

BEST CHEF

by Alysa Wishingrad • illustrated by Alessia Trunfio

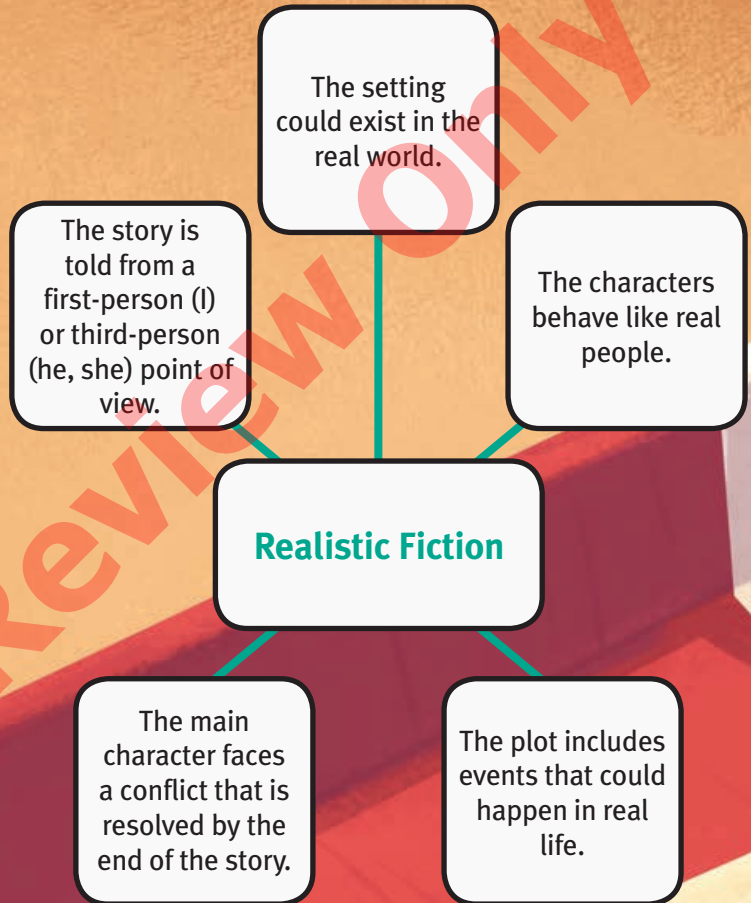


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Cooking Class Surprise

Of all the times for my best friend, Annie, to get sick and miss school, it had to be cooking week in Mr. Jenkins's ninth grade Home and Careers class. During cooking week, students in all three of his classes were challenged to invent their own healthy treat. Then Mr. Jenkins picked a winner from each class.

Missing cooking week means Annie didn't get to taste everyone else's treats, and even worse, she didn't get to make hers. You see, Annie doesn't just like cooking, she loves it. We spend every weekend at her house, cooking up amazing recipes she thinks up. Well, she cooks. I just help keep us organized. Then we watch our favorite show, *Best Chef, Jr.*

But Annie's dreams of being champion of her class at Middletown High were felled by the flu. She made it back to school the day Mr. Jenkins announced the winners. I greeted her as usual at her locker after fifth period. She looked upset.

"Hi, Bella," Annie said glumly. "I spoke with Mr. Jenkins this morning. I was hoping he would let me cook something so that I could still participate in cooking week," she explained. "But he said it's too late. He is announcing the winners today."



“I’m sorry, Annie,” I responded. I wasn’t sure what to say to cheer her up.

“I heard Ruby Wheeler was the winner in fourth period H&C. Her leaning tower of pita and beet hummus sounded impressive.” Annie was trying hard to sound positive. “I wonder who will win in our class.”

I shrugged my shoulders in response, trying to play it cool. Inside, I felt nervous that the winner could be me. The class seemed to really like my honey-glazed flax muffins, which was a surprise. I knew how competitive Annie was. My winning might make the whole situation worse.

“Let’s get to class and find out who the winner is,” Annie said, closing her locker. As we headed toward Mr. Jenkins’s classroom, I silently hoped the winner wouldn’t be me.



We waited in the hall while the fifth period H&C class filed out of the room. Everyone was high-fiving Sebastian Lutsky. He was clearly the winner of fifth period.

After we settled into our seats, Mr. Jenkins said, “I know everyone is anxious to hear who won the cooking challenge. But I have another announcement first.”

