

Contents

1	The Professor and the Colonel	9
2	Friends of Friends	17
3	The Welcome Party	23
4	An Answer to Prayer	35
5	A Very Chill Itinerary	43
6	A World of Words	53
7	The Chronicles of a Lonely Boy	65
8	Cocoa at Mr. Fred's	71
9	Just Make Tomato Soup	81
10	A Heart-to-Heart	87
11	Basketball Royalty	93
12	Surprise?	105
13	Old Stomping Grounds	115
14	An Extraterrestrial Heartbreak	131
15	Gang's All Here	141
	Acknowledgments	149



The Professor and the Colonel

“Only you can fight Star Fire!” roared Colonel Richard Blats as he used his blaster to shoot blue ray beams at the oncoming alien Zappadogs. They were closing in on him. Across a purple, gooey terrain charged hundreds more, howling and barking with fury. These were no man’s best friend. They were the prowling pooches of Doctor Zap, the most terrible, nastiest villain on Xeno—the alien planet Colonel Blats had crash-landed on a decade before.

“Watch out, Colonel!” shouted Professor Synovious as a dog jumped within an inch of Blats’s face. A shot from the Professor’s ray gun saved his life.

“Blatsplat, Professor! That was close. Thank you!”

Professor Synovious was the Colonel’s right-hand man and fellow human stuck on this alien planet. They had both crash-landed at

BEN WASHINGTON IS . . . THE ODD MAN OUT

different times and sworn their allegiance to always be brothers in this new world they didn't understand.

"No problem, ol' chap! Just look where you're going next time!" chirped the Professor. He loved calling people "ol' chap," as he was a true old gentleman.

"Sure, thing Prof—Oh, no!" Colonel Blats cried and then froze in his tracks.

"Spit it out, man, we don't have all day!" said Synovious.

The Colonel and the Professor ducked behind big, violet rocks as a shower of pellets rained down. At the same time, the scaly green dogs that were once in the distance were getting closer. "What's the plan, ol' chap?" yelled Synovious, not at all fearful. He and Blats had gotten into tons of these situations before.

"Professor, my boy," said the Colonel, raising his blaster to the sky and shooting it once. "It's go time!"

The Professor and the Colonel jumped up and showered the air with lasers. PEW, PEW, PEW! Zappadogs poofed into thin air left and right. ZOOOOOM, PAH! The Colonel hit one of Doctor Zap's engines. It spun uncontrollably through the air, still spraying pellets across the sky with loud ZIPs! ZAPs! ZOPs!

And then—

"Benjamin Washington, if you don't turn that video game down right now!" Mama called from the kitchen.

"Sorry, Mom!" I called back from the bean bag chair, which was plopped in front of the living room TV. I hit pause. I was no

longer Colonel Blats. I was a twelve-year-old kid in two-day-old socks and pajama bottoms.

“Hey, sorry, Zion,” I reported to my lifelong friend through the microphone. I wished he was sitting next to me, but he was in Atlanta, Georgia, 1,046 miles away from where I now lived in Radnor Falls, Wisconsin. “Let me turn down the volume on the TV real quick.”

“That’s all right, Ben.” Zion’s voice sounded hollow coming through the speakers on either side of the television. “My mom says I need to go help with the chores anyway.”

“Okay! Same time next week?” I asked, getting up from the bean bag chair to stretch my legs at long last.

“Ben, don’t you remember? Next week I’ll be at your house! We can play in person.”

I almost forgot! Zion was coming for the first half of Winter Break! And because it overlapped with Presidents’ Day and was sandwiched between two weekends it was going to be an extra-long Winter Break too. So long that we were spending the second half in Atlanta! I was beside myself. It was gonna be awesome. Just like the old days when I lived in Atlanta too. Up until last year I’d lived there my whole life. My family and my friends, including my best friend Zion, were all there. It was a great place to grow up. City life, Varsity (the restaurant), and a Target department store every mile and a half. But then Dad’s Uncle Herbie passed away and left Dad his bookstore, so we moved light-years away from everything I knew.

