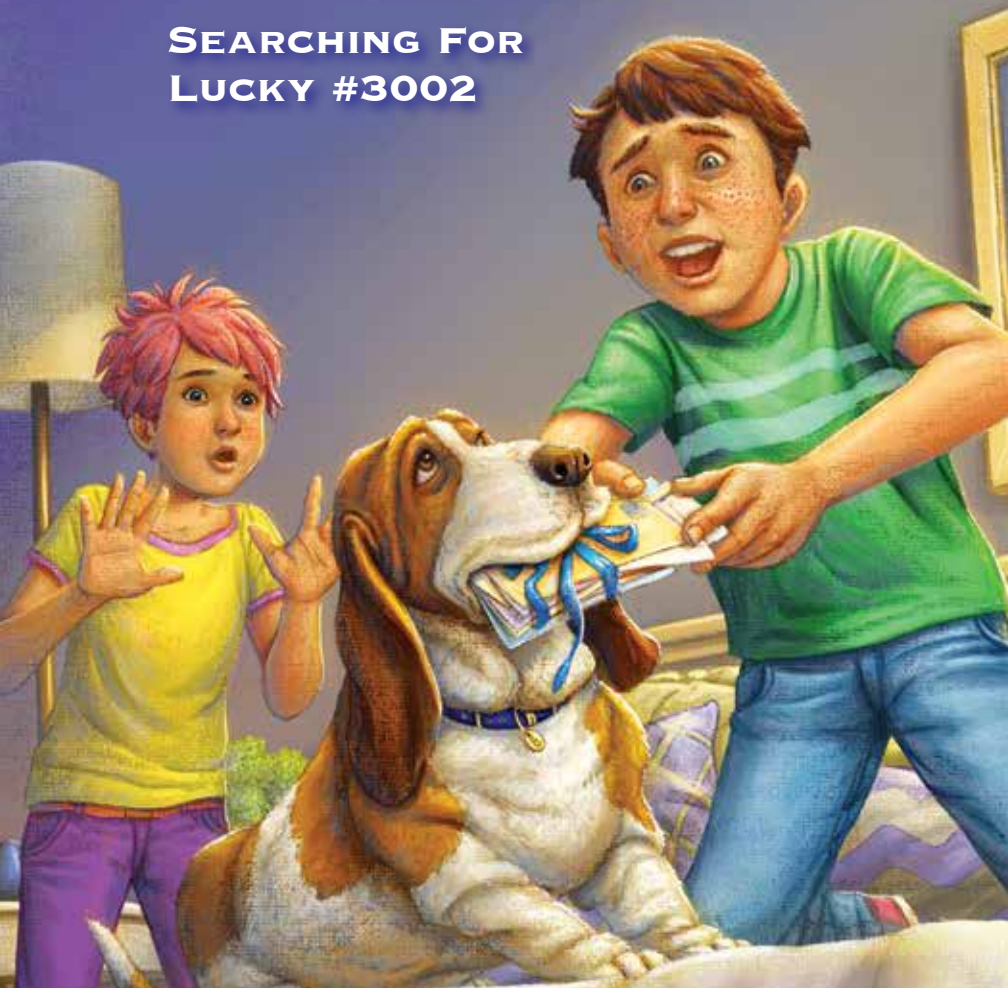


A BEN & BLUE MYSTERY

Ben & Blue

SEARCHING FOR
LUCKY #3002



BY ELLEN MELISSA COHEN
ILLUSTRATED BY DONALD WU

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Egremont, Massachusetts



RED CHAIR PRESS
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

www.redchairpress.com

Free Parent and Educator Guide online.

Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data

(Provided by Cassidy Cataloging Services, Inc.)

Names: Cohen, Ellen Melissa, author. | Wu, Donald, illustrator.

Title: Ben & Blue. Searching for lucky #3002 / by Ellen Melissa Cohen ; illustrated By Donald Wu.

Other titles: Ben and Blue | Searching for lucky #3002

Description: Egremont, Massachusetts : Red Chair Press, [2024] | Series: A Ben & Blue mystery | Interest age level: 007-011. | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: Ben was never supposed to find out about his father's mysterious past, but when a school project forces him to confront his mother, she can no longer ignore the secrets she's kept all these years. With the help of his best friend Cooper and his new dog Blue, Ben embarks on a wild journey to uncover the truth about his dad's past--and what he discovers may be stranger and more unexpected than anything he could have ever imagined.-- Publisher.

