

CAMP HALF-BLOOD



K. LEFAIVER

LONG ISLAND SOUND



1

*Hoodlums punch my face
I would smite them if I could
Mortality blows*

MY NAME IS APOLLO. I used to be a god.

In my four thousand, six hundred and twelve years, I have done many things. I inflicted a plague on the Greeks who besieged Troy. I blessed Babe Ruth with three home runs in game four of the 1926 World Series. I visited my wrath upon Britney Spears at the 2007 MTV Video Music Awards.

But in all my immortal life I never before crash-landed in a dumpster.

I'm not even sure how it happened.

I simply woke up falling. Skyscrapers spiralled in and out of view. Flames streamed off my body. I tried to fly. I tried to change into a cloud or teleport across the world or do a hundred other things that should have been easy for me, but I just kept falling. I plunged into a narrow canyon between two buildings and **BAM!**

Is anything sadder than the sound of a god hitting a pile of garbage bags?

I lay groaning and aching in the open dumpster. My nostrils burned with the stench of rancid salami and used

diapers. My ribs felt broken, though that shouldn't have been possible.

My mind stewed in confusion, but one memory floated to the surface – the voice of my father, Zeus: *YOUR FAULT. YOUR PUNISHMENT.*

I realized what had happened to me. And I sobbed in despair.

Even for a god of poetry such as myself, it is difficult to describe how I felt. How could you – a mere mortal – possibly understand? Imagine being stripped of your clothes, then blasted with a fire hose in front of a laughing crowd. Imagine the ice-cold water filling your mouth and lungs, the pressure bruising your skin, turning your joints to putty. Imagine feeling helpless, ashamed, completely vulnerable – publicly and brutally stripped of everything that makes you *you*. My humiliation was worse than that.

YOUR FAULT, Zeus's voice rang in my head.

'No!' I cried miserably. 'No, it wasn't! Please!'

Nobody answered. On either side of me, rusty fire escapes zigzagged up brick walls. Above, the winter sky was grey and unforgiving.

I tried to remember the details of my sentencing. Had my father told me how long this punishment would last? What was I supposed to do to regain his favour?

My memory was too fuzzy. I could barely recall what Zeus looked like, much less why he'd decided to toss me to earth. There'd been a war with the giants, I thought. The gods had been caught off guard, embarrassed, almost defeated.

The only thing I knew for certain: my punishment was

unfair. Zeus needed someone to blame, so of course he'd picked the handsomest, most talented, most popular god in the pantheon: me.

I lay in the garbage, staring at the label inside the dumpster lid: FOR PICK-UP, CALL 1-555-STENCHY.

Zeus will reconsider, I told myself. *He's just trying to scare me. Any moment, he will yank me back to Olympus and let me off with a warning.*

'Yes . . .' My voice sounded hollow and desperate. 'Yes, that's it.'

I tried to move. I wanted to be on my feet when Zeus came to apologize. My ribs throbbed. My stomach clenched. I clawed the rim of the dumpster and managed to drag myself over the side. I toppled out and landed on my shoulder, which made a cracking sound against the tarmac.

'*Araggeeddeee*,' I whimpered through the pain. 'Stand up. Stand up.'

Getting to my feet was not easy. My head spun. I almost passed out from the effort. I stood in a dead-end alley. About fifty feet away, the only exit opened onto a street with grimy storefronts for a bail bondsman's office and a pawnshop. I was somewhere on the west side of Manhattan, I guessed, or perhaps Crown Heights, in Brooklyn. Zeus must have been really angry with me.

I inspected my new body. I appeared to be a teenaged Caucasian male, clad in sneakers, blue jeans and a green polo shirt. How utterly *drab*. I felt sick, weak and so, so human.

I will never understand how you mortals tolerate it. You live your entire life trapped in a sack of meat, unable to

enjoy simple pleasures like changing into a hummingbird or dissolving into pure light.

And now, heavens help me, I was one of you – just another meat sack.

I fumbled through my pockets, hoping I still had the keys to my sun chariot. No such luck. I found a cheap nylon wallet containing a hundred dollars in American currency – lunch money for my first day as a mortal, perhaps – along with a New York State junior driver's licence featuring a photo of a dorky, curly-haired teen who could not possibly be me, with the name *Lester Papadopoulos*. The cruelty of Zeus knew no bounds!

I peered into the dumpster, hoping my bow, quiver and lyre might have fallen to earth with me. I would have settled for my harmonica. There was nothing.

I took a deep breath. *Cheer up*, I told myself. *I must have retained some of my godly abilities. Matters could be worse.*

A raspy voice called, 'Hey, Cade, take a look at this loser.'

Blocking the alley's exit were two young men: one squat and platinum blond, the other tall and redheaded. Both wore oversize hoodies and baggy jeans. Serpentine tattoo designs covered their necks. All they were missing were the words I'M A THUG printed in large letters across their foreheads.