I used to hate it here in Radnor Falls. In fact, I was determined to hate it. Thankfully, I met some pretty cool people like two of my new best friends, Kenny and Mr. Fred (who's like my resident grandpa). Anyway, Radnor Falls has definitely grown on me a little bit. But I still miss Atlanta sometimes, and I really miss Zion and how we'd play video games, have sleepovers, stay up late, and eat so many pizza rolls we almost got sick. *Ahhh*, the good life.

"Oh, yeah!" I said a little too loudly into my mic. I saw Zion wince in the lefthand corner of my screen. "Sorry, man. One more week, I can hardly believe it!"

"I know!" Zion sounded just as excited as I did. "It's going to be so much fun. But I better go. I don't want to give my mom any reason to change her mind about Winter Break."

"She wouldn't!" I shouted. That would be too cruel.

"You're right. She's more excited to see your mom than I am to see you. But that's just 'cause you kinda got a weird odor about you." Zion laughed.

"Hey, that's not odor, that's the smell of manliness. Don't worry, you'll get there one day," I said and laughed.

"Nah. That's called not showering for three days. Just don't let Wisconsin change you too much. You better keep using that washcloth." Trash talking was the way we said *I love you, bro*.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, later, Professor."

"See ya soon, ol' chap," Zion replied.

I removed my headset and massaged my neck and head. Saving a planet can put a lot of wear and tear on a body.

“Mom!” I shouted for her but didn’t hear a reply. “Moooooom!!” I called again. “Mo—”

“*Shhh*. Keep it down,” said Mom, bouncing the baby in her arms as she came around the corner from the hallway to the living room where I sat in my bean bag chair. Mom looked tired. She was wearing a long blue and green striped robe, orange sweatpants, and two different colored socks. Her hair . . . well, let’s just say it had seen better days. And her puffy eyes looked like they had two little grocery bags under them.

“Are you okay, Mama?” I asked quietly. “You look kinda . . .”

Mom shot me a look that said *be careful how you finish that sentence*.

“You look kinda gorgeous and beautiful. That’s what I was gonna say.”

Mama rolled her eyes and smiled a little bit.

“I’m fine, Benjamin. I’m just trying to get your sister on this sleep schedule, and she got your Daddy’s stubborn streak. But she sure is sweet, though. Look at her.”

Daisy was so little in Mama’s arms. She really was sweet. She couldn’t do a lot yet. But she smiled at me every time she saw me. Grandma said it’s probably just gas, but I know the truth. That’s the face of a little sister who loves her big brother. Daisy looks just like Dad but way cuter, and a girl. She doesn’t have much hair

yet but her head smells good and fresh like, well, not to be corny, but like daisies.

“Yeah, she really is sweet,” I said to Mama. Daisy’s eyes were opening and closing, opening and closing. She was fighting sleep. I knew the feeling. Why nap when there is so much life to live?

“Please go to sleep, baby girl,” Mama pleaded, bouncing Daisy up and down, right and left. She seemed more tired than the baby.

“Daisy,” I said, “go to sleep, and when you get bigger, I’ll teach you everything about Zapblats.”

As if by magic, Daisy made a little yawn and snuggled into Mama and closed her eyes.

Mama looked at me with amazement.

“Boy, you might be a baby whisperer.” She winked at me in gratitude, and then climbed the stairs to put Daisy to bed.

It felt good doing a good deed for Mom. I really was a hero, just like Colonel Blats. Speaking of Zapblats, I still couldn’t believe Zion would be here in one short week. I started planning my itinerary.

Saturday—Zion settles in, and we play Zapblats, eat ice cream, and stay up until midnight.

Sunday—After church, Kenny and Zion meet.

This was something I was a little nervous about. What if my two best friends in the world didn’t get along? Just because they were my best friends didn’t automatically guarantee they’d be best friends. They didn’t have a lot in common. Zion is tall, cool, chill, and popular. He makes straight A’s and plays multiple

sports. I heard last year that a seventh-grade girl asked him to a dance. His mom made him say no. And Kenny, well, he's Kenny. He's bold and energetic and kind of weird sometimes, but in a good way. He doesn't care about his grades that much. And he's like two foot nothin'. They have nothing in common except that they both have the best friend ever—me.

I was about to start planning Monday's itinerary when I heard keys in the front door. Dad was home. Sometimes that door gets stuck. It's an old door in the old house my family inherited from Dad's uncle last fall. Mom and Dad haven't gotten the door fixed yet, so we have to give it a little push when we're walking in. Unfortunately, Dad gave it more of a shove than a push, and it slammed against the wall with a WHAP!

