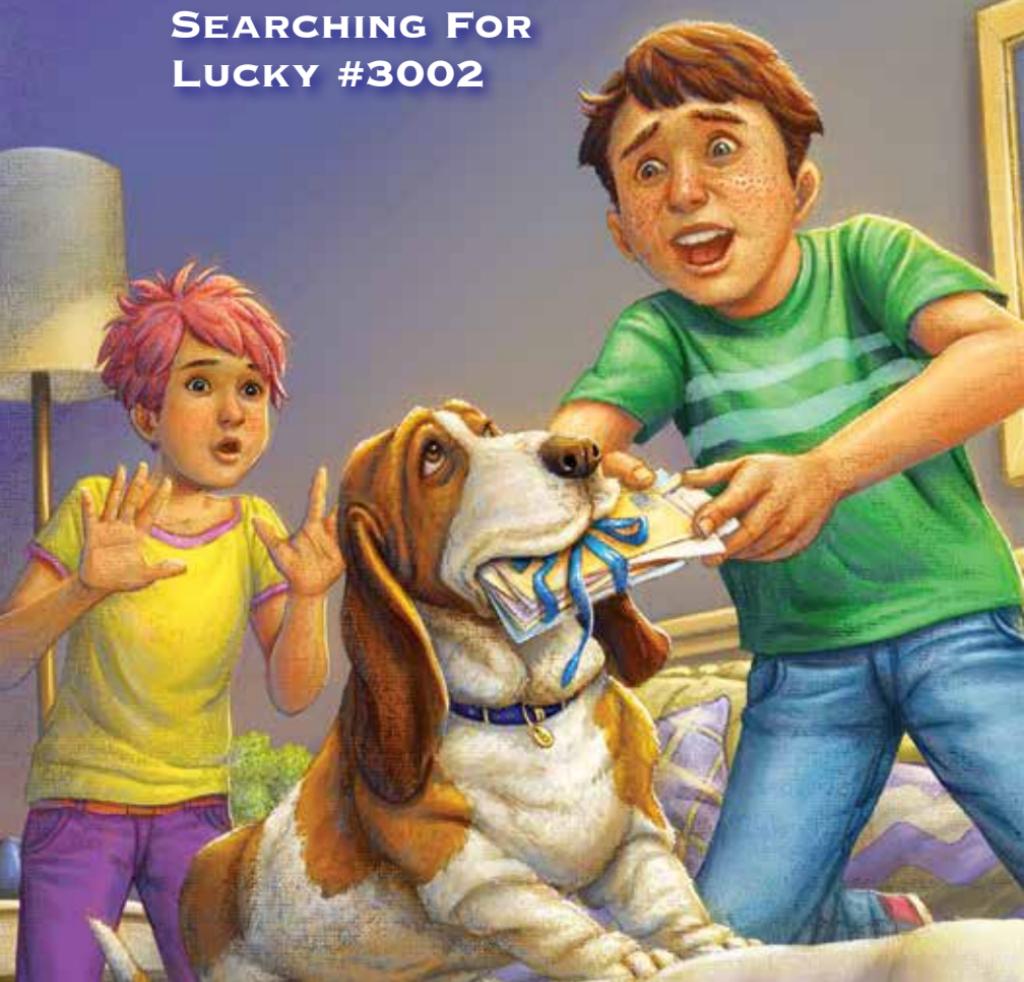


A BEN & BLUE MYSTERY

Ben & Blue

SEARCHING FOR
LUCKY #3002



BY ELLEN MELISSA COHEN
ILLUSTRATED BY DONALD WU

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— 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-kigh-ah-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 19 —

“Blue! What do you have there?” I asked. “Let me see!”

He jumped onto the bed and perched himself in the middle. A stack of papers was clamped in his jaw. They were tied with a blue ribbon.

I held out my hand. “Drop it Blue.” But Blue wouldn’t let go of his prize. I tried to grab it but he shook himself free. Like we were playing tug-of-war.

“This isn’t a game Blue!” I said. The papers looked important tied in that blue ribbon. And I didn’t want them to rip.

“I told you Blue would help us,” said Cooper.

Finally I pried the bundle from Blue’s mouth. He wagged his tail like he expected me to throw it back. But I didn’t of course.

Instead, I sat down on the bed and examined the papers. They were a little soggy from Blue's drool.

I realized what I held in my hands was a stack of greeting cards. Each one was addressed to my mother...



*“Your baby boy is here and I couldn’t be happier for you!”
“Beyond delighted for you. Can’t wait to meet your new son!”*

*“Congratulations! You are going to be a wonderful mother!”
“So proud of you Gracie! Ben is adorable! So glad you did it! Lucky #3002!”*

This last card was from Aunt Silly. That’s Mom’s sister Cecilia.

“Let me see,” said Cooper.

I handed her the cards.

“Hey these are from when you were born!”

“Look at the last one,” I said trying to keep my voice steady.

Cooper read it out loud. Then she said, “Gracie’s your mom. Cecilia’s your aunt. But what does she mean by Lucky #3002?”

“That...” I said. My voice was definitely shaking now. “I’m pretty sure that’s my dad.”

nightstand. “Evening Rose” spilled all over the floor. All over Blue. And all over me.

I tried to wipe the floor with tissues. A few drops of the stuff smelled nice on Mom. The whole bottle made you need a gas mask.

“Oh geez!” I said wiping my shirt.

Reeking of perfume, I headed down to the kitchen.

“What’s that smell?” asked Grandpa Lou.

Uh oh...

“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

