

The poster features a large, golden, mechanical dragon-like creature with a red eye and sharp teeth, flying over a city at sunset. A young man is shown falling through the air, with a city skyline and a bright sun in the background.

RETURN TO PERCY JACKSON'S WORLD

HEROES OF  
OLYMPUS  
THE LOST HERO

RICK RIORDAN

## CHAPTER 9

### PIPER

PIPERDREAMEDABOUTHERLASTDAY with her dad. They were on the beach near Big Sur, taking a break from surfing. The morning had been so perfect, Piper knew something had to go wrong soon—a rabid horde of paparazzi, or maybe a great white shark attack. No way her luck could hold. But so far, they'd had excellent waves, an overcast sky, and a mile of oceanfront completely to themselves. Dad had found this out-of-the-way spot, rented a beachfront villa and the properties on either side, and somehow managed to keep it secret. If he stayed there too long, Piper knew the photographers would find him. They always did. "Nice job out there, Pipes." He gave her the smile he was famous for: perfect teeth, dimpled chin, a twinkle in his dark eyes that always made grown women scream and ask him to sign their bodies in permanent marker. (Seriously, Piper thought, get a life.) His close-cropped black hair gleamed with salt water. "You're getting better at hanging ten." salt water. You're getting better at hanging ten. Piper flushed with pride, though she suspected Dad was just being nice. She still spent most of her time wiping out. It took special talent to run over yourself with a surfboard. Her dad was the natural surfer—which made no sense since he'd been raised a poor kid in Oklahoma, hundreds of miles from the ocean—but he was amazing on the curls. Piper would've given up surfing a long time ago except it let her spend time with him. There weren't many ways she could do that. "Sandwich?" Dad dug into the picnic basket his chef, Arno, had made. "Let's see: turkey pesto, crabcake wasabi —ah, a Piper special. Peanut butter and jelly." She

took the sandwich, though her stomach was too upset to eat. She always asked for PB&J. Piper was vegetarian, for one thing. She had been ever since they'd driven past that slaughterhouse in Chino and the smell had made her insides want to come outside. But it was more than that. PB&J was simple food, like a regular kid would have for lunch. Sometimes she pretended her dad had actually made it for her, not a personal chef from France who liked to wrap the sandwich in gold leaf paper with a light-up sparkler instead of a toothpick. Couldn't anything be simple? That's why she turned down the fancy clothes Dad always offered, the designer shoes, the trips to the salon. She cut her own hair with a pair of plastic Garfield safety scissors, deliberately making it uneven. She preferred to wear beat-up running shoes, jeans, a T-shirt, and her old Polartec jacket from the time they went snowboarding. And she hated the snobby private schools Dad thought were good for her.

She kept getting herself kicked out. He kept finding more schools. Yesterday, she'd pulled her biggest heist yet—driving that “borrowed” BMW out of the dealership. She had to pull a bigger stunt each time, because it took more and more to get Dad's attention. Now she regretted it. Dad didn't know yet. She'd meant to tell him that morning. Then he'd surprised her with this trip, and she couldn't ruin it. It was the first time they'd had a day together in what—three months?

“What's wrong?” He passed her a soda. “Dad, there's something—”

“Hold on, Pipes. That's a serious face. Ready for Any Three Questions?”

They'd been playing that game for years—her dad's way of staying connected in the shortest possible amount of time. They could ask each other any three questions. Nothing offlimits, and you had to answer honestly. The rest of the time, Dad promised to stay out of her business—which was easy, since he was never around. Piper knew most kids would find a Q&A like this with their parents totally mortifying. But she looked forward to it. It was like surfing—not easy,

but a way to feel like she actually had a father. “First question,” she said. “Mom.” No surprise. That was always one of her topics. Her dad shrugged with resignation. “What do you want to know, Piper? I’ve already told you—she disappeared. I don’t know why, or where she went. After you were born, she simply left. I never heard from her again.” “Do you think she’s still alive?” It wasn’t a real question. Dad was allowed to say he didn’t know. But she wanted to hear how he’d answer. He stared at the waves. “Your Grandpa Tom,” he said at last, “he used to tell me that if you walked far enough toward the sunset, you’d come to Ghost Country, where you could talk to the dead. He said a long time ago, you could bring the dead back; but then mankind messed up. Well, it’s a long story.” “Like the Land of the Dead for the Greeks,” Piper remembered. “It was in the west, too. And Orpheus—he tried to bring his wife back.” Dad nodded. A year before, he’d had his biggest role as an Ancient Greek king. Piper had helped him research the myths—all those old stories about people getting turned to stone and boiled in lakes of lava. They’d had a fun time reading together, and it made Piper’s life seem not so bad. For a while she’d felt closer to her dad, but like everything, it didn’t last. “Lot of similarities between Greek and Cherokee,” Dad agreed. “Wonder what your grandpa would think if he saw us now, sitting at the end of the western land. He’d probably think we’re ghosts.” “So you’re saying you believe those stories? You think Mom is dead?” His eyes watered, and Piper saw the sadness behind them. She figured that’s why women were so attracted to him. On the surface, he seemed confident and rugged, but his eyes held so much sadness. Women wanted to find out why. They wanted to comfort him, and they never could. Dad told Piper it was a Cherokee thing—they all had that darkness inside them from generations of pain and suffering. But Piper thought it was more than that. “I don’t believe the stories,” he said. “They’re fun to tell, but if I really believed in Ghost

