



Chapter 20: The Plot boils

By the time the bell rang signaling the end of English, both Jewel and Charlie were no closer to figuring out the complex blackboard writing than they were at the beginning of the day. Jewel only felt more frustrated and Charlie had relived almost every mundane event of his childhood from the age of about two until eight giving him a perplexing sense of nostalgia for his teddy bear, Aron.

He had been about to reminisce about Mitzi Millflour (his first crush besides his teddy bear), when the bell rang making Charlie feel as though he were inside an electric blender. He couldn't possibly concentrate amidst all the chaos.

Jewel made her way carefully down the hallway and entered the Unified Arts room. The room was laid out like the science lab, but the lab tables had inlays of wood, for cutting, and marble, for rolling baked goods. Underneath the tables, each lab station had an oven and cabinets that held standard items, such as flour and sugar. Perishable items were located in a large glass refrigerator at the back of the room (where Hector's hood was in the science lab.) Gas stoves ran along the side wall, where the shelves of jars would be. On each of the stoves a pot of something peculiar was bubbling rapidly. Whatever it was, it made the entire room smell like rotting strawberries, oddly sweet and sour at the same time.

Very suddenly, a chill swept into the room and Charlie could feel a gloomy presence mix with the odd smell in the air. He looked to the front of the room to see Ms. Jitherburrs was a skinny dark-haired woman and she closely resembled a character from a cartoon Charlie had once watched with his Uncle Jaxx. It had been winter time and he and his uncle had snuck into a Provider house at the far end of the woods in order to get warm. They had watched a show called "Popeye" and Ms. Jitherburrs now bore an uncanny resemblance to Popeye's love interest Olive Oil, slicked back hair, high forehead, frilled dress and all.

Ms. Jitherburrs picked up a wooden spoon and rapped it several times on her desk. "Attention. Attention! Listen up everyone!" To Charlie's surprise, Ms Jitherburrs also sounded like Olive Oil. Her voice was nasally and falsely sweet and Charlie was rapidly beginning to understand why Jewel had

such a strong aversion to her.

Jewel had explained to Charlie on the way to class that they would not be able to work on the blackboard writing while in Ms. Jitherburrs class. Jewel felt that Ms. Jitherburrs was always watching her and Jewel didn't want to risk having the paper confiscated by someone who had a habit of burning not only the day's food item, but also any notes she intercepted.

"Attention! I said," Ms. Jitherburrs voice snapped as she slammed the spoon back down on the desk. Silence rapidly overcame the room. "Now, as you can see, I have already assembled the base of your particular syrups. When we make syrups they must be boiled at a high temperature for an extended period. Does anyone here know why?"

Spencer Bluecraft raised his hand faster than the space shuttle blasting off for the moon.

"Spencer," Ms. Jitherburrs nodded.

"High temperatures for an extended period allow the sugars to break down and the liquid to condense to the desired consistency."

Ms. Jitherburrs smiled (or rather smirked, according to Jewel). "Excellent. Now on each of your counter tops I have distributed the dry mixtures I completed for you this morning. These will need to be added to the syrups slowly, a small portion at a time, while you stir constantly. Does anyone know why we do this?"

Again, Spencer's hand shot up into the air. The force of its ascent actually lifted him off his seat several inches for just a moment. Charlie was beginning to get the impression that Spencer was able to get through the class by being overly enthusiastic. If he couldn't consume everything he made, at least he could display superior knowledge about everything he prepared.

"No one else?" Ms. Jitherburrs scanned the classroom for any other volunteers, of which there were none. "Very well, go ahead Spencer."

"Consistent stirring helps to evenly distribute the added particles throughout the syrup thereby creating a mixture that is uniform in nature. It also helps to release the heat more evenly which counteracts any tendency of the mixture to, ah, clump."

“Excellent Spencer. You obviously have done your homework, while apparently no one else has.” Then quickly, Ms. Jitherburrs wheeled around on the heels of her shoes and forcefully pointed the wooded spoon across the room at a rather plump, cute, blond-haired boy who had his fingers suspended in mid-air over his dry mixture.