The living room is directly to the right of the front door, which faces the staircase up to our bedrooms. So, I had a perfect view of Dad stumbling into the house and dropping three books off a ginormous stack in his arms.

Dad tried to kick the door closed behind him, but it wouldn't close all the way. "Phylcia!" Dad called for Mom. "Leesh! Leeeeeesh!"

I got up from my seat and rushed over to pick up the books that Dad was dropping by the second from his literary tower. I reached for *100 Tips for the Considerate Husband*, which had fallen right in front of the bottom step of the staircase, just as Dad let loose a final, "Leesh!"

Mom's footfalls thundered overhead, from the baby's room to the

BEN WASHINGTON IS . . . THE ODD MAN OUT

top of the stairs where she glared down at Dad and his stack of books below with a look of fury. Her hair was even wilder than before.

“Be quiet!” she whispered, though I’ve never heard a whisper that sounded more like a yell. “I just got the baby to—”

“WAAAAAAAAAAA!” And there went Daisy, wailing like a siren.

Mom pinched the bridge of her nose with one hand and then threw up the other hand in defeat. She took a breath, turned on her heels, and headed back to Daisy’s room.

“My bad,” Dad said, clutching his books closer to his chest.

“Yikes, Dad,” I said patting his back. “You’ve got to learn to use your inside voice.”

Things sure had been crazy around my house since Daisy was born. And it felt like with Winter Break and Zion coming to visit, things were only going to get crazier—especially because my old best friend and my new best friend were going to meet for the first time. I just hoped Dad’s tumbling tower of books wasn’t a sign of things to come.



Friends of Friends

The next day was Sunday. On Saturdays, Zion and I have our weekly ritual of playing Zapblats. He always plays as Professor Synovious (except for the short time he tried playing as Doctor Zap. That caused too many arguments). And I, of course, always play as Colonel Blats. And on Sundays, Kenny and I play Zapblats after service at New Life Church. Once again, I'm the honorable Colonel Richard Blats, and Kenny plays as a character called Bleechi. Bleechi is a loveable bluish blob of an alien. He's not as smart as the Professor, but he has absorption blob powers that really come in handy. He can absorb as many as fifty Zappadogs at a time depending on what powerups he has.

Anyway, it was Sunday and Kenny and I had just finished playing Zapblats. Unfortunately, Kenny got zapped by Doctor Zap himself, leaving me vulnerable. In the end, the dogs got me. We did not beat the level.

"Better luck next time," Kenny said.

“Yeah, but you just gotta pay more attention to the enemy,” I said.

“Me?” Kenny cried. “You were the one who thought you found a shortcut and left me to get ambushed by Doctor Zap in the first place.”

“All right, all right. We both can grow.” Man, Kenny need to learn to receive constructive criticism.

Kenny got up from the bean bag chair in the living room and walked back toward the front door. He stood at the base of the staircase and started putting on his boots.

“So, next week, same time?” Kenny asked me, squeezing a too-big foot into too-small yellow duck boots.

“Oh, actually Zion will be here,” I said throwing my arms up like one of those inflatable tube men outside of used-car dealerships.

Kenny paused for a moment before trying again to crunch his toes into his rubber boots.

“Oh. Cool,” he said, not with much enthusiasm, might I add.

“I thought you two could meet. We could spend the afternoon together after church. You know, my two best friends, hanging, laughing, chilling. I mean, unless you don’t want to.” I expected Kenny to say, *Of course I want to!* But he didn’t.

Instead, he sat on the floor to get a better handle on his shoe problem. Then he silently and awkwardly lay on his back and pulled each boot on with his legs stuck straight up in the air. When he finally got them on, he stood up, breathing heavily.

I ignored this situation, got up from the bean bag, and walked over to where he was standing. Kenny was acting so weird, even for him. “Do you *not* want to meet Zion?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to meet him, it’s just—what do we even have in common?” He walked to the front door to grab his jacket from the hook on the wall.

“You have lots in common,” I said, trying to sound convincing. “First of all, you have *me* in common.”