Country, or animal spirits, or Greek gods ... I don't think I could sleep at night. I'd always be looking for somebody to blame." Somebody to blame for Grandpa Tom dying of lung cancer, Piper thought, before Dad got famous and had the money to help. For Mom—the only woman he'd ever loved —abandoning him without even a good-bye note, leaving him with a newborn girl he wasn't ready to care for. For his being so successful, and yet still not happy. "I don't know if she's alive," he said. "But I do think she might as well be in Ghost Country, Piper. There's no getting her back. If I believed otherwise ... I don't think I could stand that, either." Behind them, a car door opened. Piper turned, and her heart sank. Jane was marching toward them in her business suit, wobbling over the sand in her high heels, her PDA in hand. The look on her face was partly annoyed, partly triumphant, and Piper knew she'd been in touch with the police. Please fall down, Piper prayed. If there's any animal spirit or Greek god that can help, make Jane take a header. I'm not asking for permanent damage, just knock her out for the rest of the day, please? But Jane kept advancing. "Dad," Piper said quickly. "Something happened yesterday..." But he'd seen Jane, too. He was already reconstructing his business face. Jane wouldn't be here if it wasn't serious. A studio head called—a project fell through—or Piper had messed up again. "We'll get back to that, Pipes," he promised. "I'd better see what Jane wants. You know how she is." Yes—Piper knew. Dad trudged across the sand to meet her. Piper couldn't hear them talking, but she didn't need to. She was good at reading faces. Jane gave him the facts about the stolen car, occasionally pointing at Piper like she was a disgusting pet that had whizzed on the carpet. Dad's energy and enthusiasm drained away. He gestured for Jane to wait. Then he walked back to Piper. She couldn't stand that look in his eyes—like she'd betrayed his trust. "You told me you would try, Piper," he said. "Dad, I hate that school. I can't do it. I

wanted to tell you about the BMW, but—" "They've expelled you," he said. "A car, Piper? You're sixteen next year. I would buy you any car you want. How could you—" "You mean Jane would buy me a car?" Piper demanded. She couldn't help it. The anger just welled up and spilled out of her. "Dad, just listen for once. Don't make me wait for you to ask your stupid three questions. I want to go to regular school. I want you to take me to parents' night, not Jane. Or homeschool me! I learned so much when we read about Greece together. We could do that all the time! We could—" "Don't make this about me," her dad said. "I do the best I can, Piper. We've had this conversation." No, she thought. You've cut off this conversation. For years. Her dad sighed. "Jane's talked to the police, brokered a deal. The dealership won't press charges, but you have to agree to go to a boarding school in Nevada. They specialize in problems ... in kids with tough issues." "That's what I am." Her voice trembled. "A problem." "Piper ... you said you'd try. You let me down. I don't know what else to do." "Do anything," she said. "But do it yourself! Don't let Jane handle it for you. You can't just send me away." Dad looked down at the picnic basket. His sandwich sat uneaten on a piece of gold leaf paper. They'd planned for a whole afternoon in the surf. Now that was ruined. Piper couldn't believe he'd really give in to Jane's wishes. Not this time. Not on something as huge as boarding school. "Go see her," Dad said. "She's got the details." "Dad ..." He looked away, gazing at the ocean like he could see all the way to Ghost Country. Piper promised herself she wouldn't cry. She headed up the beach toward Jane, who smiled coldly and held up a plane ticket. As usual, she'd already arranged everything. Piper was just another problem of the day that Jane could now check off her list. Piper's dream changed. She stood on a mountaintop at night, city lights glimmering below. In front of her, a bonfire blazed. Purplish flames seemed to cast more shadows than light, but the heat was so intense, her clothes



steamed. "This is your second warning," a voice rumbled, so powerful it shook the earth. Piper had heard that voice before in her dreams. She'd tried to convince herself it wasn't as scary as she remembered, but it was worse. Behind the bonfire, a huge face loomed out of the darkness.

It seemed to float above the flames, but Piper knew it must be connected to an enormous body. The crude features might've been chiseled out of rock. The face hardly seemed alive except for its piercing white eyes, like raw diamonds, and its horrible frame of dreadlocks, braided with human bones. It smiled, and Piper shivered. "You'll do what you're told," the giant said. "You'll go on the quest. Do our bidding, and you may walk away alive. Otherwise—" He gestured to one side of the fire. Piper's father was hanging unconscious, tied to a stake. She tried to cry out. She wanted to call to her dad, and demand the giant let him go, but her voice wouldn't work. "I'll be watching," the giant said. "Serve me, and you both live. You have the word of Enceladus. Fail me ... well, I've slept for millennia, young demigod. I am very hungry. Fail, and I'll eat well." The giant roared with laughter. The earth trembled. A crevice opened at Piper's feet, and she tumbled into darkness. She woke feeling like she'd been trampled by an Irish step-dancing troupe. Her chest hurt, and she could barely breathe. She reached down and closed her hand around the hilt of the dagger Annabeth had given her—Katoptris, Helen of Troy's weapon. So Camp Half-Blood hadn't been a dream. "How are you feeling?" someone asked. Piper tried to focus. She was lying in a bed with a white curtain on one side, like in a nurse's office. That redheaded girl, Rachel Dare, sat next to her. On the wall was a poster of a cartoon satyr who looked disturbingly like Coach Hedge with a thermometer sticking out of his mouth. The caption read: Don't let sickness get your goat! "Where—" Piper's voice died when she saw the guy at the door. He looked like a typical California surfer dude—buff and tan, blond hair, dressed in

