

THE KEY OF APOLLO

THE GATES OF ARTEMIS, BOOK 1

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To the three greatest additions to my life,

My world got so much better when each of you joined it.

I love you forever and always, no matter what.

Love, Mom

CHAPTER I

HI! I'M LUCY. NICE TO MEET YOU!

HI THERE. I'M LUCY COLE, A COMPLETELY NORMAL FRESHMAN IN HIGH school ... or at least I thought I was until I learned I'm a Daughter of Artemis.

I know what you're thinking: Wait a minute, Artemis didn't have any kids! True ... sort of. But I'll get to that a little later.

So what is a Daughter of Artemis? A Daughter of Artemis is a guardian of the animals of this world, both present and past.

It sounds pretty impressive. But my start was anything but. In fact, most of my early life wouldn't even make a good movie of the week—it would be too depressing.

But then a really great thing happened to me: I got arrested ... again.

Actually, that part was pretty lousy. But after that, it got good, especially with the peacock that wasn't a peacock, my glowing eyes, and the zebra that wasn't a zebra. That's where all the current stuff *really* started. If you wanted to get really philosophical, I guess it all really began with the gods and the society they created for us and then disappeared from.

But I'm getting way in the weeds there. So there's only one place

to really begin this story: my arrest and the world's worst foster mother, Petunia Lansdowne.



TWO YEARS ago

THE BENCH in front of the juvenile court was comfortingly warm, which meant someone else had been sitting here before I plopped down. Maybe it was someone whose life was just as lousy as mine was right now. I appreciated the warmth of the seat because I knew the rest of the day was going to give some of the other completely horrible days in my life a run for their money.

Petunia Lansdowne, or Petty, as I thought of her, paced in front of me. She wobbled on her heels, her dark hair pulled up into a bun that was slowly coming undone, her fists clenching and unclenching. I knew she was dying for a cigarette. She was the one person who I really didn't mind smoking.

Shortening her life, I was okay with.

Petunia glared at the clock before spinning back to me. Spittle had gathered at the corner of her mouth. "I hope they throw the book at you. After all I've done for you, for you to humiliate me this way. I do *not* deserve to be treated like this. By the gods, I should get a medal for keeping you this long."

Yes, Petty, once again, my life is all about you, I thought, while saying nothing. After all, I was in enough trouble. But Petty hadn't expected a response. She just needed to rant and have me take it.

Stopping her frenetic hand clenching, she put her hands on her hips and glared down at me. "Look at me."

Keeping my face expressionless, my gaze shifted to her. With a nod, she began to pace. "I took you in when no one else would. I am the one ..."

Tuning her out, I shifted my gaze to a spot behind her, which I

knew made her think I was still listening to her. At the end of the hall stood a seven-foot-tall statue of Lady Justice. Blindfolded, she held a balance aloft in one hand to demonstrate that justice was blind, with each side given equal weight. According to the inscription at the base of the statue, which I read almost every time I was here, she was created to honor our system in the likeness of a daughter of Zeus, named Dike, whose very name meant justice.

But even that statue was not just. The true first goddess of justice was Themis, one of the original Titans. And while the Greek gods were continually honored, the Titans had been all but wiped from history. So placing a statue of the goddess of justice who'd replaced the original goddess of justice, whom no one ever spoke of, never really assured me that I would be treated fairly within these walls.

Petty patted her hair. "And the stress! Why, if people only knew how ..."

My gaze drifted down to the floor. As a foster kid, the halls of the juvenile justice system were pretty familiar to me. I'd been in this particular building at least a dozen times over the last eight years. There was a new dark streak ten tiles from the end of the bench. That made six.

Whenever I showed up, there was always a long wait. I tried to pass the time by finding any new scuff marks on the gray tiles. This new dark streak was distracting me. What had caused it? Scuff of a shoe? Edge of a chair? Maybe someone had—

"Lucy, look at me!" Petty shrieked.

Trying not to sigh dramatically, I looked up.

She had her hands on her hips. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" Petty demanded.

For a moment, I thought of telling her what I actually thought. After living with her for three years, I'd built up a lot of comments. But I also knew that it would not help. "Nothing."

"Nothing." She sneered the word back at me. "Miss 'I'm so tough' has nothing to say?"

I practically bit my tongue clean off. Petty didn't like when

people spoke back to her, especially me. She might have been my legal guardian, but she was not my mom. And I was not her child, as she reminded me every chance she got. No, I was a ward of the state. And according to her, I was lucky she took me in because no one else wanted me, certainly not my biological parents. As far as she was concerned, the gods had cursed me from the moment I was born.

Yeah, she'd actually said that to me. Like I mentioned, she's not a nice person.

I once made the mistake of reminding her that it wasn't an act of kindness on her part that made her take me in but the check the state sent her each month. That little statement got me moved to a lovely little basement apartment. And by basement apartment, I mean a basement with a dirt floor. And by lovely, I mean I get to sleep on a mattress next to a noisy old boiler.

I could have told my social worker about where I really slept when she came for one of her visits, but the next step for me after twelve foster homes was a state-run home, and nobody ever wanted to go there.

Besides, that move would force me away from my current school, and that was the one thing I *really* couldn't live without. Well, I could live without the school, but not my two best friends who went to it.

The elevator dinged at the end of the hall. A short, slim woman, not even five feet tall, with what I determined to be a perpetual tan, stepped from the elevator—Badeeha Ilahi, known to one and all as Nani. Lines creased her forehead as she scanned the hallway.

Gurriya Ilahi, a younger version of her grandmother, stepped out behind her, the same look of concern on her face. Riya caught sight of Petty first and blanched before giving me a small smile. She tapped Nani on the shoulder, and she also smiled at me. The last member of the group and my other best friend, Gideon Grimaldi, joined them, managing to squeak out of the elevator before the doors slammed shut on him. He gave me a huge grin and a thumbs-up before pushing his oversized glasses up his nose.

They started down the hall toward me, but I gave them a quick

shake of my head. Petty was in no mood to be nice, and I didn't want any of them on the receiving end of her not-even-a-little-subtle insults.

Riya tugged Nani and Gideon to a stop. Nani gave me a look of concern before leading them inside the courtroom.

A short blonde woman in a pantsuit hustled down the hall toward us from the other elevator. Briefcase looped over her arm, manila folders in her arms, she came to a quick stop in front of us. "Lucy Colt?"

"Cole," I corrected.

Glancing down at the file, she frowned. "Oh, right. Well, I am your state-appointed lawyer. Are you her mother?"

Petty balked. "Certainly not. I am her legal guardian. Gods know who her mother was. Or her father, for that matter."

I curled my hands into fists, digging my nails into my palms. Petty never let an opportunity to insult my parents go by.

It was true, though, that I didn't know who they were. I was born in China. A missionary couple adopted me and brought me back to the States. They knew a girl with my background wouldn't do well in the small village where they found me. You see, while I didn't know exactly who my parents were, I did know one was black and one was Asian—my skin tone and eye shape gave that away immediately—but that was all I knew about them.

The missionary couple, Bob and Sheila Cole, settled back in the States. They must have been pretty decent because they got me American citizenship when I was three. But then they died in a car accident a year later. I was in the car too, but my car seat was thrown clear. The police hadn't been able to track down any family, so into the system I went.

The lawyer, who had yet to offer her name, continued to flip through the file. "Hm, yes, okay. Well, you seem to have quite the record."

There was no good answer to that because it was true.

The bailiff stepped out. "Cole case."

Snapping the file shut, the lawyer started for the door. "Let's go."

If I had not been familiar with the system, I might have been a little shocked at being represented by someone who hadn't fully read my file and who'd somehow managed to get a last name as simple as "Cole" wrong. But like I said, I'd been around the system for eight years, so I just sighed and followed.

State-run home, here I come.

The judge shuffled into the courtroom only a few seconds after my lawyer and I sat behind our table. I didn't even have time to glance back at my support team, who sat three rows back, before I jumped back to my feet.

"The Honorable Judge Abe Isaac presiding," the bailiff announced in a booming voice.

Never met him before. Maybe he's new. But one look at his bald dome and paper-thin skin showed why assumptions were a bad thing. He couldn't have been younger than eighty-five. His glasses looked even thicker than Gideon's.

The judge waved everyone down into their seats without a word. Then he took a seat, flipping through the papers in front of him. I shifted, trying to get more comfortable in the stiff wooden chair, darting a glance back at my support team. Unfortunately, Petty had taken a seat right behind me, blocking my view of them.

I turned back with a sigh just as the judge looked up, peering above his glasses at me. "Now, young lady, I hope you realize violence is never a good option." He glanced down at his notes. "According to the report, you attacked..." He frowned. "Wait, no, this can't be right."

The prosecutor cleared his throat as he stood buttoning his suit jacket. "Your file is correct, Your Honor. She assaulted three sixteen-year-old individuals."

The judge's bushy eyebrows disappeared into his white hair. "And she's fourteen? Is that correct?"

Flicking a quick glance at me, the man nodded. "Yes, Your Honor."

Frowning, the judge stared at me. "Were they ... small ... seventeen-year-olds?"

"Uh, no, sir," the prosecutor said, looking a little embarrassed. "Two are all-state in football, and the other is center on the varsity basketball team."

The court was silent. I finally looked up to see the judge gaping at me. He shook himself from his stupor, adjusting his glasses. "Right, well, huh, are there any extenuating circumstances for this attack?"

"No, Your Honor," the prosecutor said.

I looked at my lawyer, waiting for her to say something, but she was busily scribbling down some notes. I think it was her lunch order.

I pictured the boys, their cruel laughs as they kicked the poor puppy. I knew I was supposed to stay quiet. Quiet was better, and honestly, after all these years in the system, I was well aware that my words meant nothing. But this wasn't just about me. Those boys had enjoyed what they were doing, and I knew that if they were willing to do it once, they would do it again.

"They were hurting a dog," I said.

The judge peered at me. "What was that? Did you say something, Miss Cole?"

My lawyer shushed me, putting a hand on my arm, but I shook her off when I saw she *had*, in fact, been writing down her lunch order. I met the judge's gaze. "They were hurting a dog. They tied him up and were hitting and kicking him. They said they were going to throw him in the river."