The redhead zeroed in on the wallet in my hand. 'Now, be nice, Mikey. This guy looks friendly enough.' He grinned and pulled a hunting knife from his belt. 'In fact, I bet he wants to give us all his money.'

I blame my disorientation for what happened next.

I knew my immortality had been stripped away, but I still considered myself the mighty Apollo! One cannot change one's way of thinking as easily as one might, say, turn into a snow leopard.

Also, on previous occasions when Zeus had punished me by making me mortal (yes, it had happened twice before) I had retained massive strength and at least some of my godly powers. I assumed the same would be true now.

I was *not* going to allow two young mortal ruffians to take Lester Papadopoulos's wallet.

I stood up straight, hoping Cade and Mikey would be intimidated by my regal bearing and divine beauty. (Surely those qualities could not be taken from me, no matter what my driver's licence photo looked like.) I ignored the warm dumpster juice trickling down my neck.

'I am Apollo,' I announced. 'You mortals have three choices: offer me tribute, flee or be destroyed.'

I wanted my words to echo through the alley, shake the towers of New York and cause the skies to rain smoking ruin. None of that happened. On the word *destroyed*, my voice squeaked.

The redhead Cade grinned even wider. I thought how amusing it would be if I could make the snake tattoos around his neck come alive and strangle him to death.

'What do you think, Mikey?' he asked his friend. 'Should we give this guy tribute?'

Mikey scowled. With his bristly blond hair, his cruel small eyes and his thick frame, he reminded me of the

monstrous sow that terrorized the village of Crommyon back in the good old days.

'Not feeling the tribute, Cade.' His voice sounded like he'd been eating lit cigarettes. 'What were the other options?'

'Fleeing?' said Cade.

'Nah,' said Mikey.

'Being destroyed?'

Mikey snorted. 'How about we destroy *him* instead?'

Cade flipped his knife and caught it by the handle. 'I can live with that. After you.'

I slipped the wallet into my back pocket. I raised my fists. I did not like the idea of flattening mortals into flesh waffles, but I was sure I could do it. Even in my weakened state, I would be far stronger than any human.

'I warned you,' I said. 'My powers are far beyond your comprehension.'

Mikey cracked his knuckles. 'Uh-huh.'

He lumbered towards me.

As soon as he was in range, I struck. I put all my wrath into that punch. It should have been enough to vaporize Mikey and leave a thug-shaped impression on the tarmac.

Instead he ducked, which I found quite annoying.

I stumbled forward. I have to say that when Prometheus fashioned you humans out of clay he did a shoddy job. Mortal legs are clumsy. I tried to compensate, drawing upon my boundless reserves of agility, but Mikey kicked me in the back. I fell on my divine face.

My nostrils inflated like airbags. My ears popped. The

taste of copper filled my mouth. I rolled over, groaning, and found the two blurry thugs staring down at me.

'Mikey,' said Cade, 'are you comprehending this guy's power?'

'Nah,' said Mikey. 'I'm not comprehending it.'

'Fools!' I croaked. 'I will destroy you!'

'Yeah, sure.' Cade tossed away his knife. 'But first I think we'll stomp you.'

Cade raised his boot over my face, and the world went black.

2

A girl from nowhere

Completes my embarrassment

Stupid bananas

I HAD NOT BEEN STOMPED so badly since my guitar contest against Chuck Berry in 1957.

As Cade and Mikey kicked me, I curled into a ball, trying to protect my ribs and head. The pain was intolerable. I retched and shuddered. I blacked out and came to, my vision swimming with red splotches. When my attackers got tired of kicking me, they hit me over the head with a bag of garbage, which burst and covered me in coffee grounds and mouldy fruit peels.

At last they stepped away, breathing heavily. Rough hands patted me down and took my wallet.

'Looke here,' said Cade. 'Some cash and an ID for . . . Lester Papadopoulos.'

Mikey laughed. '*Lester?* That's even worse than Apollo.'

I touched my nose, which felt roughly the size and texture of a waterbed mattress. My fingers came away glistening red.

'Blood,' I muttered. 'That's not possible.'

'It's very possible, Lester.' Cade crouched next to me. 'And there might be more blood in your near future. You

want to explain why you don't have a credit card? Or a phone? I'd hate to think I did all that stomping for just a hundred bucks.'

I stared at the blood on my fingertips. I was a god. I did not *have* blood. Even when I'd been turned mortal before, golden ichor still ran through my veins. I had never before been so . . . *converted*. It must be a mistake. A trick. Something.

I tried to sit up.

My hand hit a banana peel and I fell again. My attackers howled in delight.

'I love this guy!' Mikey said.

'Yeah, but the boss told us he'd be loaded,' Cade complained.

