

2 THREE OLD LADIES KNIT THE SOCKS OF DEATH

I was used to the occasional weird experience, but usually they were over quickly. This twenty-four/seven hallucination was more than I could handle. For the rest of the school year, the entire campus seemed to be playing some kind of trick on me. The students acted as if they were completely and totally convinced that Mrs Kerr – a perky blonde woman whom I'd never seen in my life until she got on our bus at the end of the field trip – had been our pre-algebra teacher since Christmas.

Every so often I would spring a Mrs Dodds reference on somebody, just to see if I could trip them up, but they would stare at me like I was psycho.

It got so I almost believed them – Mrs Dodds had never existed.

Almost.

But Grover couldn't fool me. When I mentioned the name Dodds to him, he would hesitate, then claim she didn't exist. But I knew he was lying.

Something was going on. Something *bad* happened at the museum.

I didn't have much time to think about it during the days, but at night, visions of Mrs Dodds with talons

and leathery wings would wake me up in a cold sweat.

The freak weather continued, which didn't help my mood. One night, a thunderstorm blew out the windows in my dorm room. A few days later, the biggest tornado ever spotted in the Hudson Valley touched down only fifty miles from Yancy Academy. One of the current events we studied in social studies class was the unusual number of small planes that had gone down in sudden squalls in the Atlantic that year.

I started feeling cranky and irritable most of the time. My grades slipped from Ds to Fs. I got into more fights with Nancy Bobofit and her friends. I was sent out into the hallway in almost every class.

Finally, when our English teacher, Mr Nicoll, asked me for the millionth time why I was too lazy to study for spelling tests, I snapped. I called him an old sot. I wasn't even sure what it meant, but it sounded good.

The headmaster sent my mom a letter the following week, making it official: I would not be invited back next year to Yancy Academy.

Fine, I told myself. Just fine.

I was homesick.

I wanted to be with my mom in our little apartment on the Upper East Side, even if I had to go to public school and put up with my obnoxious stepfather and his stupid poker parties.

And yet . . . there were things I'd miss at Yancy. The view of the woods out my dorm window, the Hudson River in the distance, the smell of pine trees. I'd miss Grover, who'd

been a good friend, even if he was a little strange. I worried how he'd survive next year without me.

I'd miss Latin class, too – Mr Brunner's crazy tournament days and his faith that I could do well.

As exam week got closer, Latin was the only test I studied for. I hadn't forgotten what Mr Brunner had told me about this subject being life-and-death for me. I wasn't sure why, but I'd started to believe him.

The evening before my final, I got so frustrated I threw the *Cambridge Guide to Greek Mythology* across my dorm room. Words had started swimming off the page, circling my head, the letters doing one-eighties as if they were riding skateboards. There was no way I was going to remember the difference between Chiron and Charon, or Polydictes and Polydeuces. And conjugating those Latin verbs? Forget it.

I paced the room, feeling like ants were crawling around inside my shirt.

I remembered Mr Brunner's serious expression, his thousand-year-old eyes. *I will accept only the best from you, Percy Jackson.*

I took a deep breath. I picked up the mythology book.

I'd never asked a teacher for help before. Maybe if I talked to Mr Brunner, he could give me some pointers. At least I could apologize for the big fat 'F' I was about to score on his exam. I didn't want to leave Yancy Academy with him thinking I hadn't tried.

I walked downstairs to the faculty offices. Most of them were dark and empty, but Mr Brunner's door was ajar,

light from his window stretching across the hallway floor.

I was three steps from the door handle when I heard voices inside the office. Mr Brunner asked a question. A voice that was definitely Grover's said, '... worried about Percy, sir.'

I froze.

I'm not usually an eavesdropper, but I dare you to try not listening if you hear your best friend talking about you to an adult.

I inched closer.

'... alone this summer,' Grover was saying. 'I mean, a Kindly One in the *school!* Now that we know for sure, and *they* know too -'

'We would only make matters worse by rushing him,' Mr Brunner said. 'We need the boy to mature more.'

'But he may not have time. The summer solstice deadline -'

'Will have to be resolved without him, Grover. Let him enjoy his ignorance while he still can.'

'Sir, he *saw* her ...'

'His imagination,' Mr Brunner insisted. 'The Mist over the students and staff will be enough to convince him of that.'

'Sir, I ... I can't fail in my duties again.' Grover's voice was choked with emotion. 'You know what that would mean.'

'You haven't failed, Grover,' Mr Brunner said kindly. 'I should have seen her for what she was. Now let's just worry about keeping Percy alive until next autumn -'

The mythology book dropped out of my hand and hit the floor with a thud.

Mr Brunner went silent.

My heart hammering, I picked up the book and backed down the hall.

