

THE HEROES



OF OLYMPUS

THE LOST HERO



AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLING PERCY JACKSON SERIES

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JASON

EVEN BEFORE HE GOT ELECTROCUTED, Jason was having a rotten day.

He woke in the backseat of a school bus, not sure where he was, holding hands with a girl he didn't know. That wasn't necessarily the rotten part. The girl was cute, but he couldn't figure out who she was or what he was doing there. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, trying to think.

A few dozen kids sprawled in the seats in front of him, listening to iPods, talking, or sleeping. They all looked around his age . . . fifteen? Sixteen? Okay, that was scary. He didn't know his own age.

The bus rumbled along a bumpy road. Out the windows, desert rolled by under a bright blue sky. Jason was pretty sure he didn't live in the desert. He tried to think back . . . the last thing he remembered . . .

The girl squeezed his hand. "Jason, you okay?"

She wore faded jeans, hiking boots, and a fleece

snowboarding jacket. Her chocolate brown hair was cut choppy and uneven, with thin strands braided down the sides. She wore no makeup like she was trying not to draw attention to herself, but it didn't work. She was seriously pretty. Her eyes seemed to change color like a kaleidoscope—brown, blue, and green.

Jason let go of her hand. "Um, I don't—"

In the front of the bus, a teacher shouted, "All right, cupcakes, listen up!"

The guy was obviously a coach. His baseball cap was pulled low over his hair, so you could just see his beady eyes. He had a wispy goatee and a sour face, like he'd eaten something moldy. His buff arms and chest pushed against a bright orange polo shirt. His nylon workout pants and Nikes were spotless white. A whistle hung from his neck, and a megaphone was clipped to his belt. He would've looked pretty scary if he hadn't been five feet zero. When he stood up in the aisle, one of the students called, "Stand up, Coach Hedge!"

"I heard that!" The coach scanned the bus for the offender. Then his eyes fixed on Jason, and his scowl deepened.

A jolt went down Jason's spine. He was sure the coach knew he didn't belong there. He was going to call Jason out, demand to know what he was doing on the bus—and Jason wouldn't have a clue what to say.

But Coach Hedge looked away and cleared his throat. "We'll arrive in five minutes! Stay with your partner. Don't lose your worksheet. And if any of you precious little cupcakes causes any trouble on this trip, I will personally send you back to campus the hard way."

He picked up a baseball bat and made like he was hitting a homer.

Jason looked at the girl next to him. “Can he talk to us that way?”

She shrugged. “Always does. This is the Wilderness School. ‘Where kids are the animals.’”

She said it like it was a joke they’d shared before.

“This is some kind of mistake,” Jason said. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

The boy in front of him turned and laughed. “Yeah, right, Jason. We’ve all been framed! I didn’t run away six times. Piper didn’t steal a BMW.”

The girl blushed. “I didn’t steal that car, Leo!”

“Oh, I forgot, Piper. What was your story? You ‘talked’ the dealer into lending it to you?” He raised his eyebrows at Jason like, *Can you believe her?*

Leo looked like a Latino Santa’s elf, with curly black hair, pointy ears, a cheerful, babyish face, and a mischievous smile that told you right away this guy should not be trusted around matches or sharp objects. His long, nimble fingers wouldn’t stop moving—drumming on the seat, sweeping his hair behind his ears, fiddling with the buttons of his army fatigue jacket. Either the kid was naturally hyper or he was hopped up on enough sugar and caffeine to give a heart attack to a water buffalo.

“Anyway,” Leo said, “I hope you’ve got your worksheet, ‘cause I used mine for spit wads days ago. Why are you looking at me like that? Somebody draw on my face again?”

“I don’t know you,” Jason said.

Leo gave him a crocodile grin. "Sure. I'm not your best friend. I'm his evil clone."

"Leo Valdez!" Coach Hedge yelled from the front. "Problem back there?"

Leo winked at Jason. "Watch this." He turned to the front. "Sorry, Coach! I was having trouble hearing you. Could you use your megaphone, please?"

Coach Hedge grunted like he was pleased to have an excuse. He unclipped the megaphone from his belt and continued giving directions, but his voice came out like Darth Vader's. The kids cracked up. The coach tried again, but this time the megaphone blared: "The cow says moo!"

The kids howled, and the coach slammed down the megaphone. "Valdez!"

Piper stifled a laugh. "My god, Leo. How did you do that?"

Leo slipped a tiny Phillips head screwdriver from his sleeve. "I'm a special boy."

"Guys, seriously," Jason pleaded. "What am I doing here? Where are we going?"

Piper knit her eyebrows. "Jason, are you joking?"

"No! I have no idea—"

"Aw, yeah, he's joking," Leo said. "He's trying to get me back for that shaving cream on the Jell-O thing, aren't you?"