'Boss . . .' I muttered. 'Boss?'

'That's right, Lester.' Cade flicked a finger against the side of my head. "'Go to that alley," the boss told us. "Easy score." He said we should rough you up, take whatever you had. But this –' he waved the cash under my nose – 'this isn't much of a payday.'

Despite my predicament, I felt a surge of hopefulness. If these thugs had been sent here to find me, their 'boss' must be a god. No mortal could have known I would fall to earth at this spot. Perhaps Cade and Mikey were not human either. Perhaps they were cleverly disguised monsters or spirits. At least that would explain why they had beaten me so easily.

'Who – who is your boss?' I struggled to my feet, coffee grounds dribbling from my shoulders. My dizziness made me feel as if I were flying too close to the fumes of primordial

Chaos, but I refused to be humbled. ‘Did Zeus send you? Or perhaps Ares? I demand an audience!’

Mikey and Cade looked at each other as if to say, *Can you believe this guy?*

Cade picked up his knife. ‘You don’t take a hint, do you, Lester?’

Mikey pulled off his belt – a length of bike chain – and wrapped it around his fist.

I decided to sing them into submission. They may have resisted my fists, but no mortal could resist my golden voice. I was trying to decide between ‘You Send Me’ and an original composition, ‘I’m Your Poetry God, Baby’, when a voice yelled, ‘HEY!’

The hooligans turned. Above us, on the second-storey fire-escape landing, stood a girl of about twelve. ‘Leave him alone,’ she ordered.

My first thought was that Artemis had come to my aid. My sister often appeared as a twelve-year-old girl for reasons I’d never fully understood. But something told me this was not she.

The girl on the fire escape did not exactly inspire fear. She was small and pudgy, with dark hair chopped in a messy pageboy style and black cat-eye glasses with rhinestones glittering in the corners. Despite the cold, she wore no coat. Her outfit looked like it had been picked by a kindergartener – red sneakers, yellow tights and a green sleeveless dress. Perhaps she was on her way to a costume party dressed as a traffic light.

Still . . . there was something fierce in her expression.

She had the same obstinate scowl my old girlfriend Cyrene used to get whenever she wrestled lions.

Mikey and Cade did not seem impressed.

‘Get lost, kid,’ Mikey told her.

The girl stamped her foot, causing the fire escape to shudder. ‘My alley. My rules!’ Her bossy nasal voice made her sound like she was chiding a playmate in a game of make-believe. ‘Whatever that loser has is mine, including his money!’

‘Why is everyone calling me a loser?’ I asked weakly. The comment seemed unfair, even if I was beat-up and covered in garbage, but no one paid me any attention.

Cade glared at the girl. The red from his hair seemed to be seeping into his face. ‘You’ve got to be kidding me. Beat it, you brat!’ He picked up a rotten apple and threw it.

The girl didn’t flinch. The fruit landed at her feet and rolled harmlessly to a stop.

‘You want to play with food?’ The girl wiped her nose. ‘Okay.’

I didn’t see her kick the apple, but it came flying back with deadly accuracy and hit Cade in the nose. He collapsed on his rump.

Mikey snarled. He marched towards the fire-escape ladder, but a banana peel seemed to slither directly into his path. He slipped and fell hard. ‘OWWW!’

I backed away from the fallen thugs. I wondered if I should make a run for it, but I could barely hobble. I also did not want to be assaulted with old fruit.

The girl climbed over the railing. She dropped to the

ground with surprising nimbleness and grabbed a sack of garbage from the dumpster.

'Stop!' Cade did a sort of scuttling crab walk to get away from the girl. 'Let's talk about this!'

Mikey groaned and rolled onto his back.

The girl pouted. Her lips were chapped. She had wispy black fuzz at the corners of her mouth.

'I don't like you guys,' she said. 'You should go.'

'Yeah!' Cade said. 'Sure! Just . . .'

He reached for the money scattered among the coffee grounds.

The girl swung her garbage bag. In mid arc the plastic exploded, disgorging an impossible number of rotten bananas. They knocked Cade flat. Mikey was plastered with so many peels he looked like he was being attacked by carnivorous starfish.

'Leave my alley,' the girl said. 'Now.'

In the dumpster, more trash bags burst like popcorn kernels, showering Cade and Mikey with radishes, potato peelings and other compost material. Miraculously, none of it got on me. Despite their injuries, the two thugs scrambled to their feet and ran away, screaming.

I turned towards my pint-size saviour. I was no stranger to dangerous women. My sister could rain down arrows of death. My stepmother, Hera, regularly drove mortals mad so that they would hack each other to pieces. But this garbage-wielding twelve-year-old made me nervous.

'Thank you,' I ventured.

The girl crossed her arms. On her middle fingers she wore matching gold rings with crescent signets. Her eyes

glinted darkly like a crow's. (I can make that comparison because I invented crows.)