The class gave a collective groan. Mr. Jenkins thought quizzes were fun.

“Don’t worry, it’s not a test,” Mr. Jenkins smiled. “I was very impressed by the **culinary** talent in all three of my ninth grade classes this year. All the students were so enthusiastic, and there were a lot of creative, and mostly healthy, snacks.”

Mr. Jenkins paused, letting the tension in the room build. “The winner from each class will face off in another cooking challenge. Just like the show, *Best Chef, Jr.!*” The students chattered with excitement at the news.



I looked over at Annie, who looked majorly disappointed. I instantly knew the surprise cooking competition made missing cooking week even worse for her.

“Our rules will be just like the TV show’s. Three contestants will have fifty minutes to cook the same recipes,” continued Mr. Jenkins. “We’ll have a host and three judges. We’ll even have the tenth grade Audio Tech class live-stream the competition so the whole school can watch.”

Twenty-four pairs of hands shot up in the air. People called out, “I want to host!” and “Pick me to judge!”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I’m going to be the host, and I’ve already chosen the judges. They are—” Mr. Jenkins was interrupted by a knock on the door. “Actually, here’s one of them now.”



That's when Ms. Allen, our science teacher, walked in.

"Hi, everyone. Mr. Jenkins asked me to tell you what I would be looking for as a judge. I will be judging scientific **methodology**. As in the lab, if you don't mix your chemicals properly, your experiment will fail."

Marcus, a boy who always shares his opinion, raised his hand. "This is a cooking contest. We have ingredients, not chemicals."

"Is that true?" Ms. Allen asked the class.

I'm usually too shy to speak in class, unless it's about science. I raised my hand, and when Ms. Allen called on me, I explained, "Well, technically the ingredients are chemicals because they are substances made up of chemical compounds. I mean, all matter is made of chemicals, really."

"Good answer, Bella," Ms. Allen nodded.

"Thank you, Ms. Allen," said Mr. Jenkins. "Our other judges will be Mr. Taft, the cafeteria chef, and finally, our student judge will be ... Annie!"

Annie looked stunned. "Me?"

"Since you were out last week and missed all the fun, I think it's only fair that you join the panel. Plus, I know how much you enjoy cooking."

"Wow," Annie said, trying to sound cheerful. "That sounds fun."

Knowing Annie as well as I do, I could tell she was still disappointed she couldn't be a contestant in the cooking competition.

"And now," Mr. Jenkins said, banging out a drum roll on his desk, "the moment we've been waiting for. Joining Ruby Wheeler, whose **exuberant** tower of pita and beet hummus

won the hearts and stomachs of the fourth-period class, and Sebastian Lutsky from fifth period, who made some pretty odd-looking yet delicious granola nut bars, is ...” Everyone leaned forward as Mr. Jenkins took another pause before announcing, “Bella Silverman!”

Oh, nooooo, I thought.

As the class clapped, I looked at Annie, who was staring down.

“Bella, your muffins were very good and ... healthy!” Mr. Jenkins said. “And they were a faculty lounge favorite. So we’ll see how you do against Ruby and Sebastian on Monday.”

“Thank you,” I responded, still feeling horrible.





Later, after class was dismissed, I caught up to Annie in the hallway.

“Annie, I’m sorry. Please don’t be upset. I would give you my spot if I could.”

Annie turned around. “But you don’t even like cooking,” she said, frustrated.

We both stood quiet for a minute, not sure what to say.

“I’m going to be late to gym class,” Annie said, and with that, she quickly turned around and walked down the hall.

It was hard to concentrate for the rest of the afternoon. Not only was my best friend upset, but the contest was only days away.

Ready, Set, Cook!

On Monday morning, I walked toward Mr. Jenkins' classroom. The competition was taking place during first period. Since each classroom had a TV, the whole school would be watching. I was super nervous, and worse, Annie and I didn't speak all weekend.

I felt a little better after I walked into the classroom.

Mr. Jenkins had transformed the classroom into a **replica** of the *Best Chef, Jr.* set. He'd arranged chairs in rows for an audience. There was a countdown clock, a table for the judges, and ingredients at each workstation. There was even a big banner on the wall that read MHS BEST CHEF.

It was all so exciting, I forgot about how nervous I felt.

Then Mr. Jenkins told us to take our places. The competition was about to begin.