“No offense, Ben, but I don’t really think it sounds fun to talk about you for hours on end.” By now he had put on his jacket, only he had put it on inside out. He let out a little sigh. He started to take it off again.

“Can you cool it with the jacket for a sec?” I said, getting a little miffed. Kenny obliged. “What’s going on? You love meeting new people. Last week at the supermarket, you talked to the new check-out woman for fifteen minutes about her glasses prescription.”

“Doris was not wearing the right glasses for her. She had on readers, but I’m pretty sure she is legally blind. Did you see how she rang up potatoes as Frosted Corn Pops? How does that even happen?”

I stared at Kenny for a minute. Sometimes he works my nerves.

“Look, Ben. I think I’m just nervous. In Radnor Falls, I’m your best friend. What if when your old best friend gets here, you decide I’m just an acquaintance or something? It happened to me at my old school. I thought this one kid was my friend, but it turned

out he only wanted me to be his friend till his real friends came around. Then he kicked me to the curb.” Kenny looked down at his yellow galoshes.

“I’m sorry that happened. But that could never happen to you and me, Kenny. You’re my best friend. And so is Zion. I just want my two best friends to be friends too.” I held up my pinkie and extended it to him. “I promise there will be no kicking anybody to the curb.”

We pinkie swore.

“See, I mean it,” I said.

“I believe you,” he said. “I’m probably just being silly. Of course I want to meet Zion. If you like him, so do I.”

And with that we pounded fists. Kenny turned his jacket the right way out and put it on. I opened the door for him.

“Oh, I just thought of one more thing you have in common. You both love Zapblats!” I exclaimed. I got really excited about the thought of the three of us playing together.

“No way! Who’s his character?” Kenny asked as he stepped out the door and onto the front porch.

“Professor Synovious,” I said in my best hoity-toity accent.

“Oh, I love that guy! What a refined gentleman. Well, that’s a start,” Kenny said.

And with that we waved goodbye. But I couldn’t help but feel that something still wasn’t quite right.



Later, as we sat at dinner, I decided to ask Mom and Dad about it.

Since the baby had been born, Mom had asked Dad and me to take over dinner duties to help out. Unfortunately, we are not as good at cooking as Mom. I mean, Dad is really good at grilling and smoking meat. But the sides are lacking. Tonight's meal was smoked chicken with what was supposed to be mashed potatoes and broccoli.

Mom took a bite of the potatoes. She stopped chewing and looked slightly confused.

"Mm, guys. These mashed potatoes are so . . . crunchy?" She searched my face for an answer.

"Don't look at me. I'm just the sous-chef," I said, deciding to take a bite of chicken instead.

"I'm sorry, honey," Dad said. "I think I didn't boil the potatoes long enough." He looked nervously at the food on the table.

Mom reached over and grabbed his hand. "It's great, babe, really. Just a 'lil extra fiber." She took a swig of water.

Mom and Dad discussed Daisy and celebrated her going to sleep long enough to eat a bit of dinner. It's weird the things you celebrate when you're a grown-up. Mom and Dad have a secret handshake that they made up forever ago. Every time the baby goes to sleep, burps, smiles, or blinks, they do the handshake. It's

ridiculous. I asked if I could do the handshake, and they said it's just for parents. Rude.

Anyway, they were mid-handshake when I blurted, "What do you do if you have two best friends, but they might not like each other as much as you want them to?"

Mom and Dad looked at each other parentally like they always do and then at me.

"Ben, what's up, son? You talking about anybody specific?" Dad asked.

"I'm a little nervous about Zion and Kenny meeting. I talked to Kenny about it today, and he didn't seem excited at all. What if my two best friends hate each other?" I stress-ate some potatoes. Wrong move.

"Look, Benjamin," Mom said. "I can't say for sure that Kenny and Zion will hit it off right away. But I do know that they both love you. You can't force friendships, but you can enjoy each of them. I'm sure the three of you will have lots of fun together. Just let it happen on its own."

I couldn't decide if I thought that was solid advice or not, but I said, "Cool. Okay. Thanks, Mom and Dad." Maybe Mom was right. I just had to let it be what it was. Besides, it was only a few days. Worst comes to worst, they'd hang out, hate each other, and never have to see each other again. And they'd still be my best friends.