'Don't thank me,' she said. 'You're still in my alley.'

She walked a full circle around me, scrutinizing my appearance as if I were a prize cow. (I can also make that comparison, because I used to collect prize cows.)

'You're the god Apollo?' She sounded less than awestruck. She also didn't seem fazed by the idea of gods walking among mortals.

'You were listening, then?'

She nodded. 'You don't look like a god.'

'I'm not at my best,' I admitted. 'My father, Zeus, has exiled me from Olympus. And who are you?'

She smelled faintly of apple pie, which was surprising, since she looked so grubby. Part of me wanted to find a fresh towel, clean her face and give her money for a hot meal. Part of me wanted to fend her off with a chair in case she decided to bite me. She reminded me of the strays my sister was always adopting: dogs, panthers, homeless maidens, small dragons.

'Name is Meg,' she said.

'Short for Megara? Or Margaret?'

'Margaret. But don't ever call me Margaret.'

'And are you a demigod, Meg?'

She pushed up her glasses. 'Why would you think that?'

Again she didn't seem surprised by the question. I sensed she had heard the term *demigod* before.

'Well,' I said, 'you obviously have some power. You chased off those hooligans with rotten fruit. Perhaps you have banana-kinesis? Or you can control garbage? I once

knew a Roman goddess, Cloacina, who presided over the city's sewer system. Perhaps you're related . . . ?

Meg pouted. I got the impression I might have said something wrong, though I couldn't imagine what.

'I think I'll just take your money,' Meg said. 'Go on. Get out of here.'

'No, wait!' Desperation crept into my voice. 'Please, I – I may need a bit of assistance.'

I felt ridiculous, of course. Me – the god of prophecy, plague, archery, healing, music and several other things I couldn't remember at the moment – asking a colourfully dressed street urchin for help. But I had no one else. If this child chose to take my money and kick me into the cruel winter streets, I didn't think I could stop her.

'Say I believe you . . .' Meg's voice took on a singsong tone, as if she were about to announce the rules of the game: *I'll be the princess, and you'll be the scullery maid.* 'Say I decide to help. What then?'

Good question, I thought. 'We . . . we are in Manhattan?'

'Mm-hmm.' She twirled and did a playful skip-kick. 'Hell's Kitchen.'

It seemed wrong for a child to say *Hell's Kitchen*. Then again, it seemed wrong for a child to live in an alley and have garbage fights with thugs.

I considered walking to the Empire State Building. That was the modern gateway to Mount Olympus, but I doubted the guards would let me up to the secret six-hundredth floor. Zeus would not make it so easy.

Perhaps I could find my old friend Chiron the centaur. He had a training camp on Long Island. He could offer

me shelter and guidance. But that would be a dangerous journey. A defenceless god makes for a juicy target. Any monster along the way would cheerfully disembowel me. Jealous spirits and minor gods might also welcome the opportunity. Then there was Cade and Mikey's mysterious 'boss'. I had no idea who he was, or whether he had other, worse minions to send against me.

Even if I made it to Long Island, my new mortal eyes might not be able to *find* Chiron's camp in its magically camouflaged valley. I needed a guide to get me there – someone experienced and close by . . .

'I have an idea.' I stood as straight as my injuries allowed. It wasn't easy to look confident with a bloody nose and coffee grounds dripping off my clothes. 'I know someone who might help. He lives on the Upper East Side. Take me to him, and I shall reward you.'

Meg made a sound between a sneeze and a laugh. 'Reward me with what?' She danced around, plucking twenty-dollar bills from the trash. 'I'm already taking all your money.'

'Hey!'

She tossed me my wallet, now empty except for Lester Papadopoulos's junior driver's licence.

Meg sang, 'I've got your money, I've got your money.'

I stifled a growl. 'Listen, child, I won't be mortal forever. Some day I will become a god again. Then I will reward those who helped me – and punish those who didn't.'

She put her hands on her hips. 'How do *you* know what will happen? Have you ever been mortal before?'

'Yes, actually. Twice! Both times, my punishment only lasted a few years at most!'

'Oh, yeah? And how did you get back to being all goddy or whatever?'

'*Goddy* is not a word,' I pointed out, though my poetic sensibilities were already thinking of ways I might use it. 'Usually Zeus requires me to work as a slave for some important demigod. This fellow uptown I mentioned, for instance. He'd be perfect! I do whatever tasks my new master requires for a few years. As long as I behave, I am allowed back to Olympus. Right now I just have to recover my strength and figure out –'

'How do you know for sure which demigod?'

I blinked. 'What?'

'Which demigod you're supposed to serve, dummy.'

'I . . . uh. Well, it's usually obvious. I just sort of run into them. That's why I want to get to the Upper East Side. My new master will claim my service and –'

'I'm Meg McCaffrey!' Meg blew me a raspberry. 'And I claim your service!'