Identifiers: ISBN: 978-1-64371-373-1 (hardcover) | 978-1-64371-374-8 (softcover) | 978-1-64371-375-5 (multi-user eBook S&L) | 978-1-64371-376-2 (ePub3 S&L) | 978-1-64371-377-9 (ePub3 TR) | 978-1-64371-378-6 (Kf8 TR) | LCCN: 2023940591

Subjects: LCSH: Boys--Juvenile fiction. | Dogs--Juvenile fiction. | Fathers--Juvenile fiction. | Family secrets--Juvenile fiction. | Sperm donors--Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Boys--Fiction. | Dogs-- Fiction. | Fathers--Fiction. | Family secrets--Fiction. | Sperm donors--Fiction. | LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | BISAC: JUVENILE FICTION / Family / Parents. | JUVENILE FICTION / Mysteries & Detective Stories. | JUVENILE FICTION / Readers / Intermediate.

Classification: LCC: PZ7.1.C6382 Be 2024 | DDC: [Fic]--dc23

Main body text set in Adobe Caslon Pro 13/18.5

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Printed in Canada

0424 1P F24FRN

— Chapter 1 —

“Good morning!” said our teacher Jassi.

In Hindi, Jassi means “a person who sits.”

This is funny because Jassi never sits. She floats around the room like a butterfly.

Her last name takes too long to say. So she lets us call her by her first name.

Jassi.

“Tomorrow we will start our end of the year project,” she said. “I think you’ll have lots of fun with it.”

As soon as she said “project” the class groaned.

But I thought Jassi’s projects were mostly pretty cool. So I listened.

I tried not to watch Jerry bounce up and down in his chair. And I ignored Ian and Elliot’s burping contest.

“The project is called My Family,” Jassi said. “We’ll learn about each other’s families. What makes them different. What makes them the same...”

Jerry fell off his chair. As usual. Then he sat back up. Jassi continued as if she hadn't noticed.

She's great at not making anyone feel silly.

"I want you to gather as much information about your family as you can," she said. "Keep in mind... Families can be the people you were born to. The people you live with. Or the people who feel like family in your heart. At the end, you'll present your family in a report."

"That will be easy," said Penny. She was twirling her braids like jump ropes.

Penny came from a big family. "At Thanksgiving," she said. "My family rents extra tables. We take up two whole rooms!"

I slunk down in my seat.

This time Jassi's project would *not* be fun. Or easy.

I stole a look at my best friend Cooper. I could tell she didn't think so either.

Cooper is the nicest girl in our class. Today she sprayed her spiky hair metallic gold. (Her natural color is blonde.) Cooper likes to change her hair color every few days.

Her full name is Calliope Claire Cooper. But she just likes to be called Cooper.



Me? I'm Benjamin Zither. But I go by Ben. I'm almost 10.

And my hair's regular brown.

Jassi kept talking and moving around the room.

"I don't want just a list of your relatives," she said. "Find out interesting things about them. You can draw pictures too." She held up a cartoon family making a human pyramid.

Cooper and I looked at each other. And rolled our eyes.

She was probably thinking about her father. He moved out last year when her parents got divorced. Now Cooper sees him every other weekend. And has dinner with him once a week. But that isn't enough for her. She misses him.

At least she knows who her dad is...

The kids in my class started shouting things about their moms and uncles and grandparents. But I only paid attention to the dad things.

"My dad's an architect. My dad's a firefighter. My dad's a nurse..."

"Yes those are interesting examples," said Jassi. "But there are smaller things that are important too. For example, my mother makes the best sweet carrot pudding. Sprinkled with almonds and rose petals."

Fine. I'll say my mom bakes the best chocolate cake. With marshmallow frosting.

I'll say she's a doctor. And likes to play Scrabble...

But what could I write about my dad?

I didn't know anything about him.

Not even his name...

— Chapter 2 —

This Family Project was going to be brutal...

I have a mom. But I don't have brothers or sisters. And I don't have a dad.

At least not one you can see.

All the other kids I know have dads. Or know where they are. Cooper's dad doesn't live with her anymore. But even she still gets to see him.

When I first met Cooper, she asked me this...

