

FAKE

a percabeth fanfic
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Annabeth hadn't agreed to this.

Seriously.

Most people would kill to even fake-date *the* Percy Jackson.

But not her.

In fact, Annabeth had met him once, back when she was a fan of his, and not an up-and-coming star. When she'd met him, he was rude, cocky, and just a bit too selfish for her liking.

But, Annabeth guesses that doesn't really explain why she was sitting petulantly in her manager's office, glaring holes in the wall while she waited for *him* to arrive. It was all Stan, her oh-so-gracious manager's idea. Annabeth was so, so close to making it in Hollywood. She had all the necessary components, according to him.

"Baby, you've got it all! The looks, the teenage innocence, the hit single... All you need is that little push, maybe a little drama to get you in the tabloids!"

And she agreed because, well, what could go wrong with a little, tiny, itty-bitty smidgen of drama?

Except, it wasn't tiny at all.

Percy Jackson was a huge problem.

He was deemed as the 'sexiest guy alive,' and he was entirely too self-confident for his own good. Percy lacked the innocence Annabeth seemed to possess.

Emphasis on the *seemed*.

Annabeth's life isn't as easy or great as it appears, with a mother who's constantly missing, and a father who never cared. The only thing that got her through was singing and writing lyrics. It was an outlet of sorts. She'd started performing at the coffee shop she got minimum wage at, somehow developing a fan base and attracting the attention of important people.

In short, Annabeth got discovered.

And now, she was wishing she could take everything back—every song she had sung, everything that had ever happened to get her to where she was now. She'd tried to convince Stan that she could write another song, or start a random rumor, but he was determined. Apparently, Percy agreed wholeheartedly and with much enthusiasm. Well, for having such 'enthusiasm,' he sure was running late.

As if summoned by her thoughts, *he* burst through the door at that exact moment. Annabeth took in his appearance for a second, noticing that his clothes were wrinkled and quite obviously pulled on in a hurry. So now, he was late, and not a single effort to look decent was made.

Yet, she couldn't help but notice the way his simple white v-neck shirt clung to his abdomen the slightest bit, proving that there were, in fact, muscles there. His jeans were lying low on his hips, but not to where it looked trashy. Windblown hair stuck up in a few different directions, but it looked intentional. Annabeth couldn't help but feel a nervous flutter; her celebrity crush from a few years ago

standing in front of her. Even though *he* wasn't trying, Percy managed to look great. Annabeth sighed in annoyance as her eyes strayed from examining him to his brown eyes.

He was staring right at her with that damn smirk.

Every good thought she'd just had about him was ripped from her mind and she scowled. "You're late."

Percy shrugged carelessly and fell into the seat next to her. "You can never be too late for love, babe."

And, Annabeth supposes, that's what started it all.

"You have got to be kidding me!" I yelled in Stan's face after standing and slamming my hands down on the desk. Percy merely chuckled beside me, and it took every part of my being not to turn around and strangle him in that precise moment.

Stan cleared his throat, appearing unfazed by my loud outburst. "Oh, but I'm not, my dear. No one will believe that you guys spontaneously start dating out of nowhere. You need to let people figure it out, let people say that they want you as a couple first. Then, when you are revealed as a couple, it'll be that much more epic. Let's say, for instance, you and Percy used to be friends back in high school, best friends even. There's your back story. Now that he found out you're moving to Hollywood, he offered to let you stay with him because you guys are just close like that. Good?"

"I like that story," Percy put in. I cast a sideways glance at him before rolling my eyes.

"Seriously? We're doing this?" I got blank stares from both men. "I'm supposed to lie to my fans, my family, my friends, everyone? I'm supposed to move in with a stranger I don't like *at all*—"

"What did I ever do to you?" Percy said, suddenly sounding defensive. "Honestly, Chase, if we could just handle this like civil people, it would be much more tranquil."

"Look who swallowed a dictionary on the way over here," I said, faking surprise. "Amazing. I didn't even know that Percy Jackson knew any other words besides his own name and 'mirror.'"

Percy scoffed. "Really? You think I'm that vain? And I'll have you know that I passed school with flying colors!"

I gave a deprecating laugh. "I'll believe that when I see it," I replied sarcastically.

Percy opened his mouth to answer my comment, but Stan spoke before he could utter a word. "Both of you, stop! It hasn't even been five minutes and you're at each other's throats!"

"Well, *maybe* if you wouldn't have picked the single most irritating person on earth for me to 'fake-date,' we wouldn't be having this problem!" I argued.

"I'm not the most irritating person, you *clearly* play that role," Percy interjected.

"I'm trying to talk to my manager," I said through clenched teeth.

Percy smiled innocently. "And I'm merely talking to my future girlfriend." I glared at him harshly before we were once again cut off by Stan, who slammed his fist on the desk to get our attention.

"You both will be moving in with one another whether you like it or not. Percy will help you move into his apartment. You guys will spend time together, like best friends should. You will add in casual flirting to spark the idea in your fans' minds, and before you know it, four months will have passed and you guys can break up," Stan explained casually.

"Four months?" I asked in disbelief. "Four months with this—this... *Pig*?"

"So now I'm a pig," Percy muttered. I paid him no mind and continued to stare down my manager with an expression of betrayal.

"Annabeth," Stan said softly. I looked to his face because of the caring undertone. "You need this." I dropped my gaze to my hands, because I knew he was absolutely right. I didn't want to go back home to the apartment with Mom. Well, technically, Mom didn't even live there. She tended to sleep at friends' houses, or whatever guy she met at the club that night. The place was a wreck, and had too many bad memories. Way too many for me to stay.

Noticing that the silence was prolonged and tense, Percy made his voice lighter when we spoke. "I have a guest bedroom, Annabeth. It's a nice bedroom; a flat screen, huge closet, mini-fridge, even a microwave. I'm alright with you staying with me, or else I wouldn't agree. I don't really know you at all, but... For some reason I'm willing to help. So, accept it or don't. It's a yes or no question; so answer now." Near the end of Percy's little speech, his voice turned biting, which made me wonder why the sudden bitterness. Deciding that it was some part of his cocky persona, I nodded my head mutely. Stan clapped his hands together, a now much more relaxed smile gracing his face.

"Wonderful! Now, in my left hand, I have Percy's file. It's a bunch of quickfire stuff any best friend should know about their best friend. In my right hand, I have Annabeth's file. Same thing, a lot of common facts most people know, but also a few more personal things. You guys have been friends for years, but lost contact when Percy had his big break. Understood? Are we all okay?" Stan said, handing Percy's folder to me, and my folder to Percy.

"Are we going to be tested on this information?" I asked, opening the folder and scanning the contents.

"Nerd," Percy grumbled. I reached out my hand and punched his arm a little harder than necessary, but the kid hardly moved. This made me roll my eyes as I looked at Stan, waiting impatiently for my answer. He could have at least pretended that it hurt.

"Well, interviewers will technically be the ones testing you, but I don't see why we can't have a little test of our own. I'll just ask you questions like an interviewer would." I nodded in approval. I could memorize information and spit it back out. "But you guys will have to make it real. Show affection." *Spoke too soon*, I thought, *I'm completely screwed*.

"Cool." I rolled my eyes at Percy's response—or lack thereof.

"So... What now?" I questioned.

"Now you move in," Stan said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. I blinked at him.

"Like... now?"

"No, let's wait until you're forty," Percy remarked sarcastically. "You can't be too far away from that age, right? I mean, I definitely see some worry lines, possibly wrinkles. Definitely grey hairs..."

"I'm pretty sure you wouldn't have agreed to this if I was close to forty," I said, easily dismissing his attempt at hurting my feelings. I'd heard much worse than that, and he would have to try a little harder.

"Maybe I like older women."

"Well this 'older woman' does not return the affection."

"I never said you specifically. Now who's the assuming, self-centered one?"

“Guys!” Stan cut in, sighing loudly. “Percy, take her to get her stuff and load in it your car—”

“It's not a car, it's a Land Rover,” Percy interrupted.

Stan nodded, seemingly not noticing how rude Percy was. “Right, the Land Rover. Then you'll take her back to your apartment, hopefully see some paparazzi so word can get out that you guys are moving in together. Cool?”

“Cool,” Percy affirmed, standing out of his chair and shaking Stan's hand before turning towards the door and nodding his head for me to follow. I sighed, grabbing my folder, which he had left, and stacking it on top of his folder that I'd have to be studying tonight. *Great. We aren't even technically living together yet and I'm already picking up after him.*

Tossing his keys in his hand and singing lightly, Percy made his way to his Land Rover, since it's not to be called a car apparently. I noticed that his Converse were untied and his hastily thrown on, not to mention that they hardly matched at all. His hair literally looked like a bird attempted to make a nest in it, but Percy honestly didn't seem to care about how he looked. I rolled my eyes in annoyance. Everyone knows he has money to look amazing, so why wouldn't he? “Having second thoughts?”

Percy's voice yanked me out of my distant thoughts as I noticed that we had arrived at his vehicle and he was already in the drivers' seat, buckled in, with the car started. I shook my head. “You wish,” I snorted.

“I kind of do, actually.” I resisted the urge to kill him as I got into his Land Rover and seat belted myself in. “Where's your house?” Percy inquired. I felt a bit of panic as I realized that Percy would actually be seeing the horrible apartment I lived in with my mother. It wasn't the most beautiful place, and I was honestly ashamed of it. Our apartment building was in probably the worst and cheapest part of town, full of drug dealers and prostitutes. Shady people thrived in this part of town.

Regardless, I recited the address and told him a few landmarks before I cleared my throat. He glanced over at me as though telling me to go on, so I did. “Can I just ask you not to judge? Or ask questions about my house or my past or anything like that? Even the 'parents' topic is off limits.” Percy sent me a sideways glance of mild curiosity before nodding earnestly in agreement. “Thanks.”

The rest of the ride to my house was basically silent, besides a few minuscule arguments and a few times where I directed Percy where to turn. I'd come to the conclusion that Percy wasn't so bad when he was completely silent. Preferably not even breathing. I was nervous, which didn't happen very often for me. I was usually independent and quite sure of myself, but it's easy to see that I'm a bit off by the way I'm gnawing at my bottom lip.

“You should stop that,” Percy deadpanned.

“What?” I asked, confused as to what I was doing that was bothering him.

“Biting your lip?” Percy said, looking at me with a raised eyebrow, clearly asking if I was as stupid as I made myself sound.

“And why should I do that?” I asked, sounding annoyed and exasperated.

“You don't want to ruin that pretty little mouth you've got there, do you?” Percy asked easily, taking the last turn into the larger parking lot for my apartment building.

“You think I have a pretty mouth?” I asked, snorting in amusement.

"Sure, why not? You have to have something pretty for me to even consider dating you, and I can't seem to find anything else that is especially appealing..." Percy replied rudely. I rolled my eyes and shoved him, not jokingly at all, as we walked towards the building. "So..."

"So what?" I asked, scared that he would grill me about home—or worse, about my mother.

If Percy was planning on asking something off-limits, he must have decided against it, instead choosing to ask, "What's your favorite color?"

The simplicity of the question made me laugh a little and I shook my head in disbelief. "Green. But... Green like the ocean."

"Isn't the ocean blue?" Percy questioned.

"Sometimes, sometimes not. I guess you just have to catch it at the right time," I replied with a shrug. He still looked confused, causing me to roll my eyes. "What's yours?"

"Blue. Gray. No, both. As a pair, I guess." I nodded, not knowing what to do with his answer, and not willing to think up another question. No more small talk was made as we started walking up the stairs, getting dangerously close to a part of my past I didn't want to dive into. There were too many memories of a vacant house, without a mother when I needed her most. And, there were memories of when the house wasn't vacant, words sharp as knives were thrown at me without ceasing.

Before I'd realized it, we were at the door. I saw the faded metal plate saying 201, just like it always had, ever since I was little. Back then, my house had meant happiness, constantly full of the smell of baked goods. That was before my mother fell into severe depression, reaching straight for the liquor cabinet and making a run for clubs and bars, often times staying with people she didn't even know. I placed my hand on the doorknob, taking an unnoticeable deep breath and pushing the door open, praying that Mom wouldn't be home.

Much to my luck, there wasn't a single sound as I entered, and I let out a relieved sigh. Taking in the broken bottles all over the floor, and the disgusting mess all over the apartment, I turned back to Percy, who genuinely didn't look bothered. I gave him a bit of kudos, but I didn't dare let him know that I appreciated it. Looking back towards the kitchen, I noticed the towering dishes that hadn't been cleaned in my absence.

"So, which way is your room?" I turned to look at Percy, to give him an answer, but I ended up catching his eyes. For the first time, I actually took note of the color of his eyes, and it was truly disarming. He had deep brown eyes, but there was something behind them, almost a bluish color. However, his eyes were so dark, I wasn't sure if it was just my imagination. Decidedly shrugging it off, I looked away and started the walk down the short hallway. Opening the door to the only tidy place of the house, I smiled a little brokenly at my childhood bedroom.

"Suitcase is in the top of my closet. Can you get that?" I asked Percy. He nodded, walking over to the closet and getting down the suitcase too easily. After setting it lightly on the ground, he bowed dramatically. I rolled my eyes and tossed my suitcase on the bed. "Help me take the drawers out of my dresser," I ordered.

"Why am I listening to you?" Percy grumbled, already taking the drawers out. I grabbed the first from him and emptied its contents into the huge suitcase.

"You wouldn't dare defy me," I said simply. I knew that I was intimidating, and maybe it isn't the best quality to have, but I enjoyed being the leader. Percy cocked an eyebrow.

"I wouldn't?" he asked challengingly.

"You wouldn't," I repeated with a nod, grabbing the second drawer and tossing that one in as well. I gathered the few pictures I had set up on my dresser and stacked them in the suitcase as well, just in time to take the next drawer from Percy.

"What makes you think that I wouldn't defy you?" Percy asked, seeming genuinely curious.

I shrugged. "Most people would have shut up about this conversation by now. Maybe you're different, Jackson," I said, not even answering his question.

"Stubborn is more like it," he muttered. "That's my stylist's words, not mine. I never want to wear the stuff she picks out. It's actually terrible choices. You know that really ugly peachy orange color? She's obsessed with it, and tries to work it into all of my outfits. That is not a color men should wear. It just isn't." I snorted lightly in laughter at how truly repulsed he sounded about the color. "It isn't funny! It murdered my pride, even though I only wore it one time."

I actually laughed this time, accepting the final drawer from him and emptying it into the suitcase. I left the drawers on the ground, not even bothering to replace them. I took a few select things from my closet, deciding that I hated the majority of it anyways. Carefully picking up my cardboard box of books, I set it down on my bed. After one attempt, I perceived that my suitcase was not about to zip easily, resulting in me hopping on it, allowing my full weight to compress the contents. "Percy?"

Percy, who had been fidgeting a bit awkwardly, glanced over at me. "Hm?"

"Please zip my suitcase." As if he had just realized I was lying on top of my suitcase, he chuckled, zipping the suitcase with much more luck than I'd had a few moments ago. I muttered a thank you as I slung my suitcase off of my bed. Percy reached for it, but I shook my head. I could handle myself, and I didn't need his help at the moment. "Just get that box of books."

"This is so backwards. Usually it's the muscular guy that gets the huge suitcase and the girl who struggles with the small box of books," Percy muttered as he picked up the box. Readjusting it in his arms, he gestured for me to go ahead and lead the way. I started pulling the suitcase by its handle, not struggling in the slightest. I may be a female, but I don't have trouble with strength.

"That's a bit of stereotyping, don't you think?" I asked, glancing back at him for a moment. He was staring up at the ceiling as he was walking and shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. Percy merely shrugged, obviously having not heard me or simply not understanding what I said. I sighed in annoyance. I would have to live with this kid, and he couldn't even carry on a simple conversation. Wonderful.

Once we reached the stairs, I picked up the suitcase and walked it down the stairs without much trouble. Percy was giving me an appraising glance, and I smirked in his direction. "I told you that was stereotyping," I said lightly. Percy laughed a little, but I didn't allow myself to acknowledge the thought that crossed my mind: *he should really laugh more often.*

Soon enough, we had everything into his Land Rover, which he had insisted on packing to reinstate his manhood. The second that he'd started driving, he started a conversation. "So, what was supposed to be so bad about that place? I mean, you acted like I was going to get the plague if I went in there."

"You didn't? Wow, you must be one of the lucky ones," I said, faking amusement.

"Don't avoid the question," Percy replied sternly. I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "I've seen worse, you know. Yours is like heaven compared to some of the places I've seen."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you lived in that place like that," I muttered.

"Who ever said that I didn't live in a place like that?" Percy asked. I looked over at him, trying to see if he was being serious. Noting that there wasn't any sarcasm on his face, I mumbled an apology. I actually started looking at his features, deciding that, all in all, Percy wasn't completely unfortunate. His hair, despite the fact that it was majorly messy, was a nice blondish color. However, taking a closer look, I noticed that his roots were definitely darker.

"You dye your hair?" I asked, before I could stop myself. Percy laughed and nodded.

"Yep, ever since I was like, ten."

"Guys aren't supposed to dye their hair."

"Now, that's a bit of stereotyping, isn't it?" I glared at the side of Percy's head. He turned his head and gave me a sarcastic grin. "Isn't that right, Annabeth?"

"You are the single most frustrating person I know," I said, still glaring at him as he faced the road once more.

"I hear an obligatory 'sexually' in front of that 'frustrating,'" Percy replied easily, laughing a bit.

"You?" I asked incredulously. "You, sexually frustrating? I'm sorry, no. Never in a million years. Just... gross."

"Someone sounds like they're trying to convince themselves..." Percy sing-songed. I rolled my eyes. *If anything, it sounded like Percy was trying to convince himself that I found him attractive.*

"How long until we're there?" I asked, neither confirming nor denying his statement. Percy still had that darn smirk plastered on his face as he replied that there was just a few more minutes. True to his word, we pulled up to his apartment nearly three minutes later.

Percy's apartment was about three times the size of mine, and it only housed one person—now two. I stared at the tall building, classic brick with white steps and an elegant white door. Sighing, I tried to suppress the aching feeling that everything in his apartment—ours now, I suppose—was going to be posh. I gasped lightly, now taking notice of the paparazzi crowded at the few steps up to the door. My jaw dropped. I was well-known, so paparazzi wasn't a big deal, but having this many paparazzi in a confined area was a bit ridiculous. "We'll be stopping and answering a few questions," Percy said, leaving no room for any comment by getting out of the Land Rover. I sat there, not sure as to what I was supposed to be doing. After he closed the door, he gestured for me to follow as he headed to, I assumed, open the trunk.

I got out of the car, immediately getting a thousand flashes from cameras in my eyes. However, I walked to meet Percy at the trunk and tried to ignore the shouting. He handed me the box this time, taking the suitcase. I gave him a weird look, but he simply shrugged and said that it would be what the paparazzi wanted. That made sense, obviously. People would want him to be the guy, and me to be the girl who isn't independent enough to carry her own bag. They would view it as a romantic gesture, when in truth, it was irritating. I'd grown up being independent, probably a little too confident for my own good. However, you have to build some self-esteem if you're constantly being put down by your

mother. Percy nudged my side, jolting me out of my deep thoughts and bringing me back to harsh reality.

“Smile,” Percy said, as if I actually needed pointers. It was common fact to smile when there was a camera. Nevertheless, I smiled, hoping that it was genuine and believable. We approached the crowd of reporters—some from magazines, some from news stations, some from radio stations—I nodded to the small crowd of fans and reminded myself to greet them after the press left. Now focusing on the questions being shouted at me, one stuck out, plain and obvious: “How do you two know each other, Annabeth?”

I looked to the reporter who had asked the golden question, and everyone else quieted, seemingly interested in my answer. I cleared my throat and opened my mouth to speak, but Percy—very rudely—answered before I could. I was extremely tempted to send a deathly glare, but I knew that this had to look real, I had to seem like I actually liked him. So, instead, I sent him a graceful smile as he spoke.

“Well, Annabeth and I knew each other back in high school,” Percy said, shooting me a small smile and a pointed look. “Once I heard about her moving to Los Angeles, I decided to ask her to move in.”

I snorted lightly. “More like forced me,” I muttered. The press laughed, as though that were a joke. “Anyways, I accepted and now I’m moving in,” I said with a shrug.

“Here,” Percy said, taking the box from me. “I’ll be right back.” He carried the box and rolled the suitcase after himself as he headed towards the door. The paparazzi took pictures of the gesture and ‘aww’ed as I resisted the strong urge to throw my shoe at the back of his head.

“So, Annabeth, what do you think of Percy?” another reporter inquired.

I grinned. “Well, we were basically best friends, so of course I think he’s wonderful,” I replied, without really going too far into detail.

“Actually, I think we’re all more wondering if you perhaps like Percy?”

“Of course I do, he’s my best friend—”

“As more than a friend though?” the reporter who asked the original question pressed. I tried my best to look a bit bashful as I shrugged. Everyone in the crowd immediately started writing things down, talking into recorders and speaking into microphones. Sensing that the questioning was over, and that they no longer cared about any more of my opinions, I turned to the fans. Most of the reporters and press were already clearing out.

I waved and smiled, making my way over to them. One girl, probably no older than ten smiled up at me and sheepishly asked for an autograph. I laughed lightly, signing her paper and making it out to Abigail, as instructed. As soon as I was done, she gave me a hug before going to meet her mother at the sidewalk. I smiled and nodded to the parent.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my back and I immediately tensed up. I moved my elbow, prepared to injure the person behind me when I heard Percy’s voice greet the fans. Turning a little, and noticing that it was indeed Percy, I was both relieved and extremely irritated. “You scared me,” I said.

Percy wrapped his arm around my waist and chuckled as he whispered “boo,” in my ear. I rolled my eyes and shoved him, meaning it to be rude, but the fans must have taken it otherwise because they ‘aww’ed as well. A few girls asked for a picture with Percy, in addition to hugs. I talked to one of the

guys that was there with his younger sister. Apparently, they had been walking home when there was lots of commotion, so they stopped and asked the crowd.

"After finding out that it was Percy Jackson, my sister went absolutely ballistic and told me that she would die if I didn't stay with her to see him. Then, after hearing that you were here, I figured I might as well since I'm a bit of an Annabeth fan," the boy, James, admitted, a bit embarrassed. I laughed and shook my head.

"You are a dedicated brother, I'll tell you that. I'd never wait with my little sister to meet Percy Jackson," I said, somewhat jokingly. James raised an eyebrow and chuckled.

"So there's really nothing going on between you two?" I shook my head a bit hesitatingly. "That's real convincing," James noted with sarcasm. "In a totally non-weird way, you guys would make a cute couple. And it seems nearly everyone is shipping you two now, so—"

"People are shipping us? What does that even mean?" I questioned.

"That people are supporting you as a couple. Look," James pulled out his phone, quickly opening up the Twitter app. "I was on Twitter while we were waiting for you guys to get here, and look at the top worldwide trends," James said, pointing to the third one down.

"Percabeth?"

James nodded. "Apparently, that's your couple name."

"So people already think we're together?" I asked, appalled. I hadn't even truly met Percy Jackson three hours ago, and suddenly people believe we're dating? "But we're just best friends..." I lied, straight through my teeth. We weren't best friends. Percy Jackson was insufferable.

"Well, honestly, you guys have a lot more chemistry than most best friends do," James said. Not mockingly, just truthfully.

"Percy," I said, getting his attention. He turned away from his fangirls and smiled at me.

"Hm?"

"We're trending."

"On Twitter? What about us?" Percy asked, already walking towards me and James. James held out his phone to Percy whose eyebrows shot up. "Wow. That was really quick."

"Were you expecting it?" James asked, one eyebrow raised.

Percy shrugged. "I knew rumors would happen eventually. I am a guy, and she is a girl, and we're moving in together. That looks a little suggestive." James nodded, seemingly finding this answer acceptable as Percy returned his cell phone.

"I better get going," James said. "Mom's waiting." I nodded, waving to him as he gathered up his sister. Percy waved to his small posse and I did as well, though they probably had no interest in me. Walking back to the door, Percy tossed his arm around my shoulder, which felt highly awkward and uncomfortable to me. He, however, seemed at ease.

"Fangirls are probably taking pictures. I know at least one of them has a Tumblr, because she begged me to check out her blog, which is about me," Percy said lowly, not wanting anyone to hear besides me.

"Doesn't it creep you out that people have blogs dedicated to you?" I asked, scrunching up my nose.

"I'm sure you have quite a few as well," Percy said nonchalantly, holding the door open for me. I scowled at the gesture, but entered the house. "Right. So. Tour?"

"Sure," I said, shoving my hands in the back pockets of my jeans. I was pretty uncomfortable in his roomy house. It wasn't as cozy as I'd been hoping.

He gave me a quick tour of the apartment, which had a music room, a small library, an office, two bedrooms, each with their own bathrooms, a giant living room and a spacious kitchen. The apartment was gorgeous, of course, but it didn't feel like a home to me. Percy pointed out my room to me, which had all of the great things he'd promised—a flat screen television, mini-fridge, large closet, the works—and I carried my bags there.

"I'm ordering Chinese!" Percy called after me.

"Orange chicken!" I shouted back.

"Lo mein?"

"Please!" I heard the muffled noises of Percy speaking into the phone, sounding utterly and annoyingly charming. Obviously, a female had answered the phone.

I put the suitcase in the corner, deciding to unpack later as I took in what would be my new room. It was fairly plain at the moment—I'd have to tend to that—with the classic blue striped bed sheets and white pillows. Despite the overused pattern, the bedset looked posh and expensive. There was a desk in the corner, a laptop sitting atop it. My eyes widened as I noticed that it was definitely a nice laptop. "It's complimentary." I jumped and turned to see Percy leaning in the door frame, having snuck up on me for the second time within a half hour.

"You have got to stop that," I muttered.

"Giving you complimentary things?"

"No, smartass. I was referring to the fact that you keep scaring me. You walk too quietly."

"You would too if you'd have—" Percy stopped his sentence abruptly before shaking his head. "I'm going to watch a movie. Join if you'd like, or not. I don't really mind since you'd probably like to unpack anyways. I'll let you know when the food has arrived," Percy said, exiting the room as quietly as he'd entered. I found myself being truly curious as to what the rest of his sentence would have been, but I quickly tossed the thought. Why was I caring at all anyways?

Deciding that I didn't want to unpack nor watch a movie with Percy, I opted for configuring my new laptop. Applying all the settings that I liked and setting a password on my computer, I nodded in approval, closing the lid and allowing the technology to shut down on its own. Feeling bored, I ventured out into the living room and fell into a chair that wasn't the one Percy was in. I snorted in laughter, nearly falling out of the chair I'd recently sat in as I noticed that Percy was watching *The Notebook*.

"It's a good movie!" Percy defended, glaring at me. I turned to look at him and make a smug remark before noticing that Percy was lacking a shirt.

“Put some clothes on,” I muttered, my laughter gone. I found it irritating when guys constantly took their shirts off. Even if they were super fit and attractive. Which Percy wasn't.

“Can't handle it?” Percy asked, smirking.

“Definitely,” I said drily.

“As I suspected.”

“Full of yourself,” I grumbled.

“Not appreciative of an attractive guy being shirtless in front of you. Most girls would kill to see me shirtless, even if they could only look at me through a computer screen,” Percy boasted.

“Well, that's great,” I said, faking surprise and happiness. “However, I'm not one of those girls. I honestly couldn't care less what you do, so please leave me alone.”

“Kind of hard when you live with me,” Percy shot back. “It gets lonely here and I'm tired of talking to myself. You're the closest human life form, therefore, I will speak to you.”

“I won't be listening,” I said stubbornly.

“I could care less whether or not you're listening. That'd be your loss, anyways,” Percy replied easily, half-shrugging. He zoned back in on the movie, sinking into the couch. He was irritatingly calm, irritatingly alright with whatever happened. It seemed like all Percy did was go with the flow. That was atrocious. I couldn't imagine my life without the plans I have set out. I wake up every morning at seven, I'm out of the shower at 7:30 AM at the latest. I'm ready and finished with breakfast by eight o'clock, and then I have open plans from eight to five in the evening. At five, I head home and cook dinner. I sit down and eat at 6:00 PM, I usually read or study from 6:30 PM to 8 PM, and after that I go to sleep.

I had a plan.

Down to every last second of every day, I knew what was going to happen.

Or at least, I used to.

Percy was unpredictable, more of the spontaneous type. He did whatever he wanted, when he wanted. There was no method to the madness; no schedule to follow.

And that, perhaps, was the number one reason that I would never be able to get along with the impossible, stubborn, absolutely frustrating Percy Jackson.

When I woke up the next morning, I nearly jumped out of my skin. There was a girl. In my living room. Sleeping.

Oh.

I recalled the previous day, when Annabeth and I had moved in together. It'd probably take a while to get used to that, waking up and having her around.

For some reason, no matter how irritating Annabeth was, I found that I was extremely comforted by her presence. Being alone for so long, basically raising myself... It felt good to have a friend—well, not really a friend—but just someone who was *there* and not under the influence. Being the good fake best friend/lover I was, I decided that I would make us breakfast, after I showered.

I glanced over at Annabeth, sleeping soundly, curled in on herself. I smiled softly. She was actually really pretty when she wasn't being stressed. I pulled the blanket off the couch I'd been sleeping on, and I tossed it over her before walking off to shower.

Even if she hated me, I was going to at least attempt to make peace with her, I decided. However, I wouldn't be afraid to argue back. We could be friends if she wanted to, or we could be enemies. I quite frankly didn't mind. I agreed to this because I was willing to help, and if she didn't want my help, then there was honestly nothing I could do about that.

About ten minutes later, I was entering the kitchen and heading straight for the fridge. Percy needed food, and he needed food now. I got out the eggs as well as the bacon from the drawer, singing Coldplay underneath my breath. I was surprisingly good in the kitchen, contrary to public belief. I was admittedly better at baking, which isn't really something that I voice, considering that it's slightly embarrassing.

I started making breakfast, brewing coffee, and singing a little louder unconsciously. After all the food was made and carefully arranged on plates, I got out coffee cups and poured coffee in them before setting them all at the table and heading in to the living room to wake up Annabeth. I shook her shoulder twice and she started blinking and stretching. "What?" she muttered, burying her face in the couch.

I laughed, noting that she sort of looked like a sleepy kitten. "Breakfast."

"Now?"

"It would be breakfast time," I said sarcastically.

"Oh," Annabeth said softly. "Okay." I mentally noted that this was her sleepy voice. She sounded like a little kid, and it was irritating but a bit adorable at the same time.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I sighed, grabbing her hand and hauling her up, steadying her when she almost fell. "Come on." She walked behind me, and sat down at the table groaning.

"I am never this tired in the morning," Annabeth said, downing about half of her coffee. "Wow. That was hot coffee."

"I'm not surprised. It was just made," I said, snorting in amusement. "Do you prefer cold coffee?"

"No, I'm just tired. Nothing is registering correctly," Annabeth said, sounding a little more awake. I nodded, eating my food in close to five minutes while Annabeth stared at me in horror. "You're disgusting."

"Why, thank you. That's what every guy wants to hear after being so nice to make the girl who hates him breakfast," I replied, rolling my eyes. Annabeth had the grace to smile a little sheepishly, shrugging one shoulder.

"I'll be the first to admit that I'm a highly critical person. Sorry. It's who I am," Annabeth said, not sounding rude, just honest.

I nodded. "I can respect that. I'm a very spontaneous person who genuinely doesn't care what happens."

Annabeth looked thoughtful. "I noticed that, you know. You're very... chill."

"And you're very stressed. All the time. You should take a break, you know," I said with a shrug. "You could use it."

Annabeth rolled her eyes. "Gee, thanks for the suggestion."

"Seriously," I said, meeting her eyes. "Go on a cruise. Or just... disappear for a while. There are secluded places you know, where they can send celebrities that need a break." I'd heard about them from my manager, several times when he suggested that I take one of the breaks I was telling her about. It was right after I'd had my big break—interviews every five minutes, fans anywhere and everywhere I went. It was highly stressful, and made me feel pretty claustrophobic.

Annabeth shook her head, smiling a little. "I'm hardly a celebrity, I doubt they'd let me take a rest already."

I thought about that for a moment. "Maybe after a few weeks of... *this*," I said vaguely, "then they'll let us leave and do something, like as a couple. Everyone will see it as some romantic thing, but I'll just leave you alone and let you do whatever."

"What would you do, hypothetically?" she asked, seemingly curious.

I sighed thoughtfully, examining my index finger for no apparent reason. "I don't know. Watch television at the room and sleep," I said with a laugh. Annabeth smiled and finished her food. I felt a little awkward, sitting at the table, not eating, and watching her, so I gathered up all the dishes and started loading the dishwasher. Annabeth handed me her dishes when she was done and started cleaning the table. I nodded appreciatively at her.

"So what's on the agenda for today?" Annabeth asked, raising an eyebrow.

I smiled. "Today, we are going shopping for you and getting lunch together. Possibly a friendly coffee date, my management talked to your management and said we should be affectionate. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but I figure they mean just hugging or something."

Annabeth nodded in approval, then frowned. "I hate shopping."

I burst out laughing. "You may just be the first girl I have ever heard say that. Good thing I hate shopping, too. Maybe we can just look at stuff for the house and for your room, not so much clothing?"

I'm sure we can get your stylist to handle all of that." Annabeth bit her lip for a second, looking skeptical.

"I can do whatever I want with my room?" I nodded. She gave a small smile and nodded. "Okay."

"And I have *the* credit card. It's practically unlimited, so you can go all out," I told her. She nodded again and looked around a little uninterestedly. I laughed, "Go! Bathe and clothe yourself, woman!" She glared at me and turned around, but I didn't miss the smile hiding in the depths of her eyes.

Twenty minutes later, we were both ready and pulling on our shoes. Unknowingly, we'd color coordinated ("Well, *I'm* not changing, Chase.") and decided that it was probably what the press wanted anyways.

We exited the apartment, me still shoving my wallet haphazardly into my pocket, when Annabeth asked, "What are we doing today? As in... *Us*?"

I grinned. "Since when is there an '*us*'? If I'm remembering correctly, Chase, you abhorred me yesterday," I said as we walked to my Land Rover.

Annabeth paused as she reached for the door handle and sent me a strong glare, as if to say *'you know what I meant, you asshole.'* I chuckled and got into my Land Rover, starting it up after buckling myself in.

"Well, *my dearest*," I said, laying the sarcasm on thick, "like I said, our management has decided that we show minor affection—hugging, possibly a lingering gaze—it shouldn't be too hard," I told her with a shrug.

Annabeth was silent for a moment, until, "I think that'll be quite difficult actually."

I paused at the stop sign, simultaneously sending her a confused look. "Why?" I asked, accelerating once more. I briefly noted that it was pretty outside today; clear sky, no clouds.

"Because," Annabeth said lightly. "I have to look at you. More specifically, your face. And I have to linger. That's enough to make anyone vomit."

I smirked. *She seriously put thought into comebacks, doesn't she?* I replied with an, "I could say the same for you," before turning up the radio loudly.

Annabeth was...Different. A breath of fresh air, really. Nearly every girl I met was either falling to kiss my feet or trying to seduce me, but not Annabeth. She was a bitch, no doubt about it, but I couldn't say much because I was an asshole. We didn't have much in common at all, which made me wonder why I agreed to all of this in the first place.

In all honestly, it was because I felt sympathetic. Being on the edge like that—so, so close to fame, but not quite close enough—it was devastating. You just wanted nothing more than to step over the line and finally be considered a celebrity. Annabeth was a breath of fresh air, simply because she wasn't into me. But she was so annoying, and unbelievably rude and mostly ungrateful. So, maybe Annabeth was just one really irritating breath of fresh air.

.. And now we have a new hit single from a brand new artist! Playing for the first time on radio, here's Annabeth Chase—rumored girlfriend and confirmed best friend of the Percy J—with her song “Ours”!..”

I smiled and looked to Annabeth who was staring blankly at the radio, not even blinking.

“Me...I'm...On the...What?”

I chuckled at the confused expression on her face. It didn't last long though and she suddenly slapped my shoulder, nearly shouting, “I'm on the radio!”

“Don't abuse the driver!” I chided. “And way to go, babe!” I winked at her, and she was seemingly so happy that she didn't mind.

I stole another glance at her as I turned right.

And *no*, I didn't grin because of her bright smile—dimples standing out and eyes crinkled at the sides.

“I like this,” Annabeth said, her hand caressing the bluish bed spread. “It looks satiny, and it's turquoise. So, with some sea green-ish and silver pillows...Yeah.” She cocked her head to the side, as if imagining it.

“Um, right...That'd be...Pretty?” I said, my brow furrowing.

Annabeth laughed, pinching my cheeks. “You are so adorable when you don't know what to say.” I gave her a confused but genuine smile, and licked my lips, about to ask why she was suddenly so nice—but I was interrupted by a squeal from behind me. I turned, seeing three teenage girls, and noting with a smidgen of disappointment that Annabeth had only shown affection for the fans.

Mentally rolling my eyes at my stupidity, thinking it was sincere, I smiled charmingly. There were two girls whose eyes were wide, jaws nearly sweeping the floor, but the third girl seemed more laid back.

“Hey, girls,” I said, waving.

“Karsyn,” the calm girl stated.

“It's lovely to meet you, Karsyn,” I said, smiling at her. “Who're your friends here?”

“Oh, those two girls that seriously need to pick their jaws up?” Two jaws snapped shut immediately, replaced with two stuttering girls.

“But...H-He's...”

“A-And sh-she...”

They looked at each other, letting out small squeals. I smiled at them again and Annabeth waved. “I,” one girl—perhaps she was Asian?—started, “am Cristina, and this is Callie.”

“Hi,” Callie stammered.

“So, Karsyn, Cristina, and Callie.” I pointed to them as I said what I hoped was their names. They nodded in approval and I sighed in relief. I'd never been amazing at names.

I scratched the back of my neck, albeit a bit awkwardly, noticing that the two girls were basically gawking at us. Karsyn watched on in mild amusement. “Would you all like a picture?” I asked with a laugh.

“Of, like, you two?” Callie asked, glancing at Annabeth.

“Us?” Annabeth asked, gesturing between myself and her. Callie and Cristina nodded in unison.

“It would be *so* perfect if we could get pictures of Percabeth! You two are so cute!” Cristina said. She started rummaging through a bag on her shoulder, brandishing a phone with a camera after a moment.

I held out my arm and Annabeth moved to stand next to me, slotting into my side easily. I wrapped my arm around her waist and she reciprocated the action, resting her free hand on my chest. We both smiled at the camera, hopefully looking genuine.

Callie squealed as soon as she took the picture. “You guys are *so* my OTP now!”

I gave Annabeth a bewildered look. She leaned up close to my ear and I leaned down a bit since she was shorter than me. “One true pairing. That basically means that out of every couple, she supports us the most.” I smiled and nodded, trying to ignore the fact that the girls had taken a photo of Annabeth whispering in my ear, trying to be inconspicuous but mostly failing.

“Well,” I said, clapping my hands together. “It was wonderful meeting you all—”

“No!” Callie interjected. “We have to get pictures with you all, too! Please!” she begged. I nodded and the girl handed me her phone. “We’ll take one with Annabeth first, then you.” I was kind of confused as to why this girl was ordering me around, but I ignored it and took the desired photos, passing the phone off to Annabeth when it was time for my brief photo shoot. The three girls all looked at the pictures, grinning.

“Thanks,” Karsyn said. The other two girls repeated what she’d said, immediately going back to their phone, probably posting it on every website possible. I waved to Karsyn and Annabeth said goodbye as well before we started walking off. With a jolt, I realized that my arm was still wrapped around her waist, and I dropped it immediately, opening my mouth to apologize, only to be cut off by Annabeth.

“Okay, so I need that bedspread,” Annabeth ordered, pointing to it. I walked down the aisle closest to the actual set up bed and found the set she was looking for. “And these two pillows. And also these two,” she said, piling pillows up on the bed sheet set I was carrying.

“Your wish is my command,” I muttered sarcastically.

“My wish is for you to kindly stop *ta*—being so great!” Annabeth said with a fake smile as a teenage girl walked by. She didn’t seem to terribly interested in us, but the girl definitely knew who we were by the way she cocked her head to the side slightly, then smiled and waved.

After the girl walked on, I snorted, tossing a pillow at Annabeth. “Nice cover.”

“Shut up! I can’t do impromptu things!” Annabeth defended, placing the pillow back on the stack.

“Whatever, Princess,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Annabeth scoffed in annoyance. “Princess. How original.”

"I can't do impromptu things!" I said, mocking her. She shot me a glare that probably should have scared me, but it truly amused me.

Although I'd only known Annabeth for not even two full days, I knew one thing for certain: her eyes were easy to read. There were times where I could see the mirth in them, or times where I could see sadness. More often than not, I see anger and irritation. Regardless of the emotion, I could clearly tell how Annabeth felt by studying her eyes. It was almost like a game, trying to figure out the mood she was in.

"Percy?"

"Mhm."

"You're staring." I turned away quickly, not being embarrassed enough to blush, but coughing awkwardly and saying that I zoned out, which wasn't a lie. "Next time, try not to zone out on my face," she said with a laugh. I laughed halfheartedly as well, approaching the checkout lane and dropping the bed set and the hoard of pillows.

The cashier, an older woman who looked very sweet, kindly asked us if that was all that we needed today, and of course we both smiled politely and said that what we'd bought would be all. She bagged them for us, carrying on a small conversation about cats.

I'd turned to Annabeth, trying not to laugh. I wasn't picking on the older woman, but *cats*? Annabeth seemed to have a glint in her eyes, saying that she'd rather be laughing as she looked at me. After there was silence for a few seconds, I mouthed "you're staring" at Annabeth. She rolled her eyes but smiled and I chuckled.

"You young folks are lucky," the elder woman said with a slight country twang. "Get to fall in love so freely. Use that skin while it lasts, baby, it won't last forever!" she said, pointing at Annabeth as she spoke and laughing to herself. We bid the nice woman goodbye and gathered our bags, Annabeth insisting on being a stubborn ass and carrying the heavier bag rather than the pillows. I rolled my eyes, but she didn't seem to have any problem shouldering the weight.

"You know," Annabeth said suddenly as we headed to the Land Rover, "we must look legitimate."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"That lady thought we were in love and those teenagers thought we were 'the cutest thing ever' as a couple," Annabeth said simply. I shrugged. I mean, I'd acted a few times, guest starring, so I was a pretty decent actor. I guess we just made it look like we genuinely were together.

"I suppose we're just good actors," I said after awhile, when we finally reached the Land Rover. "Speaking of, have you ever taken acting classes or voice lessons?" I questioned as I loaded the bags in the trunk. It'd been something that I wondered for a while now. I wouldn't ever admit it, but I'd heard Annabeth's music before we agreed to be a fake couple. She had a great voice, a range that is sought after, and she seemed to know how to sing everything so that it was perfected. And, thanks to recent observations, her acting couldn't be terrible.

I got in the drivers' seat and Annabeth frowned as she buckled in her seatbelt. "Should I have?" she questioned, hesitantly.

I turned to her, surprised. "You haven't?" Her voice talent was too good; she had to have taken lessons. Even *I'd* taken lessons.