The judge's voice took on a hard edge as he glared at the prosecutor over the top of his glasses. "Mr. Smith, that sounds like extenuating circumstances to me."

I couldn't believe it. The judge was actually listening to me. I let myself have one self-satisfied smirk.

"Sir, the three teenagers deny they had anything to do with the dog's injuries. In fact, they suggest Miss Cole may have inflicted them herself," the prosecutor said quickly.

Smirk begone. “That’s a lie! They did it. They were going to kill him,” I insisted.

Now it was my turn to be on the receiving end of the judge’s glare. “Miss Cole, this is a court of law. If you cannot behave yourself, you will be removed.”

I lowered my eyes to the table, biting my tongue.

The judge huffed. “Good. Well, it appears we have a bit of a dilemma. One young woman with a history of juvenile offenses.”

“All in the protection of animals and others,” my lawyer piped up. *Finally, she speaks.* I tried not to roll my eyes, but it was hard.

The judge peered down at my file. “Yes, there does seem to be a track record. But I believe one of the ‘victims’ in this case was suspected in another animal-cruelty case.”

“Suspected but never charged,” the prosecutor once again jumped in.

“Hmmm,” the judge muttered, not lifting his eyes. I was pretty sure that was his thinking noise.

Or he was deflating.

“Even if the victims were doing as she said, the damage done to them was quite extensive.” The judge peered down at the file again. “A broken jaw, nose, ribs—those injuries are not minor.”

And I would do it all again. Those entitled jerks got what was coming to them. Of course, most of those injuries were because they’d tripped over their own feet trying to get away from me.

The judge pushed the papers aside. “I don’t see anything here that makes it more likely that Miss Cole was involved in animal cruelty. And being she has not been charged with that, I don’t think you do, either.”

Spluttering, the prosecutor’s face turned red. “Your Honor—”

His tone growing more annoyed, the judge now glared at the prosecutor. “I also find it unlikely that Miss Cole randomly attacked three grown boys who outweigh her by nearly two hundred pounds combined. I am dismissing the case against her.”

I couldn't believe it. The system was actually working for me for once.

Petty burst up from her seat. "She can't live with me."

Thank you, Petty, for making sure my faith in the system is never fully justified.

"Who is this?" the judge demanded.

"Uh, Your Honor, this is Petunia Lansdowne, Miss Cole's legal guardian for the last three years?" And yes, my lawyer said it in the form of a question.

The judge peered down at Petty, not looking impressed. "You have something to add?"

"Yes, Your Honor." Petty started to push through the gate.

The judge held up his hand. "From there is fine."

She stopped mid-step, letting the gate swing back and hit her in the thighs with an audible thwack. "Your Honor, Lucy has lived in my home for the last three years. During that time, I have tried to keep her on the right path, but she is incorrigible. She has stolen from me, she has disobeyed rules, destroyed property." Petty wiped at the corner of her eye, even though there were no tears. I guess she hoped with the judge's thick glasses he wouldn't notice. "I simply cannot handle her any longer."

The judge frowned. "That is distressing. I see here she has been through twelve homes since the age of four."

"Yes, Your Honor. She has been with me the longest, but I don't think it's fair she should be foisted upon another poor family. She really belongs in a state home," Petty said, trying to look sympathetic, but her smile just looked weird.

Riya, Nani, and Gideon gasped behind me. I couldn't manage a sound as my mouth fell open. I knew Petty didn't like me, but the New York State Home for Incorrigible Girls, the official title for the state home for girls, was a nightmare. Girls with serious mental issues and violent behaviors were sent there. Attacks, twenty-three-hour lockdowns, forced medication were all part of the package. It was basi-

cally a mental hospital horror story. No one got out of there unless they were being transferred to an adult mental institution. It was a life sentence. After three years, as much as we didn't like each other, I couldn't believe Petty actually thought that was what I deserved.

The judge's voice was grave. "I don't take that type of recommendation lightly. Although I must admit there are some red flags in this file."

"Judge, if I may address the court?" A tall woman with long, wavy red hair and deep green eyes stood up from the back of the courtroom. Her eyes were actually the same shade of green as mine, which was ... odd.

"Ms. Smith, I didn't see you there." The judge straightened in his seat.

Smith? Elodie Smith? I looked back at Nani, who nodded at me with a smile. Elodie Smith was Nani's boss. Nani ran her home. I'd never met her. She traveled a lot, and Petty rarely let me go visit.

A giant smile was on the judge's face as he stared at the woman. "How ... how are you?"

Her steps graceful, Elodie moved toward the gate. She stopped next to Petty, who glared at her. "Well, Judge, thank you."

The judge seemed content to just stare at the woman, and let me tell you, it got awkward pretty quick.

The bailiff finally cleared his throat. "Judge."

"What?" He glanced at the bailiff before straightening, his cheeks reddening. "Oh, right. Um, you have some information relevant to the current case, Ms. Smith?"

"Not about the attack, but I do believe I may have a more amenable solution for relocating Miss Cole," she said.

"Well, it's a little unusual, but I'm sure we would all like to hear what you have to say. No need to stay out there. Please step forward," the judge said, waving her on.

"Excuse me," Elodie said to Petty, who pinched her lips so tight I thought she might actually implode.

The judge frowned at her. "Sit down, Miss Lansdowne."

With a huff, Petty thumped into the bench behind her, her arms crossed over her chest. Elodie stepped through the gate.

Resting his chin on his hand, the judge leaned forward. "Now, what is this solution you have come up with, hm?"

Geez, dude, rein it in.

But Elodie acted like she didn't notice the man drooling all over his bench. "I have recently been approved as a foster parent for the state. And as you know, I run an animal rescue ranch. Working with animals has proven to be a highly effective method for dealing with individuals with violent tendencies."

Petty burst from her seat. "What? No. She needs to go to the home. She's not safe to be out in society. She's had her chance."

The judge rapped his gavel. "Ms. Lansdowne, if you cannot compose yourself, you will be removed from the court. Is that clear?"

Her face turning red, Petty spluttered. "But, Judge, this girl is horrible. She doesn't deserve—"

"Bailiff, remove her," the judge ordered.

"What?" Petty squeaked as the bailiff strode over to her. "I am only trying to warn you about what a horrible, ungrateful—"

The man grabbed Petty's arm and dragged her down the aisle.

"Let go of me. Let go of me," she insisted, until the bailiff pushed her out the door. As the door closed, Petty's cries could still be heard.

The judge grunted. "Right, well, where were we?"

"My offer, Judge," Elodie reminded him.

"Right, right. Well, I will need to verify that you are, in fact, a certified foster parent. Not that I think you're lying," he added quickly.

"Of course, Judge. I understand," she said with a small smile.

The judge, however, did not seem quite as convinced. "Are you sure, however, that you wish to foster a child with such a track record for your first placement? I'm sure there are plenty of other children who could benefit from your guidance."

Elodie met my eyes. For a moment, I swear they glowed green. But by the time I blinked, the light was gone.

That was weird.

But Elodie just smiled at the judge. “Yes, Your Honor. I believe we will be a very good match. I have my paperwork with me.” She pulled papers out of her bag and handed them to the court clerk.

The clerk walked them over to the judge, who rifled through them for a minute. “As expected, it looks like everything is in order. Ms. Smith, you will become the legal guardian for Lucy Cole.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” she said.

He banged the gavel. “Case dismissed. Miss Cole, you are now officially placed in the custody of Ms. Smith.”

Everyone stood, including me, but I didn’t really remember standing up. What had just happened? I was going to live with Nani’s boss? As the judge left the courtroom, I flopped back down in my seat, barely registering my lawyer leaving and Elodie sitting down next to me.

“Lucy, I’m Elodie Smith.” She extended her hand.

I stared up at her before giving myself a mental shake and shaking her hand. “Um, hi.”

She smiled. “I think you and I are in for quite an adventure.”

“Um, I guess,” I hedged, not really sure what to say to that.

Elodie leaned forward, a smile on her face. “Oh, I know.”

And although I knew it was probably another trick of the light, I could have sworn her eyes glowed again.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS WRONG WITH MY SUBCONSCIOUS?

AKIA STEPPED FROM THE FOREST INTO THE SMALL, DARK VILLAGE. DESPITE his immense size, the gray and white wolf made no sound, his footfalls masked by the grass underneath his paws. The other seven members of his pack appeared just as silently from the shadows behind him. They moved forward as one, walking down the dirt lane between the houses.

Ahead, a rabbit moved quickly in the same direction. Normally it would be easy prey, but Akia didn't even twitch at its sight and neither did any member of his pack. There was something else more important for all of them to do tonight.

All the houses the wolves padded past were dark, the moonlight their only guide. But then, as he turned at the end of the path, light beckoned in the distance.

He wound his way down the narrow path that led to a house on the outskirts of the town. As he stepped into the clearing around the house, dozens of pairs of eyes turned to him. Bears, foxes, rabbits, chipmunks, squirrels—all the animals that had heard the call stood encircling the house.

As the wolf pack approached, a sight that would normally terrify the smaller animals, they simply stepped to the side, making room. The wolves

took up their spot in the circle, staring out into the dark night, guarding the home and waiting.

Together, the animals stood through the long night. None took their gaze from the woods, their ears tuned for any movement, any sense of danger. And then, when the night was at its darkest, a sound burst through the night.

A human baby's cry.

The animals all went still, and then, as one, they let out cries of their own. Their calls rang out through the night, waking the villagers from their sleep and causing more than one to stumble for their weapons in fear. But the animals meant them no harm. For those cries were not of distress or anger. No, their cries were cries of celebration. In their own language, each of the animals cried out the same message:

She is born.



MY HEAD JERKED up from the pillow. I rolled to the side, nearly sending myself face first into the floor. Flinging myself back from the edge in time, I lay back, breathing hard, the jolt of nearly breaking my nose making me shake.

Or at least that's what I told myself. But deep down, I knew that wasn't the real reason. It was the dream. I wiped my eyes. *It's normal to have a recurring dream. Everybody has recurring dreams.*

But even I could hear the doubts in my thoughts. It wasn't just because I was having the dream over and over again. It was because it was always the *exact* same dream. Each event played out exactly the same way. The only thing that changed was the vantage point.

