

'Undetermined,' Annabeth said, 'like I told you before. Nobody knows.'

'Except my mother. She knew.'

'Maybe not, Percy. Gods don't always reveal their identities.'

'My dad would have. He loved her.'

Annabeth gave me a cautious look. She didn't want to burst my bubble. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe he'll send a sign. That's the only way to know for sure: your father has to send you a sign claiming you as his son. Sometimes it happens.'

'You mean sometimes it doesn't?'

Annabeth ran her palm along the rail. 'The gods are busy. They have a lot of kids and they don't always . . . Well, sometimes they don't care about us, Percy. They ignore us.'

I thought about some of the kids I'd seen in the Hermes cabin, teenagers who looked sullen and depressed, as if they were waiting for a call that would never come. I'd known kids like that at Yancy Academy, shuffled off to boarding school by rich parents who didn't have the time to deal with them. But gods should behave better.

'So I'm stuck here,' I said. 'That's it? For the rest of my life?'

'It depends,' Annabeth said. 'Some campers only stay the summer. If you're a child of Aphrodite or Demeter, you're probably not a real powerful force. The monsters might ignore you, so you can get by with a few months of summer training and live in the mortal world the rest of the year. But for some of us, it's too dangerous to leave. We're

year-rounders. In the mortal world, we attract monsters. They sense us. They come to challenge us. Most of the time, they'll ignore us until we're old enough to cause trouble — about ten or eleven years old — but after that most demigods either make their way here, or they get killed off. A few manage to survive in the outside world and become famous. Believe me, if I told you the names, you'd know them. Some don't even realize they're demigods. But very, very few are like that.'

'So monsters can't get in here?'

Annabeth shook her head. 'Not unless they're intentionally stocked in the woods or specially summoned by somebody on the inside.'

'Why would anybody want to summon a monster?'

'Practice fights. Practical jokes.'

'Practical jokes?'

'The point is, the borders are sealed to keep mortals and monsters out. From the outside, mortals look into the valley and see nothing unusual, just a strawberry farm.'

'So . . . you're a year-rounder?'

Annabeth nodded. From under the collar of her T-shirt she pulled a leather necklace with five clay beads of different colours. It was just like Luke's, except Annabeth's also had a big gold ring strung on it, like a college ring.

'I've been here since I was seven,' she said. 'Every August, on the last day of summer session, you get a bead for surviving another year. I've been here longer than most of the counsellors, and they're all in college.'

'Why did you come so young?'

She twisted the ring on her necklace. 'None of your business.'

'Oh.' I stood there for a minute in uncomfortable silence. 'So . . . I could just walk out of here right now if I wanted to?'

'It would be suicide, but you could, with Mr D's or Chiron's permission. But they wouldn't give permission until the end of the summer session unless . . .'

'Unless?'

'You were granted a quest. But that hardly ever happens. The last time . . .'

Her voice trailed off. I could tell from her tone that the last time hadn't gone well.

'Back in the sick room,' I said, 'when you were feeding me that stuff —'

'Ambrosia.'

'Yeah. You asked me something about the summer solstice.'

Annabeth's shoulders tensed. 'So you *do* know something?'

'Well . . . no. Back at my old school, I overheard Grover and Chiron talking about it. Grover mentioned the summer solstice. He said something like we didn't have much time, because of the deadline. What did that mean?'

She clenched her fists. 'I wish I knew. Chiron and the satyrs, they know, but they won't tell me. Something is wrong in Olympus, something pretty major. Last time I was there, everything seemed so *normal*.'

'You've been to Olympus?'

'Some of us year-rounders — Luke and Clarisse and I and a few others — we took a field trip during winter solstice. That's when the gods have their big annual council.'

'But . . . how did you get there?'

'The Long Island Railroad, of course. You get off at Penn Station. Empire State Building, special elevator to the six-hundredth floor.' She looked at me like she was sure I must know this already. 'You *are* a New Yorker, right?'

'Oh, sure.' As far as I knew, there were only a hundred and two floors in the Empire State Building, but I decided not to point that out.

'Right after we visited,' Annabeth continued, 'the weather got weird, as if the gods had started fighting. A couple of times since, I've overheard satyrs talking. The best I can figure out is that something important was stolen. And if it isn't returned by summer solstice, there's going to be trouble. When you came, I was hoping . . . I mean — Athena can get along with just about anybody, except for Ares. And of course she's got the rivalry with Poseidon. But, I mean, aside from that, I thought we could work together. I thought you might know something.'

I shook my head. I wished I could help her, but I felt too hungry and tired and mentally overloaded to ask any more questions.

'I've got to get a quest,' Annabeth muttered to herself. 'I'm *not* too young. If they would just tell me the problem . . .'

I could smell barbecue smoke coming from somewhere