Overhead, thunder rumbled in the grey sky. The sound echoed through the city canyons like divine laughter.

Whatever was left of my pride turned to ice water and trickled into my socks. 'I walked right into that, didn't I?'

'Yep!' Meg bounced up and down in her red sneakers. 'We're going to have fun!'

With great difficulty, I resisted the urge to weep. 'Are you sure you're not Artemis in disguise?'

'I'm that other thing,' Meg said, counting my money. 'The thing you said before. A demigod.'

'How do you know?'

‘Just do.’ She gave me a smug smile. ‘And now I have a sidekick god named Lester!’

I raised my face to the heavens. ‘Please, Father, I get the point. Please, I can’t do this!’

Zeus did not answer. He was probably too busy recording my humiliation to share on Snapchat.

‘Cheer up,’ Meg told me. ‘Who’s that guy you wanted to see – the guy on the Upper East Side?’

‘Another demigod,’ I said. ‘He knows the way to a camp where I might find shelter, guidance, food –’

‘Food?’ Meg’s ears perked up almost as much as the points on her glasses. ‘*Good* food?’

‘Well, normally I just eat ambrosia, but, yes, I suppose.’

‘Then that’s my first order! We’re going to find this guy to take us to the camp place!’

I sighed miserably. It was going to be a very long servitude.

‘As you wish,’ I said. ‘Let’s find Percy Jackson.’



3

Used to be goddy

Now uptown feeling shoddy

Bah, haiku don't rhyme

AS WE TRUDGED up Madison Avenue, my mind swirled with questions: why hadn't Zeus given me a winter coat? Why did Percy Jackson live so far uptown? Why did pedestrians keep staring at me?

I wondered if my divine radiance was starting to return. Perhaps the New Yorkers were awed by my obvious power and unearthly good looks.

Meg McCaffrey set me straight.

'You smell,' she said. 'You look like you've just been mugged.'

'I *have* just been mugged. Also enslaved by a small child.'

'It's not slavery.' She chewed off a piece of her thumb cuticle and spat it out. 'It's more like mutual cooperation.'

'Mutual in the sense that you give orders and I am forced to cooperate?'

'Yep.' She stopped in front of a shop window. 'See? You look gross.'

My reflection stared back at me, except it was *not* my

reflection. It couldn't be. The face was the same as on Lester Papadopoulos's ID.

I looked about sixteen. My medium-length hair was dark and curly – a style I had rocked in Athenian times, and again in the 1970s. My eyes were blue. My face was pleasing enough in a dorkish way, but it was marred by a swollen aubergine-coloured nose, which had dripped a gruesome moustache of blood down my upper lip. Even worse, my cheeks were covered with some sort of rash that looked suspiciously like . . . My heart climbed into my throat.

'Horrors!' I cried. 'Is that – Is that *acne*?'

Immortal gods do *not* get acne. It is one of our inalienable rights. Yet I leaned closer to the glass and saw that my skin was indeed a scarred landscape of whiteheads and pustules.

I balled my fists and wailed to the cruel sky, 'Zeus, what have I done to deserve this?'

Meg tugged at my sleeve. 'You're going to get yourself arrested.'

'What does it matter? I have been made a teenager, and not even one with perfect skin! I bet I don't even have . . .' With a cold sense of dread, I lifted my shirt. My midriff was covered with a floral pattern of bruises from my fall into the dumpster and my subsequent kicking. But, even worse, I had *flab*.

'Oh, no, no, no.' I staggered around the sidewalk, hoping the flab would not follow me. 'Where are my eight-pack abs? I *always* have eight-pack abs. I *never* have love handles. Never in four thousand years!'

Meg made another snorting laugh. 'Sheesh, crybaby, you're fine.'

'I'm fat!'

'You're average. Average people don't have eight-pack abs. C'mon.'

I wanted to protest that I was not average *nor* a person, but with growing despair I realized the term now fitted me perfectly.

On the other side of the shop window, a security guard's face loomed, scowling at me. I allowed Meg to pull me further down the street.

She skipped along, occasionally stopping to pick up a coin or swing herself around a streetlamp. The child seemed unfazed by the cold weather, the dangerous journey ahead and the fact that I was suffering from acne.

'How are you so calm?' I demanded. 'You are a demigod, walking with a god, on your way to a camp to meet others of your kind. Doesn't any of that surprise you?'

'Eh.' She folded one of my twenty-dollar bills into a paper aeroplane. 'I've seen a bunch of weird stuff.'

I was tempted to ask what could be weirder than the morning we had just had. I decided I might not be able to stand the stress of knowing. 'Where are you from?'

'I told you. The alley.'

'No, but . . . your parents? Family? Friends?'