And that was because each time I was a different animal.

I'd been an eagle, a squirrel, a rabbit, a bear, a fox, and now a wolf. But the rest of the dream remained the same. The animals encircled the cottage, protecting it. And when the baby cried out, they all let loose with cries of joy.

Sitting up, I pushed my dark hair from my face. *Why do I keep dreaming the same thing?*

"Lucy? You up?" Nani called from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm up," I yelled back, not moving. Although I lay there a few more moments, Nani's yell had chased the remnants of the dream away. Finally, I sat up, pushing my mass of curls out of my face.

I shoved my hair back again as I stumbled over to my robe, which was hanging on the edge of my mirror. A quick glance showed that a night of sleep had not improved my hair. My dark brown curls sprung out from my face like a halo gone berserk.

Hiding underneath all that hair, my abnormally green almond-shaped eyes peeked out from under my brown skin. I stepped forward, peering into my eyes. I loved my eyes, but they also made no sense. They were the one physical attribute I shared with my foster mom. And I didn't mean they looked similar. The color was identical.

Elodie had yet to explain that little impossibility. She'd once promised to explain everything one day, but that "one day" had apparently not arrived in the last two years.

Besides that, though, I had no complaints about the last two years. Compared to Petty, Elodie was the greatest person who ever existed. Of course, compared to Petty, everyone was the greatest person who ever existed.

"Lucy! I don't hear you moving!" Nani yelled.

I stomped on the ground. "That better?"

"Much!" she replied.

I smiled. Nani ran Elodie's household, and she and Riya had moved in shortly after I did. Even Gideon, my other best friend, was living here now while his family, the Amazing Grimaldis, traveled to Europe.

"I don't hear you heading for the shower," Nani called again.

"I am, I am," I yelled back, grabbing clothes from my dresser and heading down the hall.

“And don’t forget your costume for the assembly,” she reminded me.

With a groan, I stopped dead, wondering if it was too late to pretend to be sick. I looked longingly back at my room. Nani would never believe me. I sighed, dragging my feet toward the shower. If I was lucky, I’d slip and break my ankle.

If not, I’d be subjected to the day I dreaded the most at school every single year: All Gods Day.

Trust me, a hospital visit was a much better time.

CHAPTER 3

IT ALL STARTS GETTING WEIRD

TEN MINUTES LATER, I WAS DOWN THE STAIRS AND STEPPING INTO THE kitchen with my hair still wet. I never had time to dry it in the morning.

The old farmhouse's wood floor was uneven, the cabinets had very little paint left on them, and the counters were old-fashioned Formica, but I loved every speck of it. It screamed a family lived here. I had an actual home. A place where I belonged.

Nani looked up from the kitchen island with a grin. "Finally."

"Morning, Nani." I walked over and kissed her cheek. "Where's my gang?"

As if they heard me, my three pups bolted through the dog door, their nails scrambling on the tile floor. Gray and white with bright blue eyes, the six-month-old pit bull mixes made a beeline for me. I braced myself as Max launched himself at me, his front paws hitting my stomach. Jax and Pax slid, trying to stop, knocking out Max's back legs. They all ended up in a squirming heap.

Laughing, I knelt down and rubbed each of them. "You guys are clowns."

Max licked my cheek while Jax tried to crawl into my lap. Pax put both paws on my knees and gave me one giant lick.

“Ugh, Pax. I just washed my face.” Wiping at my cheeks, I struggled to get out from underneath their unconditional love.

Nani smiled. “He’s worried you might have missed a spot.”

My gaze shifted to the calendar on the front of the fridge. Notes were scribbled all over it, but only one was circled in bright red marker: ADOPTION DAY. Elodie wanted to make it official. In two short weeks, I would no longer be a foster kid.

I’d be an adopted one.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

“Riya’s already set up her plate, but she was waiting for you two.” Nani nodded toward the den, where I could see Riya curled up with a book. I swear, if I ever saw her without a book in her hands in the morning, I would probably die of shock.

Looking up, Riya smiled, closing her book and heading for the kitchen. “Hey, you’re going to be late.”

“I know, I know.” I grabbed the plate with eggs Nani handed me. “Thanks. Where’s Gideon?”

“Right here.” Gideon slid into the kitchen on stocking feet. He grinned, shoving hair from his forehead and away from his big round glasses.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Nani asked.

“Just cereal.” He headed over to the counter. “I’ll get it.”

Shaking her head, Nani tried to beat him there. “No, I’ll—”

Gideon snatched the box from the counter. “Got it.”

But he yanked it up a little too quickly. Cornflakes exploded from the top of the box, flying everywhere. The pups scrambled over each other, trying to get to the mess.

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll clean it up.” Gideon’s cheeks flamed red.

Two giant Irish wolfhounds, Odin and Freya, joined the dogs after stepping into the kitchen at Elodie’s side.

Elodie grabbed a broom from the small closet at the end of the

row of cabinets. "It's okay. I've got it. And don't worry about it. Now you've saved me from having to feed these two breakfast."

"I'm such a klutz," Gideon muttered.

She mussed his hair. "No, you are excited by life and sometimes miss smaller objects near you. Eventually, you'll grow out of this stage."

"Yeah, sure," he said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Elodie gave him a hug and then pushed him gently toward the table where Riya and I had taken our seats. "Go. Eat. You'll be late."

Riya looked over at me. "I had the weirdest dream. I was swimming in a lake, and then it turned into a vanilla milkshake. I climbed to the edge, and it was a glass cup. Then I crawled over the edge and landed in a pile of marshmallows."

"I think that just means you're obsessed with sugar," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "Ha-ha."

I kicked Gideon's chair. He was staring into his bowl of cereal as if he wasn't sure where he was. "What do you think?"

His head slipped off his hand, nearly landing in his bowl. "Huh? What?"

"Riya's milkshake dream," I said.

Yawning, he stretched his arms above his head and scratched under his arm. "I think her body has finally realized that no kid our age voluntarily avoids sugar. Your mind's turning on you."

Riya shook her head, but smiled. "Sugar's not good for you."

"But it tastes *really* good," I said.

"She does not lie," Gideon said.

As Elodie took a seat across from me, a coffee mug in her hand, I said, "I had a dream, too. I was another animal."

Elodie's coffee sloshed over the rim, her gaze flying to me.

I frowned. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just uh ... nothing." She quickly grabbed a napkin and started wiping at the spill.

Groaning, Gideon dropped his head. "It's me. My clumsiness is now *officially* contagious."

Crumpling up the napkin, Elodie shook her head. "I'm sure that's not true." She paused. "I *hope* that's not true."

Riya leaned forward. "So, what was your dream?"

Turning from Elodie, I described the rest of the dream, the animals, and the howls.

"That's so cool," Gideon said when I'd finished. "Why can't I have cool dreams like that? Mine usually involve me sitting in class by myself while everyone else is having a pizza party outside."

"Ah, poor Gideon. No pizza for you," Riya said with a grin.

"Story of my life," he mumbled as he swirled the milk in his cereal.

"I think you're wonderful," Elodie assured him as she patted his hand.

"Thanks," he said.

Elodie turned back to me. "As for your dream, you're surrounded by animals here. And now you're surrounding yourself with them in your dreams, too."

I wanted to agree with her, but it didn't feel right. There had to be more to the dream, especially since I kept having it. "But why would I *be* the animal?"

Checking her watch, Elodie's eyes widened. "Hey, you guys need to hurry up. You're going to be late."

A quick glance at the clock above the sink showed she was right. *Oh shoot.* I shoveled down the last of my eggs. After quickly placing my dishes in the sink, I shot up the stairs to dry my hair a little more and finish getting ready. Ten minutes later, I was zipping back down, only now I was *really* late.

I'd planned on taking only five minutes, but my boot was not where I left it, thanks to one of the dogs. After a frantic search, I found it in the towel bin in the bathroom. My money was on Jax as the culprit. He was always hiding my stuff.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I slowed when I heard Elodie and Nani speaking in hushed voices.

"You need to tell her," Nani said.

"She's too young. It's not time yet," Elodie countered..

"She's having the dreams." Nani emphasized the word.

Elodie sighed. "I know. I can't explain that. But I won't tell her until I have to. She's not ready."

Odin padded over to the stairs and sat staring at me.

"Go, go," I whispered, waving him away, but he stayed where he was, tilting his giant head. "I mean it, go," I hissed through gritted teeth.

"Lucy?" Elodie called out.

I glared at Odin. *Thanks a lot.* Stepping past the giant dog, I kept my face blank. "Hey. I'm ready."

Her eyes narrowed. "How long were you there?"

"What? Just got here." I made my eyes go wide and innocent. Grabbing my backpack off the counter, I kissed Nani and then Elodie on the cheek. "Bye."

But apparently Elodie wasn't quite done with me yet. She followed me out the door. "Lucy."

I turned, cringing. She hated when I eavesdropped. But honestly, how else was I supposed to learn stuff that people didn't want me to know? "Um, yes?"

She arched an eyebrow, and I waited for the lecture. But she just pulled me in for a big hug. "I love you, Lucy."

Relief made me go stiff, but then I slipped my arms around her. "I love you, too." Neither of us said anything for a little bit; I just let myself enjoy the feeling of belonging.

Finally, she pulled back, smiling down at me. "Are you ready for All Gods Day?"

I groaned. I'd managed to shove the thought of it from my mind.

"Nani put your outfit in your bag," Elodie added.

"Great," I said with the same enthusiasm reserved for when I was told it was my turn to clean the horse stalls. She must have done it when I was upstairs because I had intentionally *not* put it in my backpack, hoping it meant I could skip the whole thing.

"I'm sorry I can't be there," she said.

I sighed. "I know. You have an animal to save." Elodie was always disappearing across the country to save one animal or another.

"And that's important, but nothing's more important than you. You know that, right?" She peered down into my face.

There were worry lines on her forehead. I had to admit, it would be nice to have her there. She would sit with me in the Artemis tent, even though she was from the House of Poseidon.