"How come your dad never comes to our soccer games?"

How would I know?

Mom never said he drowned or was whisked off by aliens. Or just took off without leaving a note. She was usually good about answering my questions. But not this one.

Mom's a psychiatrist (*sigh-kih-ab-trist*).

The kind of doctor for sad and worried people. She talks with them to help them feel better. Her office is in our house. It has a goldfish bowl in it.

Mom says the goldfish cheer up her patients. She always knows how to cheer me up. But when it comes to my dad...she kind of shuts down.

With the Family Project looming over my head, I figured I'd ask her again.

For the zillionth time.

I didn't like the idea of putting down a big fat zero on my project under DAD. A question mark wouldn't look so good either.

I scarfed down a granola bar after school. "I was wondering..." I said. "Why won't you ever tell me about my dad? Did he disappear or something?"

As usual Mom said, "He's not around."

"I know that. But where is he?"

I peeked at her face. If people could turn green, this was one of those times.

"OK," said Mom. She took a deep breath. "I think you're old enough to understand now... I found him in a bank."

I crumpled up the granola bar wrapper.

"He worked in a bank?"

"Not exactly."

“Was he a bank robber?”

I stopped chewing.

“Nothing like that Ben. It was a special bank. He made a deposit in a special bank.”

I had gone to the bank plenty of times with my mom and watched her get money from a machine. I had also seen her put checks into the machine. The screen called that a “deposit.”

“Did my dad make a deposit in the bank we always go to?”

“No.”

“Can we go to the bank where he *did* make a deposit?”

“No Ben. It’s a private bank. You can’t just walk in.”

I tried a different question. “What’s his name?”

“I don’t know his name,” said my mom. “He just has a number.”

“You mean his bank account has a number?”

“Something like that,” said Mom.

“Or do you mean *he* has a number?”

A picture came into my head of men in orange jumpsuits with numbers on their shirts.

“Is he in... jail?”

“No Ben.”

She tried to explain the bank thing again.

“Do you understand what I’m talking about?” asked Mom.

“Sure,” I said.

That was a lie.

I had no idea what she was talking about. “Can we find the man with the number?” I asked.

“Maybe someday,” Mom said. “But for right now I have an idea. Why don’t we get a dog?”

Excellent idea! I thought. But I got the hint. Mom didn’t want to talk about the man with the number anymore.

I could’ve kept asking questions. But Mom looked miserable.

I didn’t want her to think I wasn’t happy living with her. Like she wasn’t a good mother. Or like one parent wasn’t enough.

So I kept my mouth shut. Besides, getting a dog wasn’t just a good idea. It was a GOAT idea (Greatest of All Time). I had been asking for a dog forever! But Mom had always said a dog would mean too much work.

I guess she changed her mind.

— Chapter 3 —

Two days later, we drove to Furry Friends Animal Shelter. It was a new place in town.

I walked by a fluffy orange dog, a tiny Chihuahua, and a black and white Husky.

But a droopy-faced dog caught my eye.

He had short legs. Long ears. A wrinkled face. And big brown eyes.

“Pick me,” I almost heard him say. “I need a family.”

“This one,” I said to my mother.

“I like him too,” she said.

“Are you sure?” asked the owner of the shelter. She had a crackly voice. And looked like a cartoon character!

Her shaggy hair fell over her eyes. Like a sheep dog. You could hardly see her face. “Wouldn’t you rather have this one?” She pointed to a dog with a long snout, scruffy fur, and a bushy tail.

I shook my head.

The owner shrugged. “All right,” she said.

Mom paid the fee. And the droopy-faced dog was ours.

“Let’s call him Blue,” Mom said.

“Why Blue?” I asked. “He’s black, brown, and white.”

“Because he looks so sad,” she said. “Blue is a color but it also means sad.”

Mom was a psychiatrist. She would know. The dog wasn’t one of her patients of course. But she was right. He did look sad.



“What kind of dog is he?” I asked.

“I think he’s a Basset Hound. But I’ve never seen one with an extra ear before.”

I looked closely at the droopy-faced dog.

On his left side behind his regular ear there was another smaller ear. Floppy like the big one.

“Why does he have that?”

“I don’t know,” said Mom. “But it reminds me of a book: LISTENING WITH THE THIRD EAR.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means you have to listen carefully to what someone is saying. To understand what they’re feeling.”