A ripple of discomfort passed over her face. She returned her attention to her twenty-dollar plane. 'Not important.'

My highly advanced people-reading skills told me she was hiding something, but that was not unusual for

demigods. For children blessed with an immortal parent, they were strangely sensitive about their backgrounds. ‘And you’ve never heard of Camp Half-Blood? Or Camp Jupiter?’

‘Nuh-uh.’ She tested the aeroplane’s point on her fingertip. ‘How much further to Perry’s house?’

‘Percy’s. I’m not sure. A few more blocks . . . I think.’

That seemed to satisfy Meg. She hopscotched ahead, throwing the cash aeroplane and retrieving it. She cartwheeled through the intersection at East Seventy-Second Street – her clothes a flurry of traffic-light colours so bright I worried the drivers might get confused and run her down. Fortunately, New York drivers were used to swerving around oblivious pedestrians.

I decided Meg must be a feral demigod. They were rare but not unheard of. Without any support network, without being discovered by other demigods or taken in for proper training, she had still managed to survive. But her luck would not last. Monsters usually began hunting down and killing young heroes around the time they turned thirteen, when their true powers began to manifest. Meg did not have long. She needed to be brought to Camp Half-Blood as much as I did. She was fortunate to have met me.

(I know that last statement seems obvious. *Everyone* who meets me is fortunate, but you take my meaning.)

Had I been my usual omniscient self, I could have gleaned Meg’s destiny. I could have looked into her soul and seen all I needed to know about her godly parentage, her powers, her motives and secrets.

Now I was blind to such things. I could only be sure she was a demigod because she had successfully claimed my service. Zeus had affirmed her right with a clap of thunder. I felt the binding upon me like a shroud of tightly wrapped banana peels. Whoever Meg McCaffrey was, however she had happened to find me, our fates were now intertwined.

It was almost as embarrassing as the acne.

We turned east on Eighty-Second Street.

By the time we reached Second Avenue, the neighbourhood started to look familiar – rows of apartment buildings, hardware shops, convenience stores and Indian restaurants. I knew that Percy Jackson lived around here somewhere, but my trips across the sky in the sun chariot had given me something of a Google Earth orientation. I wasn't used to travelling at street level.

Also, in this mortal form, my flawless memory had become . . . flawed. Mortal fears and needs clouded my thoughts. I wanted to eat. I wanted to use the restroom. My body hurt. My clothes stank. I felt as if my brain had been stuffed with wet cotton. Honestly, how do you humans stand it?

After a few more blocks, a mixture of sleet and rain began to fall. Meg tried to catch the precipitation on her tongue, which I thought a very ineffective way to get a drink – and of dirty water, no less. I shivered and concentrated on happy thoughts: the Bahamas, the Nine Muses in perfect harmony, the many horrible punishments I would visit on Cade and Mikey when I became a god again.

I still wondered about their boss and how he had known where I would fall to earth. No mortal could've had that

knowledge. In fact, the more I thought about it, I didn't see how even a god (other than myself) could have foreseen the future so accurately. After all, I had been the god of prophecy, master of the Oracle of Delphi, distributor of the highest quality sneak previews of destiny for millennia.

Of course, I had no shortage of enemies. One of the natural consequences of being so awesome is that I attracted envy from all quarters. But I could only think of one adversary who might be able to tell the future. And if he came looking for me in my weakened state . . .

I tamped down that thought. I had enough to worry about. No point scaring myself to death with what-ifs.

We began searching side streets, checking names on apartment mailboxes and intercom panels. The Upper East Side had a surprising number of Jacksons. I found that annoying.

After several failed attempts, we turned a corner and there – parked under a crape myrtle tree – sat an older model blue Prius. Its hood bore the unmistakable dents of pegasus hooves. (How was I sure? I know my hoof marks. Also, normal horses do not gallop over Toyotas. Pegasi often do.)

'Aha,' I told Meg. 'We're getting close.'

Half a block down, I recognized the building: a five-storey brick terraced house with rusty air conditioner units sagging from the windows. '*Voilà!*' I cried.

At the front steps, Meg stopped as if she'd run into an invisible barrier. She stared back towards Second Avenue, her dark eyes turbulent.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Thought I saw them again.'

'Them?' I followed her gaze but saw nothing unusual. 'The thugs from the alley?'

'No. Couple of . . .' She waggled her fingers. 'Shiny blobs. Saw them back on Park Avenue.'

My pulse increased from an andante tempo to a lively allegretto. 'Shiny blobs? Why didn't you say anything?'

She tapped the temples of her glasses. 'I've seen a lot of weird stuff. Told you that. Mostly, things don't bother me, but . . .'

'But if they are following us,' I said, 'that would be bad.'

I scanned the street again. I saw nothing amiss, but I didn't doubt Meg had seen shiny blobs. Many spirits could appear that way. My own father, Zeus, once took the form of a shiny blob to woo a mortal woman. (Why the mortal woman found that attractive, I have no idea.)