She flicked her hair off of her right shoulder. “No,” Annabeth said, a bit more confidently.

“Wow,” I breathed, pulling out of the parking spot and starting the drive home.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Annabeth asked, sounding mildly annoyed. I smiled and shook my head.

“It's not bad. It's... good. Really good. I mean, for having no voice lessons or anything, I guess you just have a lot of raw talent. You can really tell in your slower songs, when it's just your voice and the guitar,” I said thoughtfully.

Annabeth snorted in laughter. “I never thought the day would come where *the* Percy Jackson would admit to listening to my music.”

I rolled my eyes. “It's decent music!”

“How did you even find out about me?” Annabeth asked.

I shrugged, deciding that I could definitely use some coffee and heading towards the closest Starbucks I knew of. “I get bored sometimes and I actually look at the blogs dedicated to me, or the Twitter accounts... whatever. And one time, there was a girl who posted a picture of you saying that you were her favorite female artist. Let me make it clear that I had *nothing better to do* when I Youtube-d you,” I told her. It was the honest truth, but I didn't want her to think that I'd actually been interested in her. I was bored.

“Cool,” Annabeth said. “Do you happen to remember that signing a few years ago in San Francisco? In 2010, at that one mall?”

I bit my lip, thinking. “The one with a lot of security because there had been a bomb threat the day before or something?” I asked, glancing at her. She nodded. “Yeah. Why? Stalking me, Chase?”

Annabeth chuckled, looking at the window. “Definitely not. I was just wondering if you remembered that time.”

“What was so important about it? I was irritated the whole time because I was hardly allowed to speak to my fans. I usually give out hugs or something, but security wouldn't let me do anything,” I frowned, remembering it. I'd probably been pretty rude to fans that day, seeing as I was agitated.

I glanced at Annabeth again, only to meet her eyes. She was scrutinizing me, which I'll admit made me a bit uncomfortable. “Maybe one day I'll tell you. Or maybe you'll remember.”

“Did someone die?” I asked bluntly. Annabeth shook her head with a snort as I turned into the Starbucks parking lot. Luckily, there were only a few cars, so we probably wouldn't be faced with fans. “Coffee?” I asked.

“Yeah, because I could totally tell you 'no,' now that we're already here,” Annabeth said, rolling her eyes.

“You are a sassy one,” I muttered. “A very, very sassy bitch.”

“And you are an arrogant one. A very, very arrogant ass,” Annabeth said lightly, getting out of my Land Rover and slamming the door. I tried to push down the thought that I would love to slam her head in a car door, but it kept resurfacing. We started walking into the coffee shop together, both stone-faced

and annoyed. "Look happy," she muttered bitterly as she swung the door open. I rolled my eyes, but allowed a lazy smile to be pasted on my face.

"Whatever you say, Princess," I said.

"Don't call me that," Annabeth said, happily, but there was a warning underneath it. I smirked at her and approached the counter.

"Good afternoon! What can I get for you today?" the cashier asked, scribbling something down on a sheet of paper before looking up. "Oh... Hello, Annabeth Chase and Percy Jackson."

"Hello, Harry," Annabeth said, glancing at his name tag. He smiled at her, waving. I nodded at him and he nodded back.

"It's truly wonderful to meet you both," Harry said, his gaze lingering on Annabeth. I rolled my eyes. This kid was anything *but* subtle. "Anyways," Harry said, looking back to me. "What will you be having today?"

I opened my mouth to order, but Annabeth started talking. "One grande chai tea latte, nonfat milk, no water," she stated, watching Harry enter it in on the register. "And a venti toffee nut latte with no foam." Harry nodded, reciting the order back and telling us our total, and I stared wide-eyed at Annabeth. She returned the look, instead looking at me like I was crazy. "What?" she asked, innocent smile, but also urging me to shut the hell up with her eyes.

"Oh, nothing," I said, deciding to brush her hair out of her face as a cover. "Your hair was covering your eyes." She gave me a small, and definitely not genuine, smile in return before paying Harry and gathering her change and her receipt. "I could have paid," I told her a few moments later as we stood at the opposite end of the counter, waiting for our drink order to be called.

"I know," Annabeth stated with a shrug.

"How did you know my drink order?" I inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Because I'm your best friend and I know these things about you," Annabeth said with a laugh, glancing sideways at Harry, who was observing us.

"I wish he would turn the hell away," I muttered, rubbing my eyes. Annabeth snorted in amusement, and I grabbed both of our drinks when our order was called, handing hers over to her. I nodded to a table in a corner, and started walking there, Annabeth following me like I'd assumed she would.

After we took our seat and settled down, I pasted a smile on my face. "Alright, so you're a creepy stalker of mine, I get that, but really, how did you know my drink order?"

Annabeth laughed as though I'd said something funny, saying, "I actually did my homework."

"So, in other words you stalked me," I said with a shrug, still grinning at her.

"No, in other words, I read the file my manager me with a bunch of information on you that I quite frankly don't care about," Annabeth said, her smile still intact.

"Lovely," I muttered, taking a sip of my coffee.

"It was hell reading it," Annabeth said with a winning smile.

"If only all of these oblivious people knew what we were truly talking about," I said, smirk on my face.

"Oh, they'd be surprised," Annabeth said, looking at me as though we were flirting.

"Oh, that was cute," I said, rolling my eyes hopefully playfully. "Very convincing," I told her with a nod. I glanced over at the counter. "Damn, that guy is fucking relentless. He is *still* staring at you."

Annabeth turned casually, looking over her shoulder. "He's attractive, definitely. Bit of an asshole, though, blatantly checking me out when I'm with another guy. Asshole's aren't my type." I grinned and nodded laughing. "Which means *you* aren't my type, Jackson."

"Shame," I said, biting my lip. "I happen to love bitches. And bitches love me," I said with a wink. She rolled her eyes, but kept smiling.

"Oh, you are such an arrogant jerk," Annabeth said, laughing as though we were sharing a joke. I glared at her for a moment, smiling sarcastically.

"You are the most wonderful person I have ever met, Chase," I said, glancing back at the adamantly staring and increasingly annoying cashier. "And Henry is still checking you out."

"You're wonderful as well, dearest," Annabeth said sweetly. "And his name is Harry."

"He's irrelevant; I'm not learning his name."

"Someone sounds jealous."

"Yeah, of someone who likes my fake girlfriend, someone who I hate with a fiery passion," I muttered, managing a small grin afterwards.

"So, you admit it?" Annabeth said, cocking her head to the side.

"That was sarcasm, sweetheart. Don't get ahead of yourself," I told her, scoffing. She glared at me for a moment, true irritation in her eyes. It was probably meant to be intense and intimidating, but I found myself raising an eyebrow as if to say, *should I be scared, Chase?*

"Asshole," Annabeth said through smiling teeth.

"I love you, too, baby."

Literally as soon as we were back in the car and driving down the road, my manager, Clint, called me. "Sup?" I answered, putting my phone on speaker and passing it over to Annabeth. Percy Jackson may be a lot of things, but an unsafe driver was not one of them.

"Ay, Perce," Clint said. He was only two years older than me, but he had his stuff together. "So, guess what?"

"I'm going to go home and there will magically be a refrigerator full of food?" I asked, sounding hopeful.

"That could be arranged, I suppose," Clint said jokingly. "Anyways, for the real reason I called. You guys did well today. There are pictures of you two at the mall, which look dashing, I must say, and then there are pictures of you two beaming at each other in the secluded corner of a Starbucks. It's looking

good so far.” I glanced at Annabeth, laughing a bit. We'd been insulting each other the whole time, and yet people still thought we were in love.

“Wow,” I said. Annabeth nodded in agreement.

“Oh, and someone, apparently at the Starbucks, reported that a certain Percy Jackson was jealous of a certain cashier,” Clint said teasingly.

“What?” I asked, my voice rising a little. “I was not! The little fucker was staring at Annabeth like she was a sandwich and he wanted to devour her! I simply took notice. I wasn't jealous,” I said firmly.

“Defensive,” Annabeth muttered.

'Shut the hell up,' I mouthed to her, glaring.

'Whatever you say, *best friend*,' she mouthed back.

I rolled my eyes and flipped her off. “Anything else, Clinton?”

“My name is Clint! C-L-I-N-T! There is no O-N!” I laughed at his reaction, the same as every time I said that. Annabeth laughed a little as well. “And no, that's it. Oh, but wait, is Annabeth there?”

“I hear you loud and clear, Clinton,” Annabeth said teasingly, smiling out the window. I snorted in laughter as Clint groaned.

“Not you, too... Anyways, Stan says good job and that he'll talk to you later. I think he had meetings today or something; I never listen to him when he talks,” Clint admitted.

Annabeth chuckled. “Yeah, me either. Thanks for passing on the word.”

“No problem, baby. Anyways, I better get going. You two keep up the lovin'! Oh, and Jealous Percy is a hit, by the way. Might want to keep that up, too,” Clint said, hanging up the phone.

“I was not jealous!” Percy shouted. “There was no reason to be!”

“He was pretty cute, though—”

“Shut up.”

“—And I am your best friend, rumored girlfriend—”

“Chase, I swear—”

“—so, I think that was the expected reaction. Good *acting*, Percy,” Annabeth said.

“Right! I was acting! I told you I wasn't really jealous,” I said smugly. It was a lie, considering I hadn't even acted jealous or been genuinely jealous.

“And that thought didn't just occur to you?” Annabeth asked, her expression all too innocent.

I shoved her. “No, it didn't. You are such a—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Annabeth interrupted, amused smile in place. “I know I am.”

When we got home, I sent a tweet, saying that I had a wonderful day out with Annabeth and that I had seriously missed my best friend. I immediately got hundreds of replies and I flopped down on the couch, scrolling through them. There were a few requests for us to get married, several to have babies, two or three saying that they didn't like that at all and that *I* was theirs, but the majority of them were positive, which was good.

I scrolled past one that had a link to someone's Tumblr, so with a shrug, I clicked it. As soon as the page loaded, I had to choose between shock and laughter as I fell off the couch. "Annabeth!" I yelled, chuckling. She entered the room, glass of water in hand.

"What?"

I held out my phone to her, still choking from my laughter. She sat down on the couch, eyes wide as she scrolled down the page. "What in god's name is this?"

My laughter finally subsided. "This girl already has an analysis page on us, giving millions of reasons why we're in love. Look here," I said, scrolling up a little, "Percy handed Annabeth her coffee. That's a sign of being a gentleman, which obviously means that Percy cares *loads* about Annabeth."

"But all you did was hand me a coffee," Annabeth muttered, looking confused. "Gosh, she analyzes everything we do. 'Apparently, you don't just look at me, Perce. You *look* at me.'" We both chuckled at the absurdity, and Annabeth took over my phone and scrolled through tweets as I leaned over the back of the couch.

"Get married, get married, get *lost*—oh, that's to you, Annabeth—have a baby together, two blondes shouldn't date that's weird, get married, make children..." I trailed off as Annabeth kept scrolling through them. "Mostly positive results. I think they like us, babe."

"Too far," Annabeth said. "Don't call me 'babe.'"

"Why?"

"Because. I don't like it."

"Is there anything that you *do* like?" I inquired, drinking some of Annabeth's water. I raised an eyebrow at her and she glanced up, and punched me for stealing her water.

"I like people who *aren't* stealers," Annabeth said, frowning at the cup.

"Then you'll probably dislike me even more," I told her. "Because I'm bound to steal your heart." I winked at her and she physically cringed and muttered 'gross,'

"Oh, hey. Here's that one girl—Karsyn—who we met at the mall!" Annabeth said, leaning closer to me so I could check it out.

"Even if I'm not a huge fan of either Annabeth Chase or Percy Jackson, I think we can all agree that they're pretty obvious. Hash-tag, Percabeth," I read aloud. "What does that mean?" I questioned, frowning.

"Oh, god, you are so much more ignorant than you look!" Annabeth said, rubbing her face in exasperation.

"Hey!" I said indignantly. "That was a confusing tweet, mind you!"

"She means that we're cute together, but it's obvious we like each other," Annabeth said, her voice still annoyed.

"But we hate each other," I muttered, snatching my phone back and falling onto the other couch. "I don't even know how I manage to be such an amazing actor in public. I'm surprised they don't notice that I very thinly mask my hatred."

I could practically hear Annabeth rolling her eyes. "You are such an egotistical jerk."

"I'm confident. Not cocky," I defended. "And even if I was cocky, you are too!"

"No, *I'm* confident. I am a content person and I actually *deserve* to be where I am today. My parents didn't pay for me to get here and I didn't have to get this famous through *Disney Channel*," Annabeth said, her words harsh and biting.

I physically flinched, squeezing my eyes tight. "Jesus, I can't even talk to you right now," I said, standing alert and heading up to my room with clenched fists.

What gave her the right to say that? I'd guest starred on a Disney show once. That had nothing to do with how famous I was now. I deserved to be famous just as much as she did. Plus, being famous gave me money, and money enabled me to buy hair dye and colored contacts. Whatever it took to stay away from my old life. Whatever it took.

I fell face first onto my bed, ultimately deciding that Annabeth knew nothing. She didn't know what it was like to come from what I used to be to the guy I am now. If anyone had a reason to be cocky and confident, it was me.

This room was too small; this house was too crowded. I needed to go for a run.

I hurried over to my dresser, knowing that I needed to go now before I got too angry. Annabeth didn't need to see thoroughly pissed-off Percy just yet. I pulled out a pair of gym shorts and an old t-shirt, stripping my clothes I'd been wearing for the day and changing into them. I snatched my iPod off my dresser and jogged down the stairs, picking up my Nike Shox.

I heard a voice ask where I was going, but my mind was already incoherent. I was already livid, and memories were coming back. I'd tried so hard not to think about my old life; about who I used to be.

I pulled on my shoes, tying them tightly and strapping my iPod around my upper arm before taking off running, feeling the same adrenaline I used to feel after taking advantage of drugs I had no reason to be around.

I would run until I forgot, until I passed out. I would run until the memories stopped coming back.

By the time I finally stopped running, it was getting dark outside, and I had no clue where I was. I paused the music on my iPod, some upbeat song I didn't even know, and took a look around. I saw a Wal-Mart across the street that looked promising, seeing as I desperately needed water.

I jogged across to it, slowing my pace as I walked past cars in the parking lot, and finally entering the store itself. I sighed in relief at the freezing air, heading straight for the drinks. I pulled my phone out of

my pocket, ignoring the three missed calls and seven text messages and instead checking the time. Five-thirty.

I paid for the water in a hurry, thankful that I'd had the sense to shove a few dollar bills in my shoe before taking off. I took a few sips of the water, politely asking the woman where I was. She seemed confused, looking at me like I was deluded, but she simply replied 'Los Angeles.' I sighed in relief, since that meant that I was at least in my own city. I smiled at her nodding gratefully and sitting on a bench by the doorway. I pulled my cellphone out once more.

I looked at my missed calls first, rolling my eyes at the one from Annabeth. There were two from Clint. Before calling anyone back, I checked out the texts first. Six of the seven were from Clint, mostly consisting of, *bro, where are you?* and *your mom is gonna kill me if you don't answer*. I grinned at that, laughing slightly before opening the last message.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean that.

It was from Annabeth, and I sighed out loud. She made it so easy to hate her, but horribly difficult to stay angry at her.

On a whim, deciding that I at least owed her an answer, I dialed her number, squeezing my eyes shut tight, and wondering to myself why I simply couldn't stay mad.

I literally dropped the book I was reading when my cellphone started ringing. I was beyond paranoid, and I had decided two hours ago that I absolutely hated being alone in this spacious apartment. Realizing that my phone was still ringing, I reached out towards the coffee table, snatching it up.

"Hello?" I said, setting the book down and putting my free hand in the pocket of my hoodie.

"Oh... hi."

"Percy Jackson, where the *hell* are you? Clint is freaking out and yelling at me about how your mother is going to murder me and he basically thinks you're *dead* because no one has photographed you since you left and——"

"Were you worried about me, Chase?" I heard an arrogant chuckle through the phone. In a softer tone, Percy continued, "Um, I'm sorry. About... leaving, I just needed to go for a run and clear my head."

"A *two-hour* run?" I asked incredulously. I scoffed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"I did run track in high school. I have the endurance," Percy informed me, matter-of-factly.

"Well, that's *great*, Percy, I am so happy for you," I said sarcastically. "Look, just where are you?"

"Wal-Mart."

"Gee, thanks for that descriptive answer," I muttered. "*Which* Wal-Mart?"

"That," Percy said simply, "is a wonderful question."

"So answer it!" I said, a bit exasperatedly.

I heard some shuffling and a bright, "Hey there!...Sure, yeah."

"What's going on?" I asked curiously.

"You're on speaker-phone, babe," Percy said casually. "There's a lovely lady here who wants to say hello."

"Hi!" I heard a girl say.

"Um, hey?"

"It's a fan, sweetheart," Percy said with a chuckle. "I'm not replacing you."

"You two are so cute!" I rolled my eyes at yet another fan that appeared to love the Percabeth phenomenon. It seemed that every fan we met had to speak of it. Then again, that was the whole plan, after all, wasn't it? Although, I hadn't expected it to catch fire and infect the whole forest as quickly as it did.

"Thank you," Percy said politely to the girl. "Babe, do you think that you could come get me?"

"I'm allowed to drive the Land Rover?" I asked, feigning surprise. "And also, I still need to know where you are?"

"Oh, we're at the Wal-Mart across from that one Italian restaurant," the fan supplied.

"Rosie's?" I asked, already standing. "Babe, where are the keys?" I winced at the fact that I'd let that 'babe' slip.

I could practically hear Percy grinning when he replied. "Right when you walk in, on that table-thing." I followed his directions and retrieved the keys. I heard Percy and the girl having a conversation, but I wasn't really listening.

"On my way," I said, unlocking the Land Rover and getting in the driver's seat.

"Can't wait to see you," Percy said, sugary sweet.

"Oh, shut up," I said, sounding playful—or at least I hoped so. I ended the call, tossing my phone into the passenger seat and heading to the Wal-Mart, which was thankfully only thirty minutes away. Percy must have looped around or something, otherwise he would have ended up in the next city over.

I grimaced a bit, thinking about the actual reason he went out in the first place. The words I'd said to him were a low blow, and definitely unnecessary. If they'd have been said to me, I know for a fact that I'd be livid. Thankfully, Percy seemed to accept my apology, and I couldn't be more grateful. Our little arguments weren't really a bother, but if we'd been in a serious fight, being together in public would be hell. Or, even worse than hell.

When one of Percy's song came on the radio, rather than turning it off like reflex was telling me to, I left it on. I'd been so bitter with Percy for a while simply because he was rude at the signing I'd attended, but now that I knew the reason, I found that I wasn't all that irritated. It was actually—dare I say it—sweet that he'd been upset because his interaction with the fans had been cut back to a minimum.

His music wasn't terrible by any means, but the lyrics were beyond cheesy. He made it work though, in a way.

I just wanted to know why I was developing a soft spot for Percy after one fight.

It was precisely 6:25 in the afternoon when I arrived at the Wal-Mart. I turned off the engine, stepping out of the Land Rover and closing the door to the car, locking it as I hurried inside. I slowed my pace in a vain attempt to look less concerned as I walked through the doors, walking inside and pulling out my phone to call Percy and see where he was.

I nearly dropped my fairly new white iPhone when two arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me back against a solid chest. "Hi," Percy said softly.

I turned and hugged him, hoping that there were fans around so that I could blame the affection on the fact that they were there. I had admittedly been worried, and I almost sighed in relief as Percy hugged me back and chuckled lowly in my ear. "Miss me?"

"No," I grumbled, yet not exactly breaking the hug. He didn't say anything else, instead pulling me closer and not questioning me. I was grateful for that, and I said, "I'm sorry," softly, almost hoping that

he didn't hear it. If there was one thing I hated, it was apologizing. My pride was much too high for that.

However, much to my dismay, Percy replied, "It's okay." I squeezed him tightly before pulling back, glancing around hopefully and mentally 'woohoo'ing because there was indeed a fan. I waved her over, and she smiled before joining us.

"Hey, I'm Jenna," she said brightly. I was happy to see that she wasn't squealing or anything of the sort. "I know you hear it all the time, but I would just like to tell you both that you are adorable. That hug made me 'aww' out loud." I laughed lightly, praying that I wasn't blushing.

"Yeah, well I was worried about this jerk over here," I said, playfully rolling my eyes and gesturing at Percy who tossed an arm over my shoulder. "He sort of left without telling me."

"Better keep your woman informed Percy," Jenna said with a grin. He laughed and I joined in. "Well, I better head home. I originally headed out for milk, but one never expects to meet a sweaty Percy J in a Wal-Mart."

"I was running!" Percy defended. Jenna and I rolled our eyes in unison.

"It was really surreal to meet you two," she said.

"Wait," Percy said. "As a thank you for keeping me company, do you happen to have a Twitter?" The girl nodded. "I'll follow you."

Jenna's eyes widened and she told him her username. After he followed her, I leaned over and watched him tweet her a small *'thanks for the company while I waited for Annabeth! xx.'* The girl grinned her thanks, and left with a final wave.

"That hug put on quite a show," Percy said softly after the girl was out of earshot.

"Our managers said to show affection. I was following orders," I said, a bit defensively. Percy raised an eyebrow but thankfully didn't press the topic. "Anyways, ready to go home?"

Percy shook his head. "I don't want to go home."

"Then what?" I questioned, a bit nervous. Percy was spontaneous, which means that he could suggest going to Egypt right now.

"Ice cream," he said with a firm nod. "I want ice cream."

"You are such a kid," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

"Why, thank you," Percy said genuinely. I rolled my eyes yet again and led the way out to the Land Rover. He snuck his hand into my hoodie pocket, stealing the keys, making me jump and belatedly slapping his shoulder as he jogged ahead to his vehicle, laughing. I smiled, despite myself.

And for the first time, the thought that maybe, just maybe, Percy Jackson wasn't *that* bad occurred to me.

The next two days passed with similar actions out in public. Hugs, arms around each other's waists, laughing, smiling, looking flirtatious. It wasn't as difficult, seeing as we had more of a plan. We still

argued about stupid things, like what kind of food we would eat for dinner, who drove, or who had to wash the dishes. Percy started calling me 'babe' more and more often, so often that I stopped bothering to tell him not to. And *no*, it wasn't because I liked the term of endearment.

Today was Friday, and we would be attending a movie premiere and then going to a small gathering afterwards. It would be full of stars similar to us—in their teens and drunk off of being famous. I didn't even know what movie we were seeing, but I had the lurking feeling that it would be something I wouldn't really enjoy.

Regardless, Stan called me with the orders to 'wear something pretty.' I didn't really know what that meant, but almost twenty minutes later, Percy got a call from his stylist, who had informed him that she already had planned outfits for the both of us.

"Be prepared for the peachy color," Percy muttered with a grimace. I laughed at his look of pure disgust, standing and getting a second cup of coffee. "I want some!" Percy whined.

"Then come get it," I said. "I am not your maid."

"Oh, right. I would want to save that for when we role-play," Percy said, cheeky smile on his face. I rolled my eyes and scoffed, not even dignifying that with a response.

We opted for a quiet day in, seeing as we'd been going out every day since I moved in, and we'd be going out tonight. I settled back into the couch, setting my coffee on the table and shooting Percy and disapproving glare when he stole my coffee and drank some of it. "Ugh, this is terrible," Percy said, wincing. "Do you even know what sugar is?" He squeezed his eyes shut and scrunched up his nose, making him look like a disgruntled cat in my opinion. I didn't say anything, simply smirking as he handed my coffee back to me, still grimacing.

We watched re-runs of horrible television, somehow ending up on the channel that played the horrible movies with horrible acting. We joked around, picking on the actors for about an hour, until Percy abruptly proclaimed, "I'm making brownies."

I'd given him an odd look, but didn't ask questions as he stood and entered the kitchen. I'd learned the first day that I'd lived in his house that he absolutely could not prepare food without singing, so I wasn't very surprised when he started singing something by The Fray.

I continued watching the television for a few minutes, hardly hearing what the people were saying before eventually muting it. I listened to Percy sing, just him with no instruments or voice tricks, and that's when it really hit me how surreal my life was.

Just two years ago, I would have *died* hearing Percy sing in real life. And now, he was in the kitchen, making brownies, singing at the top of his lungs. I laughed a little disbelievingly to myself, even though I didn't feel the same about *the* Percy J as I used to.

Deciding that the movie sucked a lot worse when Percy wasn't making rude comments about those acting, I walked to the kitchen and took a seat on the counter, watching Percy make brownies. He noticed my presence after a few seconds, stopping mid-song and saying, "Hey, babe." I gave him a tight smile as a reply, and rested my cheek on my knee as I pulled it up on the counter. I closed my eyes for a few moments, enjoying the smell of brownies, and pretending that I was home—back when home was happy.

Back when home didn't consist of shady guys in the apartment—different ones every night. Back when home didn't include yelling and stepping on broken beer bottles as I left for school. Back when home

wasn't just a house, but was truly a *home*. Back when Dad was alive and Mom was happy, and they were in love. Back when home wasn't hell.

I felt a hand on my cheek, and my eyes shot open to concerned brown eyes—but eyes that weren't brown, exactly. Percy's eyes were always odd to me, and I always felt like there was something else there. They were brown, but not really. They had tiny bits of a blue-green that I could see peeking through.

“Babe,” Percy said softly, stopping me from examining his eyes too much, “why're you crying?”

I noticed at that moment that his hand wasn't resting on my cheek, instead he was using his thumb to wipe away tears. I laughed something that was halfway between a choked sob and a sigh. “Nothing,” I told him. He helped me off the counter, and I stepped away, feeling like we were strangers for some reason. “I'm... showering.” He nodded, still looking mildly worried and I left.

And that's when I noticed that we really were strangers. I knew *facts* about Percy. He liked blue and gray; they were his favorite colors. The Fray was his favorite band. He refused to eat Nutella, and he played two instruments: the guitar and the piano. He was also pretty handy with a saxophone, but he didn't play all that often. He dyed his hair blonde, and he had been since he was fourteen. The beach was one of his favorite places in the world, and he was a good surfer. I knew everything that the average fan would.

However, I didn't know *Percy*, really. I didn't know about Percy's parents, or his friends, or personal things. I was living with a stranger, basically.

The thought lingered with me as I showered, singing lightly, trying in vain to clear my head but not succeeding. When I finally reentered the kitchen in sweatpants and a orange t-shirt, Percy was taking the brownies out of the oven. He grinned at me. “Perfect timing!”

I smiled half-heartedly, and he frowned. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” I told him honestly. “Stupid things. Don't worry.” He sighed and nodded, throwing the oven mitts he'd been using back into a drawer and hanging his black apron back on the hook by the pantry.

“Let those cool for ten minutes, and we should be good. Although, no one ever really waits ten full minutes,” Percy said thoughtfully. I smiled and shook my head. “There it is,” he said softly. “Was afraid I'd never see you smile again.” I rolled my eyes at that, but felt a bit...secure. Or, at least, like someone cared.

He'd just started cutting the brownies when there was a knock at the door. “Babe, can you get that?” he questioned, his eyes not straying from the brownies he was trying to perfect. I found myself wincing a bit at the term of endearment, deciding that *yes*, it did bother me again. Regardless, I pushed off from where I was leaning on the counter and headed for the door, groaning when I saw Stan's face through the peephole.

“Manager,” I warned Percy. I heard him groan from the kitchen as I opened the door and allowed Stan inside.

A younger guy followed him in, heading straight for the kitchen and sing-songing, “I smell food!” I raised an eyebrow after him, but relaxed after I heard Percy say, “Clinton!” followed by a perplexed sigh from the guy who was apparently Clint.

"How are you, baby?" Stan said, looking down at me. "You're getting more famous thought! I think you hit thirty-nine on the charts today!"

I smiled. "Really?" I bit my lip in excitement. He nodded and I bounced on my feet as I entered the kitchen. "Hey, Perce, guess what?" I asked, perching myself on the counter again.

"Hm, babe?" Percy said distractedly, still cutting the brownies into perfect squares.

"I'm number thirty-nine on the charts," I said happily, noting with mild irritation that he was adamant about calling me 'babe.'

He turned and smiled genuinely. "That's great, sweetheart," Percy said. His smile turned into a smirk. "But let me brag for a moment—"

"Not *the* Percy Jackson!" I said, faking shock.

"Shut up," he said, almost fondly, shaking his head. "I'm not *that* cocky."

"Uh-huh."

"Once again, shut up," Percy repeated. "Anyways, I would like to brag on the fact that I am number five."

I sighed in annoyance. "You always have to upstage me," I said, irritation evident in my voice.

"Wait until you're up at the top," Percy said, shaking his head. "Then you'll be the one upstaging me."

"You think that I'll beat you on the charts?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

Percy snorted. "Yeah. You're music is actually quality."

"Your music isn't terrible," I admitted with a shrug. I wasn't lying at all, really. His music was decent, even if it was too poppy for my taste—too constructed specifically for teenage girls wanting to be the one to catch his attention.

"Awww, thanks, baby!" Percy said, shooting me a wink.

"And now I take it back," I said, shaking my head. Percy pouted and I laughed at how outright ridiculous he looked.

"In celebration of you making number thirty-nine on the charts, I present to you, the first out of a fresh batch of The Famous Percy Jackson Brownies," Percy said, handing me one on a paper plate, acting as though it were a silver platter, and bowing dramatically.

"Lame," I muttered. He shrugged and started distributing brownies to everyone else. I ate my sinfully good brownie, but not mentioning to him how terribly good they were.

It was after the four of us had cleared the pan of brownies that Stan cleared his throat, revealing the true reason they'd shown up. "First of all, your outfits are in the car. Sherry sent them with us." Percy and I nodded. "And you guys have a pop quiz." This time, I was the only one who nodded.

"What?" Percy said, dragging it out. I rolled my eyes at that.

"Stan and I are going to go get your clothes," Clint informed us. "When we get back, you will both be seated on the couch. Yeah?" I nodded and yanked Percy into the living room as they both left for a few moments. We sat on opposite ends of the couch, and I propped my feet up in the remaining space between us.

"Uh, Annabeth?" Percy said hesitantly. I looked over at him. "I didn't... study."

"Do the best you can," I said, shrugging.

He groaned. "You sound like my evil English teacher back in middle school," he said spitefully, making me snort as Clint and Stan reentered the apartment.

"Well, first order of business," Stan started, clapping his hands together, as Clint threw the clothes over the back of the couch before taking a seat, "how are you two getting along?"

Unknowing, Percy and I shrugged simultaneously. There was no way to know because I wasn't looking at him and he wasn't looking at me. Stan gave a look as though he would like detail and I cleared my throat. "Well... he's still an asshole—"

"Still a bitch," Percy muttered. I shot him a sideways glare before continuing.

"—And we argue a lot because he's insufferable, but as you can tell, we're convincing," I said, referring to fans, and how we are 'the cutest thing in the world.'

"Yeah," Percy said hesitantly. "Like, we fight, but we actually *can* get along. Which is highly surprising because she's a shrewd." I kicked his thigh and he gave me a dry look as if to say *was that supposed to hurt?* I scowled and kicked him again, but he just caught my foot and held it hostage, letting my feet rest on his legs. "We don't really like each other all that much, but we get along well enough to make this work."

"Good," Clint and Stan said in unison, both nodding.

Percy and I exchanged a scared look, both suddenly worrying if our managers were robots.

"Annabeth, what's Percy's birthday?"

"August 18th, 1993," I replied automatically. Clint nodded in approval.

"Percy?"

"Annabeth's birthday?"

"June 21st, 1994," Percy said, so confidently I almost believed him.

"Absolutely not. Perce, why couldn't you just read it? You make my job so much more difficult," Clint said, massaging his forehead. Percy had the grace to look a bit ashamed, but he turned to me.

"My birthday is February 3rd, 1994. You got the year right," I said, praising him a bit. He smiled and turned back to our managers.

"I got the year right!" he said, holding his head high and looking very proud. I snorted in laughter and he squeezed my foot, fake-frowning at me. "I was very proud of my success."

"I'm sure you were," I deadpanned. He smiled, turning away and shaking his head.

"Wow," Clint said, his head cocked to the side thoughtfully. "That was cute."

"What?" I asked, bewildered.

"That. Almost looked like flirting. Huh. Must just be my old eyes," Clint said, shrugging and looking away. I, albeit a little awkwardly, retracted my feet from Percy's lap, instead tucking them underneath myself.

"You're only twenty," Percy said, raising an eyebrow.

"Right. Uh, birth defect," Clint blatantly lied. I rolled my eyes, but looked at Stan expectly, almost pleading with him to save us from this horribly awkward silence.

"So, Annabeth, Percy's favorite color?" he asked, though he didn't look like he cared much about the answer.

"Blue and gray," I said, running my hands through my still damp hair.

"Favorite type of food?"

I smirked. "Well, I'm not sure what this means, but I know the answer is 'anything blue.'"

"Lovely!" Clint exclaimed. "Percy, do tell Annabeth the story."

Percy sent him a minor glare, turning towards me. "Well, my mom used to make me blue food a lot. I started as a big 'fuck you' to my stepdad who said there was no such thing as blue food, but we continued the tradition, even after he was gone. I guess I just got used to it." He was smiling like a fool afterwards, and I could tell he really adored his mother.

"Momma's boy," I teased.

He shrugged. "Yeah. Basically." I smiled slightly. "She'd love you, I think."

I cocked my head to the side. "You think?"

Percy laughed. "She'd probably try to adopt you, honestly."

I smiled. "Well, then I think I'd like to meet her." She sounded like a sweet woman, and it'd been a while since I'd been around a motherly figure who wasn't under the influence.

"Cool," Percy said, nodding and smiling slightly. "Cool?" he said, addressing our managers.

"That's fine," Stan said, shrugging a shoulder.

"Yeah," Clint agreed. "So, this meeting was wonderful but all I've concluded this whole time is that Percy is a terrible best friend, and Annabeth is a perfect best friend."

"I'll read that file-thing by tonight," Percy said. I nodded in agreement, since I'd probably have to force him into anyways.

"Great," Clint said, standing and stretching. "Well, we're off." Percy followed to show them out, but I stayed on the couch. A few seconds later, when Percy returned, his whole mood was turned around. He looked... almost mad, but he was doing well at hiding it.

"Penny for your thoughts?" I questioned, curious as to why he was suddenly angry after being in such a good mood.

"Nothing," he said. "Just... nothing. I'm going to go read that file then shower; it'll probably be about three by then. So, we can just figure something out." He sounded bitter, and I'd be lying if I said that it didn't make me flinch a bit.

"Yeah, sure," I said, deciding to shrug it off. Percy exited the room, heading straight for his, and I sighed. It seemed like we'd been doing better, getting along, apparently *flirting* for shit's sake, and now we were strangers again, awkwardly avoiding each other. Lovely. I turned to examine the clothes, sighing in relief when there was in fact no peach, but my dress was emerald green. Percy had a classic black and white suit from the looks of it.

I fell back onto the couch, grabbing my book off the table and reading. I had a strictly non-fiction rule, and this book about architecture was actually very interesting. It had a lot of facts I already knew for the most part, but I didn't really mind. The author was truly amazing—and had a way of weaving words that made it sound like I was reading a wonderful fairytale rather than a book about architecture.

I'd probably only been reading for about ten minutes when I heard someone—Percy—walking down the stairs. I glanced up, seeing him looking quite embarrassed and a bit less irritated. "Uh, hey," he said, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly.

"Oh, are we friends again?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. He sighed and looked down but headed over to the couch and took a seat.

"Yeah. But listen... I need help. Reading this," Percy admitted. I smiled, laughing lightly as he blushed.

"What do you mean?" I questioned.

"I have dyslexia, which means—"

"Yeah, I know, I have it too," I said, taking the folder from him. "I just trained my eyes to read, probably put a lot more effort into it than you did," I commented. He shrugged.

"I didn't know you had dyslexia," Percy said thoughtfully.

"I didn't know you did either. It's most definitely not in your file," I said, wondering why it was such a secret. "Do your fans even know?"

"Nah," he replied easily. "Anyways, can you help me?"

"Of course I can," I said. "But will I?" Percy groaned out loud and rolled his eyes.

"Look, I just wanna get this done so I can make *us* look good tonight, so if you want to look like horrible, *fake* best friends, then go ahead and don't help, but if I do it myself, it'll take me a full day, at the least," Percy said, sounding resigned.

I found it a bit irritating how he was constantly so carefree about everything, but then he had moments where he seemed so genuinely caring. "I could be persuaded, perhaps."

"What do you want? My first born child?" Percy asked, not seeming all that concerned. I snorted in laughter, and he glanced over at me.

"Make me coffee?" I asked, sounding hopeful yet firm at the same time.

Percy sighed, letting his head drop against the back of the couch before standing. "Your wish is my command, your highness," he muttered sarcastically.

"In that case, I would also like for you to fan me with giant leaves and hand feed me grapes," I said poshly. Percy snorted, shaking out his hair and heading into the kitchen. I was glad that we were back on track again, but I was wondering what threw us off course in the first place? We'd been fine... then just... we weren't.

A few minutes later, in which I'd spent reading a few more paragraphs, Percy returned with a hot cup of coffee. "Here you are, dearest," he said, handing it over. I smiled gratefully and he sat himself on the couch. After a moment of hesitation, I put my feet on his lap, hoping we'd regain some of the earlier easiness.

It didn't exactly work.

However, it wasn't all that awkward either. Neither of us commented on it, and I started asking Percy questions, then relaying the answers when he was way off. He'd try to remember the best he could, then we'd move onto the next one.

I'd been in the middle of a question about my preference of breakfast food when my phone vibrated loudly. I'd long since finished my coffee, and if I hadn't I would have spilt it, seeing as I jumped a bit violently. Percy snorted in laughter and shot him a glare before opening the text.

"Oh," I said, mildly surprised. "My friend Thalia is coming to your next concert."

"Cool name," Percy commented. "But my next concert isn't until like next year. We don't even know the line-up yet—or what songs I'll be performing, seeing as I haven't finished my album yet."

"Oh, she didn't really mean it definitely. She just says she wants to meet you."

Percy looked as though something suddenly occurred to him. "Hey, she's a friend from your high school, right?" I nodded. "Well, won't the people at your high school know that we weren't friends, seeing as I didn't go to your high school?"

"I'll just say that I met you somewhere and we were friends while we were both in high school, but not at the *same* high school," I said, shrugging one shoulder.

"Where did we meet?" Percy asked. "Oh, this could be fun. Star Wars convention?"

"Uh-uh," I said, laughing. "I say we met at a mall or something. The beach?"

"The beach," Percy confirmed. "But why did we keep talking to each other?"

"Um... I thought you were cute so I gave you my number when you asked for it, but we ended up sending novel-length texts and meeting up often," I questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"Sounds like something out of a book," I said thoughtfully. "But it sounds good. And I asked for your number because you were pretty? Or because I thought you looked all sweet-southern-belle sophisticated while reading your books on the beach?"

"The second seems more likely," I told him, nodding.

“Great. So, we met at the beach, I asked for your number, we kept talking and meeting up, turned out to become best friends, lost touch when I got famous, but now we're best friends again?” Percy clarified. I hummed in approval and he smiled. “Cool.”

“Now, what do I prefer? Waffles or pancakes?”

The premiere started at eight o'clock, and as luck would have it, Percy informed me that it was the latest Twilight movie. I was wearing the emerald dress, and I thought it was too form-fitting, but Percy claimed that I looked fine and that I should shut up. My hair was left in its natural curls, but I felt like it wasn't enough for the gorgeous dress, which was shiny—satiny, even—and something I could never dream of affording.

“Limo's here!” I heard Percy yell. I sighed, pulling on one of my curls and leaving the room. I felt highly nervous—this being one of my first *big* public appearances as a celebrity. And these heels seriously weren't helping. “Babe!” Percy called again.

“Coming!” I shouted back, hurrying down the hallway.

He held out his arm as we reached the door, and I linked our arms. We ignored the two or three paparazzi outside his apartment and headed straight for the limo. As soon as we were seated, we both pulled out our phones, me scrolling through my feed on Twitter and Percy texting someone.

“Hey,” I said, “Percabeth Premiere is trending,” I told him, nudging his side.

“Yeah, a lot of fans are asking for a tweet to confirm that we're going together,” Percy said. “I don't really see the point, I mean, we'll be on the red carpet in a few seconds.” Nevertheless, I saw him reply a simply *'yes, we're going together! xx.'* His mentions were flooded again with fans exclaiming about the Percabeth 'date.'

I was scrolling through my mentions, stopping on some to click on links, or look at some of the pictures, retweeting one or two. I went and glanced at my followers, gasping.

I had nearly a million followers. When did that happen? “Percy,” I said, elbowing him and showing my phone screen. He beamed.

“Hey, they listened to me,” Percy said, still smiling. “I told all my followers to follow you.” I grinned slightly, shouldering him.

“You didn't have to do that,” I said.

“Don't go all sweet on me before we get on the red carpet, now,” Percy said with a wink.

And *no*, I didn't bite back a smile.

Later, if I was asked to describe what my first red carpet experience was like, I wouldn't be able to put it into words. It was a blur of flashing cameras, smiling purely because it was a rush, and holding tight to a strong arm that made sure I didn't get lost. We answered a few questions, having to relay the backstory we'd only made up a few hours prior, and we denied the fact that we were together—we were just close.

We weren't questioned too much before we were pushed along and the next celebrity got their chance in the spotlight. I was introduced to so many celebrities and I was floating on Cloud Nine, for lack of a better description. When we were finally seated, the movie playing, I couldn't exactly sit still.

"Babe," Percy said, half laughing.

"I'm sorry!" I whispered. "This is all just... so *crazy*."

I could see Percy's smile, even in the dark theatre. "I know. I'm still a bit surprised by it all myself."

"This movie is going to suck, isn't it?" I asked, settling into my chair, the adrenaline wearing off little by little. Percy rested his arm on the back of my chair, and I felt a bit uncomfortable for a few seconds before deciding that I needed to look very much comfortable in the off case that another person looked at us.

I leaned closer to him, and his thumb started rubbing my shoulder. It was weird—really weird—but it was also oddly comforting.

The movie wasn't all that bad, I suppose, it just wasn't of my interest. I spent the whole movie either glancing idly around the theatre, glancing up at Percy, and contemplating running out of the theatre due to sheer boredom.

When the movie was finally over and finished, I clapped along with the other people—though I'd never clapped in a theatre before—and stood up abruptly, yanking Percy up alongside me.

"Leaving in a hurry?" he asked lowly, so that no one else would hear. "That movie was shit."

"It wasn't," I said honestly. "It just wasn't my thing." He nodded in agreement and we left the movie theater, since the after-party we were attending was walking distance.

It took all of about five minutes to get there, and we were one of the first ones there, save a few other celebrities.

In the end, we only stayed until most people had arrived, and we talked to a few people on our way to the door. It was really crowded, and my feet were hurting from these heels that could be considered a method of torture.

After we finally stumbled through the door, receiving a chorus of 'goodbye!', I held onto the railing and took off my shoes, sighing in relief. "Ugh. I hate being a girl."

"Cause a girl's life is *so* hard," Percy said, rolling his eyes. "Boys have to take all the initiative in relationships: they have to ask the girl out, pay for her, kiss her first, hold her hand first—everything."

