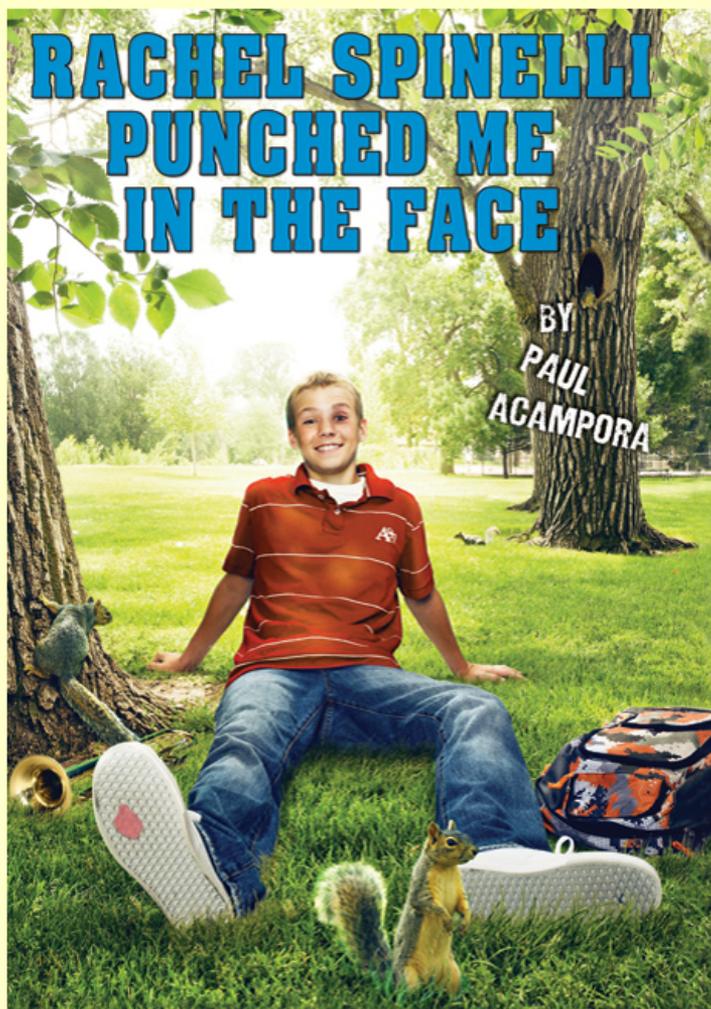


READ IT FIRST



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CHAPTER 1

FOR SEVERAL DAYS, AFTER DAD AND I discovered that Mom had gone, we tried very hard to lie. We pretended that she would be coming back even though we both knew better. Dad said things like, “We should paint the kitchen before Mom gets home.” I said, “Don’t forget to pick up some tea for Mom at the grocery store.”

But we couldn’t keep it up for long. We never did paint the kitchen. We never did buy the tea. And one night, when Dad put a bowl of spaghetti on the table between us, I said, “Mom wouldn’t like this.”

Dad took a bite. “Too plain?”

I nodded.

“Your mother’s a lot of things,” said Dad, “but she’s not plain.”

Once a week, Mom tried to serve up some kind of complicated recipe made out of strange textures and exotic spices. More than half of those concoctions ended up in the trash.

“You know the difference between my cooking and your mother’s?” Dad said.

“Yours tastes good?” I said.

“You got that right.”

Dad spoke with a Louisiana drawl he got from growing up in New Orleans. That’s where my parents first met. Dad was finishing college and paying for school by playing trumpet with six or eight different bands. Mom was on vacation and noticed my father on the stage of some club. She went to see him play every night until finally he said hello. A few months after that, Dad moved to Copper Lake, Colorado, Mom’s hometown. I was born a year later in a spare bedroom at my grandfather’s old ranch house.

“Did you and Mom ever think about moving back to New Orleans?” I asked Dad.

“I wouldn’t have said no to New Orleans,” he told me.

Dad and I ate the rest of the spaghetti without speaking. When we were done, we cleared the table and washed our things in the sink. Finally, I said, “She’s not coming back, is she?”

My father hesitated for just a moment before he answered. “No, Zachary. I don’t think so.” We returned the pot and plates to their shelves, then we stepped outside to watch the setting sun throw strange, brown shadows across the desert. “How about we go for a ride?” asked Dad.