Hmm, I thought. Maybe Mom could take her own advice. Like when it came to my dad...

Riding home Blue (and his three ears) lay next to me in the back seat. I wondered where he’d been before he was in the shelter.

Then for some reason, I pictured my dad in a bank. Wearing an orange jumpsuit with a number. I wondered how he felt about dogs.

But more importantly, I wondered how he felt about me.

Chapter 4

The next few mornings before school I spent a lot of time looking at myself in the mirror. And thinking about my dad.

My hair is brown like my mom's. And we both have freckles.

But her eyes are brown and my eyes are gray-blue. This made me wonder...

I got up the courage to ask Mom one more question. "What does my dad look like?"

"He has green eyes," Mom said.

After that, green things started popping out at me. Grass, apples, avocados...

I even paid more attention when the traffic light turned green.

Mom served peas for dinner. I felt like I was eating my dad's eyeballs. Gross!

It was even worse when I walked down the street or around town.

Especially near a bank.

I checked the color of every man's eyes. What if one of these men was my dad?

My school principal Warty Willis has big green eyes.

(His real name is Walter. But Cooper and I call him "Warty" because he flicks out his tongue like a frog. You know, like frogs give you warts!)

Oh no! I thought. I hope *he's* not my dad!

The man in the fish market has tiny green eyes. I watched him rip guts out of a fish. Pink spots dripped on his apron. Yikes!

I hope *he's* not my dad either.

The mailman has sort-of-green eyes... Or maybe they're blue? It's hard to tell since he never looks straight at you. He just puts the mail in our box and scurries away.

Even the ice cream man has green eyes. The color of lime popsicles. My favorite.

I bent down to give Blue a taste and he ate the whole thing! I guess they're his favorite too.

With all this searching around town, I didn't feel any closer to finding my dad.

What did I expect? That my dad was walking

around disguised as a fish man? Or a mailman? Or an ice cream man? Or WARTY WILLIS?!

I looked at Blue who was smacking his lips...

“Do you think I’ll ever find him buddy?”

The dog tilted his head.

Was that a yes or a no?

Would I even recognize my dad if I actually saw him?



— Chapter 5 —

I stared at the blank page in front of me. At the top of the paper I scribbled a title:

MY FAMILY

On the right side of the page I wrote: **MOM**

I tapped my pencil. Who else? I added: **GRANDMA LOU, GRANDPA LOU, AUNT SILLY, UNCLE JACK, COUSIN KATIE**

I started writing stuff about them.

MOM

Psychiatrist (talks to sad people)

Bakes chocolate cakes

Plays Scrabble (sometimes lets me win)

Lives in Plainview, New York

GRANDMA LOU (Louise)

Kindergarten teacher

Knits mittens

Chews bubble gum

Lives in Connecticut

GRANDPA LOU (Louis)

Accountant

Tells number jokes (Why is the number 6 so

lucky? Because 7 8 9)

Lives in Connecticut

AUNT SILLY (Cecilia, Mom's sister)

Librarian

Married to Jack

Katie's mom

Brings oranges when they visit

Lives in Florida

UNCLE JACK

Artist

Painted me holding a rattle when I was a baby

Picture hangs in our living room

I wish Mom would take it down

Lives in Florida

COUSIN KATIE

4 months old

I saw her when she was born

Wears diapers

Lives in Florida

The paper still seemed kind of empty.

I crumpled it and started a new one.

I wrote the names bigger.

But here was the problem.

The names were all on the right side of the page
under "MOM."

The left side of the page was blank.

I drew two green eyes on the left side.

I tapped my pencil again.

Then, at the bottom of the page in the middle
I wrote:

BLUE

After all, the dog was now part of my family.

— Chapter 6 —

Jassi walked around our classroom.

She smiled at Amy's drawing of a girl on a balance beam. Even though the girl looked like she was about to fall off.

"My cousin's trying out for the Olympics," Amy said.

Jassi smiled even more when she passed Cooper.

Cooper had drawn her dad off to the side. Probably because he didn't live with her anymore. But everyone in Cooper's family had different color hair. Green, red, and yellow.

They looked like a bunch of parrots. I knew for a fact that Cooper was the only one in her family who spray-painted her head.