But instead of going to some stupid ceremony I didn't even want to go to, she'd be out in Illinois saving a lion who'd been owned by some idiots on their farm. They'd tried to sell it for meat. Elodie had heard about it and contacted local law enforcement. They were holding the lion instead of shooting it, but she needed to get out there today to save him. That's what she did. Other people had parents who were bankers or interior designers or something like that. I got one that literally saved lives. And one day, I was going to be just like her.

So I forced a smile onto my face. "It'll be fine. Sidney and I will sit together, and we'll make fun of all the other houses."

"You just remember: Where you come from is no indication of where you'll go. And anybody that touts their distant, distant relatives isn't doing anything worthwhile with their lives," she said.

This time, my smile was genuine. "Blood's just blood. Families are made from love, not blood."

She held my face between her hands. "Such a wise young girl. Wherever did you hear such a splendid saying?"

Laughing, I hugged her again. She nodded toward the beginning of the driveway, where Gideon stood waiting. A large peacock was squawking as it circled him. Gideon was trying to shoo him away. "Looks like Frisco wants something from Gideon."

"Probably something in his lunch bag," I said. "I swear, that peacock is worse than a bully from an after-school special."

Sighing, Elodie shook her head. "I know. But he's had a tough adjustment. Try to understand where he's coming from."

Frisco was a male peacock that Elodie had on reserve for three

years. Originally, the plan was only to keep Frisco for a short while, until the illness that had infected his coat had eased. But it soon became clear Frisco was not cut out for life in a zoo. He had no fear of humans, but he also had no interest in hanging around other animals, including peacocks. If he were to be put in a pen with other peacocks, the poor thing would be miserable. Elodie was fighting to allow him to stay here.

But still ... “You want me to try to understand where a *peacock* is coming from?”

Elodie tweaked my nose. “That’s the job, sweetheart. Now go before you miss the bus.”

Right, bus. I hurried down the porch steps and over to Gideon. Behind him, paddocks lined the drive all the way to the end, a full half-mile of fenced areas for animals to roam. In the distance, I could barely make out Riya, who was nearly at the end of the long drive. She hated being late.

I wasn’t a fan of it, either, but that didn’t help get me places on time. I’d say it was genetic, but being I had no idea what my biological parents were like, I suppose it wasn’t fair to blame them. Of course, they did abandon me, so I think they might deserve just a little blame for a few things.

“Go on, Frisco. I don’t have anything for you today.” Gideon waved his arms.

Frisco ruffled his feathers in annoyance before turning away. Gideon stared after him. The peacock let out another angry squawk as he rounded the corner of the house. “*That* is one strange bird.”

Gideon was not wrong. Frisco had free rein on the reserve. He wandered around most days, visiting each of the animals, before curling up on the porch for his morning and afternoon naps. At night, he went to the barn, where a bed had been made for him in one of the stalls, complete with blankets. He was not your average bird. He was a bird who marched to his own beat—a very irregular, out-of-tune beat.

“I like him,” I said as I joined Gideon.

“Me, too. But man, he’s pushy.” Spying Riya down the drive, he yelled, “Hey, wait up.”

She just flung up her hand to indicate she was not going to.

Gideon was about to yell a response when Starbright came abreast of us in the paddock. Instead of responding to Riya, he grinned over at the zebra. “Oh, you want to race, do you?”

With a snort, Starbright threw back her head.

Starbright had been on the reserve even longer than Frisco. Whenever possible, Elodie rehabilitated the animals and then released them back into the wild or a zoo. But Starbright was blind in one eye, so releasing her was not an option. But the zebra seemed pretty happy, and each morning she accompanied us on our walk to the bus stop.

“You in?” Gideon asked.

I shook my head in mock sadness. “Aren’t you getting tired of me and Starbright beating you? Where’s your pride, man?”

He grinned. “You know what they say, three thousand one hundred and seventy-eighth time is the charm.”

Laughing, I tightened the straps on my backpack. He was never going to beat me. Not that he wasn’t fast, but if there was one thing I could do well, it was run. “All right. Starbright and I are happy to kick your butt yet again, aren’t we, girl?”

Starbright pranced in anticipation, making me grin.

“Bring it,” Gideon said as he struck a runner’s pose. The zebra stomped at the ground as if she understood as well.

Grinning, I leaned down. “On your mark ... get set ... go!”

I sprinted down the drive, gravel flying into the air behind me. Gideon stayed next to me for a few dozen yards, but then I lengthened my stride and outpaced him.

Starbright’s hooves beat right next to me. We always ran neck and neck right to the end. It was a toss-up which one of us would win on any given day, but it was always one of us.

I turned to grin at her, but my mouth dropped open instead. She had a rainbow aura surrounding her.

And she was no longer a zebra.

She was a pure white pegasus with one damaged wing, sprinting along the fence line next to me, a hologram of a zebra superimposed over her.

Tripping over my feet, I nearly bit it in the middle of the dirt drive as Gideon sailed past me, reaching Riya just after Starbright did.

Gideon threw his hands in the air, stomping his feet. "Second! Holy cow, I came in second! I beat Lucy. Yes! Yes!" With a whoop, he did a victory dance, sending dirt flying into the air.

Heart pounding and my mouth hanging open, I stood stock-still, my gaze flicking to Gideon and his maniacal dancing while Riya stood watching me with concern.

Ignoring her, I turned back to Starbright, who stood prancing in a circle, in what we'd started calling her victory dance. And she was the same Starbright she had always been—a zebra.

But I had seen a pegasus.

A chill crawled over me. Goose bumps broke out across my arms. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. *What just happened?*

"Lucy?" Riya called.

Slamming my gaping mouth shut, I forced myself to turn away from Starbright and walk toward Riya and Gideon.

Watching me, Riya frowned while ignoring Gideon's continued celebration. "Hey, you okay?" She asked.

"Yeah, um, yeah." I nodded, darting another glance at Starbright. Yep, still a zebra. What the heck had that been?

Reaching out, Riya placed her hand on my arm. "Hey, Luce, seriously, are you okay?"

Warmth spread back through me at Riya's touch, and the goose bumps disappeared. I shook my head. "Yeah, just got a little dizzy."

"Oh, yeah. Who's the man? I'm the man," Gideon's voice sang out in the background.

Riya smiled. "Well, you know we're not going to hear the end of this for days, if not weeks."

I grimaced, knowing she was right. Gideon was not known for his feats of athleticism, at least not in competitions. He was actually an incredible gymnast. He was going to crow about this forever. "Yeah, sorry about that."

Sighing, Riya linked her arm through mine. "I suppose you're forgiven. But be sure to beat him tomorrow, okay?"

"You got it," I promised.

The big yellow bus turned onto our street just as we reached the end of Starbright's paddock fence. I forced a smile on my face as Gideon danced up to me. "Hey, good race."

"Yeah, you too," I said, trying not to grin at how happy he looked. "But I'll beat you tomorrow."

He clapped me on the shoulder. "Sure you will, kid."

Riya rolled her eyes next to him. "See what you started? He's going to be like this all day," She grumbled.

The bus pulled to a stop. The door slid open. Gideon boogied on, with Riya right behind him.

I glanced behind me just before I stepped on. Starbright stood at the very edge of the fencing, watching me, as if trying to tell me something. A second chill ran over me.

Turning away, my breathing was a little thin as I climbed the stairs. *I'm just tired or thirsty or coming down with something. That's all.* But I could still feel Starbright's gaze on me as I made my way down the bus aisle and slipped into the seat across from Riya.

"Hey." Riya reached her hand across the aisle, nudging me as the bus pulled away. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I turned to look out the window. "I'm fine." But as the words slipped into my mind, I wasn't sure if I said it because it was true or because I really hoped it was.

CHAPTER 4

THE GODS ARE DEAD ... LET IT GO

I HATE ALL GODS DAY.

In theory, it sounded good—a day to honor the gods that gave us all life. You know, those immortal omnipotent beings who could throw lightning bolts, cause tsunamis with a thought, create or destroy whole cities on a whim, and who hadn't been seen or heard from in thousands and thousands of years.

But why let a little absenteeism get in the way of a good celebration, right?

So on All Gods Days, each family traced its roots back to the gods who brought them into being and then offered gifts to those gods, followed by lots and lots of food. Good, right?

Not so much.

“Lucy, come on. We’ll be late.” Riya tugged me to my feet as I finished lacing my boots. I followed her out of the locker room, feeling as if my feet had each gained about fifty pounds. All classes were cancelled after third period, at which point everyone hurried to their lockers to dump their books and get changed for the celebration. The building was humming with excitement.

I was decidedly less enthusiastic.

Riya hurried down the hall, keeping ahold of my arm as if she was afraid I might bolt. Not that it was a bad decision on her part—I was thinking of doing just that.

She craned her neck, trying to see above the crowd. “Oh, I hope we can still get seats.”

“I’ll get a seat,” I mumbled.

Riya’s face paled. “Oh, Lucy. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

I threw an arm around her incredibly thin shoulders, once again worrying I might break something. Riya was built like Nani and looked like a strong wind could blow her over. I still wasn’t sure one wouldn’t. I, however, was more “sturdy,” as Nani often said.

Thanks, Nani.

The doors to the gym were open ahead. The noise was already deafening. Even from here, I could see the streamers and banners. Other students rushed past us, wearing celebration attire—one-shoulder togas for the girls and the tunics with linen pants for the boys.

Yup, modern day and still separating things based on how you pee. So evolved.

“Hi, Aubrey,” voices called from behind us.

I groaned, but just like everyone else, turned to watch Aubrey Betcalf, the most popular girl in our freshman class, walk down the hall, her honey-blond hair glowing, her toga looking like it came from a Paris runway. Which, knowing Aubrey, it probably had.

Kids scattered to give her room as she walked, her little minions behind her, none prettier than her. There was plenty of room for Aubrey and her group to walk around me and Riya. But just as I knew she would, Aubrey walked straight toward us.

I planted myself right where I was and crossed my arms over my chest.

Aubrey stopped short in front of me, narrowing her eyes. “You’re in the way.”

I smiled sweetly at her. “Guess you’ll have to go round.”

“Hey, guys.” Gideon waved as he ran toward us, tugging on his

tunic and pushing his glasses up from the edge of his nose. His laces flopped as he ran.