“Earl. If you dip your fingers in that mixture one more time I will fail you immediately.” She then swung the spoon in the opposite direction. It was done with such force and such precision, Charlie almost thought that the spoon had come to life on its own and was actually leading Ms. Jitherburrs arm rather than the other way around. The spoon stopped at the Triplets, who now all froze in fear, their eyes wide and mouths open in disbelief that *they* should be singled (or actually tripled) out.

“Girls. If you so much as whisper another word about your ladybug, I shall fail all three of you as well.” Charlie noticed Truly’s bottom lip start to quiver and he felt a wave of sympathy come over him.

Apparently, Truly’s expression did not have the same effect on Ms. Jitherburrs. Rather satisfied, the levitating pointing spoon fell into the palm of her other hand and she returned to sternly instructing the class on the particulars of proper syrup preparation. “Before you add the last bit, you must call me over to check the consistency. Do not forget to call me over for this step. If you add the final part of the mixture without my approval, I will fail you. If I am busy when you are ready, you will need to wait. There will be no exceptions. After I have checked your syrups and given you my approval, you will add the remaining mixture, stir for exactly two minutes and then remove your pots from the heat.”

“Or I will fail you,” Charlie whispered into Jewel’s ear.)

“We will then allow the syrup to cool to room temperature and by the end of class, each of you will try your own syrup—no sharing!—and write up your opinion of its taste and consistency. If you do not try your syrup,”

“I shall fail you,” Charlie spoke the last part in unison with Ms. Jitherburrs. He was by now in complete agreement with Jewel that Ms. Jitherburrs was by far the most miserable of Jewel’s teachers.

When Ms. Jitherburrs finally finished spitting out the instructions, Charlie had counted 15 additional promises to fail various students for everything from nail biting, to improper use of a pot holder, to failure to achieve the correct heating temperature.

The students slowly got up from their work stations and made their way carefully towards the boiling

pots on the burners. Everyone was so worried about dropping the mixture and thus failing, that the room looked like a bunch of nuclear scientists transferring plutonium from table to pot, right down to the lack of smiles on their faces.

Charlie heaved a large sigh of boredom as Jewel picked up her container. His stomach growled. "Jewel, is there any other food around? I'm getting hungry again."

"Wow, aren't you lucky. I usually feel nauseous in this class. I'll try to find you something though, I just need to be careful or else 'I will fail you,'" Jewel said imitating Ms. Jitherburrs voice.

Jewel picked up her dry mixture and brought it over to her boiling pot.

As they got closer to the pot, Charlie noticed its odd sweet and sour scent and began to wonder again what exactly was in the syrup. The smell was familiar to him, but so strange that he couldn't pick out the key ingredients. He was getting tired of having that familiar feeling, like the writing on the blackboard, and yet not being able to place it. He decided to ask Jewel what it was.

"What's in that syrup anyway?"

"Beats me," Jewel replied without much interest.

"What do you mean, 'beats me?' Didn't you make it?" Charlie asked.

Jewel glanced to the side to make sure Ms. Jitherburrs didn't see her whispering. "No. Ms. Jitherburrs said that the base of the syrup need to brew for longer than our class period would allow, so she made up the mixture this morning."

"And she didn't tell you how she made it?" Charlie was puzzled. He thought that even if Ms. Jitherburrs had to make the base, at least she would have informed her students of its contents. How else would they know how to make syrup in the future if they didn't know its ingredients? Plus, how could people be sure they weren't allergic to anything in it? One thing for certain, Spencer would never taste anything if he didn't know exactly what its contents were. He was sure to fail.

"Nope."

"Don't you think that's odd?"

Jewel thought about it a moment. "I didn't really give it any thought. I think everything Ms. Jitherburrs does is odd."

"Well, do you know what it's for?" Charlie asked as Jewel added the first pinch of dry mixture to her pot.

"Actually, no. She just said we'd be making a syrup today. I assumed it was either for pancakes or medicinal." She sniffed the mixture and winced. "From the smell of this, I'd go with medicinal."

Charlie stared down at the boiling pot. "I don't know. I don't get it. Seems like pretty poor teaching to me. You should at least know what you're making."