shorts and a T-shirt. But he had hundreds of blue eyes all over his body—along his arms, down his legs, and all over his face. Even his feet had eyes, peering up at her from between the straps of his sandals. “That’s Argus,” Rachel said, “our head of security. He’s just keeping an eye on things ... so to speak.” Argus nodded. The eye on his chin winked. “Where—?” Piper tried again, but she felt like she was talking through a mouthful of cotton. “You’re in the Big House,” Rachel said.

“Camp offices. We brought you here when you collapsed.” “You grabbed me,” Piper remembered. “Hera’s voice—” “I’m so sorry about that,” Rachel said. “Believe me, it was not my idea to get possessed. Chiron healed you with some nectar—” “Nectar?” “The drink of the gods. In small amounts, it heals demigods, if it doesn’t—ah—burn you to ashes.” “Oh. Fun.” Rachel sat forward. “Do you remember your vision?” Piper had a moment of dread, thinking she meant the dream about the giant. Then she realized Rachel was talking about what happened in Hera’s cabin. “Something’s wrong with the goddess,” Piper said. “She told me to free her, like she’s trapped. She mentioned the earth swallowing us, and a fiery one, and something about the solstice.” In the corner, Argus made a rumbling sound in his chest. His eyes all fluttered at once. “Hera created Argus,” Rachel explained. “He’s actually very sensitive when it comes to her safety. We’re trying to keep him from crying, because last time that happened ...well, it caused quite a flood.” Argus sniffled. He grabbed a fistful of Kleenex from the bedside table and started dabbing eyes all over his body. “So ...” Piper tried not to stare as Argus wiped the tears from his elbows. “What’s happened to Hera?” “We’re not sure,” Rachel said. “Annabeth and Jason were here for you, by the way. Jason didn’t want to leave you, but Annabeth had an idea—something that might restore his memories.” “That’s ... that’s great.” Jason had been here for her? She wished she’d been conscious for that. But if he got his memories back,



would that be a good thing? She was still holding out hope that they really did know each other. She didn't want their relationship to be just a trick of the Mist. Get over yourself, she thought. If she was going to save her dad, it didn't matter whether Jason liked her or not. He would hate her eventually. Everyone here would. She looked down at the ceremonial dagger strapped to her side. Annabeth had said it was a sign of power and status, but not normally used in battle. All show and no substance. A fake, just like Piper. And its name was Katoptris, looking glass. She didn't dare unsheathe it again, because she couldn't bear to see her own reflection. "Don't worry." Rachel squeezed her arm. "Jason seems like a good guy. He had a vision too, a lot like yours. Whatever's happening with Hera—I think you two are meant to work together." Rachel smiled like this was good news, but Piper's spirits plunged even further. She'd thought that this quest—whatever it was—would involve nameless people. Now Rachel was basically telling her: Good news! Not only is your dad being held ransom by a cannibal giant, you also get to betray the guy you like! How awesome is that? "Hey," Rachel said. "No need to cry. You'll figure it out." Piper wiped her eyes, trying to get control of herself. This wasn't like her. She was supposed to be tough—a hardened car thief, the scourge of L.A. private schools. Here she was, crying like a baby. "How can you know what I'm facing?" Rachel shrugged. "I know it's a hard choice, and your options aren't great. Like I said, I get hunches sometimes. But you're going to be claimed at the campfire. I'm almost sure. When you know who your godly parent is, things might be clearer." Clearer, Piper thought. Not necessarily better. She sat up in bed. Her forehead ached like someone had driven a spike between her eyes. There's no getting your mother back, her dad had told her. But apparently, tonight, her mom might claim her. For the first time, Piper wasn't sure she wanted that. "I hope it's Athena." She looked up, afraid Rachel might make fun of her, but the oracle just

smiled. "Piper, I don't blame you. Truthfully? I think Annabeth is hoping that too. You guys are a lot alike." The comparison made Piper feel even guiltier. "Another hunch? You don't know anything about me." "You'd be surprised." "You're just saying that because you're an oracle, aren't you? You're supposed to sound all mysterious." Rachel laughed. "Don't be giving away my secrets, Piper. And don't worry. Things will work out—just maybe not the way you plan." "That's not making me feel better." Somewhere in the distance, a conch horn blew. Argus grumbled and opened the door. "Dinner?" Piper guessed. "You slept through it," Rachel said. "Time for the campfire. Let's go find out who you are."