"That's not always how it works," I argued. "Sometimes the girls take initiative. Like when the guy is too nervous or scared to do it himself."

"Or when the girl is too impatient," Percy muttered, sending me a pointed glance. I rolled my eyes as he pulled out his phone, calling a car.

When we got home that night, I tossed the horrid heels into a corner and fell onto the couch. "M never walking again," I concluded. Percy sat on the couch next to me, patting my ankle sympathetically.

“I'm going to shower and then go to bed,” Percy announced. “See you tomorrow.” I nodded and he walked down the hall, waving over his shoulder. I went into my room, slipped off the dress that I'd gotten several compliments on throughout the night, and instead put on sweatpants and a t-shirt. I fell onto my bed, falling asleep almost instantly.

I woke up the day after the premier to a text from Clint.

Remember what I said.

I groaned and threw my phone across the room harshly, burying my face in my pillow and wanting to scream into the soft cotton. I'd been trying to forget about what he said since the moment he said it.

"You're going to fall for her, Perce. I know you too well, and I know that look. You always were shit about hiding your emotions. Be careful. It stays fake, understand?"

And I'd nodded like a dedicated little popstar, smiled and closed the door before I could punch him. Because honestly, it made no sense. None of it did. Just because I could be civil with Annabeth, and she gave the best hugs I'd ever had—when I was graced with them—it didn't mean that I was suddenly in love with her. Annabeth was still the same insufferable, take-no-shit bitch that she'd always been since the time that I'd known her. I just liked it a bit more than I used to.

I'd simply warmed up to it—I didn't *love* it.

But, that didn't really stop me from smiling sleepily when Annabeth yelled at me to get the hell up because we were supposed to get coffee.

When I was awake, showered, and clad in a hoodie and worn-out jeans, I walked into the living room. Annabeth was dressed similarly to me lying on the couch and turning the page of her book. "Babe," I said, and she turned and looked at me raising an eyebrow. "I'm ready."

"Lovely," she said rolling her eyes. "Only took you an hour and a half." I let that one slide, deciding that it was probably true and tying my Converse. "Let's go, Princess," she muttered.

"That's my line," I said, fake frowning as I grabbed my wallet off the table next to the door and shoving it into my back pocket. I picked up the keys as well, swinging them around my index finger.

"If either one of us is a princess, it would be you," Annabeth said. I turned and glanced at her facial expression, which was dead serious. It made me smile ridiculously big because she was just so *blatant* sometimes. I sort of missed the fact that after I turned away again, she smiled as well.

We drove to the coffee shop in silence, sharing a smile when Annabeth's song came on the radio. Things were normal, easy—simple. I took a deep breath and realized that we weren't arguing—the words we shared earlier had simply been banter. I actually felt like she was my friend, rather than my pissed off future fake girlfriend.

And then I remembered Clint's words.

The smile dropped from my face, the mood suddenly and inexplicably dampened, and I scowled into the air. It wasn't fair that I couldn't even be friends with Annabeth without the thought bothering me. And then I got bothered because *why was it bothering me in the first place?*

"Are you trying to ruin your pretty mouth?" Annabeth asked innocently from next to me. I then realized that I'd bitten my lip so hard that I'd actually drawn blood. I wiped my mouth, frowning. Annabeth sighed loudly. "What is wrong with you? You're all... Frowny and scowly."

"Those aren't words."

"And someone's avoiding the question; thank you for confirming my thoughts that something is indeed wrong. Talk to me," Annabeth said easily.

"I can't really tell you about my problem if *you* are the problem," I said, my voice irritated. She took it wrong though, and I didn't blame her for it. My words were harsh and rude, but the bitterness wasn't for her. Well, not really.

"Oh," she said.

And then it was like every little bit of progress that had been made was replaced with a hundred giant steps back. I sighed, but I couldn't just *tell* her what Clint had said, because that would increase the awkward air around us. "Sorry," I muttered half-heartedly, not expecting a reply and not getting one either.

Coffee was uncomfortable, in one word. We shared fake smiles, talking about the weather and other things we really had no interest in. Henry—or Hardy whatever—flirted with her and I didn't... act jealous like I did last time. I didn't even glance in their direction actually, just smiling as I paid and handing Annabeth her coffee when her order was ready. It was simple enough, not all that terrible.

But actually, it was terrible, because I had just gotten used to Annabeth's tendency to be obnoxiously rude, even if it was directed towards me. I would rather her be a bitch to me rather than a stranger.

But now, I didn't even get the glare from across the table. I was totally and completely shut out, and it *really, really, really* scared me, because I realized that I wanted her to notice me, and I wanted her to talk to me and hug me like she hugged me at Wal-Mart. And that was simply not acceptable, according to Clint.

But I went along with it. Because I didn't want to explain the fact that the reason she was the problem was because I got attached easily and that my manager thought I was going to fall head over heels for her.

Annabeth and I were friends—if we were even considered that, actually. We were barely-there friends. Annabeth stood up abruptly, and I watched her visibly hesitate before turning and saying, "I'm getting another tea." I nodded, but she wasn't looking for my approval, and she turned. That made me sigh internally, but I glanced around the coffee shop, which was probably a bad place for a Starbucks because hardly anyone seemed to come out this way. I saw a worker on break, a grandmother who seemed to be visiting with someone, and a guy who looked immersed in his business.

Then Annabeth was sitting down again and my thoughts couldn't really stray, because I felt like total and complete shit. I sighed, closing my eyes tightly. "Annabeth, look—"

"I get it," she said, softly yet firmly. "I understand. So let's not talk about it."

"But—"

"Seriously," Annabeth said, smiling sarcastically. "Let's just forget about the whole thing, yeah?"

I winced at her words because I could tell that she didn't mean 'let's forget about the incident in the car.' She meant, 'hey, let's forget about how well we were getting along and how I hugged you that one time in Wal-Mart and the snuggling at the movie theater.' However, I just nodded in response, taking another sip of my now cooled beverage, not really understanding why I couldn't just shut the hell up sometimes.

It was about a week later when Annabeth actually *talked* to me. Sure, we'd shared small talk, about the weather, about the terrible television playing. Never smiling, never laughing.

Just when the house was starting to feel like a home with her, it reverted back into a small cramped house with no space to hide in.

We did normal publicity stunts, going out to the mall and getting coffee, going to the movies once and eating at posh restaurants together. Smiles were false then, if we could even manage to. Luckily, fans didn't seem to notice much, saying that we were too lost in each other's eyes to even think about smiling.

So, when I was laying on the sofa in sweatpants and no shirt because Annabeth wasn't in here to scold me for it, I was truly baffled that she appeared at the end of the stairs. We'd been avoiding each other for a while now. I raised an eyebrow at her before jumping up and pulling her to the couch.

Annabeth Chase's eyes were *red*.

Dare I say it, she looked like she'd been crying.

As soon as I sat her down on the couch, she just gripped my forearm tightly. I sat down next to her, not really sure what to do. I'd never really dealt with Annabeth when she was crying, and all my actions around her seemed to overthought at the moment.

It was close to ten minutes later when she spoke, her voice basically void of any emotion. "My best friend died this morning."

And, for a second, I almost expected her to crack a joke after, punch my arm and watch horrible television with me. When she didn't, I sort of panicked and just—hugged her.

It still felt awkward, since we weren't all that close, but it was really the best I could do at the moment. I knew what it was like to lose friends—hell, I'd lost over eleven. But I didn't lose my *best* friend. She put her head on my shoulder and I hesitated before carding my fingers through her hair nervously.

"How?" I asked a few minutes later, softly. Saying anything above a whisper seemed like it would disturb the quiet and serene air about us.

"Murdered," Annabeth said. "They don't really know who or by what or how yet—or they wouldn't disclose it anyways." I noted that her voice after crying was shockingly similar to her sleepy voice. I pressed my face into her hair, whispering a litany of apologies, not complaining when I felt tears on my shoulder. "Her name was Silena, Percy, and she was just the best person I knew and I don't understand *why*," Annabeth said, halfway through a sob into my shoulder I rubbed her back in hopefully soothing circles, not even bothering to tell her that it'd be okay.

If you've ever been through the pain of someone close to you dying, those were the words you never wanted to hear: 'it'll be okay.' That would be the *last* thing you wanted to hear, because it felt like lies.

Her crying got a bit less violent, and before I knew it, Annabeth Chase was sleeping in my arms and her face was buried in my neck. Trying desperately not to wake her, I laid back on the couch slowly, readjusting myself to make sure that she was more comfortable. I knew she'd murder me if she were to be conscious, but taking the chance I had, I pressed my lips to her forehead with a final "I'm sorry."

And after a while, I felt overly creepy listening to her even breaths as she slept, so I decided to let them lull me to sleep as well.

When I woke up, I was warm.

And not in a 'I forgot to turn on the air conditioning' way. I was warm and content and a little bit happy.

My first thought was that I was drunk. Which was weird, because I'd been sober for at least three years. But usually, I only get that blissful, not really conscious feeling when I was drunk.

Cautiously, I opened my eyes, only to see Annabeth, eyes peacefully closed and tear stains on her face. I briefly remembered the previous night, when we'd actually spoke again, but only because her best friend died. Feeling another wave of sympathy, I started petting her hair, praying that she wouldn't wake up. This was actually nice, seeing as she wasn't ignoring me. Then again, she was sleeping, so she couldn't exactly ignore me if she really wanted to. She'd probably murder me when she arose—or worse, go back to ignoring me. I slowly disentangled myself from her, deciding that I really didn't want to deal with how annoyed she would be when she woke, after sleeping next to me on the couch. And, I'll admit, I didn't want to deal with the awkward conversation that would follow.

A cup of coffee sounded like the best thing *ever* at the moment, so I headed into the kitchen, keeping my steps light so as to not wake Annabeth. I winced when my phone notified me—loudly—that I had an interview, but all I heard was shuffling, then a sigh, so I assumed she stayed dead to the world.

I looked to my phone, the reminder, well, *reminding* me that I had an interview with a radio station down the road in thirty minutes. Clint had also sent me a gracious text, telling me that it'd be a normal interview—nothing that I hadn't repeated a thousand times over. I started the coffee maker, walking quietly to my room to get ready. After I showered, I threw on a v-neck that was wrinkled, and it bothered me a bit, but I shrugged it off, shaking out my hair. I scowled, realizing that Annabeth was rubbing off on me. I hoped that I didn't inherit her OCD. I brushed my teeth while towel-drying my hair, reaching for my contacts case before realizing that I'd slept in them the night before. *That probably wasn't the best idea*, I thought to myself idly as I walked into the kitchen.

I still had ten minutes until I needed to leave, so I drank my coffee slowly. I already had one foot out the door, my keys in my hand, and my wallet in my back pocket before I hesitated.

Should I at least tell Annabeth where I'm going? I didn't want to wake her up, no way, but I didn't want her to wake up and think I'm dead or something. Last time I left without a reason, she had freaked out.

I sighed and walked back into the kitchen, pulling out a pad of paper from the junk drawer and searching for a working pen. A few minutes later, I'd scrounged up a highlighter, and I decided it was good enough.

I have an interview at 11:30. I should be back by 1, at least.

After a few moments of indecision, I added a quick and messy, *I hope you're doing better*, and signed my name before nearly running out the door so I wouldn't change my mind.

This interviewer was annoying. Like, door-to-door salesmen annoying. Or toll free numbers constantly calling annoying. *No*—worse. She was *girl with the high pitched voice in your math class that thinks she knows everything* annoying.

Her voice was squeaky, almost mouse-like, and she laughed at everything I said. I could have told her that my cat died and she would have cackled. She looked well over thirty, but she had on copious amounts of eyeshadow that she tried to make suggest otherwise. Still, she was cringe-worthy in my opinion, but I pasted on my charming smile and falsely interested expression as she told a story about how she'd been on the internet the other day.

“... And well, you see, I ended up finding this blog with all sorts of rumors about celebrities. It was interesting, really, though some probably weren't true. I heard one particular rumor about yourself; do you think you could give me an inkling on whether or not it's true?” she asked, giving a small giggle after.

Inwardly rolling my eyes and outwardly grinning, I nodded. “I'd love to.”

She gave me a sultry look, something that probably would have made a child cry. “Are you hiding your sexuality?”

I snorted. “No, definitely not. I like females.”

“Good to hear,” she said, batting her eyelashes, though it looked more like twitching eyes. “I have another rumor,” the interviewer said, laughing—though I didn't know why. “But first, tell me your thoughts on a certain Annabeth Chase?”

I smiled a bit to myself, still playing the part, although the interviewer and crew were the only ones who could see me. Seeing as it was a radio interview, most people would only be hearing my voice, but I knew that they were recording this as well, and some fans, the ones who took the time to look up the video, would also see my facial expressions. “She's...” I bit my lip and shook my head, really not knowing how to describe her. “I mean, obviously, she's my best friend. I care about her a lot and I'd do anything for her. She's... different.” I admitted with a shrug.

“How so, sweetie?” the world's most irritating interviewer said, pouting.

“I can't describe it,” I said with a laugh. “I mean, anyone with eyes can tell she's gorgeous and anyone with ears can tell that she's beyond talented, but... She just doesn't let anything go to her head. She's confident, but not arrogant. Annabeth's amazing, honestly,” I said, running my hands through my hair as a nervous gesture. I could practically hear people 'aww'ing at my confession.

“Does someone have a crush?” the interviewer asked, not looking as interested anymore.

I bit my lip and shrugged for the sake of the cameras, but cleared my throat. “Annabeth's lovely, but... I don't know.”

“What if by some chance, this Annabeth character fancied you?” the lady asked, examining her nails.

I chuckled. “Well, then that would be a miracle and I definitely wouldn't turn down her offer.”

"You heard it here first, guys!" she said, picking up her excited voice once more. "Percy J might just harbor a crush on Annabeth Chase!" I sat patiently as she ended the interview and said goodbye to anyone who might be listening. I was sort of hoping that Clint didn't kill me, seeing as we didn't really discuss the fact that I'd be dropping a bombshell like I did. I shook hands with most of the crew, taking some pictures and tweeting something about my interview before calling out a final goodbye.

The second I was back in my car, I called Clint. He picked up on the second ring, and I prayed it was only because he was excited, not utterly pissed off. "Perce! That was... Jesus, that was convincing! We should get you more acting gigs!"

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Sorry, I didn't mean to jump into that. I should have told you first."

"Oh, no, man, it's totally cool. Even *I* believed that. And you know I can spot things that aren't so genuine from miles away," Clint praised. "Hey, you're trending. Check that out while I call Stan!" We exchanged quick goodbyes and I started up my Land Rover and turned on the air conditioning while clicking on the Twitter app and waiting for it to load. I maneuvered my way to the trends, both of my eyebrows raising.

I didn't have one trend.

I had *four*.

"Percy's crushing," I read aloud. "Percabeth, Percy's confession, Percy's in love. Well, that's quite an assortment," I mumbled to myself, rolling my eyes and backing out of the parking lot. I glanced at the clock, seeing that it was half-past noon. "I'm hungry," I announced to myself. I shook myself mentally for talking to myself and drove to the apartment in a hurry, all too excited to order excessive amounts of Chinese food.

When I got home, much to my delight, there was already Chinese food on the table. "I love you so much, baby!" I called out loud, teasingly.

Annabeth walked into the room in an old hoodie and a pair of shorts, and *no* my eyes didn't linger on her legs for a few seconds, but *yes*, if you must know, they were endless and tan and gorgeous. "You're trending."

I nodded. "I know."

"People are tweeting me."

"Saying what?"

"Asking that I admit to liking you, so we can date then get married then have lots of babies," Annabeth said, getting a glass of milk.

"Milk?" I questioned, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "I wanted some. You?" I snorted in laughter, shaking my head.

"You look better," I added, glancing her over and noticing that she looked *a lot* better actually.

"Yeah, I'm totally fine now. No worries," Annabeth said, carelessly tossing her hand. I raised an eyebrow in question, but when she returned it with a blank stare, I resigned and sighed.

“Alright. I believe you. Anything else on the agenda today?” I questioned, turning to her, eating at the same time.

She rolled her eyes, muttering about how I was gross, but then sat down at the table. “Actually, that's what I needed to talk to you about. I want to go back home and visit some family and friends. I feel like I've been spending too much time with you, and it'll look like I have no other friends.” I nodded, understanding. “But also, just so you know, her funeral is sometime next week.”

“Okay,” I said. “Did you want me to come, or..?” I left it as an open question, not so sure if that was what she was implying or not—and I didn't want her to feel obligated.

“Would that be weird?” she asked, cocking her head to the side, and I saw Annabeth look a bit hesitant—which was really rare.

“Not at all,” I found myself replying. “I'll be your crying shoulder.”

She groaned. “Do *not* quote Edwin McCain at me,” Annabeth said, standing from her chair. She left the room.

“Dress it up, with the trappings of love!” I sang loudly after her. “I'll be better when I'm older—”

“Stop!” Annabeth yelled back, half-laughing and half-shouting.

I simply smiled before downing more food.

Three hours later, Annabeth was packed and ready to make a visit to her home in San Francisco. She'd be staying with her friend Thalia and she'd cleared everything with Stan. I was supposed to tweet about missing her or something equally as lame and cheesy. Annabeth was to be seen out with Thalia, or some other friends, and I was supposed to do something to the same effect.

In my opinion, it seemed sketchy. Right after I confess to the fact that I kind-of, sort-of liked Annabeth, she goes off with her friends and we spend a few days apart. If I was on the outside, I'd think that we had an argument over it. Clint just said that after a few public tweets about us being fine and everyone would settle.

I heard the door open and I jumped up. “Babe!” I yelled, walking into the front room and appearing aghast. “I don't even get a goodbye?”

She giggled—which should have been my first sign that something wasn't right. However, I ignored it as she leaned up and aimed for my cheek, but ended up kissing my jaw, seeing as I was a bit taller than she anticipated. I heard more than saw the flash of the camera, seeing as I'd closed my eyes for some ungodly reason. I internally groaned, hating myself for falling for that a third time. Annabeth wrapped her arms around my neck and I lifted her up off her feet as I hugged her.

“Oh, how you tease me,” I whispered jokingly in her ear.

“Eh, you like it,” Annabeth whispered back. I set her back down and she grinned up at me, patting my chest. “Don't miss me too much?”

“I'll just watch *The Notebook* and eat ice cream, drowning in my sorrows as I wait for your return, milady,” I said dramatically, bowing.

Honest humor sparkled in her eyes and she laughed, and that made me feel victorious, though I didn't want to think about why. "I'll see you."

"I'll tweet you," I said with a wink. She rolled her eyes and took a step out the door. She started to close the door, then leaned back in. I raised a single eyebrow, and she smiled wryly. "Don't use my hair-dryer."

Then the door was shut and I heard a few paparazzi calling out to Annabeth as she made her way to the car I'd called for her. I chuckled, cracking my knuckles and looking around the house awkwardly. I honestly didn't even know what to do now, even though we'd never really hung out together all that much when she was in the apartment. It felt oddly empty and silent, though it'd been just that way in the moments prior when Annabeth was packing.

Well. This would be a long few days if I didn't stop thinking like this.

I pulled out my cellphone, texting a few of my actual friends—and not friends that I was simply friends with for publicity for the both of us.

Guys night in? Don't enter my apartment without food or drink. X

I immediately got a reply from Nico Di Angelo—the youngest Hollywood director out there. All the ladies loved him, since he looked dark, mysterious and broody. However, I knew that he was a cocky and sarcastic guy.

It sounds like we're going to have a sleepover. Yay. Should I bring my nail polish?—N

No, you asshole. Like I said, bring me food.—P

Diva.—N

I didn't even grace that with a response, rolling my eyes and scrolling through the three other replies, from Travis, Jason, and Clint—who was my manager as well as my best friend—all of them saying a simple 'okay' or 'alright man.' I sighed in relief at the fact that I wouldn't *actually* have to watch *The Notebook* and wallow in my sorrows—instead I'd be watching more masculine things. *The Fast and The Furious* or *Spiderman* or something of the sort.

Tangled.

We were watching *Tangled*, for god's sake, and damn, did I feel emasculated. It had been Travis' idea, of course, and he had wanted to watch it because of a dare. He agreed that it was stupid; however, it needed to be done. Apparently, he'd rather him and four of his friends be stripped of their manhood as well.

By the end of the movie, we were all into it, needless to say. I took a picture of Travis laying on the floor, closer to the television than anyone else, soaking up every word they were saying. The guys and I had quietly snickered as I tweeted it, handing my phone over to Nico so he could type a witty remark. After the movie had ended and Travis checked his phone, he sent us all evil glares, saying that he'd get us back for that. We'd chortled and rolled on the floor until our sides were aching violently—and sometime during the long period of laughter, Travis had joined in.

We'd finally calmed our laughter and we were sitting in a nice silence before Nico girlishly squealed, "Make-overs!"

He'd been ambushed by four pillows at that moment.

We watched several more movies—all of which were much more masculine, in my opinion. The guys left at around one in the morning, besides Clint, who claimed we needed to have a talk about a certain blonde haired beauty. ("You mean *me*, right, Clinton?" "No, Percy. And don't call me that!") After I showed Travis, Jason and Nico to the door, I headed straight for the kitchen and started eating the chilled half-a-pizza left.

"Percy," Clint said, putting on his serious face. I groaned aloud. His fatherly brown eyes narrowed at me as he raised an eyebrow. "We need to talk."

"Please tell me you aren't breaking up with me!" I cried, feigning shock.

He snorted in amusement and shoved me before he pushed himself up on the counter. I briefly noted that he was sitting on *Annabeth's* counter, and he'd used *Annabeth's* way to maneuver himself up there. Before I could keep the thought for too long, he started talking. "How are things with her?"

I rolled my eyes. "They're fine, Clint, Jesus."

"That radio interview seemed very genuine—"

"Well, it wasn't," I said, cutting him off sharply. "Clint, drop it."

"Any reason why you're so defensive on the topic?" Clint asked lightly, pulling a pepperoni off of a slice of pizza.

"No," I stated firmly. "Listen: I don't like Annabeth, Annabeth doesn't like me. Everything I have said in front of the press or for interviews is totally and completely false, alright?"

"Perce—"

"*Alright?*" I repeated, not leaving him any room for another retort. He sighed dramatically.

"Alas, I have done all I can for this fine knight," he said, patting my shoulder. "I wish you only the best of luck with your princess."

"Oh my god, get the hell out," I muttered, pointing to the door, not as angry as I was before.

Clint laughed and pinched my cheek. "Don't forget what I said!"

"I never did!" I called as he shut the door behind himself. "It's actually a little hard to forget," I mumbled, though he wasn't listening. Deciding that I wanted to sleep, since it was fairly late—or early, depending on how you viewed it—I shut off the television and set my alarm on my phone for nine in the morning, taking out my contacts with practiced ease, and falling into bed effortlessly, dozing off several minutes later.

When I woke up, to the sound of my phone playing an aggravating tone, I groaned. It wasn't so much that I was tired—in fact, I'd slept wonderfully—but it was the fact that I'd been woken up by something so irritating. Clint had texted me, saying that I needed to tweet Annabeth sometime today, and I nodded at my phone, as though he could see my response.

After I was more coherent and awake, as well as freshly showered, I made myself a breakfast that should have been considered lunch if I were paying attention to time. Once I was contently full, I fell onto the sofa and sighed dramatically out of boredom.

I pulled out my phone and opened the Twitter app.

The house is so cold and empty without you, babe! Miss you @Annabeth_Chase ! x

I looked it over for a few minutes, trying to decide it was too much or too little. Deciding that I honestly didn't care, I sent the tweet and rolled over to bury my face in the arm of the couch.

Then an idea hit me.

I snatched up my phone again, checking the weather in a hurry and drumming my fingers on my screen, sighing impatiently. Sunny. All day long. I punched air and jumped up, running into my room and changing into board shorts and a plain blue t-shirt. I slipped on flip-flops and called Clint, pinning my phone to my shoulder with the side of my face. He picked up after a few rings with a rushed “Hello?”

“I'm going to the beach. Cool?” I asked, praying he okayed it.

“Yeah, cool,” he muttered distractedly, saying a firm, “No, not there!” to someone else. “Sorry,” he said, addressing me again. “Movers are helping me rearrange my apartment.”

“Lazy,” I said with a whistle.

“No, I was helping until this annoying kid called me,” Clint said sarcastically.

I smiled. “Bye, Clinton!” I hung up quickly before he could scold me, laughing out loud when there was a follow up text from him: *bye. AND DON'T CALL ME THAT I SWEAR JACKSON.—C*

I spent all day at the beach—literally. When it was around four o'clock, I decided to leave. Throughout the day, I'd signed quite a few autographs in between surfing and answered a few questions for fangirls here and there. Lots had taken pictures with me, and I'd been in such a good mood from being at the beach that I didn't even complain once.

I'd even started competing with a few other surfers on the beach—who were pretty good guys and decent surfers—but I won nearly every time. I just had a way with the water and all sports surrounding it. If I hadn't gotten famous, I'd probably be in the Olympics for swimming—or at least I'd like to think so.

Annabeth had tweeted me back sometime around noon, saying that she missed me too and that all I needed to do was turn up the thermostat in the *apartment*. Apparently, I wasn't allowed to call the apartment a house. I rolled my eyes at her logical reply, because honestly, what was I supposed to say to that? By the time I left the beach, I was thoroughly tanned and my cheeks hurt a bit from smiling. I loved the beach with all of my heart, and it'd been almost a month since I'd had the chance to go. Clint texted me, saying that I needed to reply to Annabeth, and I groaned aloud. As aforementioned, there

was no way to reply to that I didn't care at all, without being rude, I tweeted her saying ' @@Annabeth_Chase Enjoy the shirtless pictures of me, babe. x'

I tossed my phone into the seat next to mine, blaring the radio and driving back to the apartment. In what felt like no time at all, I was in the safe confines of our flat and I made a beeline for the shower. I still smelled like the beach, honestly, but I didn't really mind. I pulled on sweatpants and fell onto my desk chair, starting up my laptop and deciding that I'd surf the internet.

I Google-d my name unashamedly and read all of the articles that had rumors in them, sometimes frowning and sometimes snorting in laughter. I ran across a blog or two, but didn't stay on them for long because it creeped me out a little. Still, some of the things on the blogs were fairly neat. I finally logged into my Twitter, reading my mentions and retweeting a few, following one girl who was spamming me, and finally realizing that Annabeth had replied. '@@Percy_Jackson They're lovely, but I must say that your abs are much better in real life ;)'

I smiled and favorited it, deciding to simply retweet it instead of replying and then shutting the lid on my laptop.

Even if it was a lie for the fans and for public appearance, it still boosted my already monumental ego.

I went to the beach the next day as well, but only for two hours rather than the whole day. I had a hair appointment to dye my hair blonde again and I had to stop by the post office as well as the bank.

Everything was going totally fine, honestly. It was just like living before Annabeth, except all of my mentions usually pertained to her. My day was normal and I was relaxed, feeling absolutely no stress.

Then, I went to the post office. And I got the mail. And I had a letter with no return address. And like an idiot, I opened it. I knew this game. And I knew how it worked. But I still *opened that letter*.

Perce, I'm thinking Boss is onto you. He mentioned the fact that he wouldn't mind sending an assassin out with the subject of Percy Jackson. When Connor asked why, Boss gave him a sharp look and said that you were familiar. This probably doesn't make sense but I have very little time to write this before Boss questions me.

Stay safe,

Grover.

Panic hit my system hard and I dropped the letter. I knew it was Grover; I knew that handwriting. I also knew that I couldn't hide forever, but I'd thought that I had more time.

However, I knew for a fact that if Boss wanted me dead, even if it was mere suspicion that Percy Jackson was actually Soldier 817, he would have already pulled the trigger. Boss didn't mess around.

I'd always wondered why we'd all been named soldiers. In fact, we were anything but. We were the misfits, the thieves, the criminals that the outside world rejected. We'd never considered ourselves a gang, but after you were in, getting out was a painfully and highly frowned upon practice. In fact, if Boss didn't like the fact that you quit, he might just send someone to take care of you.

Back when I was in his 'Army,' I'd been one of the better guys. I was barely accepted in, due to the lameness of my crime, but thanks to a good word put in from both Connor and Grover, I'd found a

place where I'd felt accepted. You see, I used to steal things. I never got caught, ever, but that was simply because I never stole anything all that crucial. A candy bar here, a soda there. Truth is, I wasn't looking for being a bad guy. I was just bored.

Mom had been working three jobs to consume all of her time, and I'd hardly ever done my homework in school, so I had loads of free time. Grover and I had been best friends for years upon years, and once he found out that I stole things, he sat me down and told me about the 'Army.'

He'd told me that his family had been involved for generations, but that his boss was always looking for new recruits. I had to be three things: honest, respectful, and above all, a criminal. I had been searching for excitement at the time, after all, I was thirteen with nothing to lose.

Criminals in the 'Army' were of all ages from ten and up. It didn't matter your age; you fit in with all of those who simply *didn't*. Boss would sometimes send people on missions to prove their dedication or their worth. Mine was simply to steal a flat screen for the dining hall.

I would have felt terrible stealing someone else's, so instead I stole the one from my very own room. Boss had been impressed and I spun a lie about walking right into a sleeping older woman's house and carting it out with ease. He'd praised me for knowing that sometimes picking the easy subjects was the best thing.

I had proved my worth, and he seemed to think I was worth keeping.

I stayed in the 'Army' until I was fifteen and my mother told me that she was able to quit two of her three jobs because *surprise, we were moving in with her boyfriend*. And I'd been ecstatic, because I loved Paul, and he was a music producer who told me all the secrets and which artists were real and which ones were so auto-tuned it was sad.

I stopped coming to the weekly meetings with the 'Army' and I stopped visiting on a nightly basis like I used to. I'd hoped that they would assume I was dead, and I begged my mother to let me dye my hair blonde and get colored contacts because I 'wanted a new look' and she'd obliged. Changing my appearance would stop anyone from the 'Army' tracking me down and...eliminating me.

We moved in with Paul on the other side of L.A. I stopped thinking about the 'Army,' and I assumed that they forgot about me. We had never used each other's real names in the 'Army,' simply because we weren't supposed to be the old us. When you joined, you were supposedly born again. I'd changed my name to the word "Montauk" because it was my favorite place on earth. No one questioned it, and everyone called me by my new name.

That left only one person who truly knew my name: Grover.

He'd appeared at my house late one night, breathless as though he'd been running. He'd blinked at my change of appearance and only nodded, saying, "stay safe" before backing away from the door and jogging to his bike. He'd understood that I wanted out, and from what I understood, he told Boss that I died in a car accident.

I was done with the 'Army.'

Almost three weeks after Grover's visit, Paul heard me sing for the first time when I was carelessly walking down the hallway and into the kitchen. He'd dropped the newspaper he'd been reading and gaped at me before asking me why I wasn't famous.

The next few months were a blur. It was a mix of meeting with people, booking gigs at random coffee shops and finally catching the attention of many. When it came time for a record deal, I was fought over, but in the end, Interscope Records got me. I was in stardom at the young age of fifteen with a hit single on the radio and teenage girls fainting over me.

The years that followed were full of bliss. I was a teenage guy, and therefore, I wanted nothing more than female attention. And boy, did I get it. My concerts were all sold out, and as I grew up, my music did too. I'd worked with some of the most famous artists you could name, and I'd stayed famous for so much longer than I'd expected.

And now there was Annabeth, who hit me like a bitchy, sarcastic but actually decently great freight train.

The warning from Grover was nothing serious, or else he would have had the panic word written, loud and clear. Realizing that I'd been standing still and tense for a good ten minutes, I picked up the letter and stuffed it in a drawer in my bedroom before jogging back into the kitchen and ordering Chinese, despite the amount of leftovers in the refrigerator.

I wasn't exactly disheartened by leaving San Francisco.

I honestly just wanted to be back underneath the warm comforter of my sinfully comfortable bed. I wanted to stop having all of my friends' houses being crowded by paparazzi. And, I'm ashamed to say, I wanted to wake up to Percy's careless singing in the morning.

It'd become a bit of a routine, hearing that in the mornings, and I have to say that only hearing Thalia snore wasn't near as lovely.

Therefore, after a few goodbye hugs with my closest friends and walking swiftly past news reporters and stepping into the car, I was on my way home. Or, to our apartment, at least. I wasn't sure whether or not I could call it a home. Knowing that I was in for a decently long ride, I pulled out my iPod and listened to music, rolling my eyes at the fact that I *still* had some of Percy's old music on here. I snorted lightly, remembering how excited I used to get when his songs were on the radio. Now, it was hard to listen to the radio without hearing them.

I'd never been a super hardcore fan, knowing every tiny detail about him, but I looked up to him in a few ways. He was famous—at the young age of fifteen—and had music that was hard to hate. That'd always been my dream.

Sometime during the ride, I'd drifted off to sleep. I'd woken up to my shoulder being shaken by my driver and him saying, “Miss? Excuse me, miss? You've arrived, miss.”

Needless to say, it was irritating to wake up to.

“Please call me Annabeth,” I said, still sleepy and stretching. After I was sufficiently alert, I got out of the car and the driver popped the trunk for me. I gathered my bags and told him thank you as he nodded and stepped back into the car. Silently pulling my bags up the stairs without much trouble, I dug my key out of my pocket and unlocked the door, pushing my bags to the side and ultimately deciding that I would handle that later.

I locked the door behind me and placed my key on the table in the front room, making a beeline for the kitchen. I was parched. I quietly got a glass from the cabinet, noting that Percy hadn't made himself known yet, which probably meant he was still sleeping. I opened the fridge and rolled my eyes at the endless containers of Chinese and pizza boxes stacked up. Ignoring the leftovers that neither of us would eat, I pulled out the orange juice and poured myself a glass before replacing it in the fridge.

After my thirst was quenched, I walked down the hall, deciding that I should probably find out where Percy was, and wake him up if he was still sleeping.

As expected, he was sprawled across his bed, one ankle hanging off of the edge and drooling puddles. I snorted lightly, trying to withhold my laughter. Pulling out my cellphone and using the camera, I tweeted the picture along with the words *'Glad to be home! I sure did miss @Percy_Jackson and his drooling.'*

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I shook Percy's shoulder, attempting to wake him up. “No, Mom,” he muttered, pointing towards the door. “Leave me alone.” I chuckled, now slapping his cheek lightly. “Mom,” he groaned in annoyance. “Go.”

"You're drooling," I told him, deciding that he should probably know that I'm not 'Mom.'

"Annabeth? Ugh, no. Something even worse than Mom waking me up," he whined into his pillow.

"Great to see you, too," I said through a laugh, shaking my head. "Get up."

"Annabeth," Percy whined.

"Oh, and check your mentions," I said lightly, halfway out the door. He shot up in bed, eyes still closed for some reason, now entirely awake.

"*You didn't*," he said, squeezing his eyes shut even tighter. "Sure did, babe," I said, smirk on my face. "Good luck."

I shut the door again, hoping that he would use that privacy to put on a shirt. Heading across the hall and into my room, I sighed in relief at the familiar surroundings. I went to my closet, ready to pull out an old hoodie to get comfortable.

Huh. Funny. I don't remember buying a thousand dresses and getting a whole new wardrobe. I searched for a hoodie, feeling relieved when all of my old clothes were still there, just further back. Pulling the hoodie over my head, I yelled for Percy. "What, traitor?" he called back, sounding mildly irritated.

"What the hell is in my closet?" I questioned loudly.

His head peeked through the door and he stepped inside after seeing that I was fully clothed. "Oh. Sherry brought them. She kind of told your management that she was your new stylist, no matter what they said. She's great, really. But her obsession with the color peach is a bit irritating," Percy said, veering closer to my closet. "Ah, there it is," he told me, pulling a bit on a dress that was indeed peach.

"Oh, that's terrible," I said. "That will look atrocious on me."

"Yeah? Well, imagine the manly Percy Jackson wearing that. It looked atrocious on *me*," Percy said, huffing indignantly. "I look better in black and white."

"Blue and green, too," I said, nodding in agreement. He raised an eyebrow but shrugged.

"I look great in everything besides *peach*," Percy decided, scrunching up his nose. I scoffed at his arrogance, and closed the door to my closet. I turned and found myself caught into an unexpected hug. "Welcome home, by the way," Percy said softly, basically burrowing his face in my hair. I decided that there was no use pretending that I didn't want to hug him back, so I buried my face in his neck and sighed. I felt like there was some sort of unspoken 'I missed you' in the hug, but it was obvious that neither of us wanted to admit it.

We were both stubborn, independent people, and saying that you miss someone is so close to saying that you *need* them. And I definitely didn't need Percy. If anything, he was the absolute last thing on my list of things that I needed.

Our hug lasted way longer than usual, but I was content with breathing in a scent that was ocean-y and woodsy, and really just all around *Percy*. I thought that maybe I should say something to prevent the moment from being so heavy, but I decided that it was best not to interrupt the hug. It was probably going to be one of the few times we weren't at each other's throats anyhow.

However, just as that thought crossed my mind, Percy mumbled, "Hey, are you hungry?"

"No, but I assume you are?" He nodded sheepishly. I stepped out of his arms and headed out the door and towards the kitchen. "Why don't you eat some of the leftovers that are in the fridge?"

"Oh," Percy said, walking after me. "I wasn't really ever going to eat those. I just put them in the fridge because I didn't feel like taking out the trash." I gave him an incredulous look.

"Percy?"

"Hm?"

"Take out the trash and clean out the fridge," I ordered.

"Annabeth!" he whined. "You just got home! I want to spend time with you! I missed you!"

I laughed at the attempt. "I'm not even going to pretend that wasn't a lie. Now, go." I gestured towards the kitchen. He huffed once more, dragging his feet towards the kitchen.

"You hate me!" Percy yelled.

"Sure do," I muttered under my breath.

"I heard that, Chase!"

Nearly thirty minutes later, Percy had finally completed the task of cleaning the fridge. And, foolishly, he tried to sit down, but I immediately shot down the idea, advising him to take a shower.

"Alright, *Mom*," he muttered sarcastically, heading to follow orders anyways.

"You thought I was this morning. Actually, you called me 'Mommy,'" I said, stretching the truth, laughing and resting the book I'd been immersed in on my stomach. Much to my delight, Percy blushed a little before grumbling under his breath and going off to shower. I chuckled again, picking up my phone and calling Stan, deciding that he should know I'm at our apartment—safe and sound.

It went to voicemail instead, Stan's falsely professional voice asking me to leave my name, number, and a brief message and promising to get back to me as soon as possible. I rolled my eyes, leaving a message regardless and telling him that I was at the apartment and alive.

I picked back up where I left off on my book, jumping in shock when Percy placed himself on the couch, sitting on my stretched out legs. He sent me a smirk, pretending to get comfortable and falling on the floor dramatically when I punched his arm. "Man down," he said weakly. I rolled my eyes and kept reading my book. "Babe," Percy said, dragging out the term of endearment.

"Stop calling me that," I said, thoroughly irritated.

"We should go out."

"Stan or Clint haven't said to," I countered.

"But we still can! Like, ice cream or something. I don't want to be home," Percy complained. I sighed at his childish behavior. "Or we could buy a bunch of movies and food and have a movie night."

"Whatever you want, *Princess*. Your wish is my command," I said, mocking him.

He shot me a glare. "And we could tweet about it; fans would love it."

"We could," I said, half listening.

"Annabeth!" Percy shouted, snapping his fingers to get my attention.

"What?" I asked with a scowl.

And then he *pouted*.

With a sigh, I shut my book and placed it on the coffee table. "You are such an infant."

He grinned and winked. "Take care of me, *Mommy*."

"Oh, god, no. That's weird. Never again," I replied quickly, wincing.

Percy sighed and laughed. "Alas, I shall save it for the bedroom."

He didn't even flinch when I kicked his shoulder in protest. ("Who's the kid *now*, Chase?") So, without further ado, I stood and walked out the door, Percy following behind me, tossing the keys up and down.

About twenty minutes later, Percy and I were entering a Wal-Mart, both clad in hoodies—me in jeans, Percy in sweatpants. Percy was happily eating his ice cream, which he'd stopped for, despite my protests.

On our way to the DVDs, we were stopped three times for pictures and autographs. It didn't really bother me much; as I was still in awe that I had over ten fans, much less 1.5 million, according to Twitter. Percy immediately picked up *The Lion King*, claiming that it was his favorite and the copy he had was scratched. I decided on *National Treasure*, which made Percy roll his eyes. We picked out a few other movies that were classics, and started walking to the register.

He slipped his arm around my shoulder, and I reached my hand up, catching hold of his. He nodded in approval. "I bet this looks really cute," Percy whispered in my ear. A camera flashed and he smiled expectantly. "And now the whole world will see it. *Voilà*."

We paid for the movies, the cashier stuttering at the sight of Percy Jackson, sheepishly asking for an autograph as she handed over a receipt. Percy sent her a seemingly charming smile and flipped the receipt over, signing it out to Holly, a name he'd acquired from her name tag. "Nice meeting you, babe," he told her before we walked off. I laughed lightly when she blushed furiously.

"Oh, you ladies' man," I commented, swinging the grocery bag.

"Oh, Annabeth, you know I only have eyes for you," he said, winking at me.

"But of course," I replied, poshly. Percy smiled genuinely, retracting his arm from around my shoulder, a weight that I'd become so accustomed to over the weeks that I failed to notice he'd left it there.

My phone rang, and I got into the car before answering. "Hm?"

"Hey, baby, it's Stan. Listen, we're having a meeting, you, me, Percy and that Clint fellow tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock, at the normal place." I nodded before realizing he couldn't hear me and gave an

appropriate response. Percy stared at me curiously as he pulled out of the parking spot, but I purposefully ignored him—simply because I felt like it.

About halfway home, Percy cracked. “*God*, just *tell* me!” I’d burst into a fit of laughter, exclaiming that I knew he wouldn’t last long at all. He’d frowned at me, impatiently gesturing that I share the information.

“It’s nothing. We just have a meeting tomorrow with Clint and Stan,” I told him. He nodded. “At nine.”

“What?” Percy said sharply. “In the morning?”

“No, at night,” I said sarcastically. “Yes at nine in the morning.” Percy groaned in annoyance, complaining about how tired he was going to be nearly the whole way to the apartment. He only shut up once we were out of the car and standing on the doorstep as I unlocked the door.

“We’re watching Lion King first,” Percy proclaimed.

“Make brownies?” I asked. He sighed dramatically before nodding.

“Anything for you, Princess.” I scowled at his retreating back, heading up to my room to put on pajama pants. As I reentered the kitchen, I smiled at the sight of Percy in his black apron, singing at the top of his lungs. I took a sneaky picture of him, deciding I’d use it for blackmail later. As I walked by him to get to the fridge, I pulled his hair, making him shout “hey!” indignantly. He reached out to pull my hair as well, but I was too quick. He scowled deeply at me, rolling his eyes. “You are a terrible person.”

“I know,” I replied easily, making my way into the living room and deciding to read for a few more minutes before Percy bounced in here and demanded that we watch Lion King.