'We should get inside,' I said. 'Percy Jackson will help us.'

Still, Meg held back. She had shown no fear while pelting muggers with garbage in a blind alley, but now she seemed to be having second thoughts about ringing a doorbell. It occurred to me she might have met demigods before. Perhaps those meetings had not gone well.

'Meg,' I said, 'I realize some demigods are not good. I could tell you stories of all the ones I've had to kill or transform into herbs -'

'Herbs?'

'But Percy Jackson has always been reliable. You have nothing to fear. Besides, he likes me. I taught him everything he knows.'

She frowned. 'You did?'

I found her innocence somewhat charming. So many obvious things she did not know. 'Of course. Now let's go up.'

I rang the buzzer. A few moments later, the garbled voice of a woman answered, 'Yes?'

'Hello,' I said. 'This is Apollo.'

Static.

'The *god* Apollo,' I said, thinking perhaps I should be more specific. 'Is Percy home?'

More static, followed by two voices in muted conversation. The front door buzzed. I pushed it open. Just before I stepped inside, I caught a flash of movement in the corner of my eye. I peered down the sidewalk but again saw nothing.

Perhaps it had been a reflection. Or a whirl of sleet. Or perhaps it had been a shiny blob. My scalp tingled with apprehension.

'What?' Meg asked.

'Probably nothing.' I forced a cheerful tone. I did not want Meg bolting off when we were so close to reaching safety. We were bound together now. I would have to follow her if she ordered me to, and I did not fancy living in the alley with her forever. 'Let's go up. We can't keep our hosts waiting.'

After all I had done for Percy Jackson, I expected delight upon my arrival. A tearful welcome, a few burnt offerings and a small festival in my honour would not have been inappropriate.

Instead, the young man swung open the apartment door and said, 'Why?'

As usual, I was struck by his resemblance to his father, Poseidon. He had the same sea-green eyes, the same dark tousled hair, the same handsome features that could shift from humour to anger so easily. However, Percy Jackson did not favour his father's chosen garb of beach shorts and Hawaiian shirts. He was dressed in ragged jeans and a blue hoodie with the words A.H.S. SWIM TEAM stitched across the front.

Meg inched back into the hallway, hiding behind me.

I tried for a smile. 'Percy Jackson, my blessings upon you! I am in need of assistance.'

Percy's eyes darted from me to Meg. 'Who's your friend?'

'This is Meg McCaffrey,' I said, 'a demigod who must be taken to Camp Half-Blood. She rescued me from street thugs.'

'Rescued . . .' Percy scanned my battered face. 'You mean the "beat-up teenager" look isn't just a disguise? Dude, what happened to you?'

'I may have mentioned the street thugs.'

'But you're a god.'

'About that . . . I *was* a god.'

Percy blinked. 'Was?'

'Also,' I said, 'I'm fairly certain we're being followed by malicious spirits.'

If I didn't know how much Percy Jackson adored me, I would have sworn he was about to punch me in my already-broken nose.

He sighed. 'Maybe you two should come inside.'

4

Casa de Jackson

No gold-plated throne for guests

Seriously, dude?

ANOTHER THING I have never understood: how can you mortals live in such tiny places? Where is your pride? Your sense of style?

The Jackson apartment had no grand throne room, no colonnades, no terraces or banquet halls or even a thermal bath. It had a tiny living room with an attached kitchen and a single hallway leading to what I assumed were the bedrooms. The place was on the top floor, and while I wasn't so picky as to expect an elevator I did find it odd there was no landing deck for flying chariots. What did they do when guests from the sky wanted to visit?

Standing behind the kitchen counter, making a smoothie, was a strikingly attractive mortal woman of about forty. Her long brown hair had a few grey streaks, but her bright eyes, quick smile and festive tie-dyed sundress made her look younger.

As we entered, she turned off the blender and stepped out from behind the counter.

'Sacred Sibyl!' I cried. 'Madam, there is something wrong with your midsection!'

The woman stopped, mystified, and looked down at her hugely swollen belly. 'Well, I'm seven months pregnant.'

I wanted to cry for her. Carrying such a weight didn't seem natural. My sister, Artemis, had experience with midwifery, but I had always found it one area of the healing arts best left to others. 'How can you bear it?' I asked. 'My mother, Leto, suffered through a long pregnancy, but only because Hera cursed her. Are you cursed?'

Percy stepped to my side. 'Um, Apollo? She's not cursed. And can you not mention Hera?'

'You poor woman.' I shook my head. 'A goddess would never allow herself to be so encumbered. She would give birth as soon as she felt like it.'

'That must be nice,' the woman agreed.

Percy Jackson coughed. 'So anyway. Mom, this is Apollo and his friend Meg. Guys, this is my mom.'