I could see what was about to happen clearer than any oracle at Delphi.

Gideon stepped forward, his foot smacking down on the end of his too-long laces. A look of fear flashed across his face as he jolted forward, his arms windmilling. Aubrey ducked back to avoid getting hit. For a moment, I thought of doing the same.

That moment of indecision doomed me.

He crashed into me, and I fell onto Riya. I managed to twist myself and Gideon to the side so we didn't land on her and break her into a million pieces. We did land hard on the floor, though.

"Gideon," I groaned as I shoved his legs off of mine.

"Sorry, sorry." Gideon pushed his glasses back up his nose as he sat up with a wince.

"Guess you should have moved." Aubrey sailed past with her entourage following, but not before each one gave us a smirk.

"No, I should have stayed home," I muttered, wishing the floor would swallow me whole. Of course, if that *could* happen, I'd prefer if it opened up and swallowed Aubrey.

"Maybe it will be fun," Gideon said.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh yeah, because so far it's off to a banner start."

Together, Gideon and Riya pulled me to my feet. Riya was surprisingly strong for a tiny girl.

Gideon looked at his feet, his cheeks flaming red. "I'm really sorry, guys. I'm such a klutz. I don't know why—"

I linked arms with Gideon. "Hey, hey, none of that. Your klutzi-ness is what makes you perfect for us. Without it, you'd be completely ineligible for Misfits United."

Riya placed her hand in front of her. "Power of extreme geekiness."

I placed mine on top of hers with a smile. "Power of runaway foot in the mouth."

Gideon placed his on top of ours. "Power of unrivaled clumsiness."

A group of kids gave us a strange look as they passed, but we ignored them. Ignoring our peers was another ability we three had honed almost to perfection. We leaned in. "Misfits united," we whispered before breaking apart.

I grinned at them. "All right. Let's get this over with."

CHAPTER 5

YES, YOU'RE ALL FABULOUS. CAN I GO HOME NOW?

I MIGHT NOT LIKE ALL GODS DAY (AND BY “NOT LIKE,” I MEAN “DESPISE with the power of seven suns”), but even I had to admit that the Apollo Gymnasium looked pretty cool. Streamers of blue, red, green, yellow, and white were strung across the rafters with large balls of glittering lights dangling in between. Banners announcing the houses were draped over the tops of each of the gods’ tents. Each tent was a different color with a different material. Gold silk for Zeus, pink satin for Aphrodite, white velvet for Apollo, and so on.

The groupings were arranged in order of prominence. Up front, of course, were the major houses of the gods: Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon. I noticed Aubrey had taken the center seat in her house—Zeus. Her twin brother, Ken, was next to her, their parents on either side. Every year, the Betcalfs always made sure to be front and center in Zeus’s tent, because as I had overheard Mrs. Betcalf say more than once, good breeding must be celebrated.

Ugh.

Of course, it was all garbage. No one really knew who was related to whom. Papers were doctored all the time to make it look as if you were from a prestigious house.

And I mean, let's be honest, the gods existed thousands upon thousands of years ago. I'm going to say that thousands of years of DNA mixed in with whatever godly DNA *might* have *possibly* been in a family line had probably diluted it to the point that it would be impossible to find. It's not like the people from the House of Poseidon controlled water or the egomaniacs from the House of Zeus threw thunderbolts.

But still, the house you were from meant status. And that meant an easier time getting into the right school and the right job and the right club.

While the creators of All Gods Day may have started with a plan to honor the gods, the day had taken a little side trip somewhere along its thousand-year journey to modern times. Now it was an event where each family outdid themselves to prove how amazing they were. Everyone was dressed to the nines, even though technically, the style was the same. A girl from the House of Poseidon walked by, proving my point: Her toga was lined with seashells and pearls. After seeing the car that dropped her off that morning, my guess was they were real pearls.

Riya and Gideon said goodbye and quickly headed for their tents. I cut through the crowd toward my tent, the House of Artemis. Above my canvas tent was a banner made of burlap.

Yeah, you heard me right: burlap.

Artemis's image was also on the banner with her silver bow and arrow, made for her by the Cyclops, a stag by her side. I smiled as I looked up at her. Despite disliking the way we still honored the gods, the sight of her always made me feel good, like I belonged. I didn't know why. I mean, I knew for a fact that I wasn't related to her. No one was. Artemis never had any kids.

The House of Artemis was one of two houses orphans could be assigned to. The House of Hestia was the other, although no one at the school had been assigned to that one, so there wasn't even a tent for her. I was one of only two kids assigned to Artemis.

I looked up as I spied my lone Artemis tentmate making her way

through the crowd, her crutches moving swiftly across the floor. I smiled as Sidney whacked a man who didn't move out of the way quickly enough for her. The man turned around to yell, but catching sight of Sidney, he immediately apologized. She didn't say a word, just vaulted past him.

Sidney reached the tent and dropped her crutches to the side. "I hate these things."

"Parents make you use them?" I asked.

Sidney grabbed on to the seat next to me and pulled herself up. Her body stopped at the top of her thighs. Her umbilical cord had wrapped around her legs during labor, and by the time she was born, the blood flow had been cut off for too long. As a result, her legs had been amputated.

Not long after, her birth parents had put her up for adoption, and eventually she'd been adopted by the Keegans from the House of Apollo. But being it was blood that mattered and nothing was known about her birth parents other than the fact that they were complete heartless jerks (in my not-so-humble opinion), she was assigned to Artemis.

I didn't offer to help Sidney into her seat. She would just tell me no, and honestly, the girl was the strongest person I knew. I mean, her biceps were the size of most people's thighs. She usually didn't bother with the crutches, preferring to use her hands to walk.

"Nice job in the meet on Friday," I said. "You're definitely from the House of Poseidon. You move through water like no one I've ever seen."

Sidney grinned. "You saw that?"

Shaking my head, I returned the smile. "Not in person. But I caught it online later. You got the gold, right?"

"Yeah," she said.

I smirked. "Bet Aubrey wasn't happy."

Sidney growled as she looked over at the House of Zeus. "She actually put in a *complaint*, saying I had an unfair advantage due to my 'different physiology.'"

I stared at her in disbelief. "That's insane. Besides, you're on the same team."

Sidney scoffed. "Yeah. Team only works for her when we play backup singers to the Aubrey Show."

"Seriously, what is wrong with that girl?"

"Mommy and Daddy didn't love her enough?" Sidney mused.

"Or never said no to her?"

Sidney shook her head, scrunching up her nose. "Nah, I think she was just born bad. You know that the House of Zeus is full of inbreeding."

"Not like Artemis. We've got *no* breeding."

Sidney held up her hand. "Go House Artemis!"

I slapped her hand. "House Artemis!"

We both laughed but settled down as Mrs. Poole, the principal, walked across the dais and tapped on the microphone. "Welcome, students, families, and friends to the annual All Gods Day celebration!"

Applause broke out. Mrs. Poole waited until it settled down to continue. "Today we honor the legacy of the gods and the gifts they have bestowed upon us, their descendants. And no god is more important and has had more impact than Zeus. And for the first time, a student from the House of Zeus has been asked to lead us in the opening prayer. Aubrey?"

I groaned. Sidney growled, but the rest of the auditorium burst into applause.

Aubrey walked to the stage, her head held high, her back straight, and I prayed to each of the gods that she would trip and fall right on her big, stupid face.

Apparently none of the gods were in a listening mood, as Aubrey ascended to the stage, much like I imagine a goddess would ascend Mount Olympus.

Hera, I hate her.

Aubrey looked out across the crowd, a small smile on her face, somehow managing to pull off sweet.

Sidney leaned toward me, whispering, "Guaranteed, she practiced that look in the mirror."

I snickered, earning a glare from an older woman from the House of Dionysius.

"Thank you, Principal Poole, for this incredible honor," she said, her voice dripping with sincerity.

Not gonna lie, I threw up a little in my mouth.

Aubrey gazed across the auditorium, no doubt making sure every single person was focused on her before she began to speak. Aubrey's voice rang out in the silent auditorium for a moment before the rest of the crowd joined in.

"To the gods, who have given us life,
To the gods, who have given us joy,
To the gods who have given us love,
To the gods who have given us beauty,
To the gods who have given us wisdom,
To the gods who have given us guidance,

We thank you for all you have done, all you do now, and all you will do for us in the future. We, your blessed children, thank you."

And I couldn't help it; I was moved. There was something about those words. I might not believe that the gods were *still* looking out for us, or that they cared, but they *were* the reason we existed. The reason we thrived in the early days.

But then they'd disappeared. They were the movers and shakers for thousands of years, and then all mention of them stopped.

As everyone took their seats, Sidney was apparently thinking the same thing as me. She nodded toward all the tents. "What do you think happened to them? The gods?"

I shrugged. The fate of the gods had been speculated and debated almost weekly on different programs, but no one had come to any firm conclusions. "I don't know. I know everyone says they can't be killed, but I can't see any other explanation for where they went. I mean, why stay silent for thousands of years? Why hide? They have to be dead."

“Yeah.”

I crossed my arms over my chest as the procession of gifts began. House of Zeus, of course, went first. The Betcalfs carried a golden thunderbolt, and the crowd oohed and aahed as Aubrey and her family stood there smiling as if they had carved the thing themselves.

I shook my head at the spectacle. “But let me tell you, if the gods aren’t dead, they have a lot of explaining to do.”

CHAPTER 6

AND BY SOME MIRACLE, THE DAY GETS WORSE

THE CEREMONY LASTED FOR AN HOUR. ONLY THE TOP HOUSES DISPLAYED their gifts on the stage. The rest gave their gifts to the gods at home. Sidney grabbed some seats outside in the big tent while I went and grabbed us both some food. By the time I had plates, Riya and Gideon had found Sidney and were sitting with her.

Did I mention that we line up for food according to house? And guess which house always goes last?

My complaints aside, though, the event did always have the best food.

Riya leaned back, her hand on her stomach. “Gods, I’m full.”

“Not me.” Gideon bounded up. “I’m going back for seconds.”

The rest of us shook our heads as he headed off. “Where does he put all of that food? He’s skinnier than my little brother.” Sidney grabbed her crutches. “Well, actually, I’m going to grab one more cupcake.”

