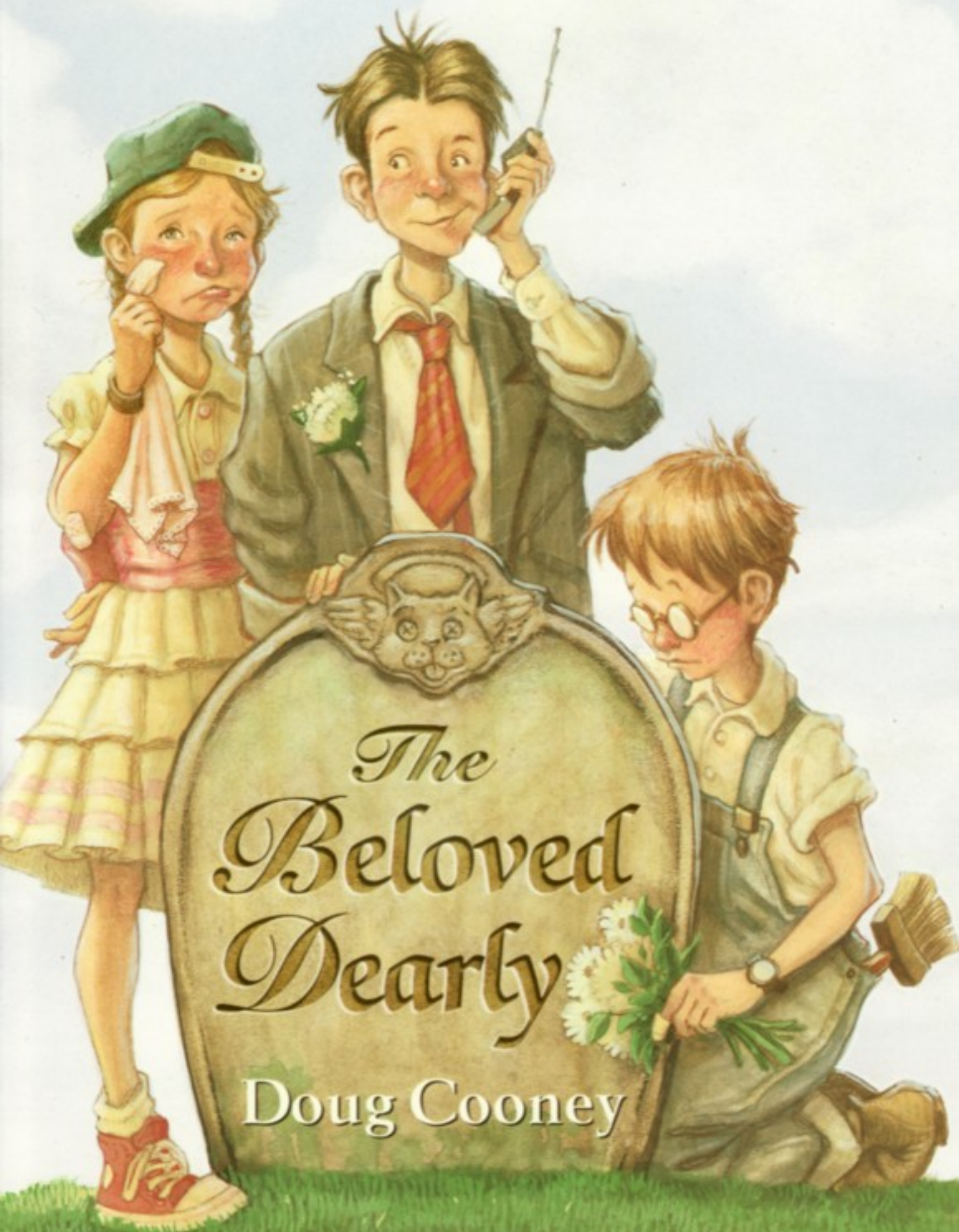


*"Witty, clever, yet touching . . ." —School Library Journal*





# Chapter One



## *The Action*

*Ernie looked like* a total teacher's pet, standing at the blackboard in a clean shirt with his hair combed flat. He was reciting a book report on Benjamin Franklin as though he were the best student in school. "In the words of Benjamin Franklin," Ernie read from his notebook, "'Time is money.'"