"We're making a syrup," Jewel shook her head slightly. "Believe me, Charlie. This is the *least* weird thing Ms. Jitherburrs has done. Yesterday, I had detention with her because I failed to bring in hair from my pet for some housekeeping project. Now *that's* weird."

Charlie had to agree. Even in ant Unified Arts, none of his teachers had ever made him bring in mite hair.

What was even weirder were all the strange things they had discovered. He started to list them in his mind:

1. First, someone wearing a hood steals Taloula's ladybug.
2. Second, someone or something scribbles some indecipherable (but vaguely familiar) code all over Professor Fahid's chalkboard in orange chalk.
3. Next, someone rearranges the horticultural and mythology books of the library, leaving them in piles on the floor.
4. Then, someone steals all the sugar and pickle juice from the cafeteria.
5. Someone also takes Nurse Weatherbottom's castor oil— used by some to ward off ghosts.
6. Late night, a tall hooded figure is seen in the gym arranging balls and ropes in Jewel's and Rock's homeroom configuration.
7. On the way out, the same hooded person drops a manila envelope on Jessop. He notices it's marked "LP."
8. After copying the blackboard, a flying hooded figure nearly runs over all three of them.
9. Sloppy Joe smelled of pickles and had white powder on his sneakers.
10. Lundiva Pommegray (initials "LP") was working with Sloppy Joe on something she didn't think was any of their business.
11. Jessop, XL and Gunther had spotted the manila envelope again.

Suddenly Charlie sat upright and went still. He had the feeling he was just about to have a revelation. He stood up and peered down at the pot and inhaled deeply. Could it be?

“Jewel,” he scream-whispered in her ear. “I’ve got to taste that mixture.”

“Charlie, I swear as soon I get a chance, I will find you something to eat. I promise,” Jewel whispered.

“No, no. I want to have some of the syrup!” Charlie bellowed, leaning further over the curve of her shoulder.

“You’re that hungry? Come on! This stuff smells awful!”

“No. No. You don’t get it. I think I’ve had this before!”

“What?!!” Jewel broke in, utterly surprised.

“I think! I can’t explain it all now. Just... let me have a taste.”

“It’s boiling hot! You’ll burn yourself!” Jewel said as quietly as she could, not wanting other to kids to overhear her and think that she was randomly talking to herself.

“Look. This is important. It will explain a lot if it is what I think it is. You’ve got to hold some up out of the pot on the spoon long enough for it to cool down just slightly. I’ll walk down your arm out onto the spoon. Just hold it steady.”

“Fine. But you’ll have to hurry. If she sees me not stirring properly, well—you know what will happen.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I promise you, if this is what I think it is, it will be well worth it.”

Charlie was already halfway down Jewel’s arm which pretended to still be stirring. Though, in actuality, Jewel was holding the spoon flat so that a pool of syrup was suspended out of the pot and now moving as if it was a tiny whirlpool. It was still over the steam and Jewel wondered if it would be cool enough for Charlie to taste before Jitherbugly made her way back over to her.

Charlie was running as fast as he could down her arm, unfazed by its circular motion: he focused solely

on the little pool of syrup that Jewel was cooling for him.

"Looks the same," Charlie thought to himself now gaining a closer view. *"It's got to be."* He inhaled deeply. He was sure it was.

Charlie made it to the base of the spoon and paused. He could feel the heat coming off the syrup with his mandible. It was definitely still too hot to test. He'd have to wait. The steam was rising up on all sides of him, making the air dense and moist. He knew he couldn't wait too long or else he'd pass out from the heat.

Suddenly, from across the room, the pointing spoon reared its ugly head and landed on Jewel. "Jewel! What are you doing? Are you paying attention? Your spoon is not in the pot," Ms. Jitherburrs snipped from across the room.

"Uh..." Jewel shook her head as if waking up from a dream and leaned down close to the spoon as if she was looking at something in her pot.

"Hurry Charlie! You have to try it now! She's coming!" Jewel whispered.

"I was just... I thought I might have seen some of the dry mixture clumping," Jewel said. "I was waiting to see if I saw it again."