“I can get it for you.” I started to stand.

Sidney waved me back down. “I’m good. Besides, I want to go see what my family’s up to. I’ll find you guys later.”

Riya turned to me, her voice hopeful. “Do you want to go check

out the offerings? I couldn't really get a good view of everything from my seat."

I really didn't want to, but I knew Riya loved all that stuff. "Sure. Should we wait for Gideon?"

Riya shook her head, standing up and waving her hands in the air. I turned to see Gideon in line, looking at us. Riya and I pointed inside. Gideon nodded in response, a half-eaten cupcake in one hand.

We headed for the front doors of school, following about half a dozen other people also headed inside. And okay, I didn't completely hate this part of All Gods Day. Getting to hang out at school without bells or homework was kind of cool.

The gym was pretty empty when we stepped inside. Riya made a beeline for the stage, but I stopped to look over all the tents. I never really understood the big deal with the gods. In reality, no one even knew if they really existed, and here we had all these decisions about what kind of person you were based on the fact that you *might* be linked to someone who lived thousands of years ago. It was ridiculous. I mean, so what if you had the bloodline of Poseidon? Since no powers came with it, what did it matter?

Riya halted, realizing I wasn't next to her. She turned back to me. "There's a fabric up there from the Poseidon House that is gorgeous. I swear it looks like actual water. You have to see it."

"I'm good." I didn't move from my spot. "Besides, unlike you, I didn't have to look past anyone to see the stage. Sidney and I had great views. I'll wait here."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Riya hurried over to the stage while I examined all the banners above the tents. Zeus looking strong with his thunderbolts, Apollo in his chariot, Athena with her armor, Hermes with his winged sandals, and so on.

Don't get me wrong, reading about the gods was fun, but why on earth did we still care about them or whether or not we might have been related to them? It just seemed like another attempt to make

sure people stayed where they were supposed to stay in society. And I was never a fan of being told what I could or couldn't do.

Besides, it wasn't like they did much for us. Look at Zeus. He had kids with about a dozen women while married to Hera. How did that make him a role model? Yet he was called the god of morality. I mean, maybe he was *sometimes* good at protecting the downtrodden, but he was still known best for throwing thunderbolts at people who displeased him. He and Petty would have gotten along really well.

Most of the gods were better known for their horrible deeds than their good ones. Even the mighty Apollo was a bit of a jerk. He was known for seeking revenge and bringing plagues to those who displeased him. Dude clearly needed anger management.

I shook my head. I guess it didn't really matter. They were long gone, if they ever existed. It just really rubbed me the wrong way that they were put on pedestals for having powers, not for doing good deeds.

Riya came back smiling, her eyes shining. "I love All Gods Day. I mean, I know you don't like all this stuff, but thinking about what they could do, it's amazing."

I didn't want to rain on her parade, so I didn't say anything, but I did glance at the clock. "Come on. I think the statue reveal is happening soon."

"Oh, right. We should hurry. I definitely don't want a bad seat for that. I have a feeling it's going to be Artemis this year." Riya tugged my arm forward.

Every year, a new statue of a god was revealed and placed along the roofline of the school. All the gods were currently represented except for Artemis, Hestia, and Athena, who all happened to be the maiden goddesses. None of the male gods were without ancestors. Athena did have a son, Erichthonius, although she somehow managed that without a dad. No clue how that worked. So she had some descendants. As I mentioned earlier, the only ones without offspring were Artemis and Hestia. This apparently put you low on the statue priority list.

But I'm sure that was a complete coincidence and not rife with sexism.

I hurried along next to Riya out of the gym. Down the hall, I heard a familiar laugh and wished there was another way out of the school.

Too late. Aubrey stepped through the main entrance with three of her minions.

Aubrey narrowed her eyes, heading for me. What was with this girl? I swear, I never went out of my way to talk to her or look at her, but she'd had it in for me since kindergarten. She stopped in front of me, her hands on her hips. "Looking at the tributes? Tell me, what are you and Sidney donating this year to Artemis? Mud?"

Two of her friends laughed.

"Go away, Aubrey." I started to step around her.

She stepped in front of me to block my path. "You really need to learn how to talk to your betters."

I laughed right in her face. "Aubrey, you're not even better than a cockroach."

One of her friends, Stacey, tapped Aubrey's arm. "They're going to reveal the statue soon. We should go."

Aubrey glared down at me for another moment before swinging around, her hair whipping across my face, before she stormed down the hallway. I probably shouldn't have even said anything, but the girl needed to learn that not everyone would bow down to her. Sidney appeared on her crutches from the side hall in between Aubrey and the exit.

A horrible feeling settled in my stomach. Aubrey looked over her shoulder at me and smiled.

Oh no. I picked up my pace, but I was too slow. Aubrey bumped into one of Sidney's crutches, sending it careening down the hall. Sidney jerked to the right and slammed into the lockers before hitting the ground hard.

"Oh, so sorry, Sidney. You're okay, right?" Aubrey's words dripped with insincerity.

Anger, white and pure, rolled through me. I wanted nothing more than to slam my fist through Aubrey's smug face.

Mr. Holland, who'd just stepped in the doorway, raced over to Sidney and reached down for her. "Sidney, are you all right?"

Sidney shoved his hand away. "I'm fine."

But her blazing face said otherwise. She tightened her straps on her backpack.

Mr. Holland reached down to help her again. "Let me—"

She waved him away. "No. I'm good." She took off down the hall, using her hands to propel her.

I growled and started after Aubrey, who'd slipped out the doors with a laugh. She had gone too far. She needed to pay for that.

Riya and Gideon grabbed my arms, yanking me into an empty classroom.

Riya slammed the door shut as Gideon released me, standing in front of the door with his hands out as if to block my way.

"What are you guys doing? Did you see what Aubrey just did? We need to—"

Riya's mouth gaped open. "Lucy, your eyes."

"My eyes? It's my *fists* Aubrey needs to worry about." I took a step toward the door.

Gideon backed up, but stayed between me and the door. When he spoke, his voice shook. "Lucy, your eyes were *glowing*."

I stared at him. "What are you talking about? My eyes weren't glowing."

"They were, Lucy. They were glowing," Riya said.

"Eyes don't glow."

"Well, yours did."

I looked between the two of them. Neither of them were smiling. They weren't joking. "Are they still glowing?"

Riya shook her head.

I frowned and looked at them suspiciously. "Were you just trying to distract me? Because Aubrey totally deserves to get her butt

kicked, or at least to get shoved into the dessert table. There's a cheesecake with her name all over it."

"She deserves it," Gideon said, "but your eyes were really glowing. It was ... weird. Cool, but weird."

I shook my head. "Whatever. I think you two are the ones losing it. Now come on. Let's go find Sidney and make sure she's all right."

"I still can't believe Aubrey did that. I mean, that was low, even for her," Gideon said as we stepped out of the classroom.

I grabbed Sidney's crutches as we passed them. "I don't think there is a too low for Aubrey."

Riya said nothing and just kept glancing at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing. It's just ... they glowed, Lucy. They really did."

We stepped outside, and being I had no idea what to say to that, I nodded toward the unveiling. "They're about to start."

Riya started forward and picked up her pace, looking for a seat. Gideon hustled along next to her, but I trailed behind them. Riya's voice kept ringing through my mind. *Your eyes were glowing.*

That was crazy. I didn't know what they saw, but it wasn't that. Maybe they'd drank some bad punch. A few years back, some kids dumped something into the punch that made everyone throw up. Maybe someone spiked it again this year.

There had to be a logical explanation. But then I pictured Starbright, who hadn't been Starbright ...

I shook my head, shutting out those thoughts. No. They were wrong, and I was just seeing things, and now apparently Gideon and Riya were too.

Because eyes simply didn't glow... right?

CHAPTER 7

UM, THAT'S NOT NORMAL, RIGHT?

THAT AFTERNOON WHEN I STEPPED OFF THE BUS, MY STOMACH WAS FULL, and my teeth were sore. Not from the food, but from clenching them every time someone gave me a pitying look for being from the House of Artemis.

After news of the Sidney incident made the rounds, I swear it had been nothing but pitying and smug looks. Gods, I hated this day. Everyone from the big houses walked around with their noses up in the air, pretending they were better than the people around them.

But my day was looking up, as my pups were sitting waiting for me at the end of the drive. They jumped all over us as we got off the bus before running down the drive, chasing one another.

Gideon climbed up onto the paddock fence and walked along the top rail as we followed. "I don't like how they treated Sidney."

"None of us do. But that doesn't seem to stop it." I kicked a large chunk of dried dirt, sending it rolling. "You know, one day I really hope Aubrey gets hers."

"If the world's fair, then she will," Riya said.

Gideon snorted before flipping over the next post and landing,

perfectly balanced, one foot behind the other. “So I guess *that* won’t be happening, then.”

Riya and I exchanged a grin. Whenever Gideon got worked up, he forgot he was supposed to be a klutz. And that’s when you truly got to see Gideon Grimaldi, the youngest son of the Amazing Grimaldis. His family had been world-renowned acrobats for generations, touring the globe and performing on every continent. Gideon was supposed to follow in their footsteps, but exceptionally thick glasses and a natural talent for tripping over his own feet when people watched him made that impossible. His parents and two brothers left him with Nani while they were touring. They’d left last week and would be gone for another two months.

“When’s Elodie coming home?”

“Actually, she sent me a text. She got home early with the lion and got him settled in.”

Gideon’s face lit up. “The lion’s here?”

I grinned. “Yup. But she had to leave on another case.” It wasn’t unusual for her to go from one case to the next, but I had hoped she’d be home for me to talk to about today. “She said to stay away from the lion until she got back.”

I had to admit I was kind of excited about this rescue. We’d never had a lion on the ranch before.

Riya let out a laugh and pointed. “Look.” The pups had scampered over to the fence and were now climbing over each other trying to reach the top.

I shook my head as Jax toppled off the top, hitting the ground with a cry. “Oh no.” I hurried forward, pulling Pax off of Max before they got a paw stuck in the chicken wire. “I swear, you three are a full-time job some days. How does Nani get anything done with you guys around?”