Jason stared at him blankly.

"No, I think he's serious." Piper tried to take his hand again, but he pulled it away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't—I can't—"

"That's it!" Coach Hedge yelled from the front. "The back row has just volunteered to clean up after lunch!"

The rest of the kids cheered.

“There’s a shocker,” Leo muttered.

But Piper kept her eyes on Jason, like she couldn’t decide whether to be hurt or worried. “Did you hit your head or something? You really don’t know who we are?”

Jason shrugged helplessly. “It’s worse than that. I don’t know who *I* am.”

The bus dropped them in front of a big red stucco complex like a museum, just sitting in the middle of nowhere. Maybe that’s what it was: the National Museum of Nowhere, Jason thought. A cold wind blew across the desert. Jason hadn’t paid much attention to what he was wearing, but it wasn’t nearly warm enough: jeans and sneakers, a purple T-shirt, and a thin black windbreaker.

“So, a crash course for the amnesiac,” Leo said, in a helpful tone that made Jason think this was not going to be helpful. “We go to the ‘Wilderness School’”—Leo made air quotes with his fingers. “Which means we’re ‘bad kids.’ Your family, or the court, or whoever, decided you were too much trouble, so they shipped you off to this lovely prison—sorry, ‘boarding school’—in Armpit, Nevada, where you learn valuable nature skills like running ten miles a day through the cacti and weaving daisies into hats! And for a special treat we go on ‘educational’ field trips with Coach Hedge, who keeps order with a baseball bat. Is it all coming back to you now?”

“No.” Jason glanced apprehensively at the other kids: maybe twenty guys, half that many girls. None of them looked like hardened criminals, but he wondered what they’d all done to

get sentenced to a school for delinquents, and he wondered why he belonged with them.

Leo rolled his eyes. “You’re really gonna play this out, huh? Okay, so the three of us started here together this semester. We’re totally tight. You do everything I say and give me your dessert and do my chores—”

“Leo!” Piper snapped.

“Fine. Ignore that last part. But we *are* friends. Well, Piper’s a little more than your friend, the last few weeks—”

“Leo, stop it!” Piper’s face turned red. Jason could feel his face burning too. He thought he’d remember if he’d been going out with a girl like Piper.

“He’s got amnesia or something,” Piper said. “We’ve got to tell somebody.”

Leo scoffed. “Who, Coach Hedge? He’d try to fix Jason by whacking him upside the head.”

The coach was at the front of the group, barking orders and blowing his whistle to keep the kids in line; but every so often he’d glance back at Jason and scowl.

“Leo, Jason needs help,” Piper insisted. “He’s got a concussion or—”

“Yo, Piper.” One of the other guys dropped back to join them as the group was heading into the museum. The new guy wedged himself between Jason and Piper and knocked Leo down. “Don’t talk to these bottom-feeders. You’re my partner, remember?”

The new guy had dark hair cut Superman style, a deep tan, and teeth so white they should’ve come with a warning label: DO NOT STARE DIRECTLY AT TEETH. PERMANENT BLINDNESS

MAY OCCUR. He wore a Dallas Cowboys jersey, Western jeans and boots, and he smiled like he was God's gift to juvenile delinquent girls everywhere. Jason hated him instantly.

"Go away, Dylan," Piper grumbled. "I didn't ask to work with you."

"Ah, that's no way to be. This is your lucky day!" Dylan hooked his arm through hers and dragged her through the museum entrance. Piper shot one last look over her shoulder like, *911*.

Leo got up and brushed himself off. "I hate that guy." He offered Jason his arm, like they should go skipping inside together. "I'm Dylan. I'm so cool, I want to date myself, but I can't figure out how! You want to date me instead? You're so lucky!"

"Leo," Jason said, "you're weird."

"Yeah, you tell me that a lot." Leo grinned. "But if you don't remember me, that means I can reuse all my old jokes. Come on!"

Jason figured that if this was his best friend, his life must be pretty messed up; but he followed Leo into the museum.

They walked through the building, stopping here and there for Coach Hedge to lecture them with his megaphone, which alternately made him sound like a Sith Lord or blared out random comments like "The pig says oink."

Leo kept pulling out nuts, bolts, and pipe cleaners from the pockets of his army jacket and putting them together, like he had to keep his hands busy at all times.

Jason was too distracted to pay much attention to the

exhibits, but they were about the Grand Canyon and the Hualapai tribe, which owned the museum.

Some girls kept looking over at Piper and Dylan and snickering. Jason figured these girls were the popular clique. They wore matching jeans and pink tops and enough makeup for a Halloween party.

One of them said, “Hey, Piper, does your tribe run this place? Do you get in free if you do a rain dance?”