Ms. Jitherburrs was fast approaching. Even in the dense air, Charlie could feel her gloomy presence striding his way. He'd have to go now. Quickly, he moved forward and took a hot taste of the syrup. It nearly scalded his mandible but he was able to taste its peculiar sweet and sour flavor. "That's it!" he yelled.

"Did you say something?" Mrs. Jitherburrs said as she approached Jewel.

"No, m'am," Jewel said. "I was just checking to see if I could find that clump."

"Well, you will end up with multiple large clumps if you do not keep stirring!" Ms. Jitherburrs snapped and then before Jewel knew what happened, Ms. Jitherburrs grabbed a hold of Jewel's hand and plunged the spoon back into the boiling pot.

Jewel gasped. She couldn't believe what had just happened. She tried to pull the spoon back out but Ms.

Jitherburrs had her hand firmly over Jewel's and was forcing it to move round and round.

Ms. Jitherburrs could feel the back pressure. "Honestly, Jewel! Sometimes I think you just don't have ears. You must keep stirring or more clumps will form and I will fail you!"

These words that Charlie, who was now most likely fricasseed in the pot, had repeated with her just moments ago, brought Jewel back to her senses.

"Uh, yes, yes. I'm sorry. I will keep stirring. I don't know what came over me," Jewel looked up at Ms. Jitherburrs hoping that her promise would send her teacher on her way.

Ms. Jitherburrs cocked her head to the side and examined Jewel with a look on her face that reminded Jewel of someone accidentally drinking sour milk. "Jewel? Are you okay? You look as if your best friend just died."

"No. No. Thank you m'am. I'm fine. I'm just feeling a little light headed that's all." Her hand still clung tightly to the spoon that was now in all likelihood rotating the boiled remains of her good friend.

"Well, you're in luck," Ms. Jitherburrs smirked. "A good swig of this syrup will have you feeling better in no time." And with that, she turned and scurried across the room, "Mike Dirk! I thought I told you the heat on your syrup was too high!"

She walked off briskly towards Mike who Jewel saw cower over his pot in anticipation of Jitherbugly's arrival.

Less than a millisecond later, Jewel lifted the spoon out of her pot and stared desperately down into the bubbling syrup. She had never looked at anything so disgusting in all her life: a thick, sour smelling goo that now contained the charred body of the only talking ant she would ever meet in her life time. "Charlie! Charlie!" she cried in a whisper as she began to jab her spoon into the pot and pull out any black speck that remotely resembled her friend. None of them were Charlie.

After several jabs, she began to hear his sweet little voice in her head "Jewel! Jewel!" which only made her more frantic and big tears started to roll down her cheek into the pot. How was she ever going to tell Rock what had happened?

"Jewel! Jewel!" she heard again. But this time it was followed by, "Stop jabbing the spoon or else I'll fall!"

Jewel thought she was going nuts, that her mind was playing tricks on her. There was just no way Charlie could have survived being boiled in a pot. She stopped moving the spoon, however, and stared down hard at its handle. She nearly screamed at what she saw.

There marching around from the bottom side of the handle, just above mid point, was Charlie.

“Oh my god,” Jewel gasped. “Charlie! But how?”

“Never mind! I’ll explain later,” Charlie said like a good spy racing to help save the world. Right before Ms. Jitherburrs had arrived he had managed to climb up the back handle of the spoon just in time to avoid getting boiled. Now he was making his way back up to the safety of Jewel’s arm as he spoke. “What’s important right now is that I know what this syrup is and what the writing on the blackboard is.”

“What?!” Jewel said incredulously.

“I’ve had this syrup before,” Charlie said as he passed Jewel’s elbow. “I knew it smelled familiar and I knew that I’d seen that writing on the blackboard.”

Beyond relieved that Charlie was okay, Jewel finally regained her composure, which was lucky because she was about to dump the last bit of dry mixture into the pot when she remembered that she had to call Ms. Jitherburrs back over for the syrup’s final inspection.

“You need to tell me everything, Charlie but first I think I should get Ms. Jitherburrs to do her final inspection so you can tell me everything without us being interrupted again. I think once I’ve got this syrup properly made, maybe she won’t watch me so closely.”