Ms. Pringle was certainly impressed. She was nodding, smiling, and totally buying the whole Benjamin Franklin thing—but if she'd seen Ernie during lunch break, she'd have seen a different Ernie altogether.

Ernie had caused a royal ruckus. Cafeteria Lady was scooping heaps of mystery meat onto the kids' trays when suddenly Ernie climbed right on top of a cafeteria table. He planted his feet firmly between a couple kids' cafeteria trays. "Cheeseburgers!" he



hollered like a ballpark vendor. "Only one dollar! Get your red-hot cheeseburgers!"

Ernie opened a large fast-food bag he'd had clamped under one arm and started tossing burgers right and left. The kids went wild. Ernie scrambled to collect all the dollar bills that were being thrust at him.

The event should have been a huge money-maker. Ernie stood to make a lot of quick cash. But then catastrophe struck.

One burger splattered against the wall. Another burger struck the overhead fan and burst into pieces. Yet another burger caught Cafeteria Lady right in the kisser. And basically what happened after that was Ernie landed in the principal's office.

Mr. Bridwell, the principal, had seen plenty of Ernie. He had heard all the stories. Ernie was the kind of kid who would drain the lunch money out of every student in the school. Ernie would sell the lawn chair from under his grandmother. The boy was just a natural-born salesman.

"Ernie," Mr. Bridwell said, "you really broke the rules this time."

"I wasn't breaking the rules, Mr. Bridwell," Ernie protested. "I was obeying the law of supply and demand!"

The principal sighed. "I think maybe we should redirect your 'entrepreneurial enthusiasm' toward something more 'appropriate'—like the school fund-raising drive." Mr. Bridwell had a habit of indi-



cating every quotation mark in his speech by wagging his fingers in the air.

Ernie threw his hands up in despair. "Bridwell!" he barked. "You're killing me with the nickel-and-dime stuff! Cookie dough, chocolate, calendars! Don't even mention magazine subscriptions!" He perched on the edge of the principal's desk. "I believe in charity, Bridwell. But I'm a businessman. And if you wanna work the kid angle, you gotta cut us in on the *action*."

"What 'action'?" Mr. Bridwell asked, with another wag of his fingers.

"The bank, the beans, the jimmy, the jive. The moola, the greenbacks, the dead presidents!" Ernie cried. He was talking about money.

Mr. Bridwell was positively flummoxed.

After the "dead presidents" remark, it was all over for Ernie, except for a detention, a blue slip, and a telephone call to Ernie's father.

Ernie's dad, Red, worked at the local sheet metal plant. His shift usually went till five-thirty or six in the evening—but when Red got a phone call from the school, he had to leave work early to bail his kid out of detention. So when Red showed up at the principal's office in his factory uniform and a windbreaker, he was not in a good mood.


Red and Mr. Bridwell had a long talk behind a closed door. Ernie sneaked up to the door and cupped his ear against it with his hands. He was try-



"Something kids won't have seen before." —*Booklist*

*Ernie is a twelve-year-old tycoon,* always on the lookout for a fast buck. This time he stumbles onto a money-making bonanza: pet funerals. He hires Dusty to decorate the burial boxes and Tony to dig the holes, but his prize find is Swimming Pool, a tomboy who can cry on cue.

Business goes through the roof—until Ernie loses Swimming Pool over a raise and the whole venture unravels. Here is a rollicking, fun-spirited novel about friendship, loss, business—and how we learn to express our feelings.

 **ALADDIN PAPERBACKS**

Simon & Schuster, New York

Cover illustration copyright © 2002

by Toni DiTerlizzi

Cover designed by Anahid Hamparian

Ages 8–12

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**US \$5.99 / \$6.99 CAN**

ISBN-13: 978-0-689-86354-7

ISBN-10: 0-689-86354-3

EAN



9 780689 863547

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