Jax looked up at me with big eyes, tilting his head. I smiled down into that little face. Honestly, how could you not love that face? “Yes, I still love you.” Jax leaned up and licked me. Not to be outdone, Pax and Max piled on.

“No, no, puppy attack. Help!” I fell back under the squirming bodies.

“We’ll save you!” Jumping from the fence, Gideon grabbed Jax and promptly brought him up to his face for a lick. Riya took Pax and stepped away, receiving her own kisses.

I sat up, Max in my lap. He nestled his head into my chest, making me grin. I was pretty sure nothing in the world was better than a puppy hug.

But then Max’s head popped up. Riya and Gideon had each stepped a few feet away in opposite directions. Max’s head moved back and forth between them before he let out a whine. He hopped off my lap, his little nails digging into my skin in his rush. “Ouch.”

He ran over, stopping halfway between Gideon and Riya, his body shaking with nervous tension, his head still whipping back and forth. Jax and Pax let off whines of their own.

“What’s going on?” Riya asked, quickly lowering the squirming Pax to the ground.

“Whoa, whoa,” Gideon said as Jax leapt for the ground as well. The pups sprinted to each other, leaping over one another with licks, and then the three sat down, each leaning against one another with eyes closed.

I stared at them, dumbfounded. My crazy rambunctious puppies were all leaning into one another, almost humming.

“Uh, Lucy? Do they do that a lot?” Gideon asked.

I shook my head. “Um, no. I’ve never seen them do that before. But puppies do that, right?”

“I’ve never seen puppies do that,” Gideon said.

From the corner of my eye, I caught motion inside the barn. Star-bright was in her stall. Again, the halo of light appeared around her. Instead of stripes, all I saw was the blinding white of a pegasus. My gaze shifted, and I gasped softly.

“Hey.” Gideon nudged my arm. “It’s weird, right?”

My head whipped back to the pups, who all still sat leaning

against one another and then back at Starbright, now the same zebra I had seen for years. I swallowed. “Yeah, definitely weird.”

But it wasn’t the pups I was talking about. Or even Starbright.

It was the swirling mass of air that had appeared in the field twenty feet away.

CHAPTER 8

WHAT'S A FEW HALLUCINATIONS AMONGST FRIENDS?

MY BREATH LEFT ME IN ONE BIG SWOOSH, AND MY BACKPACK DROPPED TO THE ground. I stared at the swirling mass of air. It was like staring into a tornado. I'd never seen anything like it before. But somewhere down deep, I knew if portals existed, this was what they would look like.

"Lucy, what are you doing?" Gideon asked.

"What am I doing?" I looked back at the swirling air. "You guys don't see that?"

Riya looked around, her gaze passing right over the portal. "See what?"

They don't see it. How can they not see it? I stepped closer. I could feel the wind from the portal, but my friends just looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "Nothing. I, uh, nothing. I just thought I saw a red robin."

Riya frowned. "A robin?"

"Yeah, I like birds."

"Ohh-kay," Gideon said.

I could tell they didn't believe me. And honestly, who would? I like birds? I live on an animal rescue with hundreds of exotic

animals. Birds, unless it was something like a phoenix or a thunderbird, just couldn't hold a candle to any of the species of animals roaming around these acres.

Gideon and Riya continued to the house. I flicked another glance at the circle of swirling air. Why couldn't they see it? Or better yet, why could only I see it? It seemed so real.

I can see it. I can see a pegasus. I'm going crazy.

Swallowing hard, I hurried after Gideon and Riya. As we headed for the house, I kept trying to come up with a rational argument as to why I was seeing things that didn't exist. I mean, pegasi had never existed, and portals did not exist outside movies. Now I was convinced someone spiked the punch again at the celebration.

Of course, I hadn't had punch for hours, but honestly, that was the best reason I could come up with at the moment. But that didn't explain seeing Starbright as a pegasus *before* going to school.

"Hey, Frisco," Gideon yelled as the peacock rounded the side of the house. The bird's head was down as he stomped across the dirt yard for the barn.

"That is one strange peacock," Riya said, watching him.

I smiled. "Yeah, he—"

The words caught in my throat as a rainbow halo appeared around Frisco. Except now instead of a peacock, he was a gnome with a round head, a dark black beard, and a short stumpy body. He even had a red pointed cap. As he crossed our path, I could see his lips moving, then I heard his low, gravelly voice. "Bad enough I'm stuck like this. If they think I'm going to some zoo, they've got another thing coming."

I stared, dumbstruck, as Frisco stalked across the yard and disappeared into the barn. Gideon and Riya continued ahead.

Noticing I'd stopped, Riya turned. "Hey, earth to Lucy. Earth to Lucy."

I forced my feet forward even as my heart threatened to pound its way out of my chest. "Uh, sorry, I just realized I, um, forgot my social studies textbook."

“Wait, we have social studies homework?” Gideon asked.

Riya nodded. “Yeah, we’re supposed to read the chapter and answer the questions in the back.”

Gideon smacked his forehead. “Why? Why must they torture us?”

Riya pointed him toward the house. “To make sure you’re learning stuff.”

“But it’s so *cruel*,” Gideon said.

Riya shook her head, laughing. I forced myself to smile, but inside I was shaking. *I’m going crazy. I’m officially going crazy.*

“You guys want to check out the lion?” Gideon asked.

Riya and I exchanged a glance.

“Elodie won’t like that,” Riya said. “Lucy said she doesn’t want us to go near him.”

True, but the idea of seeing the lion sounded really good right now. “Of course,” I said slowly, “we haven’t seen a lion here ever, and we did kind of have a lousy day. I think we deserve a little bit of a break.”

Gideon grinned at me. “That’s what I’m thinking. Come on, Ri.”

“Fine,” she said, drawling out the word, “but if we get in trouble, it’s totally on you two.”

“As always,” I said. “Come on.”

We dropped our backpacks off in the kitchen. Nani had set out some snacks and left a note saying she had to run to town for a few things. At the bottom, she wrote in all caps to stay away from the lion. Riya and I weren’t hungry, but Gideon gobbled down the granola bars Nani had left out. Seriously, how was he so skinny?

We left the pups curled up together on a dog bed and headed out past the barn. The doors were open, and the animals were agitated. But they got like that a lot when there was a new animal on the ranch, especially a predator. I could see Starbright’s stall. She watched us silently as we passed.

I shook my head. I didn’t know what was going on with me, but I

was probably just getting sick or something. I'd get Nani to let me stay home tomorrow, and then I'd be fine.

Frisco rounded the barn, looking like a peacock, his long train dragging behind him. He paused, giving us a strange look before tilting his head and letting out a squawk.

Gideon shooed him away. "Go away, Frisco."

Frisco squawked again.

"Shh, Frisco," I hissed, glancing back at the house. Nani wasn't home, but she could show up at any time, and Frisco could squawk for a while. "You're going to get us caught."

Frisco squawked one more time and then turned around and headed for the farmhouse.

"Why do I feel like he's about to go tell on us?" Riya asked.

Gideon grimaced. "Probably because he is. Thank Zeus Nani isn't home."

"And doesn't speak peacock. But just in case, let's make this quick," I said.

We broke into a jog, passing most of the other animal cages. All of them were prowling around, their fur standing. They were all worked up, but it got even worse when we passed them by. They all started to screech, yell, and hoot. Man, they were all going nuts. A chill crept over me. In the middle of all that noise, I swear I could hear someone saying no.

The hair on the back of my neck rose. I put out a hand, stopping Riya and Gideon. "Something's wrong."

Gideon looked around nervously. "Yeah. They're never like this."

The animals were even louder now. "I kind of think we should go back," Riya said.

I knew Riya was right, but at the same time, I had a feeling I needed to see the lion's enclosure. "You two stay here. I'll be right back."

Without waiting for a reply, I sprinted toward the enclosure, a burning need to see the lion racing through me.

THE KEY OF APOLLO

Please let me be wrong. Please let me be wrong. Please let me be wrong,
I chanted in my head as I ran.

I rounded the chicken coop and stopped dead in my tracks.

The lion enclosure stood straight in front of me. And it looked
exactly like it had looked the last time I'd seen it.

Completely empty.

CHAPTER 9

THE WORLD'S BRAVEST PEACOCK

OH HERA, NO. I WHIRLED AROUND. “GIDEON! RIYA, GET—” THE REST OF the words died in my throat as I saw the shadow creep up behind them. “Look out!”

The lion, tall and emaciated, stepped into view from the chicken coop’s top. For a moment, I thought it might be too weak to do anything. But then it let out a bloodcurdling roar.

“Run!” I yelled as I sprinted toward them.

Riya started toward me, but Gideon, as always, tripped over his own feet and landed face first in the dirt. My heart leapt into my throat. He wasn’t going to get away in time. I sprinted forward even faster, watching as the cat leapt from the top of the coop.

With a scream, Gideon rolled to the side. The lion landed, barely missing him.

It shifted, turning toward Gideon again, but then a sound drew its attention to the side of the barn. Frisco charged with a giant squawk.

At the same time, the back doors of the stable bounced back and forth as if someone were kicking at them. With one last push, Star-bright burst free from the barn, racing toward Gideon.

The lion let out a screech. Gideon scrambled back.

Starbright reached the overgrown cat first. The rainbow halo appeared around her, and once again I saw her in all her pegasus glory. She rose up on her back hooves before stomping back to the ground. The lion shifted to the side, but she caught him on the back of his tail. He let out a loud yowl of rage.

Not to be left out, Frisco squawked and head-butted the lion in the side with all his might. The lion swung out with its claws. Frisco leapt back, barely missing getting mauled.

Spying a rake leaning against the side of the coop, I grabbed it and swung it with everything that I was worth at the lion's head. It batted at the rake, but I managed to hold on to it, keeping it in front of me. "Get out of here! Get out!" I yelled.

The lion let out another roar as Starbright backed up. I shot a glance at Frisco, who was crouched down low on the ground, noting the lion do the same.

"Don't even think it," I snarled through gritted teeth. "Get away from him." I thrust the rake at its head again. It batted at the rake before roaring once more.