“Okay.” I stepped into the passenger side of our old Jeep, and Dad slid behind the wheel.

“Buckle up,” Dad told me.

“Don’t want to get a ticket, huh?”

“The police around here don’t give tickets,” said Dad. “They just shoot you.”

I rolled my eyes. My father was Copper Lake’s lone police officer. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that.”

The Jeep started, and we headed west. After a short ride, we pulled onto an old dirt access road and bounced a little farther into rough, open space. Dad shut off the engine, and the two of us stepped outside to sit on the front bumper and stare at the desert. A deep, heavy quiet settled around us. “I never really liked this view,” Dad finally said.

“Did you like it when you thought the land might be yours one day?”

Before I was born, my Mom’s father owned all the land around us. After he died, my parents discovered that the old man hadn’t paid taxes in living memory. Rather than inheriting a thousand Colorado acres, Mom and Dad got a postage-stamp sized lot and the aluminum-sided trailer where we lived.

Dad considered my question. “Honestly,” he told me, “I can’t say that I did.”

At night, Mom used to study maps and memos hoping to find a loophole that would require the

government to return the land to our family. “Was there ever really a chance of getting it back?” I asked.

“Nope,” said Dad.

I can’t say I was disappointed. On one far corner of the property, an abandoned mine pond held an orangey-brown chemical slick that made rainbow patterns in the sun. I saw a duck land in the pond once. The bird gave a frantic quack, a couple flaps, and then it collapsed dead in the water. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for that.

I leaned my head back and watched twinkling stars reveal themselves above us. I wish I could say that I knew all the constellations, but my attempts to memorize them always failed. To me, the stars looked like ten thousand musical notes sprinkled randomly across the sky. In the darkening light, I turned and glanced at my father’s face. A tear ran down his cheek. I’d never seen him cry. I didn’t know what to say or do, but then I remembered Dad’s trumpet in the back seat. I grabbed the horn and pushed it toward my father. “Play something.”

He shook his head. “You do it, Zachary.”

I could play, but not like Dad. I pressed the trumpet into his hands. “Play,” I said again.

Dad took the instrument and examined the valves and the brass bell as if he’d never seen them before. Finally, he lifted the horn to his lips, took a breath, and then started to blow.

Before I was born, my father played for big time recording stars and no name brass bands. Now, in the middle of nowhere, he made a song just for me. It soared high into the sky then deep down like a punch in the gut. It was a mad, lonely tune that sounded like coyotes in the desert and my mother sneaking away before dawn. Dad played and played then finally let the last whisper of music fade like a prayer into the desert.

We were both quiet for a long time. “That was good,” I finally said.

Dad returned the trumpet to me. “I think we should get away from here,” he said.

I stood. “Do you mean away from this spot or away from Copper Lake?”

“I think I mean both,” said Dad.

I wasn't sure I wanted to leave Colorado, but staying didn't feel like a solution to anything either. I'd lived in Copper Lake for my whole life, but I didn't feel especially connected to the place. With school a bumpy, forty-five minute bus ride away, my group of friends was small and not particularly close. I'd certainly never had anything even vaguely resembling a girlfriend. And living in a metal box at the edge of town did not put us in the mix of whatever social life even existed in this tiny corner of the world. Now that Mom was gone, leaving felt as sensible as staying.

A few days later, my father told me about a town

in Connecticut that needed a police officer. “What do you think?” he asked.

I sat at our kitchen table. The walls around me were covered with posters that Mom left behind. They were pictures and paintings of faraway places and cruise ship destinations. Months earlier, she’d announced that it had always been her dream to work on a cruise ship. Now I held a short letter that contained Mom’s cell phone number, her new e-mail address, and a short note explaining that she’d decided to get away and follow that dream.

“I think that it’s not fair that Mom might be in Cancún or Bermuda or Fiji, and we’re still checking our shoes for bark scorpions in the morning.”

Dad nodded.

“What do you want?” I asked my father.

“I want us to be happy,” he told me.

“That’s all?”

“That would be enough.”

I glanced around our kitchen, which looked like the break room in a travel agent’s office. I recalled the arguments, some quiet and some not, between my parents during the past year. There’d been weeks when no more than a couple words passed between them and days when the orange poison pond had been a more pleasant spot than any place inside our house. I turned to my father. “Happy would be nice,” I said. “Let’s try it.”



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