“Good thinking. I think you need to stay as far away from her as possible.”

“Well, I could have told you that,” Jewel responded. She raised her hand high up into the air. Ms. Jitherburrs was standing with her face two inches from Magda Havarti’s pot and Jewel could have sworn that she was whispering something to it. “She is the strangest teacher *ever*.”

“She’s not just strange Jewel,” Charlie whispered into her ear as he settled into her shoulder. “She’s got some serious tricks up her sleeve.”

This caught Jewel's attention. "What do you mean?"

But Charlie did not have time to answer. Ms. Jitherburrs was now marching over to them with her eyes laser locked on Jewel's pot. When she arrived at their side, she snatched the last bit of dry mixture out of Jewel's hand and stared at it. She turned haughtily to Jewel.

"Jewel, for once you have done an adequate job, despite your lapse in stirring earlier. As a reward I will add the last bit for you and stir it in myself. You may go get a cup to taste your syrup."

Jewel stared at her teacher, not moving. Charlie was right. She had to be up to something. Ms. Jitherburrs never said anything nice to her and certainly never went out of her way to *help* her.

Ms. Jitherburrs waved her hand at Jewel like she was shooing her away. "Go ahead Jewel. Get your cup like a good girl."

Jewel's head was a fog and she stood still for several more seconds until Charlie quietly instructed her to follow her teacher's orders. Jewel turned and slowly walked over to her mixing station. Charlie, however, never took his eyes off of Ms. Jitherburrs who, just as Charlie had suspected, was now adding the last bit to the pot and mumbling something under her breath.

Charlie turned back to Jewel. "Jewel, whatever you do, you can *not* drink any of that syrup."

Jewel picked up her cup. "Well, not that I really wanted to, but why not?"

"I'll explain in a second," Charlie said as he eyed the other students in the classroom. Magda was blowing on her cup, trying to cool the contents down while Mike Dirk chugged the entire hot mug like it was a glass of chocolate milk. "Just promise me, no matter how hard she tries to get you to drink it, you won't."

"I'll do my best."

"Jewel," Charlie said quite sternly. "For once your best isn't a good enough promise. You *can't* drink it, period. Promise me."

Jewel's eyes narrowed. "Okay. I promise." She couldn't quite figure out why moments ago Charlie could

drink it and now she couldn't. He hadn't exactly keeled over and died.

She couldn't ask anything else, though, because once again Ms. Jitherburrs' glare was firmly upon Jewel with her hand extended for Jewel to hand her the cup. "Here you go, I'll fill your cup for you." Ms. Jitherburrs said sweetly. That sealed the deal for Jewel. She would honor her promise to Charlie, no matter *what*. Ms. Jitherburrs was *never* that nice to her.

Ms. Jitherburrs handed Jewel back her cup, which was now filled with the hot syrup. "Give it a couple minutes to cool off and then drink up so that you can write your report on its consistency and taste. You may dispose of the rest of it as I have already graded your performance. In the meantime, you may clean up your station."

Jewel simply nodded in apparent understanding and then watched Ms. Jitherburrs stride across the floor towards Spencer who had his hand raised high in the air.

"Dump it all down the drain," Charlie instructed as soon as Ms. Jitherburrs was out of earshot.

"Roger that," Jewel said as she made her way over to the sink with her still hot pot. She turned on the water and began to pour the contents down the drain. The pot was still too hot to clean, so letting the cool water run over it, she moved back to her cook top and wiped off the counter. She then picked up her cup of syrup and started to move with it back to her mixing station.

"All of it Jewel. You have to dump that too," Charlie ordered.

"I can't Charlie. If she catches me doing that, I'll automatically fail plus I'll probably end up with three years of detention. I promise I won't drink it. I'll just pretend."

Most of the students were by now finished preparing the syrup and one by one they were returning to their mixing stations, each with their own tasting cup or empty-handed with grimaces on their faces. The room was quiet save for the scratching of pen on paper and the clicking of Ms. Jitherburrs' heels as she patrolled the aisles looking for anyone who had not yet consumed their fair share of syrup. Jewel, of course, was one of those.