The other girls laughed. Even Piper’s so-called partner Dylan suppressed a smile. Piper’s snowboarding jacket sleeves hid her hands, but Jason got the feeling she was clenching her fists.

“My dad’s Cherokee,” she said. “Not Hualapai. ’Course, you’d need a few brain cells to know the difference, Isabel.”

Isabel widened her eyes in mock surprise, so that she looked like an owl with a makeup addiction. “Oh, sorry! Was your *mom* in this tribe? Oh, that’s right. You never knew your mom.”

Piper charged her, but before a fight could start, Coach Hedge barked, “Enough back there! Set a good example or I’ll break out my baseball bat!”

The group shuffled on to the next exhibit, but the girls kept calling out little comments to Piper.

“Good to be back on the rez?” one asked in a sweet voice.

“Dad’s probably too drunk to work,” another said with fake sympathy. “That’s why she turned klepto.”

Piper ignored them, but Jason was ready to punch them himself. He might not remember Piper, or even who he was, but he knew he hated mean kids.

Leo caught his arm. “Be cool. Piper doesn’t like us fighting her battles. Besides, if those girls found out the truth about her dad, they’d be all bowing down to her and screaming, ‘We’re not worthy!’”

“Why? What about her dad?”

Leo laughed in disbelief. “You’re not kidding? You really don’t remember that your girlfriend’s dad—”

“Look, I wish I did, but I don’t even remember *her*, much less her dad.”

Leo whistled. “Whatever. We *have* to talk when we get back to the dorm.”

They reached the far end of the exhibit hall, where some big glass doors led out to a terrace.

“All right, cupcakes,” Coach Hedge announced. “You are about to see the Grand Canyon. Try not to break it. The skywalk can hold the weight of seventy jumbo jets, so you featherweights should be safe out there. If possible, try to avoid pushing each other over the edge, as that would cause me extra paperwork.”

The coach opened the doors, and they all stepped outside. The Grand Canyon spread before them, live and in person. Extending over the edge was a horseshoe-shaped walkway made of glass, so you could see right through it.

“Man,” Leo said. “That’s pretty wicked.”

Jason had to agree. Despite his amnesia and his feeling that he didn’t belong there, he couldn’t help being impressed.

The canyon was bigger and wider than you could appreciate from a picture. They were up so high that birds circled below their feet. Five hundred feet down, a river snaked along

the canyon floor. Banks of storm clouds had moved overhead while they'd been inside, casting shadows like angry faces across the cliffs. As far as Jason could see in any direction, red and gray ravines cut through the desert like some crazy god had taken a knife to it.

Jason got a piercing pain behind his eyes. *Crazy gods . . .* Where had he come up with that idea? He felt like he'd gotten close to something important—something he should know about. He also got the unmistakable feeling he was in danger.

"You all right?" Leo asked. "You're not going to throw up over the side, are you? 'Cause I should've brought my camera."

Jason grabbed the railing. He was shivering and sweaty, but it had nothing to do with heights. He blinked, and the pain behind his eyes subsided.

"I'm fine," he managed. "Just a headache."

Thunder rumbled overhead. A cold wind almost knocked him sideways.

"This can't be safe." Leo squinted at the clouds. "Storm's right over us, but it's clear all the way around. Weird, huh?"

Jason looked up and saw Leo was right. A dark circle of clouds had parked itself over the skywalk, but the rest of the sky in every direction was perfectly clear. Jason had a bad feeling about that.

"All right, cupcakes!" Coach Hedge yelled. He frowned at the storm like it bothered him too. "We may have to cut this short, so get to work! Remember, complete sentences!"

The storm rumbled, and Jason's head began to hurt again. Not knowing why he did it, he reached into his jeans pocket and brought out a coin—a circle of gold the size of

a half-dollar, but thicker and more uneven. Stamped on one side was a picture of a battle-ax. On the other was some guy's face wreathed in laurels. The inscription said something like IVLVIS.

"Dang, is that gold?" Leo asked. "You been holding out on me!"

Jason put the coin away, wondering how he'd come to have it, and why he had the feeling he was going to need it soon.

"It's nothing," he said. "Just a coin."

Leo shrugged. Maybe his mind had to keep moving as much as his hands. "Come on," he said. "Dare you to spit over the edge."

They didn't try very hard on the worksheet. For one thing, Jason was too distracted by the storm and his own mixed-up feelings. For another thing, he didn't have any idea how to "name three sedimentary strata you observe" or "describe two examples of erosion."

Leo was no help. He was too busy building a helicopter out of pipe cleaners.

"Check it out." He launched the copter. Jason figured it would plummet, but the pipe-cleaner blades actually spun. The little copter made it halfway across the canyon before it lost momentum and spiraled into the void.