The Mother of Jackson smiled and shook our hands. 'Call me Sally.'

Her eyes narrowed as she studied my busted nose. 'Dear, that looks painful. What happened?'

I attempted to explain, but I choked on my words. I, the silver-tongued god of poetry, could not bring myself to describe my fall from grace to this kind woman.

I understood why Poseidon had been so smitten with her. Sally Jackson possessed just the right combination of compassion, strength and beauty. She was one of those rare mortal women who could connect spiritually with a god as an equal – to be neither terrified of us nor greedy for what we can offer, but to provide us with true companionship.

If I had still been an immortal, I might have flirted

with her myself. But I was now a sixteen-year-old boy. My mortal form was working its way upon my state of mind. I saw Sally Jackson as a mom – a fact that both consternated and embarrassed me. I thought about how long it had been since I had called my own mother. I should probably take her to lunch when I got back to Olympus.

‘I tell you what.’ Sally patted my shoulder. ‘Percy can help you get bandaged and cleaned up.’

‘I can?’ asked Percy.

Sally gave him the slightest motherly eyebrow raise. ‘There’s a first-aid kit in your bathroom, sweetheart. Apollo can take a shower, then wear your extra clothes. You two are about the same size.’

‘That,’ Percy said, ‘is truly depressing.’

Sally cupped her hand under Meg’s chin. Thankfully, Meg did not bite her. Sally’s expression remained gentle and reassuring, but I could see the worry in her eyes. No doubt she was thinking, *Who dressed this poor girl like a traffic light?*

‘I have some clothes that might fit you, dear,’ Sally said. ‘Pre-pregnancy clothes, of course. Let’s get you cleaned up. Then we’ll get you something to eat.’

‘I like food,’ Meg muttered.

Sally laughed. ‘Well, we have that in common. Percy, you take Apollo. We’ll meet you back here in a while.’

In short order, I was showered, bandaged and dressed in Jacksonesque hand-me-downs. Percy left me alone in the bathroom to take care of all this myself, for which I was grateful. He offered me some ambrosia and nectar – food and

drink of the gods – to heal my wounds, but I was not sure it would be safe to consume in my mortal state. I didn't want to self-combust, so I stuck with mortal first-aid supplies.

When I was done, I stared at my battered face in the bathroom mirror. Perhaps teenage angst had permeated the clothes, because I felt more like a sulky high-schooler than ever. I thought how unfair it was that I was being punished, how lame my father was, how no one else in the history of time had ever experienced problems like mine.

Of course, all that was empirically true. No exaggeration was required.

At least my wounds seemed to be healing at a faster rate than a normal mortal's. The swelling in my nose had subsided. My ribs still ached, but I no longer felt as if someone were knitting a sweater inside my chest with hot needles.

Accelerated healing was the *least* Zeus could do for me. I was a god of medicinal arts, after all. Zeus probably just wanted me to get well quickly so I could endure more pain, but I was grateful nonetheless.

I wondered if I should start a small fire in Percy Jackson's sink, perhaps burn some bandages in thanks, but I decided that might strain the Jacksons' hospitality.

I examined the black T-shirt Percy had given me. Emblazoned on the front was Led Zeppelin's logo for their record label: winged Icarus falling from the sky. I had no problem with Led Zeppelin. I had inspired all their best songs. But I had a sneaking suspicion that Percy had given me this shirt as a joke – the fall from the sky. Yes, ha-ha. I didn't need to be a god of poetry to spot the metaphor. I decided not to comment on it. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

I took a deep breath. Then I did my usual motivational speech in the mirror: 'You are gorgeous and people love you!'

I went out to face the world.

Percy was sitting on his bed, staring at the trail of blood droplets I had made across his carpet.

'Sorry about that,' I said.

Percy spread his hands. 'Actually, I was thinking about the last time I had a nosebleed.'

'Oh . . .'

The memory came back to me, though hazy and incomplete. Athens. The Acropolis. We gods had battled side by side with Percy Jackson and his comrades. We defeated an army of giants, but a drop of Percy's blood hit the earth and awakened the Earth Mother Gaia, who had not been in a good mood.

That's when Zeus turned on me. He'd accused me of starting the whole thing, just because Gaia had duped one of my progeny, a boy named Octavian, into plunging the Roman and Greek demigod camps into a civil war that almost destroyed human civilization. I ask you, *How was that my fault?*

Regardless, Zeus had held *me* responsible for Octavian's delusions of grandeur. Zeus seemed to consider egotism a trait the boy had inherited from me. Which is ridiculous. I am much too self-aware to be egotistical.

'What happened to you, man?' Percy's voice stirred me from my reverie. 'The war ended in August. It's January.'

'It is?' I suppose the wintry weather should have been a clue, but I hadn't given it much thought.