Quite a few hours later, we’d eaten enough junk food to make me never want it again and we’d seen every movie in the large stack we’d bought. Percy had tweeted a picture of our feet kicked up on the coffee table, The Lion King playing in the background of the picture. His comment had been ‘*Movie night with @Annabeth_Chase !*’

We’d laughed at the quite creative replies, some quoting The Lion King, some exclaiming about the Percabeth phenomenon.

As of right now, Percy was sprawled out on the floor due to me kicking him off the couch, and he was mumbling about how he was never moving again. I didn’t feel like hearing him complain about how sore his back was *in addition* to how tired he was in the morning, so I pulled him up. “Carry me, Annabeth!” he said, laughing. I rolled my eyes as he insisted on throwing his arm over my shoulder and forced me to support the majority of his weight.

He wasn’t all that heavy of course, but it just reminded me how childish Percy was, contrary to public belief. He was needy, whiny and hated being told ‘no.’ I helped him to his bed, dropping him there and setting off for the door. His arm caught my wrist. “Tuck me in.”

“Dear god,” I muttered, rubbing my face. “Percy, don’t.”

"What, be this adorable?" he said, giving me a goofy smile. And yes, it really would help if he *wasn't* that adorable, because then I would have been able to leave peacefully and fall into my own bed.

"You are a needy, needy child," I commented, pulling the sheets up to his chin. He nodded in approval of my tucking-in skills. I sighed. "Night, Percy," I said with a yawn, heading to leave once more.

This time though, he asked for something much more... controversial.

"I don't get a kiss goodnight?" I stopped in my tracks, turning around to face him sharply.

"No."

"Not even on the cheek?"

"Why are you so clingy when you're tired?" I questioned, attempting to change the topic. "You hardly even like me."

"No," he said, his eyes closed as he shook his head. "You're my friend."

"I am?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"If you wanna be," he said sleepily. "I'd love it if you did."

"Why?" I said, inching closer to him, hoping that he'd keep giving me information that he wouldn't say if he were fully conscious.

"Because. You're awesome and you're nice and pretty and cool," he replied. I laughed at how tired he was. He surely meant to say 'pretty cool' rather than 'pretty and cool.' His tired mind was messing up his words.

Deciding that it couldn't hurt, I kissed his cheek softly. "Yay," he muttered, and then I was almost positive he was dead to the world. I left the room quietly, heading to my room just across the hall and falling into bed myself, only lingering on what'd happened in the past few minutes for a moment or two before drifting off.

When I woke up the next morning, I smiled a bit at the fact that I could hear Percy singing from the kitchen. I showered and decided on a plain black, decently loose, v-neck. I pulled on a pair of dark-wash skinny jeans and hurried into the kitchen after checking the time. "Perce," I said, already pouring my coffee.

"Yeah, babe?" he said brightly, smiling. I raised an eyebrow but shrugged at his much-too-happiness.

"We have to leave in five."

"Eat quick," he replied, dancing as he placing two plates on the table and sitting down in one of his. I nodded, sitting and eating almost as fast as Percy. He'd praised me afterwards, making me shake my head in disbelief.

"Come on, we gotta go," I told him, yanking him up from his chair by his upper arm. I picked up both of our plates and placed them in the sink, downing the rest of my coffee. I walked swiftly into the front

room, pulling on my Converse before kicking them off after realizing they were Percy's. "We have the same shoes," I said as I pulled on the Converse that were actually mine.

"Mine are just thirty times bigger," he replied with a nod.

"Yeah, you do have huge feet," I said thoughtfully.

"Well, you know what they say about huge feet," Percy said teasingly.

"What?" I asked, with much caution.

"Big socks," he replied, laughing to himself and winking at me before jogging out the door and into the Land Rover. I sighed in exasperation, chuckling despite myself and picking up my apartment key and Percy's wallet that he'd carelessly left behind.

When we arrived at the normal building we met at—called the Washington Place—it was five minutes until nine. I was relieved that we'd been on time. I had a bit of a thing for being punctual. However, Percy was the sort of guy who was late to his own funeral.

He was humming happily as we entered the elevator, and now that I thought about it, Percy'd been happy *all* morning. "Why are you so ecstatic?" I asked. "I thought you were going to be *so tired*."

Percy just shrugged. "I slept great. I feel very rested and happy. I woke up to the birds singing," he said wistfully. I rolled my eyes and muttered something about Snow White, much to Percy's annoyance. He pushed me, but smiled after.

"You are too happy," I commented, shaking my head.

"You're too unhappy," he argued childishly, sticking out his tongue.

"You are a child," I said, for probably the billionth time in the past day or two.

"I'd rather be a child than an old woman stuck in a teenager's body," he mumbled, resulting in me punching his shoulder, and him not even flinching after the blow. "What's this meeting about?" he asked, hurriedly throwing an arm over my shoulder as a gaggle of teenage girls turned the corner, presumably touring the building or going to visit their rich daddies somewhere in one of the offices. They giggled when Percy smiled at them and said, "Hey, ladies."

After they were out of sight, he awkwardly removed his hand and shoved it in his pocket. "To answer your question, I don't know." He nodded, walking with me to the very end of the hall, where the conference room in which Stan and I typically met was.

I pushed open the door and there was applause to greet me. I jumped a little and Percy laughed at me, patting my shoulder and sitting in one of the two open seats. Around the table was actually several more people than *just* Clint and Stan. Instead, there were two girls who were staring me up and down—not critically, just observing—and another guy who didn't look all that... straight.

"Right," Stan said, taking the reins. "First of all, that's Sherry," he said, pointing to the older of the two girls. "She's both of your stylist, for now. The girl next to her is Jennifer, and she's your publicist. He," Stan said, now pointing to the guy who was examining his nails and looked up uninterestedly, "is your hair stylist."

"I'm Jay," he said, finally glancing up. His eyes were blue, and his hair was black and carefully styled. I assumed that he was in his mid-twenties. "And I'm fabulous, don't you *dare* say otherwise." I laughed, immediately thinking that Jay would be a cool guy. Percy smiled when I laughed, nodding at Jay.

"Oh, Percy, babe, we need to dye that hair," Jay said, scrunching up his nose. "Remind me later."

Percy nodded dutifully, setting his sights on Stan and Clint. "So..." he said, trailing off. "Why the applause?"

"Because you and Annabeth have convinced the whole nation that you are best friends who are secretly in love," Clint answered, pushing his light brown hair out of his dark brown eyes. "Good job, by the way." He sent Percy a look, one I didn't understand, but I briefly noted that Percy tensed for a moment.

"Exactly!" Stan said. "And that's all lovely and such, but I think we need to move on a bit with this. A few people have started to think that maybe you two just are best friends, since there hasn't been all that much of *interaction*."

"We've been hugging, arms around waist and all that," Percy argued. "There's been interaction."

"Well, not enough apparently," Clint cut in, not unkindly. "So, we think that you guys should do an interview together. It'd be fairly customary, of course, how you guys met, what you like the most about each other, you'll both be able to wing it if you know your folders well."

I nodded in time with Percy, both of us sharing a glance before Stan began brainstorming where and with whom the interview should be with.

An hour later, we had formulated a solid plan. Our publicist, Jennifer, had scheduled us in with Kat Danley, a sweet but sarcastic, younger talk-show host. Our interview was the next day, and Jennifer claimed that Kat was raving about having a 'Percabeth interview.'

After the meeting was over, Jay immediately snatched Percy up and dragged him out the door so he could pile him into a car and 'dye the monstrosity that was his roots.' Percy tossed me the keys and I caught them with my admittedly good reflexes. He gave me a look that clearly said, 'good job' and I grinned back before he was pulled into the elevator, Jay still muttering about how terrible his hair looked.

I caught the next elevator down and walked hurriedly to the Land Rover, seeing as it looked like rain. However, I wasn't lucky enough to miss all of it, and just before I approached the Land Rover, rain came down in sheets. I sighed at the fact that I was now soaked, despite all of my effort, and jumped into the vehicle, hoping that Percy would forgive me for getting rainwater all over his seats. "I want tea," I announced to myself and the car, I suppose, since we were the only ones around. I backed out of the parking spot, making sure that the windshield wipers were on full power before driving to the Starbucks closest to the apartment.

And lucky me, Harry was working today. He waved eagerly at me as I entered. I internally groaned and outwardly smiled. "Hey there," he said, leaning over the counter. "Same as usual?"

"And what's my usual?"

"Chai tea latte, nonfat milk, no water," he said instantly. Then he winced and looked a bit sheepish. "That's creepy, isn't it?"

"Only a tad," I said with a laugh. "But yes, that's what I would like." He nodded, and entered it in on the register, handing me my change and a receipt after I paid. He had another person working with him today, so he wasn't the one making my drink, which sadly made me feel obligated to keep talking to him.

"So..." he said, smoothing his hair down. "Where's Peter?" Harry glanced behind me, as though he expected him to magically appear.

"What is it with you two? You never remember each other's names," I said shaking my head. "His name is Percy," I corrected.

Harry only shrugged nonchalantly. "It's a guy thing. We're bad with names, I guess."

"Or jealous assholes," I mumbled underneath my breath, fidgeting with the miscellaneous CD's in the small kiosk.

"Hm?" Harry asked, leaning forward as if to hear me better.

"Nothing," I said brightly, with a fake grin. He smiled. "Anyways, he had a hair appointment."

"Is he a diva?" Harry asked with a snort. I rolled my eyes.

"No, he isn't," I told him stonily. I drummed my hands lightly on the counter, ready for my tea so that I could leave.

Harry nodded, still looking mildly amused. He hesitated for a moment before saying, "Are you guys like... A thing?"

I paused, deciding that it'd look better if I did. We were still supposed to be planting the idea of *us* in people's heads. "Well, not really."

"Not really?" Harry questioned with a raised eyebrow.

"Like, we aren't together," I told him honestly.

"But you do things," Harry said, sounding like he knew it for a fact. He nodded to himself in a *'I knew all along'* way.

"No, we don't actually," I said sharply. "Is my tea ready? Or can you make it be ready?" I asked in an exasperated tone.

"Sure thing, babe," he said, turning around just as the barista handed it over. "You have good timing."

And that's what made me decide that I really, *really* hated the 'babe' endearment. It was irritating from Percy, but I was accustomed to that. When Harry said it, I felt angry. I sent him a tight smile, hoping I wasn't glaring too harshly, and I left the coffee shop without so much as a goodbye, despite the one he called after me.

When Percy got home, he looked really mad and really blonde. "Your hair looks good," I complimented. He dropped his keys on the table in the front room, tossing his wallet there as well.

He rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks."

"What happened to your happy mood?" I questioned, frowning. He sent me a dry look, as if to say, *'like you don't know.'* I shrugged innocently. Percy started walking toward me, pulling out his phone and typing then tapping for a few minutes before shoving it in my face.

It was what looked like a journal posting basically giving a play by play of Harry and I's conversation. I scrolled up to see what we were on, and noticed that it was a girl's blog who'd apparently been in the coffee shop, recording the whole thing. There was a video, and the play by play was an analysis. "He's a jerk," Percy said, dropping himself on the couch. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, cracking his knuckles. "First, he can't even remember my name, right? Then he pretty much blatantly asks you if you're single—"

"No," I corrected. "He asked me if we were a thing." I gestured between myself and Percy. "That's not asking if I'm single, not really."

"And now you're defending him." He glared at me and ran his hands through his hair. "Anyways, he is a jerk and none of that stuff was any of his business," Percy said, taking his phone back, locking it and storing it in his pocket.

"It may not be, but I don't see why you're so mad! I was the one being interrogated and basically harassed," I argued defensively. Percy turned to me, opening his mouth as though he was about to give a long speech, but shut it a few seconds later and sighed.

"He didn't remember my name on purpose," Percy grumbled, crossly.

I scoffed. "And that's the whole reason you're mad?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He paused before saying a very indignant, "yes!" I rolled my eyes in disbelief. That was a totally stupid reason to be pissed off. Without another word, I walked into the kitchen, and Percy had the audacity to follow me. "And he called you 'babe,' when he knows that..." Percy trailed off as I drank water.

"What? What does he know, Percy?" He didn't answer and I smirked. "Exactly! I denied the fact that we were a thing, so he wouldn't know that we were 'together' or whatever."

"But he knows that I'm like...with you!" Percy vaguely explained, gesturing wildly with his hands.

"What do you mean?" I said, calming my voice and leveling our gazes.

"It's like... a guy thing. We're territorial. You may say we aren't together, but he should just *know*," Percy said, shaking his head. "It's hard to explain."

"Well, try," I urged. I gave him a meaningful look, telling him that I wanted to understand.

Percy sighed. "It's like, I know we aren't really together or whatever, but when we're in public, we're supposed to look like it, right? Well, the first time we met him, I gave him *the look*." He leaned back against the counter, looking at the cabinet across from him.

"What look?" I questioned, feeling myself reach the end of my rope once more.

"Like, the look that said I had dibs or something," Percy admitted, running his hands over his face. "I mean, I know I don't really have dibs, but I still do. Even if it's fake dibs."

"This makes no sense," I concluded, leaving the room and shaking my head.

"It's a guy thing, I'm telling you!" Percy shouted after me. I groaned underneath my breath and headed straight for the bathroom, beyond ready for a stress relieving shower.

After I was out of the shower, I headed straight for my room, deciding that I'd had my fair dose of Percy for the day. I scrolled through Twitter, scowling at all of the tweets teasing me about how defensive I was and retweeting one who was smart enough to share my opinion on the fact that I'd been upset because it was none of Harry's business.

I was in the middle of reading a sarcastic article about how 'sassy and defensive' I was, laughing a bit when my door creaked open. I sighed, knowing it had to be Percy.

"Annabeth?" Percy's voice said, filling the silence and confirming my thoughts.

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry." My head snapped up at that and I gave him a curious look.

"Why the apology?" I questioned.

"I was an a jerk earlier. Even more of a jerk than *him*." I rolled my eyes and nodded in agreement.

"Well, you didn't have to agree," Percy said, pouting and inviting himself to take a seat on my bed.

"But if I disagreed, I'd be lying," I muttered. I glanced at his expression, only to find myself bewildered because Percy was full on grinning. "What?"

"Nothing," he said lightly, small smile still on his face. "You're just...Different."

"Because I'm not falling at your feet and praising you?"

Percy hesitated, picking at a loose thread on a pillow. "Well, yeah," he decided, shrugging a shoulder. I shook my head at his response or lack thereof, scrolling through my news feed again. "But I think that's why I respect you—*like* you—as much as I do."

"You like me?" I asked, raising a blonde eyebrow.

Much to my amusement, Percy blushed and coughed awkwardly. "No, not *like you*, like you," he clarified. "I meant as friends."

"And you're blushing why?" I asked teasingly.

"*Annabeth*," he groaned irritated, frowning at me. "If you don't mind, I am trying to have a heart-to-heart with you—"

"Wouldn't you like that?" I asked, laughing. He glared at me for a second and I smiled innocently back. He rolled his brown eyes, the ones that were blue and green as well, the ones that were easy to get lost in. I smiled at his disgruntled expression and ruffled his hair. "You'll be okay. I'll try not to tease you too much about your undying love for me."

“Annabeth!” he said, peeved, fixing his messed up hair. I pinched his cheek and laughed when he pushed my hand away. “I take it back. I don't like you,” he said, his words contradicting the fond tone of voice he was using.

And all I did was smile, because it was all too obvious that it wasn't true.

When I woke up, from a dream that left me feeling happy, despite the lack of details, I wasn't in the right room. The blinding sun was shining through the windows, and that *never* happened in my room. I had a wonderful invention called curtains.

I took into account the fact that the blanket over me was too silky and the pillow underneath my head wasn't fluffy enough. Not to mention the fact that there was a terribly insistent flicking on my forehead.

I groaned and rolled over muttering a “go away.” I heard an exasperated sigh, felt a sharp pain in my ribs, then all over my body, and opened my eyes to see cream colored carpet. I let my face fall to the ground, appreciating for the first time how incredibly soft the carpet was in my apartment.

“Morning sunshine,” Annabeth said happily, standing over me. I looked up at her eyes, seeing mirth in them.

And it'd never really crossed my mind before that moment, but Annabeth had gorgeous eyes. The cool gray color nearly sent a chill down my spine. I'd never seen eyes as unnerving as Annabeth's. Rather than looking at me, I felt like she was looking *through* me, eyes peering deep into my soul and scraping out every minute secret I had.

Wow, I was mighty philosophical when I woke up.

She raised a perfect blonde eyebrow at my staring, and I stuttered through my sleep-hazed mind for something to say. “Why am I in your room?” I decided, getting up slowly and cracking my back, and already knowing the answer to my question.

“Because we fell asleep talking. Now, get in the shower. We have an interview in thirty,” she said professionally, nodding at me. I glanced down at her attire, noting that she was already dressed and appeared ready to go. I spited her for being a morning person.

“You give me such short notice,” I groaned, trudging to the shower and letting myself wake up through scalding hot water and singing loudly just to annoy Annabeth (and he would never know, but Annabeth secretly enjoyed the way he sang at the top of his lungs without a care).

Fifteen minutes later, I was out of the shower, my hair was blow dried thanks to Annabeth's lovely hair dryer and I was heading into my room to put some clothing on. I'd just opened the doors to my closet when Annabeth's voice carried up the stairs, lacking patience.

“Hurry up, Percy!”

“I am, babe!” I called back, throwing on literally the first shirt I touched and whatever pair of jeans were lying closest to me on the floor. I shook my hair out and ran my fingers through it, pulling on socks with one hand, and opening my bedroom door with the other.

Annabeth was cooking breakfast, and it was truly a change of pace, seeing as *I* was typically the cook. I sat at the table, just in time as she set down my already made coffee. I took a cautious sip, humming in approval when it was exactly the way I liked it. It seemed to me that Annabeth simply refused to do anything imperfectly.

"I was starving and you were too busy putting your heart and soul into that Alicia Keys song in the shower," Annabeth said as a way of explaining why she was cooking. I laughed and ruffled her hair, getting a downright deadly glare. I sent her a wink for good measure, but that only caused her to raise an eyebrow.

"Just for that, you aren't getting any more than two pieces of bacon."

As it turns out, I did get more than two pieces. Percy Jackson's puppy dog eyes worked wonders. As for right now, I was being dragged into the building where Kat Danley's show was filmed, stumbling over my two awkward feet as Annabeth complained about how late we were. I rolled my eyes and continued to console her that they would wait on us anyways, since we were the party, but to no avail, we entered the set rushed, me nearly falling over and Annabeth glaring at me.

A woman walked over on heels so tall they could be considered stilts, or deadly, gruesome weapons. "Hello," she greeted. "I coordinate this show. Right now, you both are in make-up, right over there," the coordinator said, pointing in a general direction. "Hurry up. We're live in twenty." Her voice was curt and dismissive, so I decided to leave her presence.

I went to make-up without complaint, but I saw Annabeth sigh and frown. I heard her giving her make-up artist instructions ("I'd prefer if I could stay natural—no, get the eyeliner away from my face, *now!*") and snorted in amusement.

About ten minutes later, I was good to go and simply hovering near Annabeth and watching with much amusement as she fended off lip gloss. The make-up artist continued to push closer to Annabeth's face, and Annabeth persistently slapped her hands away. I smiled at her adamant nature, a smile that was admittedly a bit fond.

A woman with naturally red, curly, big hair walked up to me and held out a hand. "Kat Danley," she introduced herself brightly.

I smiled and shook her hand. "Lovely to meet you. I'm Percy."

"Obviously," Kat said with a dry look. She glanced over at the commotion Annabeth was making.

"I'm Annabeth. And I really would appreciate it if you could tell this lady I am done with make-up," Annabeth said, pushing away a hand that had a mascara tube in it. Annabeth gave the lady a deadly glare, one that was often directed towards me, as she tried once more to apply make-up on Annabeth's face.

"Jamie," Kat said, laughing at Annabeth lightly. "I think that's quite good enough."

The stylist, Jamie, nodded and walked away. Annabeth stood just as I pushed myself onto the counter, and after a moment of consideration, I pulled her wrist so she was standing in front of me. I thought for merely a second before I wrapped my arms around her waist and rested my head on her shoulder. She pinched my knee warningly and I chuckled in her ear, humming carelessly and smugly.

"That is too cute!" Kat exclaimed. "Mind if I capture this Kodak moment and tweet it to the world?" she asked, already taking out her phone.

"Not at all," I said happily. She prepared her phone to take the picture and I daringly leaned in, kissing Annabeth's cheek just as the picture was taken. Annabeth slapped my leg and rolled her eyes. I smiled, laying my head on her shoulder again.

"Well, that's freaking adorable," Kat said, typing away. Annabeth shot me a glare and I shrugged indifferently. We're supposed to be best friends, and they do that, right? Regardless, Management would love it. After all, they said they were looking for more interaction.

"Live in five," a lady said leaning her head in the door, pausing my internal reasoning. Kat nodded at her and waved her away, an action that was dramatically queen-like.

"Shall we?" Kat said. It seemed that she had a permanent mischievous smirk on her face, almost like Annabeth's permanent scowl. I pushed Annabeth forward and hopped off the counter, steadying her before she fell.

"What would you do without me?" I mused as we followed Kat to the set.

"I can't even bear the very thought," Annabeth said sarcastically. I smiled and tugged on one of her curls before jogging up ahead to escape the punch that no doubt would have been sent my way.

The coordinator directed us as to where we would stand, what our cue was to walk in, and where we were sitting. It was fairly easy, and I zoned out hoping that Annabeth was listening instead. As long as Annabeth knew what was going on, she could always lead the way.

Before I knew it, I heard a countdown and Kat's voice booming through the whole building. I looked on the screen that was visible from backstage, something that the make-up artists and stylists were watching and conversing about.

"Afternoon, I'm not Kat Danley and this isn't another boring talk show." Her live audience laughed at the sarcasm, but Kat kept her expression blank. "Today, we will be visiting a very serious and urgent topic: the Percabeth Phenomenon." The crowd 'woop'ed and cheered, making me smile as I heard higher screams, showing that a few of my girls were here. "Please welcome the ones causing the latest phenom, Percy J and Annabeth Chase!"

And upbeat tune played, and I vaguely recognized that it was one of Annabeth's songs. I smiled at her, nudging her shoulder gently. She returned the grin, and I could tell it was genuine.

Not that I'd admit it later, but I allowed myself to acknowledge the fact that Annabeth really had a beautiful smile. By no means was it perfect, in fact, I'm sure she had a few not-so-straight teeth, but none of that mattered. I could see the happy glow around her face, and that was enough to make the smile beautiful. It was a real smile.

I shook my head at my own thoughts, now forcing Clint's words into my head rather than pushing them away. *It stays fake, it stays fake, it stays fake, it stays—*

"I understand that you two are best friends who share an unrequited love for each other?" Kat said, right off the bat. The audience laughed, a loner screaming out an "I love you, Percy!"

Regaining my cool, I slouched into my seat and smiled. "Love you, too, babe," I called back to the crowd, winking. They laughed and I turned back to Kat. "We are best friends."

"No unrequited love?" Kat asked, eyebrows furrowed in mock concern.

I hesitated, playing the part, before confidently stating, “No.”

“Ditto,” Annabeth said, tugging on my hair. I closed my eyes, relishing it. My hair was sort of my weakness. “I tell this loser I love him all the time.”

The crowd 'aww'ed and I gave Annabeth a smile before looking back to Kat once more. She'd dropped the serious persona, instead leaning back in her seat and kicking her feet onto the desk in a lackadaisical manner. “So, how'd you lovebirds-in-denial meet?” she asked.

“Well, we said that we were best friends in high school, but we never really clarified that fact that we didn't go to the same high school,” I began. I gestured with my hands, smiling, but not widely. I was hoping it just looked happy, despite my inner turmoil earlier.

“We actually met at a beach,” Annabeth said, picking up the story. The audience as well as Kat was listening attentively. “The beach is Percy's favorite place in the world,” Annabeth said, glancing at me with a small smile. Even if I could compliment her on nothing else, her acting skills were amazing, and no one could deny that. “Anyways, I was at the beach, reading a book—”

“And I introduced myself because... Well, most girls go to the beach to show off their bodies, but Annabeth wasn't there for that. She was different, and obviously pretty, so I introduced myself,” I said, praying that I was being a decent liar.

“He's trying to make it sound like he was all confident and sexy as he talked to me, but keep in mind that all these muscles weren't there just yet, and he was blushing and stuttered a few times,” Annabeth said, laughing along with the audience.

“I was not!” I said defensively, trying hard not to smile.

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “I think it took him an hour and a half to recite his number to me.”

“I'll have you know that you are a highly intimidating lady,” I said indignantly. Annabeth smiled and shoved my shoulder.

“That's cute,” Kat said. “The story and the flirting bit,” she said, winking at the crowd. “What made you guys keep in touch?”

“Well, it started off with simple 'how are you's, but then it turned into novel length texts, and we just sort of... Clicked,” I supplied with a shrug. I ran my hands through my hair, hoping that my expression was something close to bashfulness.

Annabeth nodded in agreement. “After a few months, we were best friends. This kid knows all my secrets.” The crowd 'aww'ed once more. I tried not to think about the fact that I knew virtually nothing about Annabeth, much less any of her secrets.

“Then I got famous,” I said, sighing. “Lost contact with her, got caught up in, well, *being famous*. Never thought I'd see her again, really,” I said softly turning my gaze on Annabeth. She smiled softly and I squeezed her knee. She sent me a small warning look, one that would go unnoticed by others, but I saw it in her eyes. I simply laughed in response.

“Tragic, that is,” Kat said, almost sadly. “Some think that you two moving in together was a rash decision. Thoughts?”

I put my arm around Annabeth's shoulder and she leaned into me with practiced ease. "Well, we were a bit excited. Not seeing someone for years, then suddenly getting a phone call saying that the girl you've been moping about losing is about to be famous...I couldn't have been happier," I said with a shrug.

"Moping?" Annabeth asked with a smirk, looking up at me. I smiled, almost shyly, shaking my head and looking at Kat.

"Not necessarily *moping*," I corrected. "Maybe just a tad regretful that I didn't memorize your number." Kat smiled along with Annabeth.

"So, let me get this straight," Kat said, smacking her gum. "You two aren't desperately in love but you keep staring at each other like there's no one else in the room?" Kat asked blatantly.

I laughed and shook my head, praying that I was blushing or something. *Were we really staring that much?* "We aren't in love with each other...As far as I know." Kat nodded and deemed the response acceptable, launching into other set of questions on both of our albums and if there was any chance of collaboration.

After the interview was over and we took a few pictures with the crew, signing things and accepting the refreshments they gave us, Annabeth and I headed out the door. I tossed my coffee that they'd given me, deciding that I would no longer drink anything but the coffee Annabeth made me and Starbucks.

She dropped hers into the trashcan as well, standing behind me and digging her hands in my front pocket in search of the keys. I jumped and scowled at her as she laughed and walked away towards the Land Rover. I smiled something fond after her.

Little did I know, there was a group of girls filming the whole interaction, only adding to the Twitter trend '#PercabethOverload.' And that would have marked the first *true* Percabeth interaction, since it wasn't a play-up for the cameras. It was just... us. Being friendly, or something like that.

I was humming as I scrolled through what everyone was saying on the trend, laughing at the incoherent typing and people stating that 'they simply could not.'

I shoved my phone into my pocket and got into the passenger side of the Land Rover, seeing that Annabeth was in the drivers' seat and on the phone. "...Right, yeah! Cool. Yeah, we can do that. We just got in the car. No, I'm driving. Because I wanted to. Okay. Okay. No. Shut up. Bye."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who was that?"

"My friend Thalia. She wants to meet you, and she's in town. Actually, she's meeting us at our Starbucks," Annabeth said, reversing and afterwards maneuvering her way out of the parking lot. I took quiet pride in the fact that she'd thoughtlessly called it 'our Starbucks.' Despite the fact that we go there often, there's never more than a few fans. It's horribly out of the way and in a terrible location. Plus, the customer service is shoddy unless you ordered a fresh cup of a cocky, insolent, flirtatious jerk.

So, if you asked me to be honest, I would say that Harry got on my nerves. I knew his name, but I pretended I didn't because he was so disrespectful it was sickening. I didn't like the way he looked at Annabeth. It was almost... predatory. It was like no one else seemed to notice besides me, and I didn't know if it was because I'm the only one looking after her or what. Something in my head told me that I only saw it because I was looking for reasons to hate him, and maybe I was. Looking at your fake best

friend like she was a piece of meat was a good reason. I was protective over Annabeth the way an older brother was, or perhaps a father.

Even if Annabeth could be a massive, bossy, downright *rude* person, that didn't mean that I was going to let guys undress her with their eyes. Regardless of how terrible she could be, she was a decent, respectable person. She had her moments.

“Percy, hurry the *hell* up!”

And now was obviously not one of them.

We ordered our coffee and tea, and I was overly ecstatic to see that our best friend Harry wasn't working today. Annabeth laughed several times at my pure bliss, and I was just glad that she was happy and not being stared down in the process.

A girl with pitch black hair walked in several seconds later, and I was surprised at the speed Annabeth ran and launched herself at who I assumed was Thalia. They carried on a conversation for a few seconds, and I carried Annabeth's tea and my coffee to a table when our order was called. She stood in line with Thalia as she ordered, nearly bouncing up and down as she walked with her over to the table.

It was odd, seeing Annabeth excited like a young child. I was so used to seeing her be overly mature and wise, it was a massive change. “This is Thalia,” Annabeth said as they sat down, confirming my thoughts.

“Hi,” I said, waving at her. She glanced me up and down, almost scrutinizing, as if she were looking for something to approve of.

After a moment, she smiled back and waved. “Hey. You're taking care of my Annie, right?”

I laughed, raising an eyebrow at Annabeth. *Annie? I'd have to use that.* “Of course I am.”

“Good.”

A pause.

Then they launched into a conversation about someone named Piper and some movie that Thalia went to see and a bunch of other things that I didn't feel qualified to intrude on.

Instead, I took to scrolling aimlessly on Twitter, actually looking at some of the artwork or pictures people tweeted me, ones that I usually didn't have time to look at. I retweeted some of them, got annoyed with a few, but the majority of them left my mildly amused at the purposefully horrible photoshopped pictures of Annabeth and me.

Eventually, I came across a single tweet, one that I would have loved to see, if Annabeth and I were actually best friends in love.

'Jennifer_PercyJ Look,even if @Percy_Jackson and @Annabeth_Chase ARE in love,and Im not saying they are or are not,we should let them find out for themselves! #butithinktheyare'

And taking a giant, outrageous leap, I retweeted it.

It was merely ten minutes later that I got the expected call from Clint, and I walked away from Annabeth and Thalia, who were still deep in conversation. Taking the call outside, since I had no clue if he'd be yelling or cheering, I slumped into a seat and pressed 'answer.'

"Hello?" I said confidently. After all, the only thing they could do was make me delete it—and that would be pointless, since the whole world had surely seen it by then.

"Percy," Clint said, warningly. "This is the second thing you've done 'spur of the moment.'"

I sighed. "Yeah, I know."

"How come you're the one playing up the whole 'love' thing more than 'best friends'?" Clint asked. It wasn't a rude interrogation, just pure curiosity.

"I was reading through tweets, and I saw that one. It was different from the other ones. And, like, if we actually were, you know, in love, that would be what I would want to hear," I said honestly. There was no point in lying to him.

"You remember what I said, right?" Clint questioned, almost hesitantly.

I rolled my eyes, despite the fact that he couldn't see me. "Yeah, I remember."

"You know *why* I said that, right?"

"Enlighten me."

"Perce, no, I'm being serious. I didn't tell you that to be a jerk, I said it because I'm looking out for you. I just don't want you to end up liking her more than she likes you," Clint told me, cautiously.

"What do you mean?" I asked, now more confused than anything.

"I can't tell you myself, but me and Stan had a conversation about Annabeth. She's probably going to have trust issues, and... I'm your best friend. I just don't want you getting in too deep."

And I'd known all along that Clint was doing it to look out for me, I did. And I see his reasoning crystal clear. It was nice, it was, but I was a guy. After a broken heart, we move on like nothing's wrong. So, in the very, very, *very* unlikely event that I fall madly in love with Annabeth Chase of all people, and she doesn't love me back, I'll just move on. It wouldn't be hard.

"Thanks, man," I said easily, honestly thankful that I actually had people who cared for me. I glanced inside the window, just to make sure Annabeth was okay, only to see her looking at me curiously. "Hey, Clinty-boy, I gotta go. Annabeth is looking at me weird."

"My name is *Clint*. C-L-I-N-T! Not *Clinton*, not *Clinty-boy*—"

"Bye, *Clinton*!" I said, laughing and hanging up. He was too easy to make fun of. I made my way back inside the coffee shop, frowning at the fact that my phone was fairly close to dying.

Just as I sat down once more, Annabeth and Thalia stood and hugged each other again. Then, before my admittedly slow brain could process anything, Thalia was waving and walking out the door. "Oh," I said, accidentally aloud. Annabeth snorted and looked at me odd, finishing off her tea.

"Come on, let's go," Annabeth said, retrieving the keys from where she'd left them on the table.

"Can I drive *my* Land Rover, please?" I asked, throwing our trash away.

"Sure," Annabeth said, tossing me the keys, and my wonderfully fast reflexes catching them with ease. She nodded appraisingly at my catch, walking out the door before I had a chance to try to hold it open for her.

It was much later that night when there was a knock on my door. I knew it could only be Annabeth, and I wasn't surprised when she walked in directly after she knocked. However, I was surprised to see her carrying her laptop.

"Hi," I said, sitting up a bit from where I was slouching and making sure I knew all the lyrics to the new songs I'd been recording.

"Hi," she replied, handing me the laptop. "What's that?"

Oh. Right. I'd forgotten that I wouldn't just have to answer to Clint, but there was also the Annabeth issue. "It's something I retweeted," I said smartly, smiling at her winningly.

Annabeth rolled her eyes and shoved my shoulder. "Seriously," she said, taking it upon herself to sit on the edge of the bed. I scrolled mindlessly through her Twitter, checking to make sure that she wasn't getting any hate.

After I was satiated, I looked to her. "I retweeted it because I thought it was nice."

"Right," she said flatly.

"I'm being serious," I said defensively.

"I'm sure," Annabeth said, rolling her eyes. "Whatever, it's not a big deal. Did Clint get mad?"

And now that I thought about it, he'd never really reprimanded me. But at the same time, he didn't tell me to do it again. I shrugged. "Not really."

"Well, that's good, I guess." There was a few beats of silence, in which I scrolled through her news feed as though it was my own, jokingly acting like I was going to retweet a shirtless picture of me that showed up. "No!" Annabeth shouted, snatching her laptop away and closing it all in one motion. I simply laughed for a few seconds, thoroughly amused at the speed she'd done that.

"Cookies?" I asked suddenly. "Or brownies? Or cake?"

"Cookies," Annabeth said, latching onto my train of thought instantly. "I'll go find something decent on TV." I nodded at her and she got up and walked away, leaving her laptop on my bed. Deciding against mentioning it, I stood, humming, and walked into the kitchen.

I'd never admit it aloud, but baking was probably one of my favorite pastimes. It was odd, it really was, but it reminded me of happier times with my mom, when she would let me stir the batter or eat the leftover cookie dough. Baking always felt like preserving my childhood, and it made me feel like a kid again.

Realizing that I hadn't called my mother in over a week, I decided that now was a good a time as ever.

She answered on the third ring. "Hey, baby!" Mom said happily. I heard rustling in the background. "I'm just folding some clothes, sorry for the static I'm sure you're hearing."

And it made me smile, the thought of Mom sitting in front of the television, watching a Lifetime movie while folding clothes as Paul sat on the opposite couch, sipping his coffee and reading a thriller novel, occasionally taking a call.

"Hey, Mom," I said. "I'm... baking." I heard my mother's laughter and I smiled. "So, what's going on at home?"

"I think I want to hear what's going on in your world," my mother said presumptuously. "I hear word that a certain Annabeth Chase has stolen your heart?"

"Mom," I said, laughing. "Stop. She hasn't. She's my best friend."

"Funny," Mom said, sounding almost like she knew something. "I don't remember you ever mentioning her."

Not really knowing how to respond, I shrugged. After remembering that she couldn't see me, I pinned the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I replied, "Really? Huh."

"Yeah," Mom said. "So, what's she like?"

"Mom, seriously? Can't we talk about home? Or how Paul's doing? Or what your last book was about?" I asked desperately.

My mom was a writer, a good one at that, and her past three books had been New York Times bestsellers. It seemed like being famous was in my family's genes. Mom, luckily, took the bait and launched into the plot of a book she'd planned on writing.

Ironically enough, it was about a fake relationship between a prince and a princess. I sort of zoned out as she explained, giving the appropriate responses and stirring the cookie dough to perfection.

After a while, I realized that she'd stopped talking. "That sounds really great, Mom! I'm sure that it'll sell great."

"It's okay, I know you weren't listening that whole time. I just wanted to tell someone," Mom said happily through the phone, laughing. "Go ahead and finish baking. But we will talk about *that* later."

"Yes ma'am," I said, smiling at the fact that I couldn't get anything past my mom. "Love you."

"Love you, too, sweetheart."

"Isn't that just adorable," Annabeth cooed, entering the kitchen. I rolled my eyes and shrugged. "Mama's boy," she said teasingly, nudging me with her shoulder.

"Yeah, I am," I told her. "No point in lying, I suppose."

Annabeth chuckled, getting a glass of milk and then sitting on what I considered as her counter. "So, how's your mother?"

"She's great," I said. "Wants to write a book about a fake relationship."

"Sounds riveting," Annabeth said, grinning.

“I'm sure I would agree if I knew what that word meant.”

And *sure*, I took a little pride in the fact that Annabeth laughed.

Twelve minutes later, the cookies were done and I took them out to cool. Annabeth was telling me a story about Thalia and beating up some kid, and I'll admit that it probably would have been a lot of fun to know Annabeth before fame. She'd have probably been intimidating as ever, but it'd be fun to see her before... this.

We selected cookies, despite the fact that they weren't properly cooled, and rushed into the living room, both of us wanting the couch that was in front of the television rather than to the side. Annabeth ended up beating me, but I still ended up sitting on that couch after she allowed me to sit there, as long as her feet were resting on my lap. It'd happened so many times that I don't think it could bother me anymore, even if I wanted it to.

We were watching a movie about a guy whose daughter was taken to Paris to be sold as a hooker or something along those lines. I'd tried to watch the movie a few times, but I always fell asleep because I couldn't sit still for five seconds without feeling like I'd die.

Annabeth was well into the movie, watching intently. I found amusement in the way the television cast colors over her face for a few moments before I decided that I'd go to bed.

“Well, Miss Chase, the movie night in with you simply *could not* have been more lovely, but I think it's time I retire,” I said dramatically, stretching.

Annabeth converted her attention from the television to me. “Okay. Night. Sweet dreams.”

“Aww, thanks,” I said, ruffling her hair. She slapped my arm, rather harshly, as I walked around the back of the couch, but I just turned and smiled at her winningly. “Night, babe.”

“Night,” she said again, smiling after me and waving. I turned and walked up the stairs, trying really hard not to smile for no apparent reason.

Deciding that girls were odd creatures and that I'd had enough of them for the night, I buried myself under soft blankets and overstuffed pillows as I fell asleep.

I entered the Washington Place with my usual confident stride. Some might argue that I'm a bit too confident, but that's not the case. I love myself so that no one else has to. I believe in myself.

I have trust issues, I'll admit. However, it's not the typical type. Rather than having trouble trusting people, I trust them much too easily. A person listens to me one time, and I think I can tell them everything about myself. I've always wanted to believe that all people are good people, no matter how wrong that belief would be.

I stepped onto the elevator, still lost in thought. It seemed like mere seconds before I was at the correct floor. I gestured for the older woman to walk out before me, and she sent me a sweet smile that only grandmothers can give. I nodded to her and walked out myself, heading to the meeting room.

This afternoon, I got an odd request from Clint and Stan. I would have to attend another meeting, but this time without Percy. It would be the first meeting in quite a while that I would be going to without him, and I was pretty curious as to why. I originally thought that it would be a meeting about recording more music, or perhaps something I did, but if that was the case, I would only be meeting with Stan. Not Stan *and* Clint.

I opened the door skeptically, looking at the conference table where Stan and Clint were sitting. They seemed to be speaking about something, but as soon as I opened the door, they fell silent.

"Annabeth, baby!" Stan exclaimed with a grin. "How are you?"

"Skip the pleasantries, please," I said, not unkindly. Stan had a bashful look on his face, but it appeared that he expected me to say that. Clint simply laughed, shaking his head.

"You're a sharp one," Clint commented.

"Thanks. Now why am I here without Percy?" I asked, cutting to the chase. Clint raised his eyebrows amusedly.

"Why? Do you miss him?"

"No," I denied instantly. "I was just wondering."

"Ah, I see. Well, take a seat. We have a few things to talk about," Clint said, elbowing Stan. I took a seat, examining them carefully. "We have a request," Clint began.

"Right," Stan interjected. "It's very minor, actually."

"Okay," I said, prompting them. "What's up?"

Clint cracked his knuckles twice and Stan cleared his throat and averted his gaze. I wasn't stupid, so I knew that they were trying to make whatever this was a lot more nonchalant than it actually was. I gave them an expectant look, and Clint opened his mouth to speak before closing it once more.

"Jesus, just get on with it!" I snapped. Stan started and chuckled weakly.

“Well, all we need you to do is kiss Percy.”

My jaw probably hit the pavement eleven stories below us. “Excuse me?” I asked, affronted. “Are you kidding? Please tell me this is a joke. A sick joke,” I pleaded.

Stan gave me a sympathetic smile. “I’m afraid it’s not. We’ve officially hit the two month mark. Two months of you and Percy being best friends with unrequited love. Now, we’re ready to make the love very much requited.”

“What if we’re not ready?” I asked, feeling my heart sink. Percy and I were normal; good friends. I didn’t want this to break that bond.

And maybe, *maybe*, I was a little bit nervous about kissing him.

Percy was my childhood crush. It’s not unreasonable to be nervous about kissing him. Right?

“Annabeth!” I snapped back to attention, shaking my head and looking at Stan, who’d yelled my name.

“No,” I said suddenly, speaking the words without thinking.

“Why not?” Clint inquired, seeming genuinely curious as opposed to Stan, who was red in the face with exasperation.

“Because...” I trailed off finding myself unable to continue my sentence. “It’s weird.”

“We don’t really have a choice,” Stan said, giving me a stern look. “And you signed a contract.

“But it never specifically said that I would have to kiss him!” I argued, gripping the table tightly.

“You agreed to be in a false relationship with Percy,” Clint said, point-blankly. “What did you think a relationship would consist of?”

I opened my mouth to offer a snarky remark, but I found that there wasn’t one. For perhaps the first time in history, I was wrong.

But, that wouldn’t be the first time, would it? After all, I believed Percy to be a pretentious celebrity and a womanizer, but now I know him. He has a caring side, and he’s goofy and can always manage to make me laugh. He’s a bit thoughtless at times, but that’s his personality. Clueless and oblivious Percy.

“Earth to Annabeth,” Stan urged, snapping his fingers in front of my face. I pushed his hand away, scoffing. “Look, whether you want it to or not, it’s happening.”