Barking burst from the barn as the pups sprinted toward us. I frowned. They looked ... bigger. The lion took one look at them and sprinted in the opposite direction.

The dogs' barks sounded deeper as they tore across the ground, racing toward us. They sprinted past as the lion's tail disappeared behind the side of its enclosure.

My heart was in my throat as I pictured the three of them taking on the lion. "No! Come!"

The dogs screeched to a halt. They stopped so fast that Pax's back paws flew in the air, and he tumbled forward. They took one last look at the enclosure and then trotted back to me. I placed the edge of the rake on the ground, my heart threatening to pound out of my chest. "Good pups."

"Oh my gods, oh my gods." Gideon stumbled forward, carefully

leaning down to pick up Frisco and hug him tightly. "Frisco, thank you, thank you so much."

Frisco squawked in response.

Riya hurried to his side. "We need to get inside."

"I'm going to get Starbright and Frisco back into the stable, and I'll be right behind you," I said.

"Lucy," Riya warned.

"I mean it. I'll be right behind you. I promise."

Gideon shook his head, picking Frisco up in his arms. "We go together. And keep the rake."

CHAPTER 10

SURPRISE! THINGS GO HORRIBLY WRONG

AFTER DROPPING STARBRIGHT AND FRISCO AT THE BARN AND MAKING SURE that the stable doors were locked tight, we sprinted back to the house. The pups stayed along our sides, acting like sentries instead of six-month-old puppies. It was the second major weirdness from them since we'd gotten off the bus.

As soon as we were inside, I closed the wooden kitchen door, locked it, and leaned against it. The house was quiet.

"What do we do?" Gideon asked.

"Riya, call Nani and tell her what's going on. Gideon, call the police."

I stared at the screen above the kitchen sink with concern. The netting had been ripped to shreds. "What happened to the screen?"

Gideon grabbed the house phone and started dialing.

"It must have been the pups," I said. "They knew we were in trouble." I crossed the room to the ruined screen while the pups followed me. A tickle appeared in the back of my throat. I pulled the glass window down to offer us a little more protection, then knelt down and hugged each of them. "You guys are the best."

I glanced at the kitchen door and windows. They were all closed, but they weren't going to keep anything like a lion out.

Riya was talking quickly on her cell to Nani. Even from across the room, I could hear Nani freaking out. Gideon was explaining things to the police.

It was going to take minutes, at least for anyone to get here. And what if Nani came home? Knowing her, she was racing here right now. She couldn't take on a lion.

Even if it wasn't Nani, that lion was looking for someone to kill. And all I could picture were all the animals on the ranch that I cared about. I didn't want any of them getting hurt.

Then I remembered the shotgun in the stable. If I could get to that, I would have a way to protect them. To protect all of us. I should have thought of that when we were making sure Starbright was secure, but it hadn't even crossed my mind.

Gideon was back at the door now, the phone still in his hand. "Where do you think he is?"

"I don't know." I joined him, staring out into the ranch.

Riya appeared at our other side. "Nani is calling the police, too. And Elodie."

I nodded, shooting a glance at the barn. It was quiet right now. If I was going to go, now was the time. I glanced down at my clothes and noticed I'd gotten mud streaked along my side somewhere along the way. "I'm going to go get changed. Be right back." I darted for the stairs before Riya or Gideon could say anything.

The dogs started to follow me, but I stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "You guys stay here. I'll be right back."

They whined, but did as I ordered. I took the steps two at a time, closing my bedroom door softly behind me, and then hurried across to the window. I scanned the area, but nothing was moving. The animals were all quiet.

Carefully, I stepped through the window onto the front porch roof. Staying along the house, I made my way to the edge. As quietly

as possible, I grabbed the gutter and lowered myself down until my feet were standing on the porch railing banister.

I let go of the gutter and arrested my fall by grabbing the railing before dropping quietly to the dirt. I paused, listening carefully.

So far, so good. I glanced around the open space between the barn and the house, but nothing seemed to be moving. After taking a deep breath, I hustled over to the barn.

Please don't be here. Please don't be here. Please don't be here, I prayed the whole way. But nothing roared or rushed me. With trembling hands, I reached the barn's door. I quickly unlocked it and slipped inside, pulling it shut behind me. I leaned against the door and smiled. *Safe.*

The window at the back of the barn erupted as the lion sailed through.

It shook off the glass shards as it landed on the ground. Then it stood with a low snarl, its dark eyes almost glowing in the light.

Uh-oh.

CHAPTER II

I AM SO DEAD

THE ANIMALS IN THE STABLE ERUPTED. SQUEALING, SQUAWKING, WHATEVER form of yelling their species did, they did. Starbright kicked at her stall, but I had locked her door to keep her in. Frisco squawked like mad halfway down the aisle, flapping his wings and trying to get over the half door. I'd locked him in as well.

"Nice kitty kitty." I backed away toward the door. The lion prowled toward me, not interested in any of the other animals.

My heart raced. Sweat dripped down my back. The back of my foot touched the door. I didn't dare turn around to grab the handle. I knew if I did, he would be on me in a second.

A shimmer of light encased the lion. I blinked hard. Was that ...?

Frisco let out a giant squawk and managed to get a wing on top of the half door. He held on, pulling himself up. Once again, I saw the small gnome. "Stay away from her, you furball!" he yelled. He threw an apple at the lion.

The lion's head jerked toward him. It let out a roar that shook everything in the barn, including me. But I knew an opportunity when I saw one. I scrambled for the handle, flinging it open, and ran for all I was worth.

But the sound of the lion giving chase sent me a very clear message: It was not going to be enough.

My legs pounded down the drive. I steered away from the house. No doors were going to keep this thing out, and there was no chance I was going to lead it there.

“Lucy!” Riya’s yell was filled with terror.

I didn’t stop or even look over at the house as I streaked past. My mind raced as I tried to figure out where exactly I was going to go. I knew where I *wasn’t* going: anywhere near people or animals. But on an animal rescue ranch, that didn’t exactly leave me with many options.

I flashed on that strange swirling air I’d seen earlier. I had no idea what would happen if someone went into it, but if it was bad, then that’s exactly where I wanted the lion to go.

I veered right, climbed the fence, and sprinted into the pasture. Flicking a quick glance over my shoulder, my eyes widened at the racing lion. I dove for the ground with a roll. The lion leaped over me, so close that some of its drool hit me in the neck.

That is exactly as gross as it sounds, by the way.

I scrambled to my feet. The lion landed on some old fencing, its paws getting stuck. Hoofbeats raced toward me. Starbright galloped down the drive before soaring over the fence, with *Frisco* on her back.

My jaw dropped. How in the world ...

But I didn’t have time to figure any of that out. The lion lunged upright, still caught in part of the fencing. I raced for Starbright. *Frisco* bent down.

Yes, *Frisco*.

But it wasn’t a peacock reaching for me; it was the gnome. He reached out his hand, and I kid you not, as I grabbed it, it felt like a hand, not a wing.

And let me tell you, he was undoubtedly the world’s strongest peacock/gnome, because he swung me right up onto Starbright’s back behind him.

“Go, go!” I yelled. “We need to get to the other pasture.”

Starbright galloped faster than I'd ever seen her move.

The lion roared. I looked behind me. He was free and coming in fast.

I looked up. We were almost at the fence.

"Hold on!" Frisco yelled.

I tensed, hunching low over Frisco and Starbright as she soared over the fence. We touched down with a jolt. I held on tight, feeling myself slide left. *Do not fall, Do not fall!* I warned myself as I clamped my thighs tighter.

"Head to the far corner!" I yelled at Starbright, not even sure if she could understand me, but I was in no position to direct her any other way.

It worked, though. At the end of the pasture, the air shimmered and swirled. Thank the gods; it was still there. I glanced back. The lion was leaping over the fence. But far behind him, I spied Gideon and Riya sprinting toward us, Elodie's shotgun in Riya's arms. The pups shot out in front of them, barking like mad.

Oh, no, no, no, no.

This had to work. And for the first time since I'd started seeing things, I prayed I was not hallucinating.

"Slow down. I'm getting off."

Frisco's head reared back. I heard a squawk, but in my mind, it became words. "What? Are you crazy?"

Being I was riding on the back of a wounded pegasus and about to answer a peacock/gnome while being chased by a lion, I thought that answer was pretty clear. "It's okay. I've got an idea. You guys get to Riya and Gideon."

Frisco glanced back down the drive. "Oh, fargal nuts."

I blinked. *Did he just ...?*

I shook my head. No time for that now. I slid off Starbright's back, rolling as I hit the ground. Starbright picked up speed again, galloping away.

There was no guarantee the lion would stay with me, but I had a

feeling I was the one it was most interested in. It could have attacked any of the animals, but it didn't.

For some reason, this thing wanted me.

And yup, it glanced at Starbright galloping away yet immediately returned its focus to me. In fact, now it seemed to be moving even *faster* toward me.

Fan-tastic.

Starbright and Frisco hadn't glanced at the portal, so my guess was they couldn't see it. I already knew Riya and Gideon couldn't. I just hoped the lion wouldn't be able to as well.

And I hoped that it actually *was* a portal. If not, I was about to be a whole lot of dead.

I sprinted for the swirling mass. The wind tugged at me. It seemed to grow larger the closer I got.

I skidded to a stop right in front of it, turning around. "Come and get me!"

The lion roared in response, and I swear, even over the wind blowing from the portal, I could hear: "Oh, I will."

I tensed. All I needed was to time it right. When he lunged for me, I would dive out of the way. I backed up until I was at the very edge of the portal. The wind inside it was howling, making it hard to hear. It was yanking at my clothes as if trying to pull me in.

"Move, Lucy! Move!" Gideon yelled as he clambered over the fence. The dogs were desperately scrambling, trying to get over it. Riya followed closely behind them, her face terrified.

I didn't turn my attention from the lion, though.

Ten feet away.

It felt like all the hair on my body was standing on end.

Six feet.

I tensed.

Four feet.

It leaped.

I dove for the ground.

R.D. BRADY

But I wasn't fast enough. The lion aimed low and caught me on the hip. Wrapping its paws around me, it pulled me into the portal.



CONTINUE LUCY'S adventure in *The Key of Apollo*, available on Amazon!