"And what do you think of the consistency, Jewel?" Ms. Jitherburrs said as she approached the edge of Jewel's mixing station.

“I haven’t gotten that far yet. I just wanted to finish cleaning up first. I’m about to give it a try,” Jewel said sweetly. She had probably never been that friendly to Ms. Jitherburrs since the first day she had arrived.

“Well, then go ahead. I want to see what you think,” Ms. Jitherburrs responded, tapping the wooden spoon in her hand on her clipboard of notes.

Jewel looked down at her cup and picked it up carefully in her hand. She put it up to her nose and gave it a smell first. “Smells, um, sweet and a bit unusual,” Jewel said stalling for time. “What is this syrup for anyway?”

The kind expression dropped from Ms. Jitherburrs face for a moment and then, catching herself, it returned just as unnatural looking as a chimpanzee dressed in flowered pajamas. “Actually, I want to see what you think of it first before I give you any hints about its purpose. Maybe you can give me some ideas on what you think it is, based upon its taste,” Ms. Jitherburrs raised her left eyebrow at Jewel.

“Oh, okay,” Jewel smiled back. She raised the cup to her lips, kept her mouth closed, and pretended to sip its contents. When she was done, she placed the cup back down in front of her.

Ms. Jitherburrs looked down at the remaining syrup. “Jewel! You can’t possible discern the consistency and true flavor from such a paltry sip. You must drink *at least* half of that in order to fully appreciate the syrup’s qualities.”

“Oh no. I got a good taste. It’s very uh, uh, what’s the word I’m looking for?” Again, Jewel stalled. She had no idea what she should say it tasted like since she hadn’t so much as let it within an inch of her lips and had even held her breath the whole time.

“Jewel, the requirements of this assignment are that you drink a sufficient amount of your syrup, which in this case would be at least half of what is remaining in your cup, or else I shall have to fail you.” She stared down at Jewel.

Jewel remained motionless, not knowing what to do. She thought about feigning a stomach ache but knew that it would only get her a failing grade and most likely detention as well.

“I’m waiting,” Ms. Jitherburrs now tapped the notorious pointing spoon on the counter just beside Jewel’s cup.

Jewel took the cup in her hand as Charlie grew increasingly anxious on her shoulder. He wondered if Jewel was going to be true to her promise and if she was, how on earth she was going to do it.

Jewel looked up at Ms. Jitherburrs and smiled. *"There is no way out of this,"* she thought to herself. *"I'm going to have to drop this on the floor and take three years of detention."*

She loosened her grip on her cup, took a deep breath and heard someone else's cup crashing to the floor across the room.

"Spencer Bluecraft! That is the third time you have allowed your work to be ruined in my class before you have properly completed the assignment!" Ms. Jitherburr's pointing spoon was deadlocked on a nervous Spencer who was gazing down at his syrup which now covered a two by two foot square on the floor.

Ms. Jitherburrs turned quickly back to Jewel, "I'll be right back to find out what you think." She then turned and brusquely walked over to Spencer reprimanding him for his repeated, apparent clumsiness.

"Quick!" Charlie spoke in Jewel's ear. "Down the drain! Pour it down the drain!"

Without hesitating, Jewel sped over to her sink and let over half of the mixture run down the drain. She then ran the water quickly to get rid of the slimy residue and grabbed a paper towel to dry off the drain, leaving no indication that she had used it at all.

Without a moment to spare, Jewel wiped off her finger, threw the paper towel in the bin and slid back onto her stool. "Tell me what it's supposed to taste like, Charlie."

"Sweet pickles with a hint of cloves mixed with fish," Charlie whispered quickly. "Oh, and it has an oily texture."

As she started to write, Ms. Jitherburrs was appeared by her side. Charlie was reminded of a vulture peering down at its prey.

"So Jewel, did you have a taste?" Ms. Jitherburrs asked in that same sweet voice.

Jewel looked directly up at Ms. Jitherburrs. "Yes, of course," she smiled.

Ms. Jitherburrs' eyes narrowed and she looked at Jewel suspiciously. "And, so tell me Jewel, what did it taste like then?"

Charlie raced up to Jewel's ear. "Jewel! Be nice! You have to pretend you think Ms. Jitherburrs is wonderful."