"How'd you do that?" Jason asked.

Leo shrugged. "Would've been cooler if I had some rubber bands."

"Seriously," Jason said, "are we friends?"

"Last I checked."

“You sure? What was the first day we met? What did we talk about?”

“It was . . .” Leo frowned. “I don’t recall exactly. I’m ADHD, man. You can’t expect me to remember details.”

“But I don’t remember you *at all*. I don’t remember anyone here. What if—”

“You’re right and everyone else is wrong?” Leo asked. “You think you just appeared here this morning, and we’ve all got fake memories of you?”

A little voice in Jason’s head said, *That’s exactly what I think.*

But it sounded crazy. Everybody here took him for granted. Everyone acted like he was a normal part of the class—except for Coach Hedge.

“Take the worksheet.” Jason handed Leo the paper. “I’ll be right back.”

Before Leo could protest, Jason headed across the skywalk.

Their school group had the place to themselves. Maybe it was too early in the day for tourists, or maybe the weird weather had scared them off. The Wilderness School kids had spread out in pairs across the skywalk. Most were joking around or talking. Some of the guys were dropping pennies over the side. About fifty feet away, Piper was trying to fill out her worksheet, but her stupid partner Dylan was hitting on her, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving her that blinding white smile. She kept pushing him away, and when she saw Jason she gave him a look like, *Throttle this guy for me.*

Jason motioned for her to hang on. He walked up to Coach Hedge, who was leaning on his baseball bat, studying the storm clouds.

“Did you do this?” the coach asked him.

Jason took a step back. “Do what?” It sounded like the coach had just asked if he’d made the thunderstorm.

Coach Hedge glared at him, his beady little eyes glinting under the brim of his cap. “Don’t play games with me, kid. What are you doing here, and why are you messing up my job?”

“You mean . . . you *don’t* know me?” Jason said. “I’m not one of your students?”

Hedge snorted. “Never seen you before today.”

Jason was so relieved he almost wanted to cry. At least he wasn’t going insane. He *was* in the wrong place. “Look, sir, I don’t know how I got here. I just woke up on the school bus. All I know is I’m not supposed to be here.”

“Got that right.” Hedge’s gruff voice dropped to a murmur, like he was sharing a secret. “You got a powerful way with the Mist, kid, if you can make all these people think they know you; but you can’t fool me. I’ve been smelling monster for days now. I knew we had an infiltrator, but you don’t smell like a monster. You smell like a half-blood. So—who are you, and where’d you come from?”

Most of what the coach said didn’t make sense, but Jason decided to answer honestly. “I don’t know who I am. I don’t have any memories. You’ve got to help me.”

Coach Hedge studied his face like was trying to read Jason’s thoughts.

“Great,” Hedge muttered. “You’re being truthful.”

“Of course I am! And what was all that about monsters and half-bloods? Are those code words or something?”

Hedge narrowed his eyes. Part of Jason wondered if the guy was just nuts. But the other part knew better.

“Look, kid,” Hedge said, “I don’t know who you are. I just know *what* you are, and it means trouble. Now I got to protect three of you rather than two. Are you the special package? Is that it?”

“What are you talking about?”

Hedge looked at the storm. The clouds were getting thicker and darker, hovering right over the skywalk.

“This morning,” Hedge said, “I got a message from camp. They said an extraction team is on the way. They’re coming to pick up a special package, but they wouldn’t give me details. I thought to myself, Fine. The two I’m watching are pretty powerful, older than most. I know they’re being stalked. I can smell a monster in the group. I figure that’s why the camp is suddenly frantic to pick them up. But then *you* pop up out of nowhere. So, are you the special package?”

The pain behind Jason’s eyes got worse than ever. *Half-bloods. Camp. Monsters.* He still didn’t know what Hedge was talking about, but the words gave him a massive brain freeze—like his mind was trying to access information that should’ve been there but wasn’t.

He stumbled, and Coach Hedge caught him. For a short guy, the coach had hands like steel. “Whoa, there, cupcake. You say you got no memories, huh? Fine. I’ll just have to watch you, too, until the team gets here. We’ll let the director figure things out.”

“What director?” Jason said. “What camp?”

“Just sit tight. Reinforcements should be here soon. Hopefully nothing happens before—”

Lightning crackled overhead. The wind picked up with a vengeance. Worksheets flew into the Grand Canyon, and the entire bridge shuddered. Kids screamed, stumbling and grabbing the rails.

“I had to say something,” Hedge grumbled. He bellowed into his megaphone: “Everyone inside! The cow says moo! Off the skywalk!”

“I thought you said this thing was stable!” Jason shouted over the wind.

“Under normal circumstances,” Hedge agreed, “which these aren’t. Come on!”

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