"I come from a family of jumping beans," said Jerry bouncing in his seat.

Jassi just shook her head.

When she came to me Jassi paused.

I saw her look at the green eyes on the left side of my page.

But she didn't say a word.

I was glad when she moved on.

Then Jassi said, "Most of you have gotten off to a good start. If you are unsure of any facts or would like to get more information, ask your parents or guardians for help."

Donny smiled.

He was in foster care with a nice family. He hoped they would adopt him.

I wondered how much he knew or remembered about his birth parents.

I tried to see his page. But Carter blocked my view. He was a big kid who probably had a relative that was a football player!

Finally, it was the end of our work time.

I was glad when I could put the Family Project away. I was tired of those green eyes staring up at me. Plus, I wanted to go home to see Blue.

His ears... that was something I could add to my project. Who else had a dog with three ears? That could be even more interesting than having a dad!

Of course it would be better to have both.

"Hey Cooper!" I said as we walked to the bus.

“What’s with those wild hair colors on your family?”

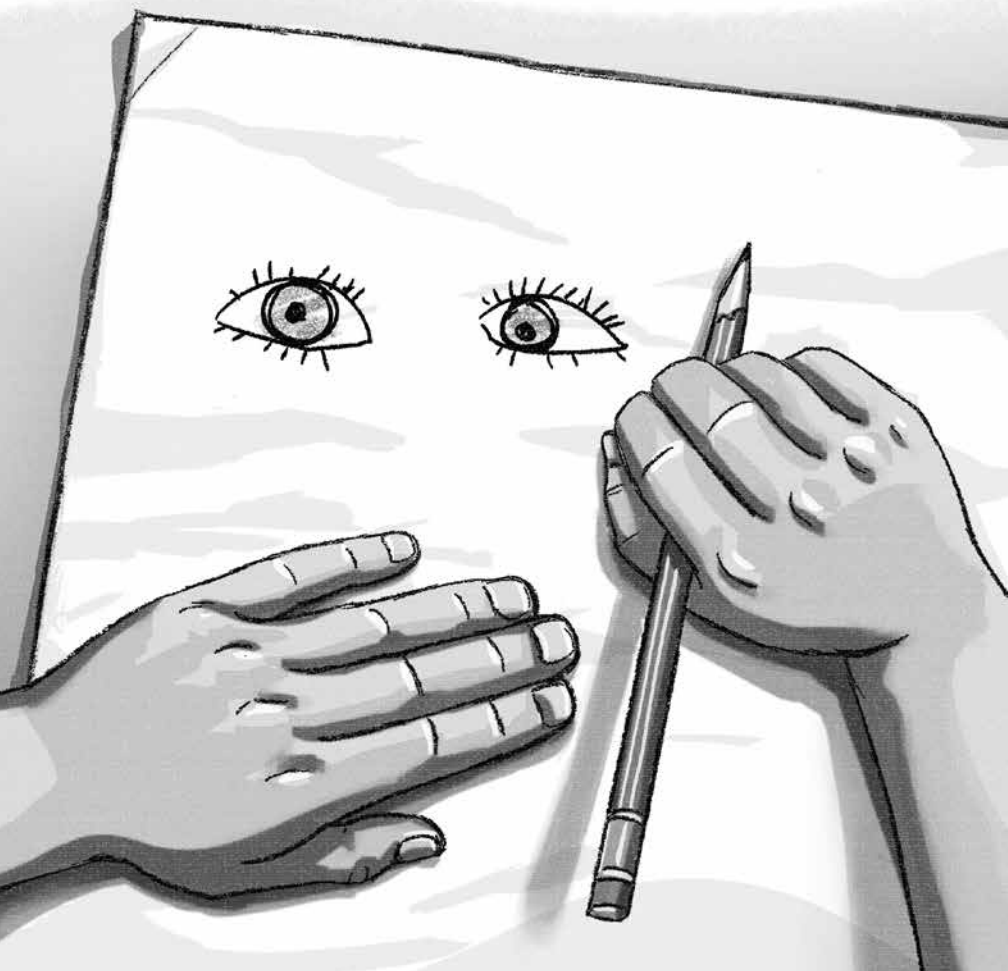
“I don’t know dude. Brown is boring... What’s with those green eyes on your page?” she asked.

“Just doodling,” I said.