Jewel couldn't believe what she heard. Why on earth would Charlie want her to make Ms. Jitherburrs feel great when she was probably responsible for poisoning her entire Unified Arts class or at least giving them all a bad case of dysentery?

"It was odd really..." Jewel began, not nasty but not particularly affectionate either.

"Jewel! Trust me! Be *overly* nice! Like you *love* her," Charlie reminded Jewel again.

Jewel nearly choked on her saliva. Love Ms. Jitherburrs? That would be the day pigs flew with Spencer Bluecraft steering. But, she trusted Charlie, so she swallowed hard and continued in such a warm and loving voice that Charlie added "Oscar-worthy actress" to the long list of Jewel's many surprising talents.

"...but really fantastic in its own way. Sweet but I also detected something sour, like pickles, which I just love," Jewel said, "And then there was the faintest hint of clove which always reminds me of my dear old grandmother. I also thought I picked up a touch of seafood, which I'm sure most people wouldn't think would mix well with the clove taste but somehow your recipe seemed to make it all blend together beautifully."

Jewel looked up and batted her eyelashes at Ms. Jitherburrs who looked noticeably more relaxed as Jewel finished her description. "Excellent analysis, Jewel," she smiled at Jewel. For the first time that Jewel could remember, Ms. Jitherburrs' smile actually seemed *genuine*.

"Have you finished your write-up?" Ms. Jitherburrs looked down at Jewel's paper.

"Not quite yet. I was looking for the perfect words to describe such an unusually great taste. I'm so glad we got to make it." Jewel was making herself sick.

"Well, when you are finished, you may leave your paper on my desk," Ms. Jitherburrs passed behind Jewel and walked over to Jewel's sink. "I see that you have cleaned up already, so you may help your fellow students do the same if you have time before the bell." Ms. Jitherburrs then left, making her way

over to the triplets, who, Jewel noticed, were all waiting dreamily for Ms. Jitherburrs to talk to them.

“How pathetic,” Jewel thought to herself and then turned back to her paper.

Jewel glanced up at the clock. *Three more minutes, she thought, And then I can get out of here and find out what this whole crazy thing is about.*

Jewel wrote as Charlie told her what else to say about the syrup. She then carefully re-read her paper for any gross spelling errors (on the last assignment she had been docked one grade for forgetting to cross a “T”) and made her way up to Ms. Jitherburrs’ desk, where she placed her paper on the top of the growing pile.

Not wanting to draw attention, she looked quickly around the room for someone to help. As usual Mike Dirk was behind on his clean up, so she hurried over to assist him, keeping her eyes directly ahead of her.

She came up alongside Mike, smiled and whispered, “How glad are you that this class is almost over?”

Mike stared at Jewel in confusion “Why?” he asked her, his voice rather incredulous. “I love this class.”

Jewel’s mouth nearly hit the floor. She knew Mike hated this class, he had bad-mouthed it to every one in the boys’ locker room according to Rock and she had been relieved to hear that someone else hated the class as much as she did.

Jewel suddenly got the joke and giggled, “Oh my gosh, for a second there I actually thought you were serious. Boy, am I slow today.”

“I am being serious,” Mike looked directly at her, his appearance stoic and solemn. Jewel’s mind went blank. She could not for the life of her figure out why Mike was pretending so convincingly to like this class.

In fact, Charlie had to whisper in Jewel’s ear to bring her back from outer space. “Just agree with him Jewel.”

Jewel gave a little huff and shook her head to indicate to Charlie that she had positively no idea what was going on. She went along reluctantly, hoping that she’d get all her answers soon enough.

“Well, I guess it’s *you* who’s slow today,” Jewel raised her eyebrows at Mike. “Of course, *I* was joking. Who doesn’t love this class?” She picked up a sponge and wiped off the counter top for Mike.

Mike chuckled in relief. “Gosh, you had me going there for a second. For a moment I thought you actually disliked this class. It’s totally my favorite. I’d take this class over anything else any day.”

“Over football?” Jewel was curious how far Mike was going to go with this.