“How come Percy couldn’t come to this meeting with me?” I asked suddenly as the thought occurred to me. I tried to pretend that Stan didn’t say what he did. I watched Clint’s expression go from bemused, to contemplative, to something akin to guilty.

“We weren’t planning on telling him, originally,” Clint said cautiously. I raised my eyebrows in silent questioning. “And in the end, we decided that it would be best if we didn’t disclose that information to him.”

I choked on pure air. *How in the world could not telling Percy help the situation?*

“Look, I know it doesn’t make much sense to you—”

"You're right, it doesn't! He won't be expecting it. What if he pushes me away? That's not what best friends in love do!" I exclaimed.

"Trust me, he won't push you away," Clint muttered, running his fingers through his sandy brown hair.

"Excuse me?" I questioned. Clint shook his head and seemed lost in thought for a moment. "Seriously? How do you *know* that this will work perfectly?" I inquired, still astonished that this was happening.

"Trust us," Stan commanded, his voice vitriolic. "Stop arguing, and follow directions." I rolled my eyes at how bitter Stan was being. What was up with him anyways?

I looked at both men, a pleasing look from Clint and a stringent, irritated look from Stan. It seemed that there was no way I was going to win this argument. However, I could change the terms. I put on my best agreeable look, nodding my head. "Fine, I'll do it." Clint looked relieved and Stan still seemed angry. "*But* I will be choosing the place, the circumstances, and any other factors. I have full control of this situation."

Clint nodded immediately, but Stan muttered something about how I was a control freak. I sent him a venomous glare as Clint asked me to talk details with him.

A mere half-hour later, we'd come to an agreement. I could pick any time I wanted, as long as it was within the next week. Whenever the moment felt right to me, I could...kiss Percy.

It felt odd, saying it in my head; it felt foreign. Kissing Percy was a thought I used to squeal over, but now I wasn't so sure how I felt about it.

"Well, I guess I'll know when it happens," I muttered to myself just before I unlocked the door to our apartment.

"Annabeth!" I heard Percy yell. I watched as he jumped up from the couch and ran into the front room like a child runs on Christmas Day. I briefly noted that he'd neglected to put on a shirt before he enveloped me in one of his world famous hugs. I laughed slightly and hugged him back, a bit unnerved by his presence. He pulled away from the hug and led me into the kitchen where he presented a brownie to me. I smiled gratefully and ate the gourmet food, still surprised that Percy had such an affinity for baking.

"These are amazing," I said, my mouth halfway full.

Percy snorted. "Well, that's attractive," he said lightly, brushing what I assumed was a crumb off my face. I rolled my eyes, but he gave me a goofy smile. "How was that riveting meeting of yours? Probably just about four dates, right?"

"Right," I said, probably a bit quickly, but he didn't seem to notice. "Pretty boring, honestly."

"Yeah, I think it's cool though," Percy said with a shrug as he retrieved a cold slice of pizza from the fridge.

"What's cool?" I inquired, cocking my head to the side and pushing myself up on the counter. Percy leaned up against the counter opposite of me and raised an eyebrow.

"The fact that they managed to schedule us to tour together. You open for me," Percy said, still eating all the while. "It's practically a joint concert though, because we'll both singing a lot of songs. Maybe even a duet." He waggled his eyebrows and winked. "I can do anything you can do better..."

"I can do anything better than you," I finished with a laugh. "We'll have to do that." He nodded and retrieved a second slice of pizza. "Jesus, you're a bottomless pit, aren't you?"

Percy nodded innocently and I laughed at him. "I like food. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Some might say it's cute," I said without thinking. I slid off the counter after finishing off my brownie and walked into the living room.

"Are you 'some'?" Percy called after me.

"Maybe, maybe not," I said lightly, chuckling. "What's it to you, Jackson?"

"Nothing, just curious," Percy said simply, falling on the couch next to me. I tucked my feet underneath myself and glanced over to see Percy's expression.

He appeared to be amused, his odd small smile playing at his lips. He glanced over at me, catching my glance. I expected him to give an overdramatic wink or make a stupid comment, but he did neither. Percy threw me off by meeting my eyes for only a second or two before turning away, even looking mildly embarrassed. I raised my eyebrows, thinking that maybe, seeing that side of Percy could be nice sometimes.

Percy clearing his throat pulled me from my reverie. I blinked and looked at him once more. He gave me a small smile, something in his oddly colored eyes twinkling. "I think we should do something."

I tucked my hair behind my ear and raised an eyebrow. "What'd you have in mind?"

"Percy, wait up!" I called, still tying one of my Converse as he jogged to the Land Rover. I adjusted the sleeve of my plain green t-shirt and brushed off my dark wash jeans. Percy, being the kid he was, somehow talked me into going to the park with him. And by 'park,' I don't mean those parks with a lot of land, a few trees evenly distributed, and quite a few runners and dog walkers. I mean the colorful, child-swarmed, classic park for children.

To top it all off, Percy was wearing his Avengers shirt and being overly hyper. I hurried to the car as Percy honked the horn, glaring at him as I took my place in the passenger seat. "You took so long!"

"Well, I'm here now," I commented logically. He shot me a dirty look, backing out of the driveway nevertheless. "What park are we going to anyways?"

"The one I used to go to when I was in high school. Me and my friends used to...chill there," Percy said vaguely.

I gave him an odd look but decided to shrug it off. "How far away is it?"

"Hour and a half to two hours."

If I had been drinking something at the moment, I probably would have spit it out. "*What?*" I demanded.

Percy patted my knee and laughed. "Don't worry, babe. You get to spend the whole time with me." I scowled at him for a second before sighing helplessly. Percy was impulsive, and I'd have to learn how to deal with it.

"Tell you what," Percy said suddenly, "I'll even buy you a Starbucks."

"Why, thank you, kind sir," I said sarcastically, rolling my eyes. Although, two hours alone in a car with Percy couldn't be *that* terrible, could it?

"Hey, it's our song!" Percy yelled over the radio as the beginning notes of 'I'll Be' by Edwin McCain blasted through the stereo. I smiled at the memory, laughing when Percy started serenading me, sounding horrible intentionally. For the full thirty minutes we'd been driving, Percy had been singing every song that played on the radio. Every station that he chose, he just so happened to know the song playing. The windows were rolled down; the weather was amazing. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, listening to the sound of the wind and Percy's voice. He actually started trying a little more, letting his real talent shine through, and it took me by surprise. I looked over at him and he gave me a small, if not somewhat bashful smile, and gestured for me to join him in his singing.

I did, and I could help but notice the way that our voice complimented each others. Percy's voice was deeper, with just the right amount of rasp, but his range was great. If Percy needed to sing falsetto, he wouldn't have a single issue. My voice was soprano, naturally higher than Percy's, but the combination of both of ours was phenomenal.

After the song ended, Percy smirked at me. "Well then, Chase. Maybe we should collaborate."

I chuckled. "Yeah. We sound okay together." I gave a noncommittal shrug.

Percy looked aghast. "Seriously? We just sound 'okay'? Annabeth, do you realize how lucky it is that we just so happen to work with each others' voices so perfectly? Wait until Stan and Clint hear us; they'll get us recording time and want us to have a single out as soon as possible! And your voice, Annabeth, Jesus. I mean, I've heard your music before, and I've even heard you sing around the house, but I'm still really surprised. Your voice is perfect. I don't think you could make it sound bad if you wanted to, honestly..." Percy trailed off, leaving the perfect amount of silence for it to be awkward. After a few seconds, Percy spoke again. "You know, you really do deserve to be famous, unlike so many celebrities these days. I don't understand how you weren't famous years ago."

I bit my lip at the huge speech Percy just gave me, honestly hoping that I wasn't blushing. I was Annabeth Chase, and I had a tendency to roll my eyes rather than blush, but when the compliments were that deep and contemplative, I couldn't help it. Things like that meant the world to me.

"Are you blushing?" Percy asked, breaking the soft silence. I immediately covered my face with my hands and groaned at the fact that it felt warm.

"No," I lied. Percy snorted in laughter and I moved my hands so I could glare at him. His eyes were literally sparkling, and I had to tell myself to look away a total of seven times in my head before I actually did.

"Don't worry," Percy said quietly. "It's sort of nice to see that side of you."

"What side of me?" I inquired.

Percy smirked. "The one that's actually a girl." I scoffed and pulled his hair, knowing he'd be torn between sighing happily and yelling at me for causing him pain. The Land Rover swerved a little as I caught him off guard and he narrowed his eyes at me. "Watch it, Chase."

"I still think it's funny that you have a kink for people pulling your hair," I commented lightly.

"I do not!" Percy refused, yelling much louder than necessary.

"Mighty defensive," I muttered. "However, I know for a fact that you do."

"And just how is that, dearest?" I rolled my eyes at the term of endearment.

"Well, *dearest*, you like to talk in your sleep. Remember that one time when you fell asleep in my room?" I asked, looking over at him in question.

He nodded firmly, scrunching up his nose. "Yeah. Your pillows aren't fluffy enough." I lifted my hand up to threaten that I'd pull his hair, but he caught me before I could. "Careful, now. You keep doing that, and we might end up at a hotel rather than a park."

I rolled my eyes. "Gross."

"Please, you know I'm sexy." *Narcissist*. "Continue."

"Right," I said, remembering that I was telling a story. "Well, I woke up in the middle of the night, and you said something, so I asked you what you said and you repeated it. Then I asked you something else, and you answered. Turn out that you tell all your secrets when you're asleep."

Percy seemed to tense a bit. With a laugh that I definitely detected nervousness in, he asked, "Really? What all did you learn?"

I laughed. "Much more than I wanted to about you," I said vaguely. "So, is Miley Cyrus a good kisser?"

Percy groaned. "Jesus, no. She attacked me!"

"But you didn't stop her," I pointed out.

"I was a little drunk, too!" Percy argued.

"Were you drunk again when you made out with Madonna?" I asked innocently.

Percy gave me a wide-eyed look. "I never made out with Madonna. Do you know how much older than me she is?"

"Well, you at least kissed her," I said, "because you said that you never wanted to again." I laughed as Percy rubbed his temple and groaned.

"Also, why did you lie about how you took your coffee to the president of your management company?"

Percy sighed. "I didn't want him to think of me as a kid because I like so much sugar in it."

I snorted in laughter and Percy glared at me. "You are just *great*," I said, smiling and laughing. Percy still looked disgruntled, so I patted his face lightly. He glared at me and faced the road. I fixed a misplaced piece of hair that was falling into his eyes.

"No need to crash because your so-called luscious locks are in the way," I joked. I noticed that his demeanor softened once more, and it let me know that he wasn't really all that mad.

"Can I ask you questions?" Percy asked. "I mean, you took advantage of me while I was sleeping. You owe me." Hesitantly, I nodded. Just as Percy was about to launch into his questioning, a phone rang. I checked mine, though I don't know why, because I didn't even have such a ringtone. Percy looked confused as he answered. "Hello?" I heard Percy sigh, something that sounded relieved unless my ears deceived me. "Jesus, don't scare me like that! How are you calling off his phone?" I briefly wondered the gender of the person he was talking to, but I quickly rolled my eyes at myself. It didn't matter anyways. "No, man. I'm not even in town, I swear. Yeah. No, we're going to a park. 'We' is Annabeth and I. Yes, Annabeth Chase. Annabeth, my friend Grover says hi."

"Hi," I responded automatically.

"She says hi as well. No, Grover, we aren't. Yet." Percy spared me a sidelong glance and I became curious as to what was being said. "Yes. Yes. Maybe. Shhhh! Stop, man. Okay. I have to go, my service is bad. Yeah. I'll stay safe, calm down. Yes. Shut up, man! I told you, *no*. Whatever. Bye."

He hung the phone up, and cleared his throat awkwardly. "You aren't going to tell me anything he said, are you?" I asked after a moment.

"I told you that he said hello," Percy dodged.

"What did you mean by 'yet'?" I inquired. Percy coughed, obviously stalling for time.

"He asked if we were...at the park! And I said we weren't...yet," Percy said, thought it sounded more like a question. I decided to forget about it and shrugged. I turned up the radio as I heard the beginning beat of a song I liked, shifting my weight.

I wondered how Percy was so amazing at acting when he couldn't tell a fib convincingly. I wondered how Percy passed school with 'flying colors' yet he seemed like he had minimal education. A lot about Percy didn't add up, and he was full of contradictions.

As odd as it sounded, Percy's eyes were perhaps the biggest contradiction. Everybody swore up and down that his eyes were umber, a pretty shade of brown, but not me. I saw something here and there, a twinkling of blue tint, a spark of green. It wasn't a typical thing to see in brown eyes.

"Percy, why do your eyes look blue and green sometimes?" I asked as the song came to a close. My question sent him into a violent coughing fit, followed by a nervous chuckle and a 'it must be a trick of the light, huh?'

I decided that Percy was on a lying spree today. "Are you ever going to tell me the truth?" I found myself asking.

And much to my surprise, Percy gave me an odd look paired with a muttered, "maybe."

When we finally arrived at the park, it was nearing five o'clock. There were only a few more families here, but all of the kids were much too young to recognize us. We saw the occasional teenager as we took a large sweep of the park, and if they asked, we signed autographs and took pictures. After about an hour of walking around and playing on the children's equipment, we noticed that there was a group of teenagers, no *teenage girls*, looking around curiously. I nudged Percy and pointed, causing him to roll

his eyes and sigh. Seizing hold of my hand, he took off running towards the small pier connected to the park. At first, I thought that we were about to go straight into the water, but instead he dropped my hand and jumped down a level, helping me down as well, although I didn't need it. He gave me a smile and pulled on both my hands as he walked backwards.

We were standing directly underneath the pier, and I cautiously looked up, expecting to see spiders. However, I saw lights. A million small lights that looked like stars. I glanced at Percy quizzically, and he removed his gaze from the lights with a small smile. "I wasn't sure that they'd still be here," he admitted.

"What are they?" I questioned.

"Fireflies," he answered, seeming to realize that he'd still had hold of my hands. Releasing me from his grip and awkwardly shoving his hands in his pockets, we both looked up and I finally noticed that the lights were moving. "It's actually a pretty wide and deep aquarium. I know it's odd, but there was always an old man who kept fresh fireflies in there. He always used to tell me that there was a secret to keeping them from dying, but he never told me..." Percy trailed off and looked thoughtful. "He promised that I could come back any time and that there would be fireflies here. I guess his grandson started it up for him, perhaps."

I smiled up at the fireflies, mystified at the story. "Why fireflies? Why here?"

Percy grinned and met my eyes. "Wanna hear a good love story?"

I raised an eyebrow and nodded as Percy sat on the ground. He laid back, staring up at the fireflies. I laid parallel to him, and he cleared his throat dramatically. "Once upon a time, there were two young, reckless kids in high school. He was a football player, and she was the girl who had the highest GPA. I'm paraphrasing here," Percy said with a laugh. "Anyways, like any good, cliché story, they fell in love. However, her parents didn't like this football player, as they believed he would break her heart. So, they decided to run away together. They packed up, and on a Thursday night, they jumped in his truck and made it all the way to...well, here." I could tell that Percy was smiling. "It was dark outside, and there were fireflies all over the place when his truck broke down. It'd been the first time she'd ever seen them, and ever since then, she loved them. They had a deep meaning for them. He secretly constructed an aquarium and put it underneath the pier. On their one year anniversary of running away, he set up a picnic underneath the pier so she could stare up at the fireflies." I turned to look at him, watching his animated expressions as he told the story. "He didn't originally plan on it, but seeing her face light up made him propose to her then and there." I smiled at how sweet the story was. "He didn't have a ring, but she accepted anyways. He's always said that they were three things: young, stupid, and too in love to care." There was a long silence after Percy finished his sentence, but I had a feeling there was more. I closed my eyes and listened to the water; it was so peaceful here compared to the city.

"What happened next?" I found myself asking. Percy turned and smiled at me, his eyes lit up from the story and the fireflies above us.

"They lived happily ever after," he stated simply. "Until they weren't living anymore." I smiled softly, content with the ending. "I never took you for such a sap, Chase."

I scoffed indignantly. "I could say the same for you, Jackson." He smiled at me, a real smile, not a smirk and looked back up at the lights. "It's a cute story though."

"Definitely," Percy said, nodding. "And feel special. You're the first girl I've ever brought here." I rolled my eyes.

"I feel ever so privileged," I said sarcastically, pulling out my phone and taking a picture of the fireflies. The image didn't capture the true beauty, but it was enough to help me remember. I put my phone away and stared at the gorgeous blinking lights once more. Hesitantly, I cleared my throat to gain Percy's attention. I saw him turn to me, and I said, "You know, you aren't all that bad, Jackson." I turned to give him a small glare so that he didn't let it go to his head.

I noted with much amusement that Percy was surprising me a lot lately as he awkwardly fidgeted with his hands. "Thanks. You aren't all that bad either, Chase." He turned to look at me, almost hesitantly. "You're actually really, um, nice like this."

I watched as he fixed his blonde hair, drummed his fingers, and scratched the back of his neck. It made me smile, seeing Percy so awkward. I had a feeling that this was the real Percy, and he had a different persona he put on for the celebrity world.

"Like what you see, Chase?" Percy asked lightly, turning to face me. I realized that I was staring, but unlike most girls wouldn't do, I boldly returned his gaze. He raised a challenging eyebrow, which led us into a staring contest. I was still trying to find out the secret behind Percy's eyes; why they were blue, but not, and why I couldn't help but feel like there was something else.

Nearly making me jump, Percy placed a hand on my cheek and brushed hair out of my face that wasn't bothering me in the first place. "You know, you're really beautiful, Annabeth," Percy said barely above a whisper. I felt my cheeks flush against my will as I stared into his earnest eyes.

And then, something. I felt...

Like I wanted to kiss him.

But it was only because I knew that I had to at some point. Right?

Well, I could do it now, I thought idly. But somewhere deep in my mind, logic spoke out. There was no way that it would make it into the news if I did because there's no one around.

There's nothing wrong with a practice run, though. Right?

I was about to contemplate more, having inner arguments with myself, but Percy leaned forward. For a split second, I thought he might kiss me. But just as quickly, his warm lips were pressing a light kiss on my cheek, and he was sitting up.

I put my inner turmoil behind me for the time being and sat up as well. "What was that for, Jackson?"

"What do you mean?" Percy asked, looking genuinely confused.

I rolled my eyes. "You kissed me. On the cheek."

"Oh, that," Percy said, nodding casually. "I kissed you on the cheek because I wanted to."

I was slightly taken aback by his boldness, but then I thought about it. *This is Percy, I told myself, of course he'd be impulsive as ever.*

"Plus," Percy continued, "we're friends. Friends do that all the time."

"Well, okay," I said, sounding a little awkward.

Percy looked over at me and grinned. "It's late. We should go, yeah?" I nodded as Percy stood, holding out his hands to assist me in standing. After I was steady and on my feet, he started back from the way we came, helping me up even though I probably could have managed.

"Why are you being so nice and thoughtful?" I finally asked as he opened the car door for me. He rolled his eyes and shut the door without an answer, walking around to the drivers' seat.

"I'm not being nice," Percy said as he got in the Land Rover. "I'm just being less of an ass." He started the vehicle and looked at the time, pursing his lips. "Hey, how about that Starbucks?" he asked, already en route.

"Sure," I replied. "A chai tea sounds amazing."

I suppressed a sigh as I dug for my key to the apartment door. Finally, my hand grasped the cold, metal key and I pulled it out of my pocket, reaching to unlock the door.

However, I did so at the time as Annabeth, resulting in a small moment of tension. I glanced over to her and met her eyes, starting for a moment at our proximity. Almost accidentally, my eyes drifted down to her lips as I unlocked the door. I opened the door and gestured for her to walk in before me. I followed her and locked the door behind us, leaning my head against the cold door for a second. I took three deep breaths, and tossed my key on the random table near the door. It would be most beneficial if I could get my thoughts together. Or perhaps I needed just the opposite: to clear my head completely.

“Percy!” Annabeth yelled, already down the hallway. I headed towards her voice and called back an answer. I leaned in her door, raising an eyebrow. “Oh, I just wanted to let you know that I had fun today,” Annabeth said with a smile. I grinned and nodded.

“I’m glad,” I said, scratching the back of my neck. Annabeth walked the few steps over to me, leaning up and wrapping her arms around my neck. I stilled, watching her next move. She stood on her tiptoes, kissing my cheek and making me blush a lot more than I wanted to. “Payback,” she said with a laugh, hugging me. I hugged her back, sighing into her shoulder. It was so easy to be affectionate with her, yet equally as easy to want to roundhouse kick her. “Now leave. I’m going to sleep.”

I rolled my eyes and broke our hug, turning to walk out the door. “Night,” I called over my shoulder, going to the living room rather than my bedroom. She called a reply after me.

I fell onto the couch carelessly, sighing deeply. It’d been a fairly long day, and my body was completely worn out, contrasting my wide awake mind.

I turned on the television purely to have something to focus on. My mind may have been alert, but my thoughts were all over the place. I mindlessly flipped through channels, frowning when I saw celebrities I hated.

After about five minutes with no luck on anything interesting, I decided to play it safe with the news channel.

The remote fell out of my hand and onto the floor.

“...Recent reports say that this middle-aged man was found in an alley. The man was no longer alive when officials arrived on the scene, but gang action is suspected, taking into account the area and one witness account who has asked to remain anonymous. In other news, there was a major traffic accident on...”

I stared at the television blankly. I felt my hands shaking. My thoughts were choppy; I couldn’t focus. Finally, I broke through my daze and scrambled for my phone, dialing the one number I knew would know the truth.

The moment Grover answered, I started firing off questions. “Is it true? Is it really him? Who did it? What’s going to happen to you guys? Don’t you have to pick a new leader? Does this give you a chance to get out? Does—”

"Whoa, Percy, slow it down. Take a deep breath for me." I took a shaky, shallow breath. "Close enough," Grover muttered. "Yeah, it's definitely him," he said in a quiet voice, as though he was walking past people. I heard a rustling, and Grover's voice come through much clearer. "Everyone's saying that he got caught in a gang fight with our rivals. As you can see, he didn't win." I could almost picture Grover attempting a smile, but I bit my nails anxiously, sitting up straight. "Look, man, I would love to say that we're just electing a new leader, but that's hardly the case. Word is that the gang who killed Boss is coming after us next. Rather than staying and fighting for *us*," Grover said, sounding irritated, "all but a few people ran. I think it's over, man, but that's not exactly a good thing. Our group was family for some of these kids. I feel like I let them down." I shook my head profusely, despite the fact that Grover couldn't see me.

"No, Grover, don't do that," I said softly. "It's good that this happened. They should get out of it while they can." I heard him sigh and I ran my hands over my face. "How many are left?"

"Five," Grover said thoughtfully. "You know, I think I'd have enough room for them, if they wanted to stay with me. I mean, they sleep here, Percy. I can't toss them out on the street!"

"I know," I said, nodding. "That's your choice. And it's good, that you care, you know."

"Thanks, Percy," Grover said. "Look, I better get back to them—"

I chuckled. "Yeah, yeah, go on, you saint." I heard him laugh and we exchanged goodbyes before disconnecting the call. I dropped my phone on the couch and slumped back.

I started laughing somewhat manically out of relief, pushing the heels of my hands into my eyes and rubbing my temples. My mind was exhausted now as well. I turned off the television and stared into the darkness for a while. It sort of helped me relax, odd as it sounds. After a few minutes, I got up walked into the kitchen, my body light with relief yet heavy with grief.

I pulled out a pizza box, not really caring from how long ago it was as I started eating the leftovers. I got a glass of milk as well, leaning up against the counter and staring into space. I finished off the leftovers within a few minutes, feeling much more stable thanks to the food.

I decided that I should probably sleep it off; everything would make much more sense when I woke up in the morning. I made sure to be quiet as I passed by Annabeth's room, not wanting to wake her as I stepped over the threshold of my bedroom. I closed the door and immediately collapsed on my bed. After a few seconds, I groaned after a few seconds, realizing that my contacts were still in.

Muttering to myself about how much of an inconvenience they were, I trudged into my bathroom. I removed my contacts with practiced ease, looking up at the mirror.

And that's when it hit me.

I didn't have to hide anymore.

I could dye my hair back to its true color; black, not blonde. I could stop wearing those uncomfortable contacts I usually forget about before I go to sleep.

No one had it out for me anymore.

I grinned, pushing myself off the counter and heading back into my room, having taken out my contacts that I hated and collapsing on my bed for good.

I walked out of my room and jogged to the couch in front of the television where I knew my phone was. After all, I left it there. For a few minutes, I searched fruitlessly, sighing in annoyance before yelling, "Annabeth!"

"Yeah?" she called back, and I started, realizing that she wasn't in her room, but she was in the kitchen. I walked swiftly through the archway, smiling gratefully as she handed me coffee.

"I love you," I said, drinking my perfect coffee.

She smirked. "I know." I rolled my eyes, opening my mouth to ask her if she'd seen my cell phone, but she cut me off. "It's charging by your bed. I plugged it in for...Percy, why are your eyes so green today?"

I blinked in confusion at her before realizing that I'd completely forgotten about how my contacts were *brown* and my real eyes were *green*. "Um..."

"And don't even say it's a trick of the light!" Annabeth enjoined. "I know that's a lie." She gave me a sharp look and I avoided eye contact.

"My eyes change color with the seasons," I said with a grin. She narrowed her eyes, and I knew she didn't believe me. I scrambled for a better cover as she sighed and shook her head.

"You'll have to tell me the truth eventually, you know," Annabeth said bluntly. I sighed deeply and nodded. The only reason I hadn't told her already was to protect her.

I finished my coffee quickly and cocked my head to the side. "Hey, Annabeth?"

"Hm?"

"How do you think I'd look with black hair?"

It wasn't as easy as I thought it'd be, talking my manager and stylist into letting me make that drastic of a change with my hair. Luckily, I had Annabeth on my side. If she hadn't become famous, I could see her being a wonderful lawyer. She had a way of weaving words that made you see things in new light; she had a retort for every argument thrown her way.

In the end, we won the argument, Jay finally admitting that it would be a lot easier than touching up my roots so frequently. Clint shook his head and sighed, saying that it was my choice. I gave Annabeth an excited grin when they okayed it and she sent me an odd look back. "I just really missed having black hair," I told her with a shrug. She raised an eyebrow.

After a lot of begging, she went with me to Jay's salon, sitting with me through the whole process. It took a while, but Annabeth and I's conversations kept me from falling asleep.

After the lengthy regimen was over, Annabeth raised an eyebrow as I shook my newly dried and black hair out. "You are aware that your fans will freak out, right?"

I shrugged nonchalantly as I headed for the door, calling out a goodbye to Jay. "They'll get used to it." However, in my mind, I fretted for a moment or two. *What if they hated it? What if they stopped liking me?*

"Don't look all worried," Annabeth said, rolling her eyes and reaching up to ruffle my hair. "It actually looks better."

"Awww," I said, winking at her. "Does Annabeth Chase think I'm, gasp, attractive?"

Annabeth scoffed. "Don't let it go to your head or anything."

"So, you do," I said lowly, smiling at her as I opened the door for her. She looked up at me, seemingly half amused, half irritated. I raised a suggestive eyebrow and let my signature smirk adorn my face.

"I never said that," Annabeth replied vaguely, not even sparing me a glance over her shoulder as she walked ahead of me. I ran to catch up, stopping directly in front of her.

"But you did imply it," I argued. I gave her a stern look she moved to step around me. I stopped her by extending my arm. "Uh-uh-uh," I sing-songed. "Answer me."

"Did you know that you drool when you sleep? I have a ruined pillowcase to prove it," Annabeth evaded.

"Avoiding the question," I said with a laugh. "Come on, Annabeth. Just say it. You think I'm sexy."

Before I could blink, the collar of my shirt was pulled down, and I was face-to-face with Annabeth. She raised a challenging eyebrow and I felt my breath literally cease as she leaned closer.

I closed my eyes, waiting, almost hoping, but all I heard was a whisper in my ear. "Percy Jackson, I think you're sexy."

My collar was released and I struggled to stand up straight without falling over. I felt Annabeth dig into the pocket of my leather jacket, taking possession of my keys and sending me a sweet smile. "Come on," she said, patting my arm and walking ahead once more. I decided not to run and catch up with her, seeing as I was still having difficulty breathing.

I'd be lying if I said that was the first time that the thought '*Annabeth Chase will surely be the death of me*' ran through my mind.

The ride home felt tense, though I couldn't honestly figure out why. My hands felt eager to fidget with something—anything, and I had trouble focusing. I changed the radio station almost constantly, never leaving a song on for too long.

Eventually, I just turned the radio off and sighed loudly.

"What's wrong?" Annabeth questioned, sounding thoroughly bemused. I spared her a glance to see her grinning and seemingly trying to hold back a laugh. "Still having trouble with that crazy big crush you have on me?"

I shoved her shoulder, groaning as she burst out laughing. "I do not!"

"Oh, sure," Annabeth remarked sarcastically. "So you *aren't* freaking out right now because I told you that you're sexy?"

I took a shaky breath, seriously, seriously abhorring the fact that Annabeth had such control over me. “No,” I said, probably not all that convincingly. She sent me a smirk, and I sent her a glare, daring her to say a word.

“Alright, alright, I’m done,” Annabeth said, taking a right onto our road.

“Thank you,” I said, huffing.

“Oh, but I’m so not. Imagine what our fans would say, knowing that you harbor this ridiculously huge crush on me—”

“I don’t!” I interrupted. “Seriously. I don’t.”

“Defensive,” Annabeth sing-songed. I rolled my eyes, deciding not to respond. “Aww, is my little boyfriend upset with me now?”

I raised an eyebrow at her as she pulled into our driveway, still giving her the silent treatment. I did not have a *crush* on Annabeth Chase. It sounded so childish.

“Come on, *babe*,” Annabeth said, emphasizing the term of endearment I used most often. I sent her a sideways glance, my eyes narrowed.

“What? Is this the part where we kiss and make up?” I asked sarcastically, rolling my eyes.

And just like that, the mood dropped to deadly serious rather than teasing. Annabeth launched into a coughing fit as I blinked at the sudden lack of banter. I opened my door and gave her a concerned look.

I felt the sudden tension, crashing over me like a fifty foot wave. Annabeth waved me off to say that she was okay, but I shut my door again. “Care to share what just happened?”

“What do you mean?” Annabeth asked innocently. I sent her a dry look and she bit her lip furiously.

“Don’t ruin that pretty mouth,” I said, offhandedly, hardly noticing that I said it at all. She sent me something that could have been a smile or a frown. “Come on. I’ll...” I trailed off, not really sure what I’d been saying in the first place.

“Tell me why your eyes are different and I’ll tell you what just happened,” Annabeth said firmly, leveling our gazes. I glanced at the time.

“It’s a long story,” I warned.

“And we have lots of time,” Annabeth said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, we should at least go inside if this is happening,” I told her, taking a deep breath. She nodded and we both evacuated the Land Rover, heading for the door. I waited for Annabeth to unlock the door seeing as she’d stolen my keys, and I walked in after her. “Better go get some popcorn.”

“I think I’ll settle for coffee,” Annabeth replied with a nod. “Get your thoughts together.”

Then, almost instantly, she was gone, and in the kitchen. I fell onto the couch, groaning lightly. *Is this really about to happen?* I asked myself. *Was I seriously about to tell Annabeth Chase the whole truth?*

I muttered a cuss word to myself, simply because, yes, yes I was.

Too soon, Annabeth was in the living room, handing me a cup of her flawless coffee and sitting at the end of my couch after I ever so graciously moved my feet for her.

“So,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee. “You ready?”

“Yep,” Annabeth said, nodding.

“Do you want the short version?”

After a moment of hesitation, Annabeth gave her consent. “I doubt you want to give out every minute detail.”

“You're right,” I told her. “I really don't.” I briefly thought about the fact that Annabeth was actually be considerate for once, but her pressing gray eyes forced me to face the situation at hand.

“Well...” I began, changing my position on the couch. I trailed off, not even sure how to start. It seemed like so much had happened that there was no way I could condense such vast occurrences into a mere few minutes.

There was a few beats of silence in which I struggled to find where to start and Annabeth looked on impatiently. “Percy!”

“Okay, okay, sorry! Jesus. So, pretty much, when I was twelve, my friend Grover introduced me to these people who were...misunderstood. Um, criminals, I guess. And they let me join their group.” I glanced at Annabeth briefly and she gestured for me to continue. “So, I became one of them.”

“Is it like a gang?” Annabeth asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Well, I suppose it was *like* a gang, but we never did anything horrible. It was more like a home for the misfits; the kids who got kicked out of houses for being juvenile delinquents,” I clarified.

“What'd you do to be considered a 'juvenile delinquent'?” Annabeth inquired, raising an eyebrow.

I scratched the back of my neck. “The short version is that I steal things.”

Annabeth snorted. “Alright. Continue.” I sent her a glare. *Was it really that unbelievable that I could steal things?*

“It's called the ‘Army,’” I shared. “We were all soldiers. I was number 817. There's really no reason to call us soldiers though, since we don't really go to war or anything. Well, at least I never did. You saw the news reports? About the man found in an alley?”

“Yeah,” Annabeth confirmed. “And this is relevant how...?”

I sighed loudly at her impatience. “I was about to explain that.” Annabeth had the grace to send me a sheepish smile. “That was our leader. We just called him 'Boss' though.”

“And he's dead,” Annabeth said, sounding unsure of where I was going with this.

“Right,” I agreed. “Which means the group either elects a new leader or the group is dissolved. Too many people decided not to stay, so it was dissolved.” I bit my lip, ordering my thoughts. “Like a gang, getting out of our army was highly frowned upon and a pretty serious thing. If Boss didn't like the way you went about it, he'd probably send someone after you to... take care of you.” I sent Annabeth a

meaningful look to let her know what my words meant. She nodded solemnly, and I silently commended her for handling the situation with such aplomb.

“So, how'd you get out?”

“I faked my death. Well, not technically. When I was fifteen, Mom told me that we were moving in with her boyfriend, Paul. I slowly stopped attending the meetings we had every week and stopped the visits I made all the time. Then, I asked Mom if I could change my hair color and get contacts because I just wanted something new. If my appearance is different, it's a lot harder for them to track me down,” I expostulated. Annabeth seemed deep in thought, and I inferred that she was absorbing the information.

“Then you got famous?” Annabeth said finally.

“Then I got famous,” I concurred. “Paul works for a record company and heard me singing one day. He put in a pretty good word for me.”

“God, I am so sorry,” Annabeth said, looking highly frustrated. “I can't believe that...”

“That what?” I questioned, leaning forward as her voice got softer.

“Remember that first fight we had?”

I smiled slightly. “We were fighting about three seconds after meeting each other.”

“You know what I mean,” Annabeth said begrudgingly. “The one where I said that you didn't deserve to be famous.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I remember.”

“I'm sorry,” Annabeth said, clear as day. If I knew one thing about Annabeth, I knew that her pride would probably be the death of her someday. Therefore, that minute apology probably cost her much inner turmoil. I nudged her leg with my foot playfully.

“Hey, forget about it,” I told her with a shrug. “We were both mad.” Annabeth nodded hesitantly, sending me a grateful smile. “What are your thoughts on my... past?”

“I'm not all that bothered by it, Percy. I mean, everyone has something in their past they aren't proud of. Yours is just a much bigger something,” Annabeth said thoughtfully. “But in all honesty, I completely get your reasoning. Are you just planning on telling fans your eye color change is 'a trick of the light'?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, actually. My eyes change color with the seasons. That's something you should know about your best friend, Annabeth,” I chastised jokingly. She kicked me lightly once more and I squeezed her foot in warning. “So. Are you going to tell me what happened in my Land Rover?”

She sent me a sideways glance, looking apprehensive. “I was given orders at my latest meeting with management.”

“And what were they?” I questioned, examining my thumb nail.

“I'm not even sure if you want to know,” Annabeth said, sounding uncomfortable. “And I'm not sure if I'm supposed to tell you.”

"Uh, Annabeth," I said, my voice neutral. "Sort of just told you *my life story* and you can't spare me one small detail about what your manager said to—"

"It wasn't just my manager," Annabeth interjected. "Clint was there, too."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "Why?" Annabeth turned her head to look at me, leveling our gazes. I saw storms swirling in her gray eyes and I was once again taken aback by their unnerving color. "Tell me. Come on, now, you've brought it up. Finish what you started."

"Somehow, I think it would be easier if I didn't tell you—"

"Annabeth!"

"Percy!"

"Tell me!"

"It's complicated!"

"Annabeth Chase, so help me god—"

"We have to kiss!"

My throat died in my throat and I stared at her in shock for a moment. "*What?*"

"Management wants us to kiss by the end of the week," Annabeth repeated, avoiding eye contact.

"Why would they only tell you?" I asked, my throat feeling inexplicably dry.

"I heard Clint say something about how it would be a bit less uncomfortable," Annabeth replied, still soft-spoken.

"Not really," I replied, my voice full of bitterness not meant for Annabeth. "I wouldn't have known. What if I would have freaked out when we were in public?"

"Clint said something about how you wouldn't reject me," Annabeth mentioned. I gaped at her for a moment, wondering what Clint had meant and how she'd taken it. Then I considered possible ways to assassinate someone who I considered one of my best friends.

"I'm murdering him," I decided, muttering it under my breath. Annabeth sent me a half-amused ghost of a smile before turning away again.

"It's okay, right?"

"What, that we have to kiss?" I inquired, confused about where she was going with this.

"Yeah," Annabeth replied softly, facing me once more. "Like... do you think it'll change anything?"

"Oh, Annie," I said, dramatically throwing my hand over my heart. "I daresay I'll fall so deeply and irrevocably in love with you after a mere pressing of lips—"

"I'm being serious," Annabeth said, her harsh tone undermined by her smile.

"I, Perseus Jackson, son of Sally Jackson, solemnly swear that Annabeth Chase will remain the same to be before and after any kiss that may occur," I told her, interlocking our pinkies and grinning. Annabeth smiled softly, seemingly relieved.

"Good," she said, tightening her grip on my pinky. "Because actual feelings just complicate things, right?"

"Of course," I replied. I didn't add my next thought: *but sometimes, a little complication is healthy.*

"So, when, do you think?" Annabeth asked, not bothering to disentangle our pinkies. It made me smile, but I didn't want to even consider why. "When should we do that?"

"You can say it, you know," I told her with a laugh. "It's not like the name Voldemo—"

"He who shall not be named!" Annabeth interceded with a smile. I laughed and nodded. "Okay, so, when should we... kiss?"

"Whenever we do," I said with a shrug. "Whenever we feel like it will look okay? I'm not sure. I've never faked a kiss before. Actually," I ameliorated, "that's a lie."

"What do you mean?" Annabeth asked, now taking it upon herself to absentmindedly examine my hand rather than keeping her pinky locked with mine.

"Well, there was this one time in fifth grade," I began, already chuckling at the memory, "when my friend Juniper wanted to see if my best friend Grover liked her."

"Ah," Annabeth said fondly, "the fine middle school years."

"Yeah," I said, laughing. "So, I agreed to help her out, and I kissed her in front of Grover. I got a bruise," I said, smiling warmly at the memory, "but he finally admitted that he liked her."

"Aww, that's cute," Annabeth said, folding all of my fingers to my palm and individually extending them once more. "The things you do for young love. Percy Jackson, you complete saint."

"I know, I know," I said, sighing dramatically. "I'm flawless. It's a bit upsetting, isn't it?" Annabeth sent me a sarcastic look and I grinned. "Tell you what," I said, glancing at the clock. "It's only four o'clock."

"So it is," Annabeth said, casting her gaze at the clock.

"I personally would love to go do something, maybe just a small outing to see a few fans? I feel like maybe we should be really nice for the huge scene we'll be causing in less than five days," I suggested. Annabeth looked contemplative for a few moments before nodding.

"Alright, let's do that," she agreed. "And let's get ice cream."

"You become more and more like me every day," I said with a warm smile. She returned the look, releasing my hand and standing up.

"Come on, Jackson, we've got fans to suck up to."

It was nearing half-six and I'd already taken at least seventy pictures with just me and fans. If I counted the so-called 'Percabeth' photos, I'd have over a hundred, no doubt. We wandered around town

aimlessly; visiting the mall and other teenage-targeted places. I got many startled glances at my drastic hair change, but most of my girls liked it, much to my relief. They'd mostly claimed that it would just take some getting used to.

After much pleading on my part, Annabeth finally agreed to walk the pier with me.

The sun was setting gorgeously, shades of orange, pink and reds spread out across the sky. People were standing all along the edge of the railing and we stopped every once in a while to sign something for a fan or snap a few quick pictures. When we made it to the end of the pier, I sat down, leaning my back against the wooden railing and breathing in the ocean and soaking up the decreasing warmth of the sun.

"This is probably one of my favorite feelings in the world," I shared as I heard Annabeth seat herself next to me. "It's right up there with performing on stage and singing in the shower."

I heard Annabeth laugh, something that sounded almost like a giggle, and I opened one eye to send her a curious look. She returned my gaze with an innocent one and I shook my head with a small smile before leaning my head against the railing once more. I listened to the ocean and Annabeth's calm breathing: two things that brought me the utmost tranquility.

"So, Annabeth Chase," I said suddenly, "tell me a secret."

"About what?" she asked, sounding puzzled by my vague command.

"Anything."

"I don't like the color yellow."

"That's not a secret," I argued, opening my eyes and sending her a narrow eyed glare. "That is a fact."

"I've never seen the movie 'The Godfather'?"

"Once more, that's a fact."

"Well then, care to differentiate between a *fact* and a *secret*?" Annabeth said, sounding mildly irritated.

"A secret is something that you've never told anyone," I explained. "It's something that you've maybe thought in your head, but never actually voiced it. Want an example?"

"That would be helpful," Annabeth said, facing me.

"Annabeth Chase has pretty eyes," I said, pushing her bangs away from her face so that I could see her gray orbs more clearly. "And they're frighteningly easy to get lost in."

"Sap," Annabeth replied, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah," I said with a sigh. "Maybe so. I've always been the hopeless romantic. Anyways, a secret. Do tell."

"Percy Jackson has pretty eyes," Annabeth mocked, dramatically, running her fingers through my eternally knotted hair. I sent her a small glare, seizing her hand. "Fine," Annabeth said, seemingly thinking hard as I released my grip on her hand.

"Just any thought you've ever had," I said, making it seem as nonchalant as possible. It seemed like Annabeth was getting worked up for no reason.

"I literally have no clue what to say right now," Annabeth said, putting a hand to her forehead. "I feel like I'm pretty vocal with my opinions."

"There must have been something, *anything* that you've thought but never said out loud," I urged.

"I miss my mom," Annabeth said suddenly, as though the thought had hit her like a twenty ton wrecking ball rather than a mere pile of bricks. "I miss her. I miss home when she wasn't like how she is now."

Deciding that, if it made her mad, I could always say that I was playing up the affection for the public, I reached out and took Annabeth's hand. "I know what it's like to miss people. And I know how hard it must be for you since you've had close to no stability in your life, but just know that you have me," I said with a shrug. "Even after this is all supposed to be done and over with, you can still talk to me."