“Sure,” said Cooper.

It was obvious she didn’t believe me.

I wondered, could I tell my best friend about my dad?



— Author's Note —

In this story, Ben finds the courage to talk to his class about being a donor-conceived boy. He says if kids want to know more about it, they should ask their parents.

This note is for parents who want help explaining donor conception to their children. And it is for children who are ready to learn more themselves. After all, some of you readers may be donor-conceived... Or have friends who are.

LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING: DO YOU KNOW WHAT 3 THINGS ARE NEEDED TO MAKE A BABY?

- A sperm cell from a man
- An egg cell from a woman
- A woman's uterus (the part inside the woman's body where a baby grows for 9 months during pregnancy)

WHAT IF SOMETHING IS MISSING? OR NOT WORKING RIGHT?

- An individual man or an individual woman can't make a baby on their own.
(What are each of them missing?)
- Two women in a relationship or two men in a relationship can't make a baby.

(What is each couple missing?)

- If something is missing or not working right with any part of the man or woman's reproductive system (the parts that make sperm and egg cells, or the uterus), a baby can't be made. That is, a baby can't be made *without help*...

LUCKILY, THERE ARE NOW OTHER WAYS TO MAKE BABIES FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BE PARENTS.

(People can also decide to adopt or become foster parents.)

A LITTLE HISTORY

In 1988, the first human was born using Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART). That means help was needed by scientists and doctors to make the baby.

This baby is now an adult. Her name is Louise Brown. She was born in England by in vitro fertilization (IVF), an important type of ART.

- In IVF, eggs are collected from a woman and combined with a man's sperm in a lab. (The sperm can be from the woman's real-life partner or from a donor.)
- The combined cells are grown in the lab for a few days until they become an embryo. The embryo is then placed in the woman's uterus or can even be frozen for future use.
- IVF is considered such an important discovery that in 2010 a British physiologist, Robert Edwards, won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his work developing it!

Since Louise Brown was born over 35 years ago, more than 8 million children have been born in the world using ART!

DONOR CONCEPTION IS ONE WAY ART CAN BE USED TO MAKE A BABY.

- A man can donate sperm cells.
- A woman can donate egg cells.
- A woman can offer to have an embryo placed in her uterus to help make a baby. She allows the baby to grow in her uterus for 9 months until it is born.

HOW COMMON IS DONOR CONCEPTION?

- At least 30,000-60,000 children are conceived this way in the United States every year.
- That's a lot of children!

In Ben & Blue: Searching for Lucky #3002, Ben's mom, a single woman, used her own egg plus donor sperm to create Ben. She got the sperm from a sperm bank.

WHAT IS A SPERM BANK?

- A sperm bank is a laboratory that collects, freezes, and stores men's sperm cells.
- Later the sperm can be mixed with a woman's eggs, hopefully to grow into a baby in her own uterus or in a donor's uterus.

WHAT INFORMATION WILL A SPERM BANK LET YOU SEE ABOUT THE DONOR?

- General information like eye and hair color, weight, height, ethnic background

- Sometimes education, occupation, medical records, genetic testing, family medical history
- Sometimes photos of the donor as a child, teenager, or adult

(Ben knows his donor has green eyes but does not have any photos.)

CAN YOU CONTACT THE SPERM DONOR?

- Some sperm donors want to remain anonymous.
- Some sperm donors agree to be identified or contacted after the child turns 18—if the child is interested.
- Different sperm banks and different states have rules about this.

If you still have questions or want to know more, ask a parent, a teacher or a trusted librarian.



Ellen Cohen, M.D. is a psychiatrist on faculty of Harvard Medical School, and a board member of the New England Society of Clinical Hypnosis. She graduated Barnard College as a creative writing major before going to medical school. Ellen lives near Boston with her husband.

“Ellen Melissa Cohen masterfully brings us along on the narrator’s quest to discover who his father is, tackling a tricky topic with sensitivity, suspense and humor, all in the believable voice of 10-year-old Ben.”

–Jane Sutton, Author of *Me and the Weirdos*,
ALA/CBC Children’s Choice

“This book was mysterious, funny, and fun to read!
...I was laughing so loud!... I’m ready for
Ben and Blue’s next mission.”

–Eyal Zeiger, age 12, 6th grade



ISBN: 978-1-64371-373-1

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