A shadow slid across the lighted glass of Brunner's office door, the shadow of something much taller than my wheelchair-bound teacher, holding something that looked suspiciously like an archer's bow.

I opened the nearest door and slipped inside.

A few seconds later I heard a slow *clop-clop-clop*, like muffled wood blocks, then a sound like an animal snuffling right outside my door. A large dark shape paused in front of the glass, then moved on.

A bead of sweat trickled down my neck.

Somewhere in the hallway, Mr Brunner spoke. 'Nothing,' he murmured. 'My nerves haven't been right since the winter solstice.'

'Mine neither,' Grover said. 'But I could have sworn . . .'

'Go back to the dorm,' Mr Brunner told him. 'You've got a long day of exams tomorrow.'

'Don't remind me.'

The lights went out in Mr Brunner's office.

I waited in the dark for what seemed like forever.

Finally, I slipped out into the hallway and made my way back up to the dorm.

Grover was lying on his bed, studying his Latin exam notes like he'd been there all night.

'Hey,' he said, bleary-eyed. 'You going to be ready for this test?'

I didn't answer.

'You look awful.' He frowned. 'Is everything okay?'

'Just . . . tired.'

I turned so he couldn't read my expression, and started getting ready for bed.

I didn't understand what I'd heard downstairs. I wanted to believe I'd imagined the whole thing.

But one thing was clear: Grover and Mr Brunner were talking about me behind my back. They thought I was in some kind of danger.

The next afternoon, as I was leaving the three-hour Latin exam, my eyes swimming with all the Greek and Roman names I'd misspelled, Mr Brunner called me back inside.

For a moment, I was worried he'd found out about my eavesdropping the night before, but that didn't seem to be the problem.

'Percy,' he said. 'Don't be discouraged about leaving Yancy. It's . . . it's for the best.'

His tone was kind, but the words still embarrassed me. Even though he was speaking quietly, the other kids finishing the test could hear. Nancy Bobofit smirked at me and made sarcastic little kissing motions with her lips.

I mumbled, 'Okay, sir.'

'I mean . . .' Mr Brunner wheeled his chair back and forth, like he wasn't sure what to say. 'This isn't the right place for you. It was only a matter of time.'

My eyes stung.

Here was my favourite teacher, in front of the class, telling me I couldn't handle it. After saying he believed in me all year, now he was telling me I was destined to get kicked out.

'Right,' I said, trembling.

'No, no,' Mr Brunner said. 'Oh, confound it all. What I'm trying to say . . . you're not normal, Percy. That's nothing to be —'

'Thanks,' I blurted. 'Thanks a lot, sir, for reminding me.'

'Percy —'

But I was already gone.

On the last day of the term, I shoved my clothes into my suitcase.

The other guys were joking around, talking about their vacation plans. One of them was going on a hiking trip to Switzerland. Another was cruising the Caribbean for a month. They were juvenile delinquents, like me, but they were *rich* juvenile delinquents. Their daddies were executives, or ambassadors, or celebrities. I was a nobody, from a family of nobodies.

They asked me what I'd be doing this summer and I told them I was going back to the city.

What I didn't tell them was that I'd have to get a summer job walking dogs or selling magazine subscriptions, and spend my free time worrying about where I'd go to school in the autumn.

‘Oh,’ one of the guys said. ‘That’s cool.’

They went back to their conversation as if I’d never existed.

The only person I dreaded saying goodbye to was Grover but, as it turned out, I didn’t have to. He’d booked a ticket to Manhattan on the same Greyhound as I had, so there we were, together again, heading into the city.

During the whole bus ride, Grover kept glancing nervously down the aisle, watching the other passengers. It occurred to me that he’d always acted nervous and fidgety when we left Yancy, as if he expected something bad to happen. Before, I’d always assumed he was worried about getting teased. But there was nobody to tease him on the Greyhound.

Finally I couldn’t stand it any more.

I said, ‘Looking for Kindly Ones?’

Grover nearly jumped out of his seat. ‘Wha – what do you mean?’

I confessed about eavesdropping on him and Mr Brunner the night before the exam.

Grover’s eye twitched. ‘How much did you hear?’

‘Oh . . . not much. What’s the summer-solstice deadline?’

He winced. ‘Look, Percy . . . I was just worried for you, see? I mean, hallucinating about demon maths teachers . . .’

‘Grover –’

‘And I was telling Mr Brunner that maybe you were overstressed or something, because there was no such person as Mrs Dodds, and . . .’

‘Grover, you’re a really, really bad liar.’

His ears turned pink.

From his shirt pocket, he fished out a grubby business card. ‘Just take this, okay? In case you need me this summer.’