"Um, thanks," Annabeth said, seemingly unable to meet my eyes. I squeezed her hand and stood up, assisting her in standing as well. I sent her a sympathetic smile and opened my arms to give her a hug. She rolled her eyes but hugged me anyways, and I looked at the sunset just behind her. It was absolutely gorgeous, and it reminded me of the ends of movies, where the couple walk off happily into the sunset holding hands at the beach—

"Hey, Annabeth," I said, sounding cautious.

"Thinking the same thing as me?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"It would be perfect. We just embraced," I told her dramatically. She smiled and glanced at the sky. "And there's a sunset. And there's lots of fans," I said, glancing back down the pier, seeing fans not-so-discretely watching us. "And now you're smiling."

"Alright. Man up, then," Annabeth said, raising a challenging eyebrow. I raised one back, winking at her.

"I'm not supposed to be the one who kisses you," I said with a smug smirk. "Management only told you."

"Ah, right," Annabeth said, sighing. "I can't. Like, I don't feel like I have a reason to."

"One moment," I said, looking away, and blinking my eyes twice. I looked back at her, knowing that I was giving her my most charming of smiles and that I was gazing deep into her eyes purposefully.

"Huh," Annabeth said, meeting my gaze. "That's very convincing."

"Just wait," I told her. "I'm not done yet."

I cleared my throat softly, wrapping one arm around her lower back and moving her bangs out of her face once more. "You know, you're really beautiful Annabeth," I said softly, meaning every word, but repeating the words I'd said at the firefly place.

I watched Annabeth bite her lip and heard her whisper a curse word before she stood on her tiptoes, leaning up and kissing me.

I wasn't sure whether it was exactly what I was expecting or completely the opposite. She tried to move away almost as quick as she had kissed me, but I pressed my forehead against hers once more, inwardly nodding as I heard shocked gasps. "Encore," I muttered, making Annabeth laugh lightly as I kissed her again, something that I'm sure was cute.

I kissed her once, twice, then started as I heard the distinct cry of a fangirl screaming, "Percabeth!" Immediately, about twenty people shushed the poor girl, and I smiled against Annabeth's lips before pulling away.

"Well, that was fairly painless," Annabeth said, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"You think it looked staged?"

"Who cares? They'll analyze it later. I think they're a bit preoccupied with hyperventilating right now," Annabeth pointed out. I chuckled, slowly breaking our embrace and instantly coughing awkwardly.

"Okay. So. What now?"

"We'll probably be answering a few questions, yeah?"

"Right."

We didn't end up getting home until a full two-hours later, due to so many fangirls asking a million questions. We tried to answer only the ones we knew we could, not wanting to push any limits management didn't want us to. I got a few questions about my hair, but the majority of the conversation topics were Percabeth related.

Clint had called Annabeth about thirty minutes after the kiss, exclaiming about how it was everywhere and very well done. She faked that it was her friend, saying a chorus of, 'yeah, sure, I'll talk to you soon!'

The moment I stepped into the house, I simply laid down on the wood floor. "That was pretty exhausting."

"We got a lot done in one day though," Annabeth said, optimistically. "At least we don't have to stress about the whole kiss thing."

"Well, we may not have to stress about going through with it, but now we hear all the feedback," I mentioned.

"Oh, right! Speaking of feedback, we should call management," Annabeth said, walking into the living room and plopping down on the couch. I pushed myself up off the floor and followed after her, sitting at the end of the couch she was on and not complaining at all when she rested her feet in my lap. It was almost an unspoken reassurance, as if to say, *yeah, things really didn't change*.

"Hello, Clinton," Annabeth said, holding back a laugh. I heard Clint yelling through the phone and I gestured for her to put it on speaker.

"... I swear! You and Percy both!"

"Hello, Clinty-boy," I said, laughing as it caused him to groan once more.

"Wait," Clint said suddenly. "Percy, I need to speak with Annabeth privately."

"Um, he sort of, well, knows," Annabeth said, a bit ungracefully. I sent her a pointed look and she kicked me. I seized hold of her foot, glaring at her and shaking my index finger back and forth. She bit back a laugh and we both noticed that Clint had started speaking.

“... Actually, I don't really want to know how he knows. You guys are okay? Coolio? Fine? It's a done deal?” Clint asked.

“Yep,” Annabeth and I chorused.

“Great,” Clint said, and I could envision him nodding his head. “Try to fly under the radar for a bit. You guys disappearing will make it look like perhaps you weren't supposed to do that.”

“You sound pretty unsure for a manager,” I remarked.

“Percy, I will kill you. Now, goodnight you two,” Clint said, hanging up with finality. Annabeth and I both laughed after seeing the call drop.

“He is simply too amusing to tease,” I commented.

“Agreed,” Annabeth said. “And I don't know about you, but I am quite tired.”

“Ugh, same,” I said, stretching my arms. “I love my girls, but they wear me out.”

“That's cute,” Annabeth said with a smile. “How you call them 'your girls.’” I sent her a smile in return, accepting the quick hug she gave me before bidding me goodnight and retreating to her bedroom.

I sat on the couch for a few minutes more, letting out a huge breath I never knew I'd been holding.

I kissed Annabeth Chase.

Well, Annabeth Chase kissed me, technically, but that's just details.

I'd felt an urge or two before to kiss her, but now that I had, I felt like I'd gotten it out of my system. It was like friends with benefits in a way, except we would really be sticking to the 'no feelings' aspect. And we would only pretend that we had feelings in front of civilization.

I could handle this.

I gave Percy a quick hug and told him goodnight before retreating to my room. I put my hair up in a messy bun as I walked down the hallway, slipping inside my door and closing it behind me. I leaned up against the closed door and sank to the ground slowly, my arms carefully resting on my knees. I picked at a loose thread on my shirt, one that had been bothering me for the whole day.

Well, at least it's over with, I thought to myself.

And yet, I was still stressing over it.

What'd he think of it? Was it weird for him? Was it like kissing his sister? I'm just going to cut back on the affection with him unless we're in front of people. Would it be weird if I asked him how he felt about it?

Annoyed with my inner thoughts, I sighed and picked myself up off the floor, changing into a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt that had no loose threads before walking to my desk to get my computer. I stared blankly at my dark mahogany desk when I saw no silver laptop.

I checked underneath my bed, remembering that I'd put it there once, but came up with nothing. Deciding that I had to have left it somewhere else in the house that wasn't my bedroom, I left the confines of my room and searched in the living room. Percy wasn't in there, so I assumed that he'd already gone to bed. I really didn't want to wake him, but he couldn't be that deep asleep, right? I needed to find my laptop.

Deciding that it was my last resort, I walked down the hall once more to Percy's door. I reached out to open it, but instantly retracted my hand. *Would it be weird if I just walked in there without knocking?* I decided that it probably would be, so I hesitantly knocked on his door. I heard rustling, as though he was getting out of bed, and felt guilty. He opened the door, rubbing his left hand over his face and I smiled apologetically.

"Is my laptop in here?" I asked hopefully.

He shrugged and opened his door wider. "I'm not sure. Feel free to look around though," he offered, walking back to his bed and collapsing on it once more. I cleared my throat and walked in, feeling extremely uncomfortable by invading his privacy. "Annabeth, I gave you permission."

"I know, but it's still weird. I feel like I'm going to see something I'll regret," I admitted with a small laugh.

Percy sat up and winked at me, making me realize that he'd been shirtless this whole time. I blinked at his bare chest, still surprised at his utter perfection body-wise. "Don't worry. I already got rid of all the dead bodies."

I gave him a wide-eyed look. He had been in somewhat of a gang after all. However, he just laughed and shook his head. "Oh, you were kidding," I said, unnecessarily as I started walking around his room and picking up the things off his floor so that I could find my laptop.

"Uh, yeah," Percy said obviously. "I've definitely never killed anyone."

"That's a relief," I said lightly, putting all of his dirty clothes in his hamper. My obsessive compulsive disorder was kicking in a bit, and I simply could not handle the mess that was Percy's room.

"Hey, I had that shirt there for a reason," Percy said, pouting when I picked up a particular blue shirt. I raised an eyebrow, silently questioning. "It was covering up a stain."

I glanced down at the carpet to see a coffee stain and I rolled my eyes. "I'll clean that, too, I suppose."

"You really don't have to clean my room for me," Percy told me, sounding sincere.

"I really can't stand this mess, so yes, actually, I do," I firmly stated. "You know that you have a hamper for a reason, right?"

"I thought it was for decoration," Percy said, his tone completely serious. I blinked at him, wondering if a person could really be that ignorant before deciding that *yes, a person could* and that the one person who was just so happened to be Percy Jackson.

I laughed, almost to myself as I picked up the last article of clothing off the floor and placing it with the other dirty clothes. I picked up a jacket off the chair in the corner of his room and found my laptop underneath it, making me sigh in relief. I really didn't need it to go missing. I was already pretty attached to it.

Taking it upon myself to sit on Percy's bed, on the side he wasn't occupying, I started my computer up, laying the jacket next to me and deciding I'd deal with it later. "Percy," I urged, pushing on his shoulder. "Sit up."

"Why?" he groaned into his pillow.

"Because I'm going to see what's happening on Twitter and I think you should look at it with me. Sit up," I ordered.

"Yes, *Mom*," Percy petulantly said. His hair was sticking up in several directions and I silently compared him to a disgruntled cat. I typed in my password and watched as my desktop loaded. The second my computer was completely started up, I got on Twitter and signed in. I heard Percy laugh next to me and when I glanced over, he was leaning back on his elbows and staring at me blatantly.

"Yes?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nothing, you just looked so... *determined*," Percy said, laughing once more. I gave him an odd look before redirecting my attention to the page now loaded and scrolling through all the tweets for a few moments before finally searching 'Percabeth.' "Ah, the big moment," Percy announced dramatically.

"Wasn't the kiss the big moment?" I inquired, looking over at him. I saw him glance at my lips quite indiscreetly, and awkwardly looked away, letting the question drop. I wasn't sure how I felt about that occurrence, and I wasn't sure if the turning of my stomach was good or bad nerves.

I cleared my throat, reading the first tweets and smiling at how nice they were. When I got to probably the tenth one, I cocked my head to the side as I clicked the link.

It was to a post on someone's blog, and it had these moving pictures—gifs, I think they're called—of me and Percy's kiss. I scrolled down a little, trying to figure out if there was any significance. I'd never really gotten into the whole blogging thing, seeing as I'd heard that it was a major time-consumer.

"*Oh*," Percy said, sounding enlightened.

"What?" I questioned, still looking at the post.

"Remember when we kissed?" Percy asked, glancing over at me.

I gave him a dry look. "Absolutely not."

He rolled his eyes but smiled softly. "Shut up, Chase. Remember when we kissed for the second time? What'd I say right before that?"

I searched through my carefully filed memories. "'Encore,' right?"

"Right," Percy concurred. He pointed to a spot on the screen. "But they think I said 'don't care,'" he explained. "And that's good, because they all assume I'm saying something like, 'oh, I don't care that people are going to find out.'"

"*Oh*," I said, understanding. "Well, that works out well." Percy nodded in agreement as I exited out of the newly opened tab and returned to Twitter. Many were claiming that they'd known all along that we were together, and the ones saying we were officially the cutest thing ever made me smile for no reason.

We read all the tweets for a while, retweeting one or two that were either really nice or hilarious. Eventually, Percy and I decided that I should tweet him something to confirm everything.

"Say, 'the secret's out,' but make it all love-ish. I have an idea," Percy told me, grabbing his phone off his nightstand. I nodded, tweeting him just that with an added 'babe' and a few letter x's. I leaned closer to Percy so I could see what he was typing but he positioned the phone so that I couldn't see. I scowled at him for a moment before scrolling through tweets once more.

I yawned, deciding that I was actually pretty tired despite the fact that it was only eight-thirty at night. I refreshed my feed, Percy's tweet appearing at the top of the page.

' *@Annabeth_Chase Don't care. The world needed to know that you're mine. x'*

I rolled my eyes, sending him a sideways look. "Sap." He grinned. "But the 'don't care' is a nice touch. It's almost confirming that it's really what you said, though it's not."

"Exactly," Percy agreed, yawning like I had a few moments ago. He groaned and let his head fall against his headboard. "I feel like never moving again."

"Me either," I coincided. "It has been a long day." Percy sighed in response and I logged out of my Twitter account, shutting down my computer.

I started to stand to leave his room, but Percy grabbed my wrist. I looked at him and rubbed my eyes. "Percy, I'm tired."

"So sleep in here," Percy suggested casually. "I'm still talking to you." His words were slow and slightly slurred, and I knew that he might say two words to me before passing out. "Come on, I owe you for that one time I slept in your room. Just this once, okay?"

I hesitated still and Percy yanked my wrist, urging me to lay down. I sighed, deciding that it couldn't hurt, and placed my laptop on his nightstand. I got underneath his comforter, which was perfectly fluffy. I turned on my side, knowing that it was the only way I could fall asleep. I jumped a bit when out of nowhere, I felt Percy's leg intertwine with mine. "I don't have the plague, Chase," Percy said sarcastically. "You really don't have to be on the edge of the bed."

I gave an uneasy laugh, moving about an inch closer. Percy sighed, irritated, pulling me until my head was resting on his chest. "I cuddle when I sleep, and you're going to have to deal with it," Percy told me teasingly. I could almost imagine him rolling his eyes beneath his closed eyelids. I decided that the nerves in my stomach definitely had to be the bad kind. I wasn't comfortable with this.

And yet, I pushed my face closer into Percy's chest, sighing as he started rubbing my upper arm. "Night, Chase."

"Night, Jackson."

"I fake-love you," he said, laughing. I grinned.

"I fake-love you, too," I replied with a chuckle.

I don't think I've ever slept so soundly.

I awoke with a start. Percy seemed to wake up as well, groaning and shoving a pillow over his head. I processed the fact that there was someone ringing the doorbell and I jumped up. "No, leave it."

"I have to get the door," I said, rolling my eyes at Percy's laziness. I briskly walked down the hallway, taking a right and opening the door as the person relentlessly continued to ring the doorbell. "Yes?" I answered, sounding mildly aggravated.

"Yay, it's management!" Clint cheered, walking inside. I glanced past him, looking for Stan.

"Where's Stan?"

"I'll explain in a second," Clint said. "Where's Percy?"

"He's busy being annoyed with you for waking him and Annabeth up from their very peaceful sleep!" Percy shouted, making his way slowly down the hallway.

"Annabeth slept this late?" Clint asked, raising an eyebrow as he walked into the kitchen. I followed him and my eyes widened as I saw the time.

"It's one o'clock," I said, blinking. "I slept until one o'clock. I don't think I've ever done that."

"Must have been an exhausting day," Clint said, raiding our fridge.

"Either that or I magically inherit Percy's laziness when I sleep with him," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Probably that," Percy said with a grin as he entered the kitchen. "Goodmorning, babe. Goodmorning, Clinton."

Clint looked at both of us with raised eyebrows. "You guys *slept* together?"

I felt myself blush, much against my will. "Not like *that*," I replied. "We just slept. In the same bed. But nothing happened."

"Oh," Clint said, sounding mildly relieved. "But you still slept together."

"In a totally platonic way," Percy assured him, going to drink the orange juice out of the carton. I gave him a sharp look and he sighed, getting out a glass. I briefly thought that all his cuddling didn't feel exactly platonic, but I pushed the wandering thought away.

"Where's Stan?" Percy asked, mimicking my words from earlier. I looked at Clint expectantly. Percy started making us breakfast, giving me a wink as he put on his apron. I wasn't sure what the wink was for, but I gave him my best unamused face. He grinned. I turned my attention to Clint once more, only to see him glancing wearily between the two of us. I heard Percy start singing underneath his breath.

"Clint? Where's Stan?" I questioned once more.

"Oh, he's... well, Annabeth, I'm afraid that he retired." I felt my jaw drop. "Actually, he quit."

"Why?" I stammered, closing my jaw with a snap. I scowled into air, wondering if it was because of me.

"Family issues, apparently. He had to go back home to Boston," Clint answered apologetically. "I'm really sorry."

"No, it's cool," I said, still feeling a bit shocked. The one person who'd been there for me every step of the way for fame had quit on me. I couldn't help but feel bitter and abandoned. "What now, though?"

"Well, that's why I'm here!" Clint said happily, sanding his hands together. "I have a few options for you."

"Okay." I gestured for him to carry on.

"Well, for one, you can just request a new manager. There's plenty of people out there needing a job." Clint cleared his throat. "*Or*, you can put in a request for me to be your manager. I mean, only if you want to. I won't be offended if you don't, of course. I just feel like it'd be easier to just have one person for the both of you, that way I don't have to talk to other people, you know?"

"I never knew you were antisocial!" Percy exclaimed, rubbing Clint's shoulder. "Poor baby." He pouted as Clint shoved him off and rolled his eyes.

"It'd just be easier, if you think about it. Even if it's just until *this*," Clint told me, gesturing between both Percy and I, "is over. After that you can get a different one."

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed with a shrug. "Plus, I really don't feel like having to meet a new person and have to awkwardly get to know and trust them."

Clint smiled. "Cool."

"Cool," I concurred.

"Cool," Percy interceded. I raised an eyebrow at him and he shrugged. "I just want to fit in." I laughed and rolled my eyes, setting about making coffee.

"Well, that's all I was here for really. I can take care of the request for you, if you'd like? They'll probably just call you for confirmation or something," Clint said, checking for my approval. I gave my consent. "Any questions? Comments? Concerns?"

"How's the world dealing with all this Percabeth?" Percy asked, smiling at me.

"Millions of fangirls worldwide fainted," Clint joked. I grinned along with Percy. "Oh, and the tweets last night—"

"Sorry! We probably should have checked to make sure that was okay," Percy said, turning around from the stove where he was making eggs and looking apprehensive.

Clint simply shook his head. "Nah, it was fine. Just no outings for a few days, okay?" We both nodded dutifully. Clint waved to both of us, bidding us adieu and leaving.

I pushed myself up on the counter after making us both cups of the already brewed coffee. Percy took a sip of his, sighing contently. "You've done it yet again, Chase."

"Done what?" I questioned, drinking my own coffee.

"Made my coffee perfectly," Percy complimented. "It's great. Thanks, babe." I nodded my thanks as Percy started singing again, louder now. I smiled softly at his careless singing. Punching his arm when he kept changing the lyrics to relate to me and my 'grey eyes.'

About ten minutes of Percy singing the worst songs ever, and me constantly rolling my eyes or injuring him for singing those terrible songs, breakfast was on the table. "Straight out of the famous Percy Jackson Kitchen," Percy announced dramatically, gesturing to the plate in front of me. I raised an eyebrow and ate my admittedly delicious food in record time. "Babe, you are starting to become so much like me," Percy said fondly, ruffling my hair.

"I am not your pet dog," I scolded, seizing his hand and removing it from my hair.

Percy snorted. "Yeah, I know. My pet dog would have been a lot more receiving to the petting." I sighed at his sarcasm. "What are we doing today?"

"Staying in," I told him, picking up both of our cleared plates and coffee cups. I took them to the sink and rinsed them off before loading the dishwasher.

"Obviously," Percy said, shooting me a sarcastic and amused look. I found myself staring at the odd color they were once more, now knowing why I'd always seen hints of blue and green in his prominently brown eyes. Percy's eyes really were gorgeous, no matter how many times I'd said such things sarcastically. At first glance, you assumed they were green, but the longer you stared into them, the bluer they got. "I know I'm gorgeous, babe, but this intent staring is making me self-conscious."

"Please," I said, rolling my eyes. "People stare at you everywhere you go."

"And why's that?" Percy questioned, seemingly already knowing the answer.

"Because you're so unbearably sexy, Percy," I said dryly, knowing that it was exactly the reply he was expecting.

"Aww, thanks, baby!" Percy said flirtatiously, winking at me. I closed the dishwasher and ignored him. "Seriously, though, back to the original question before we got sidetracked with how amazing I am, what are we doing today?"

I leaned against the counter, thinking. "Well, I am personally going to clean, but you can do whatever you want."

"No, Annabeth!" Percy whined. "Don't do stuff on the few days we're going to have off. Let's be lazy."

"I think I've been lazy enough," I said with a scoff. "I slept until one o'clock."

"Oh, well, look, you've already broken your strict schedule today, might as well not even try to get back on track," Percy said, shocking me by sweeping me up into his arms without blinking an eye. I protested, slapping his chest, which he didn't even react to, and threatening to kill him in his sleep. "No," Percy said firmly as I tried to get up right after he sat me down on the couch. "Please." He pouted pitifully and I scowled at him.

"Why would you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Pout! You know that I can't say no when you pout! It's an unfair advantage," I argued, shoving him. He smiled at me, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

"Aww, you have a weakness with me. That's cute," Percy said, decidedly sitting on my lap since I relentlessly tried to escape him.

"Oh my god, Percy, get up, *now!*" I shouted, pushing on his back.

"Promise me you'll stay!"

"I promise! Now move!" I urged, putting all the pressure I could on his back. "God, how much do you weigh?"

"Are you calling me fat?" Percy asked, sounding highly offended as he finally removed himself from my lap, only to lay his legs across me.

I rolled my eyes, gesturing to his still bare chest. "Seriously Percy? Anyone with eyes can tell that you aren't fat."

"I see someone's been admiring my gorgeous abs," Percy muttered, picking up the remote and turning on the television. He soon after stretched halfway off the couch to retrieve the Wii remote. I pretended that he never made his last comment as we browsed through movies. We disagreed on every movie one of us suggested, so finally, after I was too exasperated to argue, Percy turned on Spongebob.

"You're such a kid," I told him.

"So I've heard," he said with a wink in my direction.

After we watched a total of three episodes and I felt my brain cells literally dying off, I stole the Wii remote and argued that I was turning something of quality on.

Scrolling through the genres, I stopped and grinned. Percy was answering a text message as I clicked on the movie I decided I wanted to watch.

"This one looks really good," I told him as he glanced back at the screen, which has just gone black. A few minutes later, the screen lit up with an arena of screaming fans and a superbly energetic teenage popstar on the screen.

I laughed as I heard Percy groan. "Seriously? My tour movie? Who are you?"

"I want to see how you sound live," I told him poshly.

"You've been to one of my concerts, I'm sure," Percy said blankly. I glared at him. I tried to suppress my Percy Jackson Fangirl days. "Plus, you get a few live concerts every day. When I shower, for instance."

"When you cook anything," I added. "You simply cannot cook without singing."

I glanced back at the screen, hearing Percy introduce his band and saying hello to the crowd. I imagined myself being the one on the stage, with thousands of people there simply to hear me sing. It honestly gave me chills, just thinking about it. I bet the experience was as good as it gets. I turned to Percy, asking him what it was like.

He smiled, something that looked almost unconscious, and I knew that it was something he loved more than anything. "It's a giant adrenaline rush," Percy shared, watching the screen, almost looking like he was reminiscing. "I mean, you just feel so... overwhelmed. There's thousands of people in an arena. The whole place is completely packed and it's so loud you can hardly hear yourself, but it doesn't really matter. It's honestly the best feeling. You're going to love it."

"You really think I'll fill up arenas that big?" I asked, giving him a skeptical look.

"Even bigger," Percy replied, sounding doubtless. "And besides, we'll be on tour together, so even if you can't fill up arenas, you have me as a backup," Percy added cockily. I shook my head at his relentless confidence, focusing on the screen once more. He was singing a cheesy song about a girl that he was apparently going to make his. I started laughing after a ridiculously cliché lyric.

"Seriously? These lyrics are possibly the worst thing I've ever heard," I said, not meaning to sound harsh. Percy didn't seem to take any offense though, as he laughed along with me.

"I know, right? I'm surprised anyone listens to my music at all." I turned towards him.

"I mean, the lyrics are terrible, but you make it work, somehow," I told him with a shrug.

"I know," Percy said. I gave him a disbelieving glance.

"You are so unbelievably cocky," I said astounded.

"Ah, it's all part of my charm," Percy replied, sending me another wink. I pretended to cringe and Percy kicked my leg, calling me an obscene name. I leaned over, petting his hair softly and nearly wanting to laugh as he closed his eyes and sighed, much like a cat. I yanked his hair just as he was getting comfortable and he flinched, glaring at me. "You are the worst person I know."

"Ah, it's all part of my charm," I mocked. Percy sent me another fierce look. I laughed slightly, noting that he looked like a puppy dog trying to be angry. And then I thought that I should maybe stop with all these Percy-animal analogies.

"Can we not watch this anymore?" Percy asked, purposefully pouting at me. I sighed and dropped the remote on his chest, blinking when it sounded like it hit a rock. He waited for the genres to load once more and went straight to the action movies. We finally decided to watch 'Ocean's Eleven' after I told him that it was my favorite movie. "Why do you like all the movies that you actually have to pay attention to in order to understand them?"

"Why do you like all the movies that someone with literally no brain could watch and understand?" I retorted.

“Touché,” Percy relented. “I’m getting a blanket while this loads.”

“Bring me one,” I called after him.

“We’re sharing, babe,” he answered. I sighed, deciding that I was doing a very poor job of minimizing contact with Percy when we weren’t in front of civilization. It was really hard to break a habit once you started it, I guess.

It’s fine, I thought, inwardly reassuring myself. *Just no kissing. Not even on the cheek. That’s when it looks less than platonic.*

Percy returned with a blanket and a shirt on, thankfully. It could be a bit distracting, at times. “So, are we going for the couch or sprawling out on the floor?”

“I don’t know. Depends. Are you planning on eating again?” Percy gave me a blank stare. “Right, of course. What a pointless question...” I chuckled. “Sprawling out on the floor.”

“Wise choice,” Percy said with a nod, laying out one blanket he’d brought on the ground. He retrieved two pillows off the couches and laid them in front of the blanket laid out. He gestured for me to come lay by him and I retrieved the remote before settling down next to him, laying on my stomach like he was. I pressed play after we situated the blanket and ourselves.

I was instantly absorbed in my favorite movie, noticing a few things here and there that I’d never noticed before. It was crazy, how after seeing something a million times, you could still find something new—a new meaning, a new word you now understood, a new motive behind people’s actions.

“This is so boring,” Percy groaned ten minutes into the movie. I rolled my eyes. “Are there no females?”

“Julia Roberts, soon,” I promised. He sighed and resituated himself. Inwardly, I thought about how irritating his impatience was.

Twenty minutes later, Percy was leaning forward, completely taken with the movie. I smiled and rolled my eyes almost fondly. Percy played the part of a live audience, laughing, ‘aww’ing, and gasping at all the right parts. Near the end, when the plan was revealed, I watched as Percy’s jaw dropped. “All along... so, they already robbed them? What?”

“Yep,” I said, nodding.

“That is genius,” he said, in complete awe. He watched the remainder of the movie, but I found myself begrudgingly glancing over at him nearly every ten seconds to watch his facial expressions flicker. When the credits started playing, Percy buried his face into his pillow. “I am so mind-blown right now.”

“That’s what happens when you watch movies that actually have a plot,” I told him sarcastically. He sent me a glare with no bite behind it, and we both ventured into the kitchen. I retrieved a glass of water and Percy raided both the fridge and the pantry for junk food. After he had a good assortment of things, he carried about twenty different food items into the living room and dropped it all unceremoniously on the floor.

“What’s next?” he asked, already looking through the lists once more.

“Your pick,” I said with a shrug. He nodded, almost to himself, instantly picking a random cartoon movie.

“You are such a—”

“Sex god. I know, babe.”

After a week of pretty much staying inside apart from a coffee outing or two and grocery shopping, Clint arrived at our early one morning and told us that we should start going out more often once more.

“However, I think I need to see something first,” Clint said, raising a challenging eyebrow. “Both of you, stand.” We followed directions and I adjusted the old hoodie I was wearing. “Now, hold hands.”

“What?” Percy and I asked simultaneously.

“Believe it or not,” Clint said drily, “couples do hold hands. Come on. You guys have kissed. Just, hold hands.” I felt Percy's hand slip easily into mine, intertwining our fingers and squeezing my hand softly, almost as if he were apologizing. Before I had time to wonder about that, Clint sighed. “Can we look a little less awkward? Stand closer? Something?”

Percy moved to stand closer to me. “So, just take a chance, try to hold my hand,” Percy sang in a falsetto voice. I rolled my eyes.

“Do not sing 'Oh Darling' to me,” I said dryly, feeling the awkwardness fall away.

“Oh, darling, I love you so,” Percy sang, laughing. I nudged him with our intertwined hands.

“Stop,” I ordered.

He winked at me. “Babe, your wish is my command.”

“In that case, please, stop talking,” I answered sarcastically.

“Ah, I've always been more of a man of action,” Percy said, waggling his eyebrows. I scoffed but smiled nonetheless.

“Lovely,” Clint interjected, making me jump. “Convincing. You guys are good. Can I see a hug?” I let go of Percy's hand, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and burying my face in his chest. He leaned into my hair and put his arms around me. “That was perfect!” Clint praised.

“It's not the first time we've hugged,” Percy said sarcastically, speaking into my hair. We both stepped away from the hug.

“Is it weird if I ask to see you guys kiss each other on the cheek?”

“A little,” I admitted.

“Sorry about that,” Clint said, gesturing for us to complete the action anyways. Percy rolled his eyes, obviously hating the fact that he was having to follow orders, and leaned down, kissing me on the cheek. “Annabeth,” Clint prompted.

“He's too tall,” I grumbled as I had to pull Percy down about an inch to my level as I stood on my tip-toes. Clint nodded in approval.

"And I'm guessing you guys can handle the occasional kiss? Yes? No?"

"We'll be fine," Percy said, speaking for both of us. "Right?" he questioned, turning to me. We were still standing close together from our earlier actions, our arms brushing each other. I hated how aware I was of that fact.

"Right," I finally said, a bit delayed. Percy gave me a look, and I knew he'd ask me about my hesitation as soon as we got rid of Clint.

"Alright," Clint decided. "My work is done here. Feel free to do whatever you want to day. Be in love."

"Yeah, yeah, we know, goodbye Clinton," Percy said, already rushing him towards the door. I heard them talking in hushed voices for a few seconds, which bothered me, but I decided I probably didn't want to know. Percy walked back into the living room, where we'd presently been and sat down on the couch, gesturing for me to sit next to him. "What's up?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, already knowing what he meant.

"Annabeth, come on."

"Nothing's wrong."

"Says every girl *ever* when something is bothering them! Are you having second thoughts or something? Because seriously, we don't have to be that affectionate. We really don't even have to kiss or anything. Plenty of couples do that when they're in public. You know you can tell me if you feel uncomfortable, right?" Percy worried.

"Percy, I'm fine," I promised. "Just adjusting between friends and now being *together*. It's... different." Percy tossed an arm over my shoulder.

"We can handle this," Percy said firmly. "Especially you."

"Why 'especially me'?" I inquired, leaning my head on his shoulder, deciding that I should start getting a bit less uptight about the affection.

"Because you're the strongest, most relentless, determined person I know. So, I know you can do this, even if I can't," Percy told me. I glanced up at him and he glanced down at me with a slightly awkward smile.

"Thanks."

He nodded. "Anytime."

"You're irritatingly nice sometimes."

"You're irritatingly ungrateful sometimes," Percy responded, childishly sticking his tongue out at me. "So, ready for our first outing as a couple?"

We'd decided on walking aimlessly around the streets until we found something to do, since we were completely out of ideas. As soon as we stepped outside, Percy grabbed my hand, catching my eyes and giving me a look. "Just let me know if you're uncomfortable."

I nodded. "I will." He grinned at me. "Ready for reactions?"

"Only the good ones," Percy replied. He gripped my hand tighter, pulling me along after him until I caught up. We smiled at the few paparazzi hanging nearby, waving with our free hands. We continued down the road and I was surprised at the amount of photos being taken of us. I was bothered by that, especially since if Percy and I really *were* a couple, not being able to go anywhere without being photographed every two steps would be a major hassle.

I squeezed Percy's hand, letting him know that I was getting a little self-conscious with all the photography. I glanced up at him with a smile and he sent me one as well, nodding his head almost imperceptibly to show that he got the message.

He pulled me into the next door he saw, which just so happened to be this random boutique with lots of pretty dresses and overly girly jewelry. I started laughing, and Percy glared at me. "*Great* choice," I emphasized. He nudged me with his elbow, looking around the store.

"Just until they leave, or most of them anyways," Percy assured me, nodding to the outdoors. The boutique was already fairly small, and I'm guess thing paparazzi already knew, because they didn't even attempt to come inside.

"Hey guys! Welcome to Sparkle! Can I help you with anything?" The girl who greeted us was gorgeous, but looked like she hid under layers of make-up. I briefly wondered why, since it seemed like she'd be the type to have natural beauty. "Oh, I'm Drew by the way!"

"Percy Jack—"

"Duh," Drew said, rolling her eyes. "And you're Annabeth. You guys are everywhere. You're really cute, by the way."

"Thanks," Percy answered with a seemingly genuine smile. He looked down at me, and I noticed he was doing that thing with his eyes again—where he made them sparkle and look charming. "We were a little worried about how everyone would take it."

"Well, everyone's thought you were together since day one, so..." Drew trailed off with a shrug. "Obviously everyone thinks you're adorable. Plus, Percy, you sort of look at Annabeth like she's the bane of your existence, and Annabeth, you do the same to him, so it's kind of hard *not* to think you guys are cute."

I wondered if the blush on my cheeks was me forcing myself to, unconsciously, or my actual reaction to her words. "Thank you," I said squeezing Percy's hand. He returned the gesture, a silent reassurance.

"Drew," Percy said politely. "I promise to do something nice for you if you give us a way to escape the paparazzi. Have a back way, or something?"

"Oh, of course," Drew offered. "But what are you going to do?"

"I'll follow you on Twitter. Or sign something. Or both. And I'll take a picture with you? Or all of them?" Percy proposed. Drew seemed to think.

"That'll do." Percy gave her a sweet smile, and I accepted the phone Drew held out to me. Luckily, it was an iPhone, so I didn't have to question her about how to work the camera. I counted backwards from three and took a picture of them, taking an extra just in case Drew didn't like the first one. After

Percy got her Twitter username, followed her, and signed a scratch piece of paper for her, Drew led us to the back way.

"It was really great, seeing how you two really don't let the fact that you're famous go to your head, you know? You guys are just... normal. It's nice to see in celebrities, especially people as famous as you," Drew said with a smile. We both thanked her as we slipped out the backdoor, which led us into an alleyway. I didn't care for the darkness, especially since it looked sketchy.

Percy took hold of my hand, and I wasn't sure if it was because he thought I needed the comfort, because he needed the assurance, or if he was just keeping up public appearances. Now that I thought about it, it would be much harder to differentiate between real affection and fake affection now.

Or maybe, they were becoming one and the same. Real was becoming forced and fake, and sometimes the fake was becoming real.

I scowled at the thought, but Percy's voice broke me out of my thoughts as we reached the place where the alley led back out to the street. "Stop being all scowl-y. Smile. You're in love with me. I'm sexy."

I snorted and grinned nonetheless. "Speaking of how *sexy* you are," I started, "how's your major crush on me doing?"

Percy glanced down at me, rolling his eyes, but smiling. "I don't have a crush on you," Percy digressed.

"Oh, sure," I replied sarcastically. "Because you *totally* weren't having trouble keeping it together after I called you sexy."

"I was fine," Percy urged, leading us to a small park with a few fountains. We'd been there once before. "Just surprised."

"So being surprised makes you sexually frustrated?"

"Excuse me?" Percy asked, his voice rising several octaves.

I laughed. "Nothing, nothing."

He gave me an incredulous look, chuckling after. "I cannot believe you just said that."

"So it is true!" I accused, hitting his chest with our intertwined hands. He glared softly at me, swinging our hands back and forth.

"I don't have a crush on you! It's like how you don't have a crush on me, but you think I'm sexy," Percy reasoned.

"So you think I'm sexy?" I questioned, staring up at him innocently. I inwardly high-fived myself for the blush that appeared on his cheeks. "You so do!"

"Of course I do, you're my girlfriend," Percy said with a wink.

"Avoiding the actual question," I said under my breath.

"I don't think you're sexy," Percy said, stopping in his tracks by a random tree. "Or hot, or any other derogatory way of calling women attractive."

"Oh, look at Percy, what a gentleman," I joked.

"I am a gentleman," Percy said, sounding offended. "I would be more of a gentleman if you didn't play 'hard to please.'"

"I don't play 'hard to please,'" I denied.

"Sure," Percy said sarcastically. "You are never satisfied. And when you are, you never voice it. You don't like anyone knowing that you actually appreciate things."

"Maybe because every time I did those things were taken away from me," I said, my brow furrowing, partially in anger and partially out of being hurt. "Nevermind. Just... forget it. You wouldn't understand." I started to walk again, but Percy seized my hand, his eyes sincere.

"Hey, look, let's not fight."

"Says the guy who started the argument," I retorted.

"Annabeth," Percy said softly. "Come on."

"You don't get it," I whispered urgently. "It's just like how I didn't get your old life until you explained it. You won't get mine until I tell you the full story, and I never will!"

"Why?" Percy said, seemingly insulted once more.

"Because I could never trust someone like you with something like that," I replied honestly.

"Someone like me?" Percy asked, his jaw clenched. His eyes were a dark blue, and I instantly knew that they were only that color when Percy was mad.

"Someone temporary." I almost winced at the hurt that flashed in his eyes, but instead I steeled myself. "This doesn't last forever, Jackson. I can't just bare my soul to you. After we're through, who knows what'll happen? What if we end up hating each other? You'll use it against me, I'm sure."

"Annabeth, you know I wouldn't do that! I can't believe you think that I... Do you not trust me?" Percy questioned, pain lacing his voice.

"I trust you with the unimportant things." I knew I was being harsh, but I had to let him know that he didn't mean that much to me. My world didn't revolve around Percy Jackson. I was independent.

"Your friend dying is an unimportant thing?" Percy inquired, his jaw still clenched and his eyes cold.

I felt honest pain in my chest for the memory. "How dare you?" I asked softly. "Why would you even take it that far, Percy?" I saw his eyes soften, but my glare only got harsher. "Who do you even think you are? You think you can just say things like that? She was *my best friend*, Percy! The wound still hasn't healed!" I heard my voice get louder, and Percy gave me an annoyed look.

He stepped closer to me, but I took a step back. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me tightly.

"You're going to kill me later for this," Percy said, sending me a glare, as though it was my fault that he was acting the way he was. He backed me up against the tree. "Stop talking."

And then I was kissing Percy Jackson, and I wasn't even sure why.

My first instinct was to push him off, but I knew that Clint would kill me if I did. Percy was kissing me forcefully, and instead of a nice, almost friendly kiss like the ones we shared at the pier, I knew that this one was out of anger. This was a frustrated, an almost hateful kiss. Rather than pushing him away like

every cell in my body wanted me to, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his hair much harsher than necessary. He pressed his lips harder to mine, and I knew that they would be bruised.

Deciding that I couldn't let him win the silent argument, I kissed him back just as hard, keeping my grip in his hair. He broke the kiss momentarily, and we both struggled for breath.

"You're such a bitch."

"I could say the same for you," I replied with an affronted expression. His eyes darkened with anger.

"No one can ever have the last word besides you, can they?" Percy asked, his tone vitriolic.

I smiled, sickeningly sweet. "Nope. Any particular reason why you kissed me?"

"Any particular reason why you kissed me back?"

"I couldn't let you win."

"Win what?" Percy asked, sounding exasperated.

"That wasn't a nice kiss," I pointed out.

"Because I was obviously mad," Percy responded.

"So, please, take it out on me!" I replied, rolling my eyes. Percy looked contemplative.

"It actually did help a little," he admitted with a shrug. "I feel less... frustrated. Less angry."

"And now I'm your punching bag," I said sarcastically.

"I've never kissed my punching bags," Percy said with a wink. I felt myself start to smile and I instantly diffused it.

I shoved his chest, but not hard enough so that he'd back away. Clint wouldn't like that. So, I pushed him just hard enough so that he'd know I was still mad. "You're really rude, you know?"

"Yep," Percy said, kissing my cheek unexpectedly and hesitantly taking my hand. I could tell by the slightly tighter grip of his hand that he wasn't exactly done being upset. "Back to playing the part of happy couple, not angsty teenagers." He sent me a smile, one that seemed unsure, I softly returned an identical grin.

It was completely out of line for him to mention Silena, but I did feel a bit less angry after that... occurrence. It was almost like I just took a jog—something that helped me blow off steam. *I'll just take a jog next time*, I decided, touching my lips softly and wincing at the pain Percy's bittersweet kiss had brought.

We both knew that we'd have to talk about the whole happening later, but for right then, I lost myself in a fake smile and counterfeit love for Percy Jackson.

My hand felt tense and awkward in Annabeth's as we walked up the steps to our apartment. I felt relieved when I had an excuse to release her hand; someone had to unlock the door. I pushed it open after turning the key, holding the door for Annabeth to walk first. She glared at me, storming past and taking a direct right into the kitchen.

I sighed, letting myself in and locking the door behind me. After the key was placed on the table where I always left it, I cautiously ventured into the kitchen.

Annabeth was leaning against the counter, scowling at the opposite wall, and by the looks of it, she was brewing coffee. I stood opposite of her, but farther away in case she tried to hit me. When I intercepted her line of vision, she rolled her eyes at me. "So, we're talking about this I guess?"

"What do you think needs to be talked about?" I asked her, fidgeting with my hands just so I could have something to do.

"This isn't working out," Annabeth stated bluntly.

"It's been one day," I reasoned. My anger had wore off, and now I felt guilty and a bit awkward around Annabeth. I didn't care for the feeling. It took so long to get as beautifully comfortable as we are, and I feel like I've completely thrown all our hard work out the window. "We can't give up after one bad experience."

"Well, this one experience was bad enough to count for ten, you think?" Annabeth's back was now to me as she formulated herself a cup of coffee.

I scowled at her. "It could have been worse. We could have yelled louder or seriously injured each other."

"My lips are fairly bruised," Annabeth mentioned lightly. I glanced down at them, noting that they looked the slightest bit purple. I knew mine were bruised as well.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I just...got really mad. I lose myself a little, you know? Remember our first big fight? It's just like that. I wasn't thinking when I left and just ran. I needed to take my frustration out somehow." I shrugged after all my honesty.

"So, once more, please take it out on me," Annabeth scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"It won't happen again," I promised. Annabeth raised an eyebrow. "Or at least not often. Just don't provoke me when we're supposed to be couple-y. It causes irrational reactions."

"Whatever," Annabeth sighed. "But I'm still unhappy with you."

"Same here," I told her, leveling our gazes. We had a small staring competition until Annabeth averted her eyes to take a sip of her coffee. I watched her for a few moments until I felt creepy, then I retreated to the living room. I decided to play some games on my phone, but as I unlocked the screen, I saw that I had seven missed calls. They were all from Mom.

Silently scolding myself for leaving my cell phone on silent, I redialed Mom's number and tried not to worry too hard.

She picked up on the third ring. Before I could even ask her if she was okay, Mom started firing off question after question.

"Are you okay? You weren't answering. Are you dating Annabeth now? I thought you guys were just friends. How is she? When do I get to meet her? Is she nice? Why didn't you tell me you guys were dating? Why didn't you let me know you were dying your hair back—"

"Mom!"

"Yes, baby?"

"You done?" I asked her, rubbing my temples. I could practically feel her warm smile through the phone, which relaxed me a bit. I laid back on the couch, one leg laying on the couch and one falling to the floor. I frowned, but decided I was too lazy to fix my position.

