

Here
in the
Real
World

ALSO BY SARA PENNYPACKER



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SARA PENNYPACKER

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First Edition

To my daughter, Hillary,
for keeping this book here in the real world



one

Ware patted the two bricks stacked beside him on the pool deck, scored on the morning's ramble. Tomorrow he'd bash them into chips to build the ramparts of his castle, but tonight he had another use for them.

He swirled his legs through the water, turquoise in the twilight, and at exactly 7:56, he snapped on his goggles and adjusted them snug. "The boy began to prepare himself for the big event." He whispered the voice-over, in case anyone had their windows open, or the Twin Kings were lurking around.

The Twin Kings weren't twins, just two old men who dressed alike in plaid shorts and bucket hats. They weren't kings either, but they paraded around Sunset

Palms Retirement Village like royal tyrants, making life miserable for anyone they encountered.

Ware had studied the Middle Ages in school. Back then, kings could be kind and wise, kings could be cruel and crazy. Luck of the draw: serf or knight, you lived with it.

The first time the Twin Kings had come across Ware, he'd been cheek down in the grass, watching a line of ants patiently climb up, then over, then down a rock, thinking about how much harder human life would be if people didn't know they could just go around some obstacles. "Space Man" they'd dubbed him, claiming they'd had to yell at him three times before he'd lifted his head.

Now, whenever they found him, they delivered some zinger they found so hilarious they had to double over and grab their knees. The comments were not hilarious, though. They were only mean.

Which was okay—people made fun of him for spacing out; he was used to it.

No, the mortifying thing was when Big Deal came out and sent the kings slinking away with a single glare. An eleven-and-a-half-year-old boy was supposed to protect his grandmother, not the other way around.

“Oh, they’re harmless,” Big Deal had said last night, laughing and making him feel even more ashamed. “They’re deathly afraid of germs, so just tell them you’re sick. Diarrhea works best.”

As if he’d called them up by thinking of them, the Twin Kings rolled around the corner, hands clasped around their royal bellies. “Earth to Space Man!” the shorter one cackled. “Don’t get your air hose caught in the drain down there!”

Ware glanced back at his grandmother’s unit, then faced them. “Better stay away. I’m *sick*.” He grabbed his belly and groaned in a convincing manner. The Twin Kings scuttled back around the corner.

Ware raised his eyes to the clock again: 7:58. He kicked off the seconds in the water.

At 7:59, he picked up the bricks. Then he slowly filled his lungs with the sunscreeny air—hot and sweet, as if someone was frying coconuts nearby—and slipped into the deep end. The bricks seemed to double in weight, sinking him softly to the bottom.

He’d never been on the bottom before, thanks to a certain amount of padding that functioned as an internal flotation device. “Baby fat,” his mother called it. “It’ll

turn into muscle.” Witnessing his bathing-suited self in his grandmother’s mirror every day, he realized his mother had omitted a crucial detail: *how* it would turn into muscle. Probably exercise was involved. Maybe tomorrow.

Ware located the four huge date palms—each one anchoring a corner of the pool. Their chunky trunks staggered in the ripples like live gargoyles.

At eight, the twinkle lights winding up those trunks were set to come on. Tonight he would see it from the bottom of the pool. Okay, the big event was not exactly a dazzling spectacle, but he’d discovered that everything looked more interesting through water—mysteriously distorted, but somehow clearer, too. He could hold his breath for over a minute, so he’d have plenty of time to appreciate the effect.

Five seconds later, though—a surprise. The palm fronds began to flash red.

Ware understood right away: ambulance. Three times already in the weeks he’d been at Sunset Palms, he’d been awakened by strobing red lights—no shock in a retirement place. He knew the drill: the ambulance cut the siren at the entrance—no sense causing any extra

heart attacks. It parked between the buildings, and then a crew ran around poolside where the doors to the units were sliders, easier to roll the stretchers in, haul the people out.

Don't be afraid, he telegraphed to whoever lay on the stretcher, the way he had the other times. Scared people seemed like raw eggs to him, wobbling around without their shells. It hurt just to think about people being scared.

While he watched the date palms pulse, he thought about being happy instead. How happiness could sneak up on you, like, for instance, when your parents send you away for the summer to your grandmother's place, which you know you'll hate, but it turns out you love it there because for the first time in your life you have long hours free and alone. Well, except for maybe two old men so harmless they're afraid of germs.

An egret, as white and smooth as though carved from soap, glided through the purpling sky. In a movie, a single flying bird like that would let you know that the main character was starting out on a journey. Ware wished, the way he always did when he saw something wonderful, that he could share things like this. *You see that? Wow.* But

he didn't really know anyone besides his grandmother here, and she hadn't been feeling well today, had barely stepped out of—

Ware released the bricks, burst to the surface, snapped off his goggles, and saw: Big Deal's sliding glass doors gaping open like a gasp, two EMTs inside, bent over a stretcher.

A third EMT squinted toward the pool, her white coat flashing pink in the lights, as if her heart beat in neon. Mrs. Sauer from Unit 4 hovered behind her, bathrobe clutched to her chest, face clenched. She raised one bony arm like a rifle and aimed her finger right at Ware.

Ware shot over to the ladder, slapped the water from his left ear, his right, and as he scrambled out he heard, "That's her grandson. Off in his own world."

At eight exactly, the twinkle lights came on.