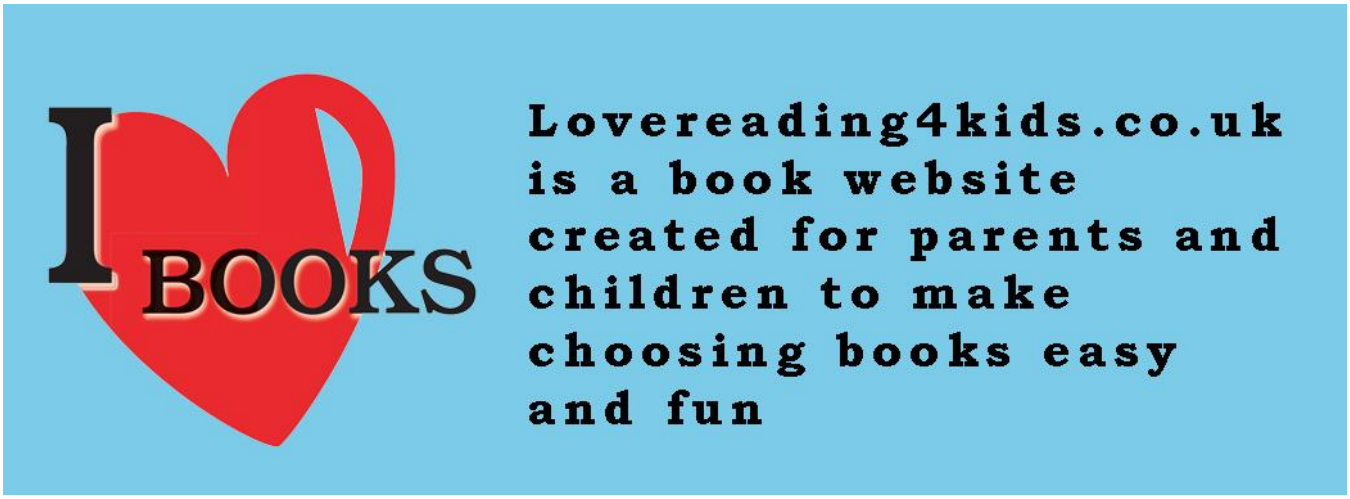


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Rick Riordan

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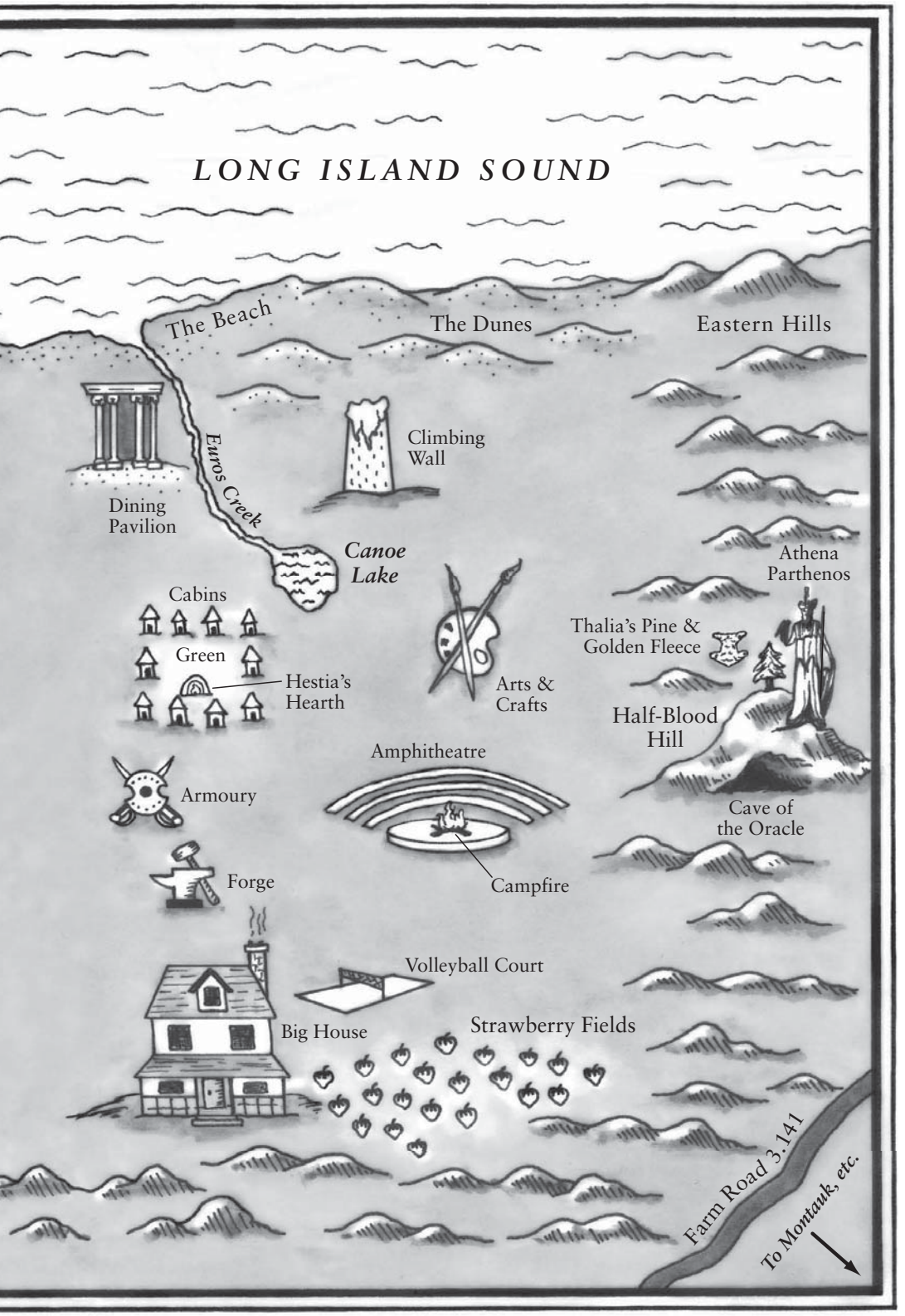
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1

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.