"Oh, of course, dear. You know, you should call me more often," my mom mentioned lightly. She hated to complain, and hated being a burden to anyone. I felt guilt wash over me like a ten-foot wave. Mom was completely right. It really wouldn't hurt to call her more. It wasn't even the fact that I was low on free-time; there's always car rides or five to ten minutes in the morning.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I said softly. I missed her more than anything, and I'd been so selfish—not answering her calls or taking the initiative to call her.

"Oh, sweetheart, it's fine! I don't blame you, Percy. I bet it's busy. Just don't forget about old Mom over here," she said with a light laugh. I grinned and closed my eyes, wishing that I could magically teleport through the phone so I could hug my mother right now.

"You aren't old," I told her. "Don't look a day over eighteen."

"Well, sadly I am, and I can spot someone who's trying to avoid the topic pretty easily. What's with this Annabeth issue, Percy?" Mom asked. She didn't sound rude or pressing; she sounded like the caring and worried mother I'd always known.

"Yes, we are dating,"—Mom shouted an 'I knew it!'—"and I think you guys should meet each other."

It was shocking, the speed at which we organized a dinner party. The next evening—the only evening for the next two weeks that there wasn't either an interview or a performance—would be the evening that Annabeth and I joined Mom for dinner. Paul was on a business trip.

It was completely ridiculous, but I was actually nervous. I know, it's weird to think about. I'm Percy Jackson. I'm the confident, maybe a little cocky, never-unsure-of-anything guy.

And yet, I was worried if my mother would like my fake-girlfriend.

When I woke up on the morning of the day of the family dinner, I immediately left my room to find Annabeth and pass on the information that we were busy tonight. It'd completely slipped my mind last night, especially since Annabeth had holed herself up in her room.

I knocked on her door for a good two minutes before the thought occurred to me that she wasn't in there. I sighed, padding into the kitchen and hoping she was being the amazing fake-girlfriend she was and making me coffee.

However, all I found was a note.

'Percy, I have an acoustic performance and a radio interview this morning. I'll be back by noon, which is probably soon if you're finally awake. Don't miss me too much. I fake-love you, Annabeth. x'

I smiled at the note, simply because I'd read it in the tone of voice I knew she'd be using. I glanced at the time, noticing that Annabeth wasn't completely wrong. It was half-eleven. I picked the note, written in Annabeth's careful print, and folded it a few times before stowing it away in the junk drawer.

It was weird to consider what would happen after our contracts are up, but I knew that I would want at least a few small memories of her. Annabeth was one of those people who just *fell* into your life so easily. Once she was there, you can't imagine life without her, or remember what it was like before you knew her. Annabeth made an impression.

I drummed my fingers on the counter for a few moments, the apartment feeling creepily empty without Annabeth here. I finally approached the fridge, deciding on cold pizza and orange juice. I almost drank out of the carton, but I could practically hear Annabeth scolding me, so I decided to get an actual glass.

The silence as I started eating made me uncharacteristically uncomfortable, so I took it upon myself to watch television while I ate my fill of cold pizza. The show I ended up watching didn't make much sense and had no plot really, but it was loud and colorful and just enough to keep me entertained.

I was so immersed in the show and chilled pizza that I nearly fell off the couch when I heard the front door open. Taking a deep breath and calming my heart rate from the scare, I called out, "hey, babe!"

"Hey."

I jumped once more, noting that the voice definitely wasn't Annabeth's. I sat up, eyes wide at the intruder. Mere moments later, I was catapulting myself over the side of the couch and attacking my friend in a fairly impressive hug.

"Grover!" I shouted unnecessarily.

"Percy, get off me!" he called back, sounding short of oxygen. I rolled off of him, laughing and still having a temporary high from seeing my best friend after so long.

"You're so tall," I said in amazement as Grover stood with my help. "And look at that goatee," I whistled. "Impressive. What're you doing here?"

"Glad to see you, too," Grover retorted sarcastically.

I raised an eyebrow. "Do you need me to do the run and jump hug *again*?"

"Touché," Grover sighed. "You win." I grinned. "And I just stopped by to visit. I was hoping to meet your girlfriend."

"Gotta check out the competition?" I asked him with a wink. He hardly reacted, much to used to my suggestive and flirtatious ways.

"Of course, Percy," he replied jokingly. I laughed and waved him into the kitchen.

"Well, she's at this interview-performance thing, but she said she'd be back soon," I told him. "You can eat whatever you want." Grover accepted the invitation, swiping the pre-bagged tossed salad and eating it straight out of the bag. I was glad that Annabeth wasn't here, since she'd more likely than not have a conniption fit.

"So, tell me about her, Perce," Grover said, stuffing lettuce into his mouth at an alarming rate.

"Who?" I asked, not following his train of thought.

"Your girlfriend," Grover replied with a dry look.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "She's great."

"Thanks for that enlightening description. Now would you like to *really* tell me about her?" Grover asked. He knew me best, and he knew how I acted when I really liked a girl.

Well, I thought to myself, *here's the true test of Percy J's acting skills.*

"She's gorgeous," I said not having to try my lying skills out just yet. "Kind of rude and sarcastic at times, but I like it."

"It always was about the challenge for you," Grover pointed out, using a string carrot to emphasise his comment.

"Yeah," I replied with a shrug and a smile. "I guess so." I considered it, thinking about how much of a challenge Annabeth really was. She was ridiculously stubborn, fearlessly bold and *honest*. I filed through memories, smiling at some of them fondly yet begrudgingly.

"You're done for," Grover told me, breaking me out of my small thought process lapse. I glanced at him, watching as he shook his head and ate another string carrot.

"What do you mean?" I questioned, wondering if he'd seen through the lie I'd told him from the start: that Annabeth and I were dating.

"I mean that you are totally in love with her. Sickeningly," Grover added.

I coughed and wondered how I'd done it. I'd hardly said anything yet. "What makes you say that?"

"You got this look in your eyes. Perce, just trust me. As your best friend, I know these things. You like her. Love her, actually," Grover affirmed, nodding to himself.

"What kind of look are you—?" The door opening once more cut off my sentence effectively.

"Percy!"

I pushed off from the counter, heading into the front room to tell Annabeth that we had a visitor.

"Hey, babe," I said, loudly enough to where I knew Grover would hear. In a lower voice, I added, "my best friend is in the kitchen so we're in love, okay?"

"Hey!" Annabeth replied louder. "Who is it?" she whispered. "How was your day?" she added in a conversational tone.

"Grover," I replied quietly. "It was alright. I woke up like half an hour ago. Come meet my friend." I instinctively wrapped my arm around her waist and we walked into the kitchen together.

"Hey, man," I said, nodding to Grover and gesturing to Annabeth. "Annabeth, Grover. Grover, Annabeth."

"I've heard lots about you," Annabeth said, shaking his hand with aplomb.

"And I you," Grover said, giving me a pointed look. I sent him one back, a warning look. "You do know that you have this fool wrapped completely around your finger, right?"

Annabeth chuckled and smiled at me with a glint in her eye. "I like to think so."

I wondered what that meant, and I almost asked her out loud, but I decided to save it for a car conversation. "Oh, babe, we're going to my Mom's tonight."

"Why?" Annabeth questioned, sending me a glance and silently asking if I wanted coffee. I gave her a hopeful smile and she rolled her eyes with a begrudging grin.

"Family dinner." Annabeth nodded to herself, knowing that it was code for 'meeting the parents.' I thought it was convenient, how easily we read each other and saw between the lines of one another's words.

"So," I said, not liking the brief silence that occurred.

"You *do* know that it's okay for there to be silence between conversations, right?" Annabeth asked sarcastically. I shoved her, since she was in reach anyways.

"Yes," I stuck out my tongue childishly. She rolled her eyes.

"You are such a—"

"I know!" I exclaimed. "I am such a child." I raised my nose in the air. "And I'm a damn adorable one, so get over the fact that I'm immature."

Annabeth laughed, looking over at me with a real smile, not a false one. I returned the smile, liking the way that her eyes were crinkled slightly with amusement. "You are ridiculous."

"Thank you," I replied, my eyes not leaving hers for a beat. She raised a challenging eyebrow and I did the same. "You're staring," I mouthed, reviving the memory of a forgotten inside joke between the two of us. Her eyes crinkled again as she shook her head and poured my coffee.

"That's cute," Grover told us. I glanced over and him, sucking in a deep breath because I'd honestly forgotten he was there. "You forgot about me didn't you?"

"No," I protested.

"Really now? I guess you were too busy making bedroom eyes at your girlfriend. I get it. Best friend takes the back seat," Grover said. I noticed that he was joking and I gave him a dry look.

"I made no such 'bedroom eyes,'" I denied, rolling my eyes. Grover sent me a pointed look, but let it go.

"Look, man, I gotta get going anyways," Grover admitted. I nodded in understanding, giving him a bro-hug and showing him to the door with a bit of sadness. He promised to come back as soon as possible and that was enough to tide me over until the next time I got to see my best friend.

"How was the interview?" I asked, reentering the kitchen. Annabeth presented me with coffee and I kissed her cheek without thinking. "Thanks," I said, taking a sip. I nearly spit out my coffee after realizing what I'd done. "Um, sorry," I told her awkwardly.

"It's fine; not the first time you've kissed my cheek," Annabeth assured me with a laugh. The laugh sounded off, and I knew it was fake. I watched a pretty, innocent blush rise on her face. I smiled to myself, blocking out all the thoughts of how adorable Annabeth was when she blushed and instead focusing on what she was saying.

"Well, the interview was a bit crazy. They had a bunch of questions about us, two about myself, and one about my family. As you can see, Percabeth is a trending topic," Annabeth told me lightly, formulating her own coffee to perfection. "And there were a few fan questions, like 'my favorite thing about you' or 'what made me fall for you.' Things such as that."

"Can I ask your answers?" I questioned, giving her my most charming smile. She open-palmedly covered my face.

"Stop. Don't give me that expression. Ever," she ordered. The friendly undercurrent to her voice let me know that she wasn't truly telling me to never make the expression again. "My favorite thing about you is how stupid you are—"

"Hey!" I interjected, not really all that offended.

"And you're charming, so that's why I fell for you," Annabeth finished, ignoring my interruption. "They also asked me what my favorite color was for you to wear—black—and how far we've gone—I didn't give an answer. I sang two songs, took a few pictures, and Clint walked me to my car because of all the fans at the radio station."

"Do I really look that sexy in black?" I inquired, waggling my eyebrows.

"It's called lying, Jackson," Annabeth said with a dry look. "Don't get too ahead of yourself."

I shook my head at the bickering, oddly happy that we weren't acting different around each other. I still had the lurking feeling that our conversation from last night was finished just yet, but I decided to accept the calm before the storm and enjoy the day until we left for Mom's.

We'd only been in the car for five minutes, and I was already considering the pros and cons of 'accidentally' crashing my Land Rover and killing us both.

Annabeth was uncommonly anxious, asking me every minute if these was anything she needed to know about my mom, if she needed to act a certain way, or if she was easily offended. I was curious as to why she was so nervous, but she never gave me a straight answer.

"Does she have anything against blondes? Is she going to stereotype me as a blonde? Is she friendly? She's not one of those fake moms who are really nice to your face but then actually hates you, right? Please tell me she isn't going to make things awkward on purpose—"

I sighed loudly, cutting Annabeth off. I saw her bite her lip, and I knew she wasn't just nervous. "What's wrong? And don't say that you're simply nervous about meeting my mom," I ordered.

"I'm just...not good with parents," Annabeth vaguely answered. I shut off the radio, which had been playing at a low hum, and waited for her to continue.

When she didn't, I blew out a breath of air and prompted her. "And why is that?"

"It's a long story," Annabeth said dodgily.

"Oh, how convenient that we have a really long drive," I said conversationally.

Annabeth sighed. "Okay, I lied. It's a really short explanation. I thought maybe you wouldn't care enough to listen to the long story so you'd let it go," she admitted.

I smiled. "Babe, you will *never* be able to get rid of me that easily."

"I know that now," Annabeth muttered begrudgingly. I glanced at her, watching for a few seconds as she scowled out the window. I averted my eyes back to the road and waited—not all that patiently—for her to tell me what the matter was. "It's stupid. It's so minor that it's nothing to worry about."

"Well, it has to do with you," I told her honestly, "so, of course I care. Just tell me."

Annabeth was silent for a few moments, maybe gathering her thoughts or maybe thinking of another way to avoid the question. Eventually, I heard more than saw her resituate herself so that her feet were on the passenger seat. I thought about scolding her, but I decided to forget about it. "I'm just bad with parents, okay?" Annabeth finally said. Her words were rushed as though she didn't really want to say them, but they were drawn out by some unknown force.

I considered her answer. As far as I knew, Annabeth was the most responsible, persuasive and person I knew. "How?"

"Well, Percy, look at the evidence," Annabeth answered me in a soft, almost secretive tone. "Both of my parents either left me or didn't care. Obviously, I'm not good with parents."

I searched for something to say, words of comfort, just *something* that would help.

I came up empty.

"I'm sorry, Annabeth," I told her, knowing that the words sounded bottomless. 'I'm sorry' was such a common phrase that it didn't cover the sympathy I felt for her. "But trust me when I say that my mom will love you."

"What makes you say that?" Annabeth asked me, the typical strength of hers behind her voice once more.

"Because she doesn't hate anyone as far as I know," I told her. "My mom is sort of the best person ever. And she loves people who pick on me—tease me—like you do."

I saw Annabeth smile slightly. "You're such a mama's boy."

I tsked indignantly. "You love it."

"*Fake*-love it," Annabeth corrected lightly. I smiled at the mention of something that was ours and only ours.

"Fake-love it," I concurred. *Just like how I fake-love your eyes*, I added silently. "So, stop worrying. Mom will probably like you more than she likes me."

Annabeth chuckled. "Everyone likes me more."

"Shut up. It's only because you're likable," I told her with an eye roll.

"Aww, you and your massive crush on me," Annabeth cooed.

I felt my cheeks warm, much against my will. "I don't have a crush on you."

"Says Percy Jackson as he blushes fiercely," Annabeth said through a laugh. "I swear, you are the most painfully obvious guy I know. You might as well wear a shirt that says, 'I have this massive crush on Annabeth Chase—'"

"Stop!" I told her. "I don't!"

"Don't not have a major crush on me?"

I paused, confused with the wording. "Yes?" I ventured. This sent Annabeth into a laughing fit, so I quickly released a litany of 'no's.

"Nope, you admitted it. I will forever remember this day," Annabeth said dramatically.

"If I recall correctly, you called me sexy once—"

"And you blushed," Annabeth interjected.

"—So you obviously have a crush on *me*," I concluded.

"There's a difference between finding someone attractive and having a crush on that someone," Annabeth pointed out.

"Well, yeah, there may be," I agreed. "But at some point in time, you develop a crush on the person. Maybe it's temporary or maybe it's not, but it's inevitable. You, for instance, never stopped having a crush on me from your Percy J Obsession days. And that's alright, babe," I told her, stopping at a red light and patting her hand. She glared and I grinned. "I've never minded when a gorgeous girl like you had a crush on me."

"And I'm sure it's happened *so* often," Annabeth replied sarcastically.

"No, actually. In all seriousness, I have *never* had a girl as beautiful as you like me," I admitted. I pushed down the burst of delight I got by seeing her cheeks tint a gorgeous rose color on her otherwise golden skin.

"Shut up," Annabeth responded, with the most clever and all around best comeback of all time. I just smiled and turned up the Coldplay song on the radio.

The rest of the long car ride there was either exchanging small and random conversation or mostly me singing really obnoxiously along with the radio. When 'I'll Be' came on by chance, I serenaded Annabeth as I always did when the song played. I don't think I've ever gotten so many unamused looks and eye rolls.

In the end, it was worth it because I made her smile once or twice. And that was enough.

When I finally stopped at my mother's house, and Annabeth realized that I had cut the engine, her eyes widened. "I'm not ready!"

"Well, I'm gonna take a few seconds to text Clint, so you have time," I attempted to reassure her. She scoffed at me as I sent Clint a plain message telling him that we'd made it here alive. I glanced out Annabeth's window, noticing that by some sheer luck there was no one waiting for us to arrive—fans or paparazzi—so it was safe to assume that it had been kept under wraps fairly well.

"Do I look okay?"

Annabeth's question broke me out of my brief zoning out and my eyes flickered to her face, deciding to stay there for a while.

'Okay' was an understatement. Even though Annabeth was wearing a plain grey v-neck and capris, with minimal make-up, she looked gorgeous beyond words. I was trying to come up with a word for her, or maybe just a sentence so that I could answer, but my mind blanked. Instead, I nodded.

"Okay," Annabeth said, taking a deep breath and opening her car door. I copied her actions, honestly a bit nervous about what my mom would say. She's always claimed that she 'liked' any girl that I'd brought home, but I can always tell when my mom is being nice. She's never truly *liked*—or *approved*, rather—of the girls I've brought to meet her.

We walked up to the doorstep, and I accidentally almost grabbed her hand out of habit, barely stopping myself right before it would have been awkward. Coughing lightly, I dug for something imaginary in my pocket after knocking on the door.

"Oh, and Annabeth," I found myself saying without a thought or a care, "you look perfect."

She caught my gaze for only a second before the door opened and we were ambushed by the smell of sugar and candy and cookies and—well, just sweetness. It smelled like home.

Mom squealed quietly, hugging Annabeth first and me afterwards. "Well, look at that," I said, winking at Annabeth. "Told you she would like you more than she likes me."

Mom hit me with the dishrag she'd had over her shoulder. Annabeth laughed as I pouted. "Oh, we'll get along great," Annabeth said to my mother.

Mom returned the maternal smile that made you warm all over with the feeling of approval. I grinned because I knew that she already liked Annabeth. "Well, come on, you two. Get inside before some paparazzi try to break down my door."

We shuffled inside and Annabeth stumbled slightly over a pair of shoes, an old pair of mine, and I caught her waist to keep her steady. "Careful there, babe. No need for bloodshed just yet," I said quietly. And *no*, the gorgeous smile she sent me didn't make me forget where I was for a moment.

"Oh, you two are just adorable! It's so odd that Percy never mentioned you, dear. You must be quite a gem if he hesitated to tell me. Percy's selfish when it comes to the girls he really loves—"

"Mom!" I said loudly, effectively stopping her rambling. She looked at me expectantly. "Uh, missed you?" I continued, thinking quickly. Her smile softened and she repeated the phrase to me.

I glanced at Annabeth, who mouthed *'mama's boy'* at me. I rolled my eyes but shrugged. "You love it," I whispered, the same answer I'd given her earlier today.

She raised a hand to shove me, but my reflexes were too quick. I caught her hand with ease. I raised a challenging eyebrow, as if to say 'did you really think that would work?' I intertwined my hand with the hand of hers that I'd captured, maybe a little more for myself than for putting on a show in front of Mom.

She sent me an almost confused look, and I silently prayed to whoever and whatever was listening that she didn't freak out about it. Luckily, I felt her hand only tighten around mine and I mentally sighed in relief.

Mom was at the stove, just having finished stirring something. "It's almost done! About ten more minutes. Do you guys want any drinks? Or maybe Percy should give our guest a tour?" Mom sent me a pointed look.

"Mom!" I groaned.

"Percy," she said warningly.

"Mom, she doesn't care about the house—"

"Actually, I would love a tour. Thanks for being so thoughtful, Ms. Jackson!" Annabeth enthused.

I gave her a dirty look. "Traitor," I muttered, kicking the back of her foot lightly. She only smiled more indulgently at Mom.

"Oh please, call me Sally, sweetheart," Mom said with a wave of her hand.

"Then thank you, Sally," Annabeth ameliorated. Mom gave her an adoring smile and I knew that Annabeth was her new favorite person. "So, *babe*," Annabeth said with humor. "How about that tour?"

I'd never thought that my room from high school was anything special, but Annabeth seemed fascinated with it. Mom had alerted us that dinner would be just a little bit longer, so we could just spend time together. I'd flopped onto my childhood bed, basking in the comfort.

Annabeth walked all around my room, examining every poster and knick-knack I had. On my bedpost, there was the necklace that my mom had given me when I was twelve. Apparently, it was one of the only things she had left of dad. It was a simple and perfect sand dollar. I was surprised it hadn't broken yet, seeing as I'd dropped it a million times, but the off white surface remained unscathed.

Annabeth finally made her way back over to me, picking up the necklace to examine it. "It was my dad's," I told her with a shrug.

She winced. "Sorry." I shook my head.

"No, it's fine. In fact," I said, using a great amount of energy to pull myself off the bed and standing, "you should keep it." I took the necklace from her grasp and fastened it around her neck like I'd seen in so many movies. "Keep it no matter what...happens."

She knew that I meant *whatever happens after the contracts*. I had domestic notes as my memories, and she could have my dad's necklace. "Um, thanks." Her voice was soft and even a little tentative.

I turned her around, pretending that it was because I wanted to see how the necklace looked. I straightened it out, making sure that it was falling evenly before replying, "You're welcome."

And I honestly couldn't tell you what happened after that. I'm not sure. But something *broke*—a barrier, a promise, maybe both. Or maybe, something was formed. A trust? A mutual agreement? I guess I'll never really know.

However, I did know one thing for sure. I kissed Annabeth Chase, a stark contrast to our last kiss. The darkness and bitter bite was absent, replaced with a warm comfort.

Surprise registered fast as I realized that she was kissing me back, maybe even deepening the kiss. Actually, maybe that was me. Regardless, as it intensified, my bruised lips started to hurt once more. The feeling receded. I pulled her slightly closer to me on instinct, only breaking the kiss for a mere moment of breath. Her arms reached around my neck and I felt something flutter in my chest, something that was both very unmanly and very uncharacteristic of me. She buried her hands deep in my constantly knotted hair and I sighed.

My mind was racing, probably something close to the beat of my heart.

Oh, god, I thought mentally, *what are we doing?*

And yet, I didn't exactly do anything to stop it.

Clint's words slammed into my mind like a ton of bricks. I paused, contemplated, and Annabeth pulled back. I kept my eyes closed, my forehead resting on hers and tried to regain my breath.

"Percy," Annabeth said. I almost smiled smugly at the fact that she sounded fairly breathless herself. "What just happened?"

"Don't think about it," I pleaded, shaking my head. "Just don't. Don't think about it, but..." I wanted to tell her not to forget about it either. It was the first time we'd ever kissed outside from the prying eyes of paparazzi and camera flashes blinding our closed eyes. That was the first time it was...real.

Annabeth's hands slowly fell down from where they were around my neck, but I didn't dare open my eyes. As long as my eyes were closed, I didn't have to see her expression—which was probably ranging somewhere from disgust to complete horror. I started slightly when I felt her hands catch at my shirt gripping it tightly in my midsection.

"What?" I whispered, finally having returned my breathing rate to normal. I nearly gasped as I felt her kiss me again, short and sweet. She pushed me away slightly, only so I was out of her personal space bubble. I finally opened my eyes, the fact that she was flustered and only slightly disheveled piling up my man-pride.

"We will never talk about this again," she said firmly, checking for my ratification. I nodded. "But..."

"Don't forget about it?" I finished, almost a bit hopeful that she was on the same page as me.

Instead, all I got was two seconds of eye contact before Annabeth left the room. I turned and fell face first on my bed.

Jesus Christ, I thought, putting a pillow over my head.

"Percy, dinner!" I groaned softly.

Jesus Christ.

I adjusted my shirt back to normal and made sure that my hair wasn't messy before walking down the stairs.

Percy's mom—Sally—was humming to herself and getting plates out, so I offered to set the table for her. She gave me a motherly smile, one that had never really been sent my way, and I thought that maybe it wouldn't be so bad to consider her as my mother figure.

"So, dear, how is it dating my son? I can personally say it's never been easy being his mother," Sally said in a teasing tone.

I grinned. "It's definitely not conventional," I told her honestly. I tried not to think about what had happened mere minutes ago as I laid out forks and spoons.

"Oh, he's different. In a good way though, you agree?" I nodded dutifully. Sally smiled. "You're the first girl he's ever brought home who I've actually liked," Sally admitted a bit sheepishly. "You seem to be well with it, which is good for him. He needs someone smart to be a good influence."

I laughed as the fact that Sally was pretty much exposing the fact that she knew her son wasn't the brightest crayon in the box. "We kind of make up for each other's faults," I shared after a few moments. It was true, for the most part. "I think the main problem is that we're both stubborn and hate apologizing."

"Oh, that will work out in time," Sally assured me. "Once you fall in love, saying sorry isn't as much of an embarrassment. As for the stubborn issue..." Sally shrugged. "Well, you know Percy. He hates being told what to do."

I sighed in annoyance. "Believe me when I tell you that I completely understand."

Sally laughed lightly, and I was stuck once more by how *maternal* she was. Everything about her screamed caring mother. "Well, let's see if we can get him down here. Dinner's finally ready!"

I snorted. "Food is the one thing he'll listen to you about." Sally chuckled before calling him to dinner.

And that's when it hit me that *he would be walking down the stairs and entering the same room as me*. I coughed to myself, hoping that we could handle this dinner without making Sally suspicious. Percy jogged into the kitchen, looking eager. "Food?"

"That's typically what dinner means," I commented sarcastically. Percy glanced at me, his green eyes darker than usual. He sent me an overly charming smile.

"Aww, baby, you're so smart. I knew there was a reason why I kept you," Percy said, gliding past me and ruffling my hair. I sighed in annoyance, fixing it once more.

Sally handed him a plate and he said 'I love you' before sitting down at the table and waiting not-so-patiently for us to take our seats as well. I felt his eyes on me, but I resisted the urge to turn and look. as obvious that we weren't going to talk out-right about that, but we quite blatantly hadn't forgotten. I wasn't sure if I liked that he was staring, but the smug feeling was rising, building my pride. The fact that he was having trouble taking his eyes off me made me laugh quietly to myself.

Sally handed me a plate and I gave her my thanks, taking the seat next to Percy half out of habit and half because Sally needed to believe us. I knew he was still staring at me and I was beginning to feel irritated.

“Can I help you?” I asked lowly, not loud enough for Sally to hear across the kitchen. All I heard was a breathy laugh from Percy, something that instantly struck me as very attractive. I swallowed the thought.

“Let's try to be as normal as possible.”

I gave him a dry look. “You figured that out all by yourself?”

He sent me a cocky smirk, shaking his head. “Your relentless sass is actually very amusing.”

“Your relentless cocky attitude is actually very irritating. Care to stop?” I asked, unfolding my napkin and laying it across my lap.

He leaned closer to me, unnecessarily close—so close that his mouth was literally pressed up against my ear—and whispered, “never.”

I resisted any shivers I may or may not have gotten.

Sally turned away from the counter, now facing us. Percy moved away from me, and I tried my hardest not to think of ways for him to “accidentally” fall out of his chair.

“So, you two, tell me what's been happening with fame? And the relationship?” Sally asked conversationally after a curt prayer. We all started eating, talking in between bites.

“Fame's the same,” Percy said with a shrug. “It's fun but not at the same time.” I nodded in agreement with him and Sally looked sympathetic.

“And you two? How are you guys doing?”

There was tense silence and we both waited for the other to speak. Finally, Percy sighed. “It's great. Minus Annabeth being hard to please.”

The comment made my skin hot with anger. I knew I wasn't flushed, but I felt the irritation clear as day. He was starting up our last big argument again. “I wouldn't be considered so 'hard to please' if Percy's gentleman standards were higher,” I replied with a shrug. Sally laughed in response and I got the feeling that she wanted us to say more.

“I'm so glad you aren't one of those girls who refuse to acknowledge it when a guy actually does care about you and tries to be a gentleman. That's so annoying,” Percy told me. His voice was sincere but I saw the bitter sarcasm in his readable eyes.

“I'm really glad you aren't one of those guys who refuse to acknowledge the fact that some girls may have trust issues. You completely understand and I *love* that,” I answered. I adopted the serious tone he'd been using.

“I understand you,” Percy said, looking me in the eyes. “And it's good that you aren't one of those girls who thinks that no one understands them because their problems are so much worse than anyone else's.”

I bit my cheek, setting my jaw defiantly. He sent me a cocky smirk, knowing that he'd infuriated me. I had to keep myself from pushing him off his chair as he rested a hand on my thigh. "I'm so glad that you're one of those girls who are just easy to get along with. And you don't play games—don't play on people's emotions like so many girls do."

I placed my hand on top of his, sending a sweet smile his way as I simultaneously made a point to squeeze his hand so much that it was painful. *Where was he going with this? I don't play games.*

"You two are adorable," Sally said, wiping non-existent tears from her face. "I'm so proud of you, Percy, for finally finding the girl perfect for you."

Percy tightened his grip on my leg. "Me too," he replied with a grin. "Annabeth is *perfect* for me. She trusts me with everything."

I discreetly pried his hand off me and pushed it away lightly. "Everything that I can tell him."

"Every woman has her secrets," Sally agreed lightly nodding her head at me. "There's some things I still haven't disclosed to Paul."

"But you've told him the important things, right? You don't just tell him the minuscule things, right, Mom?" Percy asked. I resisted the urge to glare at him. He was only trying to prove a point.

"Well of course," Sally replied. "A healthy relationship builds its foundation on trust."

"So, you should tell your significant other the important things, and say, I don't know, mention the things you appreciate?" Percy questioned casually, taking a sip of his drink. I ate my last bite of food and chewed with vigor. I was taking my anger out on my food.

Sally's brow furrowed. "Well, yes. Someone who's always negative is no fun."

"Ah," Percy said as though he was humored, "I see."

"But, Sally," I said, making both sets of eyes turn to me. "Out of curiosity, what if that person doesn't find anything about their significant other necessarily 'appreciable'?"

Sally looked contemplative. "Then I'd say that the couple wasn't a good match."

"Ah, I see," I responded, mocking Percy slightly.

"Or, the two people would just have to learn to find things they like about each other. Take, for example," Percy stated with a shrug, "arranged marriages. Sure, they don't have to *love* each other, but they do learn to appreciate what they've been given. Such as...I don't know. If you were in an arranged marriage I'm sure you could either admire the person's personality if not their looks."

Sally nodded at the debate occurring. "Exactly! That's what my upcoming book is based on. Except, in the end, they loved each other all along."

"Loved each other *all along*," Percy repeated. "And they never even noticed."

"Or maybe they're mistaking simply knowing each other well for love," I shot back. "Maybe neither of them loved each other."

"But maybe they could," Percy said so quietly that I know we were the only two who heard it. When I looked at him, I saw something akin to challenge in his eyes. I sent him a clear look saying, '*what do you mean?*' But he smiled and shook his head, putting on much-too-okay look.

"So, Mom," Percy started. "Tell us more about your book."

"Well, make sure you two come see me again!" Sally said, gathering us both in another hug. Percy's arm wrapped around my waist and I bit my cheek to stop myself from prying it off. She let us both go before pinching Percy's cheeks and cooing about how she was proud of it.

What was even more amusing was the fact that he just took it. He let his mom poke and prod his face without a complaint. I figured that he felt like he owed her, but then I remembered that Percy was a mama's boy. He was more likely than not loving the attention. I bit back a smile.

Finally, with tears rimming her eyes, Sally released Percy. He kissed her cheek and let his hand drop from around my waist only to fall and intertwine with my own hand. I was about to take my hand away since Sally had already shut the door but Percy squeezed my hand as a warning. We walked to the car and as Percy was opening the door for me a camera flashed.

"Told you," Percy said, shutting my door behind me and walking around to the driver's side. I scowled into the air.

In the five to six seconds it took Percy to get into his seat, I decided that we needed to talk about... *this*.

"Look, Percy," I started, "I think we should—"

"You said we weren't going to talk about it," Percy interrupted, shooting me a sideways glance.

"I know what I said," I snapped. Percy held his hands up in the universal sign of defeat. "It can't happen. Ever again. *Ever*," I stressed. Percy solemnly met my gaze.

"I get it," he said, not breaking my gaze. "We're just roommates at home. When we're out, we're a couple. Only quick kisses."

"Right," I said, feeling guilty for some reason.

"Cool," Percy said, starting the engine and backing out of the driveway.

I hoped he understood, *truly* understood, why I had to do that. We promised that it would stay a fake relationship, and letting things like passionate kissing happen when there's no one to photograph it...that breaks a promise. Guilt weighed heavy in my chest and I couldn't define a specific reason.

I spared Percy a glance, and he was staring straight ahead, his jaw set. *Still mad about the not-really-an-argument argument at dinner*, I noted briefly. He reached a hand over and adjusted the radio, turning it up.

We can do this, I optimistically thought, *and make it out alive. And hopefully stay friends*, I added, feeling a small rush of fear at the thought of not having Percy around anymore. He'd slowly but surely become a symbol of steadiness in my life, despite any harsh words I'd ever said about him or to him. He'd slowly but surely become a part of my life, whether it was initially counterfeit or not.

I miss Silena, I realized suddenly. She'd always been there to be my so-called Love Guru. Any time I needed to talk about a guy or get expert advice, I could call her. But now, well, it's hard to call people who find their home in an underground casket. I sighed and rubbed my temples, trying to fight the headache that was coming on.

Leaning my head against the cold glass window, I let myself stare out the window and avoid thought the whole way home.

Two months later, and Percy and I were still 'sickeningly in love' and 'the cutest couple on earth.' We were great out in the public eye, holding hands and smiling sweetly at each other. I'm not sure how much of it was real affection and how much of it was conjured up for the benefit of our managers and paparazzi.

Our tour was due to start in a few months, depending on how quick we could pull everything together. Percy and I had both finalized our albums, at an impressive speed. My album peaked at number two, much to my mirth and surprise, with Percy's peaking at the top spot of number one. He teased me about it for days.

We were okay. Not great. Not wonderful. Just okay.

Percy and I returned to how we initially were at home—friends. When we saw each other early, after we'd just woken up, we said 'good morning.' No kiss on the cheek or intimate hug.

There was no more sleeping in each other's rooms, and above all, no cuddling. Actions like those would just result in a repeat of the scene at Percy's childhood home.

And we promised it wouldn't happen again. We promised, we promised, *we promised*.

Sometimes, I even had to remind myself. Like when Percy's eyes sparkled too bright after an especially sarcastic comment of mine. Or when I saw him in the kitchen in the early hours of the morning, singing at the top of his lungs as we waltzed around the kitchen. Times like that made it hard to remember that I couldn't just walk up to Percy and kiss his cheek, simply for being him.

We had a meeting with our managers on this particular morning, and neither one of us had any clue what it was about.

"It's probably just a checkup," Percy reassured me. "They do them all the time. Just telling us what's up, us telling them what's up, et cetera, et cetera..." Percy trailed off, gesturing with his hands.

I nodded silently, walking to winding path to our typical conference room. Percy startled me by grabbing my hand. I looked up at him curiously, but he stared straight ahead with a calm smile on his face.

"Um, Percy—"

"Yeah, babe?" Percy asked. That was his tell. I knew that this was for the public. Percy had completely refrained from calling me 'babe' around the house, now only using it when we were a 'couple.'

"Nothing, I just love you," I said sweetly, smiling up at him.

He smiled so genuinely that his eyes crinkled. "I love you, too."

I subtly glanced behind us to see if there was someone there, since I didn't see anyone in front of us. I just barely stopped my eyes from widening as I saw a woman with a strong nose and nicely styled hair. Her shirt was black, and in white writing it read, "no, actually, I'm not the editor of Seventeen magazine" in bold white lettering. It was obviously sarcastic.

I inconspicuously watched as she stopped and walked into an office on the right.

Percy dropped my hand as if it'd burned him. I tried not to let it bother me.

We walked into the conference room, responding to the greeting called to us from Clint. "So, straight to business, just how you like it, Annabeth," Clint said with a nod and smile in my direction. I grinned back. Percy cleared his throat.

"So, business?" he asked, leaning back in his seat and examining his thumbnail.

"Right," Clint said, sanding his hands together. "I have a proposal."

"Uh-oh," Percy muttered.

"What kind?" I questioned.

"Well, as you two know, your joint tour starts in a few months," Clint mentioned. We nodded. "And your contracts are up in less than one month."

I blinked at him. *Had four months already passed?* A bit of panic settled in my stomach.

Contracts are up. That meant that Percy and I wouldn't be a couple anymore. That meant that...I might lose Percy.

I gave Percy a sidelong glance, hating the fear of no longer having him. *I'll never know what made me so attached to you, loser*, I thought, almost fondly, as I watched his careful expression.

"Okay," Percy said, his voice dispassionate. He glanced at me, and I saw his eyes.

No, Percy wasn't okay. His eyes were darkened by thoughts and clouded over with too many emotions—too many to read. In some sick way, it comforted me to know that I wasn't the only one feeling upset. Percy looked back to Clint.

"Which is why," Clint carried on, "I took the liberty of printing these." He shuffled papers in front of him that I hadn't seen before. "It's an extension of contract."

"How long?" Percy and I asked in unison. We shared a humored look. After spending nearly four months together nonstop, it wasn't uncommon for us to say things in unison or finish sentences.

"Five to six months." Clint spoke as though he were treading on glass. "The length of your tour, plus a few weeks. Breaking up right after a tour...I feel like it would look sketchy."

"Okay," Percy said, stretching. He set his sights on me. "You in?"

I found myself frozen in place, locked underneath his gaze. *Did I want five or six more months of guilt? Did I want five or six more months of trying so hard to keep the normalcy between Percy and me?*

No, I didn't, I decided finally. I definitely didn't.

But more than all that, there was something that I didn't want even more.

I wasn't ready to let go of Percy yet. I felt that there was unfinished business. The tour wouldn't work if we were broken up. I was doing it for the sake of the tour.

Percy must have seen the answer in my eyes. "She's in," Percy told Clint confidently. I nodded in agreement.

"Okay," Clint said, seemingly astounded that we'd taken the news so well. "Time to sign and date a lot of papers."

"So, do you think we can handle this?" I asked Percy as we walked out to the Land Rover. He smiled, grabbing my hand and squeezing it before intertwining our fingers.

"Of course," he said, his voice sincere and soft. "I'll sign those every few months for the rest of my life if you want me to."

I glanced up at him, and I noticed that he wasn't saying it for show. He meant it. His face was relaxed, not tense with the pressure of lying. I looked away, not replying.

I didn't know how to react. It'd been so long since Percy had said something like that; lately it'd been a battle of who could friend zone the other more. He opened the car door for me, putting his hand on my knee and looking as though he were about to say something, but instead he just smiled and circled around to the other side.

I buckled my seat belt and wiped imaginary dust off of the dashboard. My cell phone vibrated in my pocket, and I retrieved it while unlocking it all in the same motion. I heard Percy get in the car, but I was busy reading the text message from Thalia to spare him a glance.

"Thalia bought tickets for our show in L.A.," I shared, scrolling down to the second message. "And she says it's already sold out," I said in shock. "Wow."

"Well, that's what happens when you put two amazing—and romantically involved—pop stars on a tour together," Percy told me as he maneuvered his way out of the parking lot. "But you could have filled up the arena by yourself, I'm sure," he added.

"No way," I disagreed. "An arena of sixteen-thousand, with just me? Doubtful." The thought was ridiculous. Maybe one-eighth of the fans that are going to be at the concert will be there for me. Percy was more famous, and much more liked by teenage girls, than I was.

"I'd go to a concert of just you," Percy said sweetly. "Don't say it like it's a bad thing. Just 'you' is perfect." I turned my head to direct my attention out the window and prayed he didn't see me blushing. I found it strange, the fact that he'd refrained from saying such things for so long, but now he's being more charming than ever. "Don't look away because you're blushing," Percy ordered, reaching out and pulling my chin slightly so that I faced forward. "It's cute."

"Why are you acting like this?" I said, half-coughing and half-choking.

"Because I realized that there was no reason I shouldn't be," Percy shared bluntly. I glanced at him and he smiled at me. "Might as well make things less tense since we'll be together for longer."

"Right," I replied, not really sure how to answer but not wanting to leave it at silence. "Okay." He took a left and I smiled. "Aww, Starbucks."

"Like old times, babe. A trip down memory lane," he said wistfully, his eyes sparkling a dangerously gorgeous green. I grinned at his using of the term of endearment. It'd been a while, but it still felt like something special for me. It was just one of those Percy-Annabeth things.

But for a long time, it hadn't been. It'd been something that he used as a name when we were only in public. Saying 'babe' had become more of a fake thing rather than a real affectionate nickname.

But then again, the line between real and fake had been blurred for a while, some crazy side of me thought. I ignored it.

We decided to go inside, simply because Percy said he missed our dear friend 'Hanson.' I'd rolled my eyes at him as he purposefully said Harry's name wrong, but decided that it was another Percy thing that he would simply never let go.

"Hank!" Percy called out as we approached the counter.

"Pierre!" Harry said back, faking a grin. He winked at me. "Hey there, Annabeth."

"Yeah, hi," I said, ordering my drink with practiced ease. Percy threw his arm over my shoulder and pulled on one of my curls.

"Order for me," he whispered in my ear as I gave Harry my highly specific directions. I felt Percy kiss my ear lightly before walking off in the direction of the bathroom. I ended up pausing in the middle of my sentence and completely forgetting what I'd been saying, only because things felt like they were falling back into normalcy. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Actually, I wasn't even sure what was considered 'normal' anymore.

"Please no...What?" Harry prompted, asking me to complete my order.

"Right," I said, bringing myself back to reality and tucking my hair behind my ear. "Please no foam and put as little sugar as possible—not *none*, just not a lot. And a toffee nut latte with non-fat milk and no foam," I added.

"Cool," Harry affirmed, nodding and repeating my orders back to me before telling me my total. As I surrendered my credit card to him, he cleared his throat. "So, how are things with Pablo?"

"Perfect," I told him.

"He seems like he'd be a good boyfriend," Harry asked. I sensed something beneath his voice.

"He is," I concurred.

"If he ever took the time to look away from the mirror. Who takes longer to get ready for dates?" Harry questioned, his voice sounding cynical.

"He's not vain," I told Harry, affronted. "He's actually pretty self-less, once you get to know him—*really* know him."

"Percy Jackson, the self-less," Harry said mockingly. I rolled my eyes at his childish ways. When Percy acted childish, it was adorable—endearing even. When Harry acted childish, I felt like I was speaking with a stubborn and disrespectful kindergartner.

“What'd I miss?” Percy asked, materializing at my side. His arm found its way around my waist. He must have sensed the tense air. “Everything okay?”

“Just talking about how great you are, actually,” Harry said with an admittedly bitchy smile.

“Oh, really? I'm flattered, dearest, but I'm afraid I'm taken,” Percy said, giving Harry a sassy look before pulling the receipt out of Harry's hand and leading me away to the end counter where we received our drinks.

Percy snorted lightly in laughter and hid his smile in my hair when he saw how heavily Harry was glaring. I pinched his side. “Don't be rude.”

“He started it,” Percy whined.

“You're a child.”

“That kind of makes you a pedophile, in a way,” Percy said thoughtfully, placing his chin on top of my head. I pinched his side again and heard his chest rumble as he laughed. “I missed this,” he whispered softly. I closed my eyes, wishing I could curl up in the words—his tone of voice, his secretive whisper, the way he said it.