The card was in fancy script, which was murder on my dyslexic eyes, but I finally made out something like:

Grover Underwood, Keeper

Half-Blood Hill

Long Island, New York

(800)009-0009

‘What’s Half –’

‘Don’t say it aloud!’ he yelped. ‘That’s my, um . . . summer address.’

My heart sank. Grover had a summer home. I’d never considered that his family might be as rich as the others at Yancy.

‘Okay,’ I said glumly. ‘So, like, if I want to come visit your mansion.’

He nodded. ‘Or . . . or if you need me.’

‘Why would I need you?’

It came out harsher than I meant it to.

Grover blushed right down to his Adam’s apple. ‘Look, Percy, the truth is, I – I kind of have to protect you.’

I stared at him.

All year long, I’d gotten in fights keeping bullies away from him. I’d lost sleep worrying that he’d get beaten up

next year without me. And here he was acting like he was the one who defended *me*.

‘Grover,’ I said, ‘what exactly are you protecting me from?’

There was a huge grinding noise under our feet. Black smoke poured from the dashboard and the whole bus filled with a smell like rotten eggs. The driver cursed and limped the Greyhound over to the side of the highway.

After a few minutes clanking around in the engine compartment, the driver announced that we’d all have to get off. Grover and I filed outside with everybody else.

We were on a stretch of country road – no place you’d notice if you didn’t break down there. On our side of the highway was nothing but maple trees and litter from passing cars. On the other side, across four lanes of asphalt shimmering with afternoon heat, was an old-fashioned fruit stand.

The stuff on sale looked really good: heaping boxes of blood-red cherries and apples, walnuts and apricots, jugs of cider in a claw-foot tub full of ice. There were no customers, just three old ladies sitting in rocking chairs in the shade of a maple tree, knitting the biggest pair of socks I’d ever seen.

I mean these socks were the size of sweaters, but they were clearly socks. The lady on the right knitted one of them. The lady on the left knitted the other. The lady in the middle held an enormous basket of electric-blue yarn.

All three women looked ancient, with pale faces wrinkled like fruit leather, silver hair tied back in white bandannas, bony arms sticking out of bleached cotton dresses.

The weirdest thing was, they seemed to be looking right at me.

I looked over at Grover to say something about this and saw that the blood had drained from his face. His nose was twitching.

‘Grover?’ I said. ‘Hey, man –’

‘Tell me they’re not looking at you. They are. Aren’t they?’

‘Yeah. Weird, huh? You think those socks would fit me?’

‘Not funny, Percy. Not funny at all.’

The old lady in the middle took out a huge pair of scissors – gold and silver, long-bladed, like shears. I heard Grover catch his breath.

‘We’re getting on the bus,’ he told me. ‘Come on.’

‘What?’ I said. ‘It’s a thousand degrees in there.’

‘Come on!’ He prised open the door and climbed inside, but I stayed back.

Across the road, the old ladies were still watching me. The middle one cut the yarn, and I swear I could hear that *snip* across four lanes of traffic. Her two friends balled up the electric-blue socks, leaving me wondering who they could possibly be for – Sasquatch or Godzilla.

At the rear of the bus, the driver wrenched a big chunk of smoking metal out of the engine compartment. The bus shuddered, and the engine roared back to life.

The passengers cheered.

‘Darn right!’ yelled the driver. He slapped the bus with his hat. ‘Everybody back on board!’

Once we got going, I started feeling feverish, as if I'd caught the flu.

Grover didn't look much better. He was shivering and his teeth were chattering.

'Grover?'

'Yeah?'

'What are you not telling me?'

He dabbed his forehead with his shirt sleeve. 'Percy, what did you see back at the fruit stand?'

'You mean the old ladies? What is it about them, man? They're not like . . . Mrs Dodds, are they?'

His expression was hard to read, but I got the feeling that the fruit-stand ladies were something much, much worse than Mrs Dodds. He said, 'Just tell me what you saw.'

'The middle one took out her scissors, and she cut the yarn.'

He closed his eyes and made a gesture with his fingers that might've been crossing himself, but it wasn't. It was something else, something almost – older.

He said, 'You saw her snip the cord.'

'Yeah. So?' But even as I said it, I knew it was a big deal.

'This is not happening,' Grover mumbled. He started chewing at his thumb. 'I don't want this to be like the last time.'

'What last time?'

'Always sixth grade. They never get past sixth.'

'Grover,' I said, because he was really starting to scare me. 'What are you talking about?'

'Let me walk you home from the bus station. Promise me.'

This seemed like a strange request to me, but I promised he could.

'Is this like a superstition or something?' I asked.

No answer.

'Grover – that snipping of the yarn. Does that mean somebody is going to die?'

He looked at me mournfully, like he was already picking the kind of flowers I'd like best on my coffin.