“Over football,” Mike nodded up and down without even hesitating. “I mean Coach Cranium is cool and everything but he’s certainly not as rockin’ as Ms. Jitherburrs.”

For the second time in less than an hour, Jewel nearly choked on her own saliva. If she had been drinking something she was sure it would have come streaming out of both nostrils like a geyser. She could not believe what she was hearing.

Thankfully, the next thing she did hear was the bell ending class. Both Charlie and Jewel noticed that the level of chaos that broke out in accordance with the bell was mysteriously subdued. Mike spent an extra thirty seconds or so shining his sink while the triplets made sure that their pots and pans were organized properly from largest to smallest, with each corresponding lid placed on top.

It was all very bizarre. Suddenly, Jewel felt as if aliens had invaded her classroom and taken over the bodies and minds of all her classmates.

She slid her books carefully off the top of her mixing station and tucked them under her arm, still eyeing her classmates. “Charlie, you have *got* to tell me what’s going on here,” she whispered under her breath.

“When we get outside the door,” Charlie whispered back. He was also fascinated by the behavior of Jewel’s peers.

Jewel walked behind Magda Havarti on their way out the door. “Goodbye, Ms. Jitherburrs! Can’t wait for tomorrow!” Magda chirped.

Jewel groaned.

Charlie reprimanded her at once. “Jewel! Say something similar to Ms. Jitherburrs as you leave!”

This was all getting to be too much for Jewel. Ms Jitherburrs was the absolute last teacher in the entire school that Jewel wanted to brown-nose, but she bit her lip and concentrated on the five feet of floor that separated her from the other side of this bizarre parallel universe.

As she passed Ms. Jitherburrs, she looked up with a great big grin on her face and noticed that Ms. Jitherburrs was staring at her intently. "Me too! See you tomorrow! Great class!" she intoned with exuberance.

"Goodbye Jewel," Ms. Jitherburrs replied.

Jewel never heard her. She was already out the door surrounded in the comforting pandemonium of the hallway. "What the heck happened in there??!!"

"*That* my dear was the result of the writing on Professor Fahid's blackboard," Charlie replied.

"What do you mean? I don't get it," Jewel said, walking quickly towards homeroom.

"Jewel," Charlie said taking a deep breath. "That syrup was a love potion."

Discussion Questions: *Take time to read through all the questions first to find out which ones you feel will be right for you and your family. Not all will be suitable for all families since these questions were made to appeal to many different ages. And, of course, they are simply suggestions. Feel free to ask any questions that come to your mind and don't forget to get CURIOUS about the answers your children give! Ask questions related to their answers if you can.*

1. What are your first thoughts about this chapter? What surprised you? What did you already know?
2. Ms. Jitherburrs voice is nasally. What does that sound like? Can you make a nasally voice? How many different ways can you disguise your voice/make it sound different?
3. Ms. Jitherburrs is a tough, strict teacher. What strategies do you use when you have a teacher that is tough or with whom you don't really click. What helps you to handle your feelings?
4. The books in the horticultural and mythology sections of the library were knocked over. What are those??
5. Jewel and Charlie make several promises to each other throughout the chapter. Did you make anyone a promise today? This week? Did you keep it? Why or why not?
6. Charlie could feel the heat of the syrup on his mandible at one point. What is that? Do you have a mandible?
7. Jewel was worried that Charlie had been "fricasseed" in the syrup. What does that mean? Use it in a sentence of your own. Or, better yet, make up a rap using the word.
8. Ms. Jitherburrs looked at Jewel with "a look on her face that reminded Jewel of someone accidentally drinking sour milk." Have you ever accidentally drunk spoiled milk? Describe the experience or at least the smell.
9. Ms. Jitherburrs looked at Jewel and raised one eyebrow. Can you raise one eyebrow at a time? Which one or both? Can you wiggle your ears?
10. The expression "when pigs flew" is used to describe something that would never happen. Can you make up another expression describing something that would never happen?
11. If Jewel had been drinking something when she heard Mike talk about Ms. Jitherburrs, "she was sure it would have come streaming out of both nostrils like a geyser." Have you ever had a drink pour out of your nose? Ever seen that happen to someone else? Tell the story.