“Me too,” I agreed, rubbing his back lightly.

“We're better this way,” Percy told me. His voice was still quiet, but I could tell that there was a small, underlying, questioning tone.

“Yeah,” I replied, gripping tightly and almost desperately to the back of his shirt, just to show him that *yeah, maybe I have trouble saying it, but I do need you.*

He sighed softly, and I hoped that he took the hint. The barista called our orders out and we retrieved our drinks before exiting. I didn't want to stay for Harry's ridiculously childish glaring. Percy drank his coffee before letting it cool down and whined for about a whole minute that his tongue was burnt.

The drive home was ridiculously comfortable, probably the most comfortable we'd had in months. I pulled my feet beneath me and drank my tea. Percy was fidgeting with the radio, trying to find something acceptable. When he finally did, he started nearly screaming it at the top of his lungs.

“Well, baby, I surrender to the strawberry ice cream. Never, ever end of all this love...” he turned and winked at me as he stopped at a red light. I faced the window and poorly attempted to hide my grin as he continued to sing whole-heartedly.

I envied him, the way that with every action he took, he did it with all of his being. He put all of his soul into singing. Everything he did seemed so *intentional*. He was dedicated to each and every one of his conquests.

I wondered if I could ever be like that.

I knew that the normalcy wouldn't stay perfect forever, but I'd hoped that it would last for at least a day. No such luck.

Percy had distanced himself a bit more since we arrived at home, and I suspected it had something to do with the text he was reading as we walked in the door. I was itching to ask him, but I didn't want to intrude.

Percy and I were sprawled out on the two couches, Percy watching a mindless cartoon and me reading the recent news on my phone. "Babe," Percy said, snapping my attention from the article.

"Hm?"

"I'm going to shower," he told me, standing and stretching.

"You showered this morning," I pointed out.

"Keeping tabs on me, Chase?" Percy asked with a raised eyebrow. He smiled at me. "I want to shower again. I'm sure you like your men clean."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I dismissed, waving him off. He left the room without another word, but I could practically hear the smug smile.

The fact that he had gone from being uber affectionate to being distant within the span of an hour was bothering me. I laid my phone down on my stomach and sighed, staring at the ceiling. I started thinking of ways that I could bring it up without sounding like an overbearing fake-girlfriend.

I sat up, my phone dropping to my lap as I kicked my feet up on the coffee table. My eyes wandered mindlessly around the room. *Why don't I just bluntly ask him? He seems to be appreciative of straightforwardness and...* Oh.

Sitting innocently on the other couch occupying our living room was Percy's cell phone. I stared at it for two beats before looking away. *That's completely wrong and an invasion of privacy*, I silently chastised myself.

My eyes drifted over to the phone again. "I'll just look at the most recent text to make sure it's nothing serious," I spoke to myself. I got up and gracefully sat on the couch next to his phone. I took a mental picture of how it looked so that I could return it to the exact original position.

Carefully, I picked up the phone, glancing down the hallway twice before unlocking it.

I was faced with a password. I sighed, having forgotten that he had one, before trying a random set of numbers. Then, I remembered something.

A few weeks prior, I'd questioned Percy on what his password was. He'd taken his phone from me and punched in the four-digit code before handing it back over and saying, "us." I hadn't thought that it was important at the time because his phone was already unlocked for me, so I had no worries.

Well, obviously it couldn't just be the word 'us.' That wasn't enough digits. Percabeth was too many. I paused, looking curiously at the sets of letters next to the more prominent numbers.

Carefully, and almost in an intrigued manner, I typed the numbers 2-2-7-5. I grinned as the phone unlocked. 2-2-7-5, or A-C-P-J. It was sweet how he put my initials first. I rolled my eyes at my own thoughts, irritated that I couldn't quit calling everything Percy did 'cute.'

I went straight to business, the thought that I did have a time limit hitting me. I clicked on his messaging app and shuffled my feet. It felt wrong, but I convinced myself that I was doing it for the benefit of Percy.

The most recent message was from Clint.

I wished I hadn't of opened the threaded conversation.

'Saw recent photos, you two look mighty cuddly in Starbucks. Don't forget what I said, man. Just looking out for you. x'

I read it twice before a thousand questions found their home in my mind. Cursing myself but doing it anyways, I scrolled so that I could read earlier messages. I saw a few just telling Clint that we were at this place or that place and Clint replying with small answers of acknowledgment. Then, there was one from months upon months ago.

'Percy, I see your eyes in all these pictures. I know that look. You know we can find a way to cut the contract off early if it gets worse, right?'

“What look?” I asked out loud, silently admonishing the male species for being so vague in their texting.

Scrolling down slightly, my eyes fell upon Percy's reply.

'Clinty-boy, calm down. I'm not head over heels for her just yet. I'll tell you if I want out, but I don't. We're fine. x'

“Yet?” I muttered aloud, briefly noting that it sounded like they'd had this conversation before. I tried to ignore the guilt falling on my shoulders as I looked at Clint's answer.

'I just don't want you to fall for her, Perce, and end up getting hurt. I know you care about her, I'm not blind...'

I cocked my head to the side and read the next message.

'It's not my fault that I care, Clinton. Don't worry about me, I won't let it get out of hand. :).'

I smiled slightly. It was cute, I decided. Sweet, even.

'Just don't fall too hard for her, Perce.'

The messages stopped then, the next one being about an interview time. I exited off of the messaging app and locked the phone, carefully placing it on the couch once more.

I stood up and cleared my throat, brushing imaginary dust off my jeans. I gave the phone an uncomfortable look, feeling extremely regretful of my actions. “I shouldn't have done that,” I said to myself. “I'm a horrible fake-girlfriend.”

“Babe!”

I nearly jumped out of my skin as I heard Percy coming down the hall. “Hm?” I replied, sitting quickly on the opposite couch. He entered the living room, still pulling his shirt over his head. I tried to ignore his flawlessly sculpted body, but, well, it was difficult.

“Nothing, just wanted to know what you wanted for lunch,” Percy said, shaking his still damp hair out slightly and nodding his head toward the kitchen.

“Whatever you want,” I said, wanting to be as nice as possible to compensate for my actions.

"No, I want to cook for *you*," Percy stressed. "You pick."

It only made me feel worse. "Percy, just make what you want."

"Annabeth, stop being difficult and just tell me what you want," Percy told me, rolling his eyes and falling on the couch next to me. "What you really, *really* want."

"Stop quoting Spice Girls," I said fondly. Percy had a tendency to bring lyrics into his sentences. "But seriously, just do whatever."

"Annabeth."

"Percy."

"Annabeth."

"*Percy*."

"Annabeth!"

"Percy, just go make something! I don't care!" I snapped, my patience breaking.

"The one time I attempt to do something nice for you, you decide to play hard-to-please. Great," Percy said sarcastically, his head lolling back to lay on the back of the couch. I sighed. *Now I've invaded his privacy and hurt his feelings. You, Annabeth Chase, are officially the lowest of all people.*

I tentatively started carding my fingers through his hair and he brightened up immensely, leaning into my hand. "And now you're being manipulative," Percy muttered contently. I smiled as he nudged my hand with his head. "You're not a nice lady."

"And yet you're practically purring because I'm petting your hair," I remarked. Percy opened his eyes slightly and saw my sassy expression before smiling and closing his eyes.

"Whatever," Percy replied, and it was obviously because he couldn't think of another comeback. "What do you want, seriously?"

"What do *you* want?" I questioned, pulling his hair a bit. He cleared his throat and shook his head.

"You know better," he said with a laugh. "And it doesn't matter what I want, I'm trying to do something nice for you."

"You've been nice enough lately," I said, retiring from petting Percy. He whined quietly before opening his eyes and facing me.

"You think so?" he asked, his eyes looking innocently into mine. It piled the remorse on my shoulders.

"Yeah," I said softly. "So either go make what you want or order a pizza."

"Pizza," Percy said, sounding as though he were carefully considering the thought. "Well, that depends. If I buy pizza, are we going to have a sleepover?"

"Percy, we live together," I said with an eye roll. "We have sleepovers every night."

"No," Percy corrected. "I mean, I want to have a best friend sleepover. Where we watch movies all night and talk about everything and eat a lot of sugary food. With sleeping bags laid out."

I laughed. "You want to have a teenage girl sleepover?"

"No," Percy insisted. "I want to have a Percy and Annabeth sleepover. Best friends have sleepovers all the time without being teenage girls."

"Best friends," I repeated.

"Best friends," Percy affirmed. "I mean, even if it started out fake, I consider you my real best friend. I mean, a best friend is when the person knows all that you can tell them about yourself, right? Like when you trust a person with your life? And, I mean, you're that for me," Percy shared.

"Thanks," I said with a flattered smile. "You're my best friend, too."

"Well, that's good, because I already bought us bracelets," Percy said, hopping up and walking down the hall to his room. He returned in an impressive amount of time with two bracelets.

He took my hand and rested it on his leg as he fastened a bracelet on my arm. It was all thread, but personalized. "It's your favorite color," Percy pointed out, sounding uncharacteristically shy. He turned my arm over so that I could read what it said.

"Percy," I read aloud.

"And mine says 'Annabeth,'" he said, handing me his as an innuendo to help me tie it on his wrist. I wrapped the gray and blue bracelet around his arm. "I figured that it would be cute, you know, to the public. They would think it's because we're a couple, but we'll know it's because we're best friends. It's like..."

"Something that will stay real, even when we're in public and everything is...fake," I finished. Percy nodded and smiled, showing that I'd guessed it right.

"That's why I wanted to cook you something you liked," Percy said with a slightly irritated look. "I was hoping to soften you up before freaking you out with the whole 'you're my best friend' speech."

"You could have just told me that," I responded.

He rolled his eyes. "Then please tell me: what would have been the point in cooking for you if you already knew the reason?"

I coughed. "So, pizza?"

Percy's eyes widened. "Oh my god, I'm right!"

"What?" I asked, scowling slightly.

"That's why you changed the subject! I was right for once! Oh my god, *yes*. *Y-E-S*. This is beautiful. I'm writing this date down," Percy said happily.

"No," I defended. "I'm just hungry."

"Oh, babe, you and your pride," Percy said with a wink. I rolled my eyes and scowled. "That's cute, you're angry," Percy teased, taking my phone and unlocking it. Unlike him, I didn't have a password set.

He dialed the number for the closest delivery restaurant from memory, and I snorted in laughter. He seemed to know exactly what I was talking about because he jokingly glared before sprawling out over my lap, so that his head was resting on the arm of the sofa and his back laid over my thighs. I moved my hands from underneath his back and instead rested them on his stomach. He didn't even spare me a glance.

It's safe to say that affection comes easy with us. Between being best friends for the public and now lovers, it became customary to hug for a long time and, well, lay all over each other. We were just close best friends.

"Four large pizzas, two with just pepperonis and mushrooms, the other two with everything you've got besides anchovies—*no anchovies*," Percy stressed. My eyes widened. *Four pizzas?* He recited an address and told them that the order was for Percy.

After he hung up, I voiced my opinion. "Four pizzas?" I questioned incredulously.

"I am a teenage boy and I like food, Annabeth," Percy said sarcastically.

"But still. *Four?*"

"One of them is for you," Percy said with a grin.

"Gee, thanks," I replied.

He only smiled. "I missed this."

"Us arguing?" I asked, confused.

"No," Percy amended. "Us being. . . *us*."

"So, in other words, us arguing," I repeated. Percy removed my arm with the bracelet off his stomach. He adjusted it slightly, though it didn't need adjusting, and instead took hold of my hand. Our fingers weren't intertwined, and it was friendly hand holding, almost like a handshake locked in place, but it had the same effect. It made me feel safe.

"Yeah," Percy replied with a smile. "I guess so."

"Good morning, best friend," Percy said, ruffling my hair as he accepted his cup of coffee from me.

"Good morning, best friend," I said tiredly. We'd stayed up pretty late for having an early morning.

"You okay?" Percy questioned, feeling my forehead. I shoved his hand away.

"I'm just tired," I told him honestly. He nodded in understanding and leaned against the counter next to me.

"So, what's on the agenda today?" Percy inquired, taking a sip of his coffee and sighing contently.

"Perfect, as always, babe." I sent him a sleepy smile.

"Um, we're on some talk show at eleven with a live performance after," I recited, flipping through my filed memories to find what Clint had said we're doing today. "Tour dates are finalized, so we have a

meeting at I think three or four, depending on how long the talk show takes, and after that we're home free."

"Cool," Percy said, drinking too much of his hot coffee and wincing. "Ow."

"Idiot," I muttered, turning away from him. "I'm going to get ready."

Percy hummed. "Me too." He walked past me and tugged on one of my curls, something that he'd recently decided was his favorite pastime. He hurried down the hall, yelling that he had first shower.

I called back a reply before entering the confines of my room. Carefully, I set my coffee down and opened my closet to pick out something to wear before realizing that I didn't have a clue of what sort of occasion this was.

I grabbed my phone from my night stand and dialed the number of our stylist, Sherry. She answered on the third ring. "Hello!" she sing-songed.

"Hey, Sherry," I said politely. "Anything particular we're supposed to wear?"

"Oh, right," Sherry said, sounding thoughtful. "You're on Tyler Taylor today. He's more of a formal talk-show host, so wear the red strapless dress—not the satin one—with the dark blue blazer with the white lining." I pawed through my closet, searching for the items.

"Oh, found them," I said seeing that they were conveniently placed next to each other. "What about Percy?"

"Sand-colored skinny jeans and a white dress shirt. Make sure that there's not any stains on it for him, please," Sherry said, sounding exasperated. "*That* was embarrassing."

I laughed. "Okay, well, thanks, Sherry!"

"Anytime, sweetheart." The line went dead. I scowled at the strapless dress, just now seeing how low cut and short it was. *Great.*

I turned as Percy let himself into my room, still clad in only his towel. He glanced me up and down, his eyes lingering curiously on the dress in my hand. "I'm guessing that's what you're wearing?"

I tried to ignore the stark contrast of the coal black hair falling to cover his face and the green of his eyes. They sparkled. I looked to my dress. "Yeah, I suppose so. Sherry's orders. It's a bit short, don't you think?" I held it up against my body, frowning at the fabric, or lack thereof.

Percy cocked his head to the side. "Well, *I* don't think it's too short." I scoffed and tossed the closest pillow at him harmlessly. He grinned as he caught it smoothly. "Developing a soft spot for me, Chase? That wasn't a very hard throw."

"Don't test me, Jackson," I said, shooting him a small glare before dropping my dress and blazer on the bed. "Come on, Sherry has orders for what you're wearing, too."

Percy groaned. "If it's peach—"

"No, it's white," I disclosed with an eye roll. "And I'm sure you'd look fine in peach anyways."

"Would I now?" Percy asked, nudging me with his hip. "Is that a come-on, Chase?"

I slapped his chest carelessly with my hand, yanking it back to me when he caught it. “No,” I said defiantly.

“I don't believe you,” Percy said, narrowing his eyes at me with a devilishly charming smile. “Wouldn't that be a plot twist? If you'd had a crush on me all this time that you were teasing me about mine?”

I swallowed the uncomfortable lump in my throat. I wasn't sure why it was there. “Finally come to terms, Jackson?”

“Who knows, I could have come to terms with it months ago,” Percy mumbled almost to himself as I scavenged through his closet. I shot him a look, but he was staring off into space and more likely than not thinking about food. Shaking my head, I returned to my search for a white button up.

After a good two minutes of searching, I decided that a white polo was as close to orders as we were going to get. Percy'd already found and changed into the sand-colored skinny jeans I'd told him to find. I turned around to see him sprawled out face first on his bed.

I tossed the shirt at his bare back, simply to keep myself from thinking about how oddly attractive his back was before leaving the room.

I showered without wasting time, as I always did, and in all of about ten minutes, I was putting on my blazer and smoothing out the skirt of my dress. My hair was already blow dried—thankfully I'd been blessed with the gene of quick-drying hair—and I was preoccupied with the length of my dress.

If I pulled it down to cover more of my leg, there was too much cleavage. If I pulled it up in order to not be so revealing, my legs were ridiculously visible.

I was just about to call Sherry and ask for an alternative outfit when Percy invited himself into my room once more. He collapsed on my bed. “I was lonely.”

“Well, you're going to have to leave again soon because I'm changing,” I told him, picking up my phone to dial Sherry. In record time, he'd stood up and snatched my phone from my grasp before seating himself on the edge of my bed.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, 'why'?” I questioned. “It's too short and too revealing and too not-me.” Percy appraised me silently, his eyes never leaving my face. I felt bare, despite the clothing I was wearing.

“Annabeth,” Percy said, sighing.

“Percy,” I returned, glancing impatiently at my phone.

“You look beautiful.”

I pushed down any blush that may have tried rising to my cheeks. “Sure,” I said, taking the few steps over to him and retrieving my phone. “But I'm still changing.”

Percy hooked one of his hands around the back of my leg. I tried to ignore the feeling. “Don't.”

“Since when do I take orders from you?” I asked him, probably a bit more harshly than I'd meant to. I didn't like the way he was making me feel. The feeling that someone may actually care is disarming, not safe, and above all, unstable. I didn't need it and I didn't want it.

“Annabeth,” Percy repeated, now grabbing my hand. I thought about taking my hand back, but no matter how much my mind was shouting for it to do so, my hand remained tightly intertwined with Percy's. “Breathe.”

I honestly didn't even feel as though I was that upset, but at Percy's words, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. I took one deep breath, then two, then three, and my shoulders relaxed. Percy smiled brightly up at me. I scowled lightly at him and found the will to take my hand back. He only grinned wider. “What?” I finally asked.

“Nothing,” he replied. “It's just cute, the fact that I can calm you down.” And before I could even think of a sarcastic reply, Percy was on his feet. He rubbed his rough knuckles over my cheek gently. “Don't change. Not your outfit, not yourself, not anything.”

And then he was gone.

I turned to the mirror, cocking my head to the side and examining the dress. It really wasn't *that* short, or *that* low cut. It actually looked fairly decent. I grabbed the navy blue heels that I'd assumed Sherry wanted me to wear before giving myself a final glance and leaving my room.

It was convenient that Percy calmed me down, simply because I probably would have had a minor anger fit with him.

But I didn't like it.

When someone could actually tame me, and make my bitter emotions vanish—that wasn't a good thing.

That meant that I trusted them.

A lot more than I should.

Percy Jackson was absolute last on the list of people I would trust. *He's temporary*, I thought, trying not to feel so heartless about the vitriolic words. What's the use in trusting transient people? They'll always leave in the end.

My thoughts are going to drive me insane, I decided simply, pushing them away for late night pondering. Just as I set foot into the living room, Percy called, “Annabeth! Time to go!”

“Coming!” I shouted, turning off the television and shutting off the lights he'd neglected to turn off.

As I approached the door, Percy's arm fell naturally around my waist almost on instinct. I decided through a minor mental debate that even if Percy was temporary, he's still be good while he was there.

So, without another hesitation or second thought, I let myself acknowledge the fact that I trusted Percy Jackson. Completely and totally and irrevocably.

I got a headache.

“Thank you so much, everyone! This was by far my favorite performance ever. What do you think, babe?” I asked, throwing my arm over Annabeth’s shoulder and grinning. Adrenaline rushed through my veins as the audience cheered louder. Between the crowd and my clamorous heartbeat, I could hardly hear a thing.

Annabeth brought her microphone up to speak, smiling back at me. “They definitely made an impression,” she said, turning to the crowd. “We love you!”

A few cries of our names as well as one ‘Percabeth’ rose above the cheering as Annabeth and I waved our final goodbye before running off stage. I was breathing slightly heavy, but I felt indescribably calm. Performing on stage was like meditating to me. I took a few deep breaths just so that I didn’t sound like a cow in labor, especially in front of Annabeth.

I couldn’t stop smiling, and Annabeth couldn’t either. I thought about talking to her, but even backstage the screams were deafening. I settled for a wink and pulling one of her curls before nodding to the dressing rooms. It was actually kind of cute; the studio had put a sign with ‘Percabeth’ on our door, rather than giving us separate rooms.

I collapsed on the chair in the corner and Annabeth leaned against the side. I grabbed us two bottles of water from the cooler placed conveniently next to us, handing Annabeth hers. We both drank almost all of it in one go, completely parched due to our performance. I pushed my hair out of my face and dropped my head to lean against the back of the chair.

“That was awesome,” I muttered. “But very, very exhausting. It’s been a while.”

“I hope I didn’t flash anyone,” Annabeth said, sounding thoughtful. I lolled my head to the side and gave her an odd look. “This dress is short.”

“I doubt they’d be complaining,” I said under my breath, making Annabeth slap the back of my head. “Jokes!” I assured. She rolled her eyes and I elbowed her. “Come on, *baby*, you know I didn’t mean it.”

“Shut up,” she said bluntly, sending me a falsely sweet smile and finishing off her water. I was laughing as Tyler Taylor entered our dressing room. He gave us his movie star smile, giving us a brief speech about how it was an honor to have us on his show. He had us sign two pictures of ourselves to be hung on their wall of people they’d had on the show. With two handshakes and another flawless smile, Tyler Taylor left the room.

“Time to go?” I asked, looking at Annabeth. She sunk into the chair I was previously occupying.

“Call Clint,” she suggested. I took out my phone, dialing his number.

“Clinty-boy!” I announced, the moment he answered. I heard a resigned sigh and smiled. “When are you getting us out of here?”

“Go to the back entrance, there’s a car waiting for you. Be careful though, there are some fans. Don’t get injured,” Clint advised. I nodded my head though he couldn’t see me. “And it’s okay to sign a few autographs. *A few*,” he stressed.

“Okay, I get it,” I said, sounding more like a child. “Fine.”

“Good. Hurry up now,” Clint ordered, hanging up.

“Love you, too,” I muttered grumpily at my phone. Forgetting about the conversation with Clint, I held and hand out to Annabeth. “Let us leave, dearest Annabeth.”

“Stop with all these weird names,” Annabeth ordered. “My name is Annabeth.”

“Well, *Annabeth*,” I said with a smirk, “please stop being so grumpy.” She scowled at me and I stole her hand away from her. “Come on, we have a car waiting.”

We managed to make it to the car without much trouble, and we both signed autographs and took quick pictures with as many fans as possible. After we finally got into the car, Annabeth basically collapsed on my shoulder. I twirled a curl absentmindedly around my finger as we were chauffeured home. “I’m exhausted,” Annabeth mumbled, dropping her head into her hands.

I patted her shoulder sympathetically. “I was like that too, for a while. You get used to it. It gets easier,” I promised with a smile. She managed one back before filching my phone and unlocking it with ease. “How’d you know my password?” I asked with a laugh. I didn’t mind that she did; I had nothing to hide. I put a password in the first place as a precaution. In the event that I dropped my phone somewhere in public, there were incriminating messages on there describing just how fictitious Annabeth and I’s relationship was.

However, in response to my light-hearted question, Annabeth tensed; barely noticeable to everyone except me. I gave her an odd look. “I watched you type it in earlier,” she stuttered out.

I smiled, figuring that she probably just felt uncharacteristically guilty. “Okay, Annabeth. It’s fine. The password wasn’t to keep you out; I don’t care if you see it. I put it in case the fans—”

“Here,” Annabeth said, thrusting my phone out to me as though it were burning her hands. I took it, a mask of confusion on my face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked bluntly, carefully examining her expression. Before she answered, I knew it would be a lie. It was easy to tell when Annabeth was about to lie. Her face scrunched up the slightest bit in a terribly cute expression and she always tried to make whatever the lie was a laughing matter.

“Nothing. Just a bit jumpy from the adrenaline,” she said with a small laugh and a genuine smile. And I wanted to believe her, really, because her smile was positively enticing. It made you want to listen and believe in every perfectly weaved word that flowed from her mouth. More or less, I could take a hint when someone didn’t feel like talking about whatever thoughts plagued their mind. So, as Annabeth averted her attention out the window, I listened to the radio, humming along to the horrible yet catchy Lady GaGa song.

When we got home, Annabeth and I both retreated to our separate rooms. I was planning on changing at the speed of light, then passing out even faster, but I heard a transient crashing from the living room. Sighing as I finished pulling my fresh shirt over my head and rushing towards the noise, I called out to Annabeth.

“It’s nothing!” she said in an anomalously scared voice. Despite the intention of her words, it only made me rush more.

When I stepped foot into the living room, almost directly on a piece of glass, I saw Annabeth standing near the couch and looking a bit confused. She was already changed into sweatpants and a t-shirt, with no shoes on. And I wasn't about to let Annabeth Chase cut her foot on some stupid glass that broke. "Do not move," I enjoined. She didn't even glance at me, instead staring at a specific spot on the ground. I tried to follow her line of vision, but I wasn't good at it. So instead, dancing around shards of glass, I made it over to Annabeth. Belatedly, I realized that shoes would have been a helpful accessory.

"Percy," Annabeth said softly, swallowing nervously. "If you don't let me on your back, I'm going to push you into the broken glass." I laughed slightly at the vitriolic threat, bending down for her slightly. She clambered her way onto my back, hanging on as if her life were in danger.

"Do you have a fear of broken glass or something?" I asked her, maybe a bit insensitively. She removed one hand from her fierce grip to hit me.

"No, you loser. I drink out of glasses all the time. It's the spawn of Satan I'm worried about," she mumbled, burying her face in my shoulder.

What? I thought, glancing carefully around the room. Then, directly front and center of the television was a spider. My eyes widened slightly in recognition. *Oh.*

I tiptoed my way carefully out of the glass, taking Annabeth into the kitchen and sitting her on the counter. She seemed glad that she wasn't touching the floor. I reentered the living room, this time equipped with the deadly weapon of a shoe and rid of the spider.

I went back to the kitchen and retrieved the broom. "The creature has been murdered brutally," I told her with a grim expression. "S a shame, really. He will be missed."

"Certainly not by me," Annabeth stated, pushing herself off the counter. I started sweeping up the glass. "So, I'm guessing you dropped the glass when you saw the spider?"

Annabeth flinched at the word, sheepishly watching me sweep. "Yeah, but luckily I'd already finished my water, so..." she trailed off and didn't finish her sentence. When I looked up to see the issue, she was staring at me curiously, her head cocked to the side.

"What?" I inquired, half-smiling and half-laughing.

"Nothing," Annabeth replied. I shrugged it off and continued sweeping. "I'm showering."

"Have fun with that," I called after her. She turned, giving me a dry look, which I returned with a wink. She left the room, and I was left to sweep.

I swept the floor probably around five times just to make sure there wasn't any glass shards left on the floor. I didn't want Annabeth cutting her foot. I mean, obviously I didn't want to either, but she takes precedence on who needs to be safe.

I guess that's what happens when you love someone, I thought idly.

Exactly two months ago today, I'd realized that I *liked* Annabeth. I didn't love her in that way yet, but I really did care. I smiled to myself as I put the broom away. Something about the way she was rude, yet sweet, and nice, but insulting, had me hooked. I thought several times about telling a friend, or even her, of my affection towards her.

Everyone goes through it. That feeling where the words are just waiting to get out; to be said, and out in the open. You probably open your mouth, maybe stutter a few times and finally get half the sentence out before you decide that maybe it's not such a brilliant idea. Then you either say one of the following: "nevermind," "forget it," or another sentence that isn't the original one you planned on. And afterwards...that may be one of the worst feelings in the world.

You're constantly plagued with the thought "I should have just gone through with it." You feel stupid, and you know you'll never gather the courage again; at least you feel like you won't. The feeling after you neglect to confess yours is one of regret, relief, pain and happiness all in one.

I'm mostly going through the relief stage. Thinking about it, I know that telling her would have been a rash decision. Who knows if this is a committed thing, or if it's just a minor infatuation that'll fade? Telling her, suffering all that embarrassment and rejection, and then figuring out it's not true anymore? It's almost like it was all for nothing.

So, that's why I, Percy Jackson, have decided to formulate a plan.

I don't know how Annabeth feels about me. Half the time, I think she hates me, and the other half, she probably looks at me as her brother. But I'm determined to sway one of those sides, hopefully by the end of this years' tour.

It's all in the little things. Watching how she reacts when I give her compliments. Back off from her and see if she initiates the affection. Some may call it over analyzing, but I like to call it tactfully making sure that she likes you back before you go all in.

When Annabeth reentered the living room from her shower, I was staring at the ceiling. I glanced at her briefly, barely refraining from falling off the couch after seeing that she was wearing shorts. "Hi," I said, after regaining my cool and ultimately deciding to look at Annabeth's face, and only her face.

"Hey," she replied, falling backwards onto the adjacent couch. "What's up?"

Would it be weird if I asked her to not wear shorts? "The ceiling," I responded, giving her a sarcastic look. She rolled her eyes at me and started to fidget with her still damp hair. "Nothing. Kind of tired," I finally shared.

"Me too," Annabeth groaned. "My feet are killing me from those heels. How's your back?"

"It's fine," I told her honestly. After finding out that I had back pain, Annabeth always seemed to be worried about it. "Really, it's only if I do heavy lifting."

"Well, I don't know," Annabeth countered. "Microphones may be heavy for your scrawny self." I scowled deeply at her, and she raised an eyebrow challengingly.

"If I remember correctly," I retaliated, "I was just carrying you not even an hour ago. So, don't sass me, Annabeth Chase." I smirked at her and rolled deftly off the couch before stretching my limbs as I stood. "And I'm also making you dinner."

"No one asked you to," Annabeth grumbled sourly, picking at a loose thread on the couch.

I approached her, examining a curl that I'd deemed my favorite. Tugging on it slightly, I smiled. "Well, yeah. But can't a guy do something nice for his fake-girlfriend?" I questioned softly, brushing something imaginary off of her cheekbone.

She turned her head away from my hand, and I pulled it back to my side. "Yeah, of course," Annabeth affirmed. "But you're too nice. And you always do things."

"It's odd," I wondered aloud. "Girls always complain when we're assholes, then when we're actually nice, they complain more."

"I'm not complaining," Annabeth said, as though it were ridiculous.

"Mhm."

"Shut up," Annabeth ordered, glaring at me.

"I can't help but notice how *right* I've been lately," I boasted. Annabeth stood and shoved past me, heading towards the kitchen. As expected, as a reflex, as if I was meant to, I followed her.

"Shut up," she repeated.

I felt my eyes crinkle at how genuine my smile was. "You're cute when you're prideful, you know?" Annabeth scrunched up her nose. "And when you make that face," I cooed, grinning at her. She scowled at me. "That one, too."

"Stop," Annabeth muttered, rubbing her face and turning her back to me as she set about making coffee. I watched as heat spread to her cheeks and felt myself smile.

"Stop what?" I asked innocently.

"Flirting with me and saying nice things," Annabeth said, authority present. "Only for the cameras."

My smile faltered into a mere bittersweet twisting of lips. "You know this is all real, right?"

"What do you mean?" Annabeth inquired, all four words running together at the laziness of her speech.

"Our friendship and such," I said vaguely. "You know that I mean it, right?"

"Of course," Annabeth replied, holding up her bracelet. "I have this to prove it. But romance is different."

"Who says I was being romantic?" I asked. "I'm a world-renowned flirt."

"But..." Annabeth trailed off, cocking her head to the side. "Nevermind. I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"That you are. A flirt, I mean. I just...yeah. Forgot," Annabeth replied brokenly. I raised an eyebrow at her before searching the fridge for something to cook.

Since my back was turned, I didn't see the way Annabeth gave me a look, half-curious and half-irritated.

"See you later, love you," I said, dropping a light kiss to Annabeth's lips. She fixed my hair slightly before gesturing for me to leave.

I exited the popular cafe and hurried down the road to where my next interview was. For a magazine—Seventeen, maybe? People?—I would have to answer a few customary questions that my answers are almost automated to. I would more likely than not be interviewed by a pretty girl who wore a bit too much make up and could do with an extra layer or two of clothing. That was how my interviewers always were.

Until today, apparently. Because my interviewer was not a pretty girl with a smidgen too much make-up. My interviewer was a guy who looked to be about college age. And I wasn't sure about how great my gaydar was, but this guy seemed straight as a ruler.

When he saw me enter the conference room, he stood and greeted me with a firm handshake. “Hey man, huge fan,” he told me as he clapped my shoulder. “Sadly, this article isn't about to write itself,” he muttered with a shrug. “I'm Malcolm.”

“Hey,” I replied.

He leveled me with a dry gaze. “I know what you're thinking. The only reason I have this job is because I have to exhibit “excellence in journalism” for my assignment. My stepmom works here and got me an interview. Didn't really know it'd be with you until a few minutes ago.”

I nodded, understanding. “Cool.”

“You're a man of many words,” Malcolm muttered.

I laughed. “You're a man of many comebacks.”

Malcolm seemed to consider. “Touché.” I smiled. “Okay, so let's make this a quick and painless as possible. What made you choose fame?”

“I didn't choose fame; fame chose me,” I responded as usual. “I wasn't really expecting it at all. After my stepdad heard me sing, it was kind of a whirlwind from then on out.”

Malcolm nodded, scrawling down a few notes but leaving it up to the recorder on the table to memorize my words. “And what do you like most about it so far?”

“It's be hard to choose between performing on stage and reconnecting with my best friend,” I answered, trying not to make it sound so robotic.

“Ah,” Malcolm said, glancing up at me. “You beat me to the topic of Annabeth Chase. Thoughts on her?”

“She's perfect,” I told him and a smile. “I mean, I'd always liked her back when we were just best friends, but guys get locked in the friend zone, often. I never thought she liked me until...well, I just sort of went for it.”

“Right,” Malcolm said, sounding amused. “The kiss of the year at the pier.”

“Why, yes, Dr. Seuss,” I responded with an eyeroll. He seemed amused. And then I realized that my sarcasm paired with the eye rolling was completely and only Annabeth.

Malcolm laughed. “You're mighty sassy,” he muttered.

“I get it from Annabeth,” I said with a shrug. “Probably hang out with her too much.”

"Right," Malcolm replied conversationally. "You guys live together, right?"

"Yeah," I told him with a smile. "It's awesome."

"Elaborate a bit, would you?" Malcolm asked, not unkindly.

I chuckled. "Well, she's a handful. Keeps me busy, I guess. Sometimes she cooks; most of the time I do. Coffee and tea is more of her specialty. I swear, it's perfect every time."

"Are you guys still best friends? Obviously there's romance now, but are you guys still...?" he trailed off, gesturing vaguely with his hands. I liked how the interview sounded like a casual chat between friends, and not so much like a pressing interrogation.

"Yeah," I replied, carefully considering my words. "Definitely. We were best friends before love, and still after. She knows everything about me, and I know everything about her. Well, except for the things she can't tell me," I amended. "Every woman has their secrets," I quoted.

Malcolm nodded understandingly. "Makes sense. Can I ask the story behind those bracelets? They've gotten a lot of media attention."

I smiled down at my wrist, automatically adjusting the bracelet. "Well, I bought them for us. It was kind of like..." I grasped blindly for a lie. "We just wanted something to solidify our relationship."

Malcolm looked confused. "PDA didn't?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, obviously that did. I guess it was more of a cute couple thing."

"Like best friend bracelets," Malcolm contributed, helping my explanation. "Just best friends in love bracelets."

"Well, yeah," I said with a grin, running my hand through my hair. "Yeah."

"Do you ever feel lucky?" Malcolm inquired. He looked intrigued, and I assumed that the question wasn't actually on his list. "I mean, you've got fame, money, and now the girl you've always wanted."

"Every day," I answered earnestly. "I wake up every single morning, wondering how my life turned out like this. You never really expect things to start going great, but some people just have a lucky streak, I suppose. I'm just one of those people who ended up achieving goals and getting the girl of their dreams."

"Modest, aren't you?" Malcolm mumbled, scrawling something on his notepad.

"Well, if I wasn't, everyone would hate me," I replied bluntly. He laughed at my unexpected answer, and I shrugged. "It's the truth. No one likes a vain celebrity."

"And you aren't?"

"I try not to be," I said, not offended by his question in the slightest. "I mean, everyone has their moments of pride and arrogance, but I try to keep mine to a minimum."

"Mhm," Malcolm said, still writing something. He finished off his sentence then clicked his pen. "That's all my questions. Anything you'd like to add?"

"Big thank you to all the fans, my mom, and that I love Annabeth," Percy offered with a cheesy smile.

"I'll work it in," Malcolm said with a dry look. Percy and him both stood, shaking hands once more. "Good to meet you, man. You aren't as much of an asshole as I thought you'd be."

"Thanks," I said with a genuine laugh. "I try, kind of."

"An honest man," Malcolm sighed. "Always appreciated."

And I bit my tongue, because I was the furthest thing from an honest man.

When I arrived back at the apartment, I heard laughter in the living room. Cautiously, I toed off my shoes, locked the door behind myself, and walked slowly into the room. "Hello?" I questioned, knocking on an imaginary wall.

Clint was perched on the couch next to Annabeth, and they paused in their conversation. "Just the man I was looking for!" Clint exclaimed, standing to give me a hug. I hugged him back, blowing a kiss at Annabeth over his shoulder. She rolled her eyes.

"What'd we do this time?" I addressed Annabeth, sitting on the other side of her.

"Not sure," Annabeth replied as though Clint were absent. "He's been making small talk."

"You aren't chatting up my woman, are you, Clinty-boy?" I asked, leveling my gaze with Annabeth's as we began a silent staring competition.

"Jealous Percy? Shall we bring him back?" Annabeth teased.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Are we really about to start that again?"

"We wouldn't have to if you weren't the jealous type," Annabeth quipped.

"I'm not!" I protested. "Seriously. I don't care."

"So, if Clint and I were secretly dating—"

"You are?" I asked, my eyes widening to probably the size of a giant squid's. "Seriously?" I shot a look at Clint who stared back innocently. "Guys."

"What if we are?" Annabeth asked, biting her lip.

"No. No, no, no, no, *no*. I would have noticed. You guys are lying. One of you is lying. You two are *not* dating," I tried reassuring myself, ignoring the way my heart was slowly sinking. I lost confidence in my firm denying after Annabeth looked down. "Really?" I questioned softly.

"Nah," Annabeth said suddenly, pinching my cheek and grinning. I tried to decide between sweet relief and anger. "But your reaction was cute."

"Don't call me cute," I muttered, pushing her hand away.

"Awww," she cooed.

"Stop!" I demanded, rubbing my face. "And don't do that to me again."

"It was a joke," Annabeth assured.

"Yeah, one that made me question my friendship with both of you," I grumbled, my head resting in my hands. "That's just what I needed after a long day."

In an almost apologetic way, Annabeth ran her fingers through my hair. Almost immediately accepting the apology, I laid my head in her lap and closed my eyes, gesturing for her to carry on. I could almost hear the smug smile widening across her face. Therefore, I flicked her with a 'shut up, Chase.'

"Anyways," Clint said, clearing his throat. "I just came to give you guys the schedule for the next few weeks."

"Mhm," I managed, my brain melting a bit from the content I was feeling.

"He rolled his eyes at you," Annabeth tattled. I flicked Clint off lazily, snuggling closer to Annabeth. They started having a conversation about the agenda for the following month or two, but I was halfway asleep and only caught bits and pieces.

A few hours later, when I woke up, I heard Annabeth in the kitchen. However, for a few moments, I stared at the ceiling to let my senses readjust to being awake. Sighing as I stood and stretched my bones, I trudged to where Annabeth was. She'd just dropped a lid on a pot and I dropped my head on her shoulder, hugging her from behind. "I'm tired," I whined.

"Then why'd you wake up?" Annabeth asked, patting my head sympathetically.

"Because I'm hungry," I added.

Annabeth sighed. "Such a convenience that your lovely fake-girlfriend made spaghetti then, huh?" I grinned into her shoulder, tightening my grip on her only slightly before letting go.

"You are a goddess," I announced, sleepily beaming at her.

"So I've heard," she said flippantly. I shook my head at her. "Go on. Set the table."

"Yes, *Mom*," I muttered sarcastically.

"Don't sass me," she called as I entered the dining room.

"Whatever, *Mom*!" I yelled back.

"You're acting like a child!"

"When am I not?"

"Excellent question, you petulant and inconceivably ignorant five year-old!" Annabeth argued. I blinked, not catching half the words she'd said.

"I just woke up! Stop using big words," I complained, reentering the kitchen to retrieve silverware.

"Even if you were completely alert, you wouldn't know the meaning of them," Annabeth said with an eye roll. I frowned at her.

"We can't all be flawless and smart," I retaliated.

"Who said anything about being perfect?" Annabeth challenged, appearing affronted. She scowled deeply at me, and I tried to ignore rising thoughts of how pretty she was. They were completely irrelevant.

"No one had to say it," I replied, pinching the bridge of my nose. "That's what you expect, from *everyone*. Just because *you* can handle the pressure of perfection, doesn't mean every other person can."

"I never said that—"

"You didn't have to," I repeated, stepping closer to her. "It's obvious. You want everyone to be as precise and planned as you are."

"Well, it wouldn't exactly be an inconvenience," Annabeth shot back. "Maybe, if you tried to be a little more prepared and stop with all the spontaneous *bullshit*, this argument wouldn't be happening."

I dismissed her remark easily. "The argument would still be happening. It'd just be about something else. Have you ever actually considered how much we fight?" I questioned, my voice no longer escalating. "It's really unhealthy. We don't work."

"I know that," Annabeth snapped. "That's what I've been trying to communicate to *you* for the past few months."

"Really?" I asked drily. "That's what you were trying to tell me."

"Yes," Annabeth stressed icily. "But you have this problem where you don't tend to listen."

"I do listen!" I yelled. Taking a deep breath and trying to level my voice, I shakily replied, "You just never want to talk. I open up to you, I tell you *every—little—detail*. And what do I get from you? Pity. Sympathy," I spat. "You don't trust me in the slightest."

"Why does it matter if we won't even be talking in a few months?" Annabeth asked, exasperated. "Give me one good reason why I should trust you, and tell you every aspect of my life, just so you can forget about me in six months?" Her voice was bitter and nearly made me wince. "*Why?*"

"Because I'm your best friend," I told her, anger barely constrained. "Or at least, I *thought* I was."

"You are," Annabeth admitted. "But not forever."

I rolled my eyes. "It's always the same damn argument with you!" I exclaimed. "I'm 'temporary' or I'm 'just going to forget about you.' Do you even *think* before you talk?" I questioned, my fist clenching. "Do you know how it feels? To be called and pushed aside as 'temporary'? I trust you with my *life*, Annabeth. And you can't even trust me with one secret. And how, *please tell me how*, I could *ever* forget you after all of this. Because if you know the answer, I would just *love* to."

I was close to Annabeth, maybe too close, or maybe too far away. However, I was close enough to see the slightest bit of guilt on her expression. It was masked by pride, layers and layers of it. "You know," I said with a disbelieving laugh, "I used to think the worst feeling in the world would probably be rejection, or someone dying that you love. But, now, I know. The absolute worst feeling you could ever have is when you trust and care about someone with all of your *freaking* heart, and they can't even fathom what that means."

I pursed my lips before deciding that I had nothing more to say, and I didn't want her reply. Turning on my heel, I walked with clenched fists into my room, trying my hardest not to punch a wall. I sat down on my bed, taking a few deep breaths, trying to think of happy things.

But, you know, it's really hard to do that when the things that make you happy are also the things that make you furious beyond belief.

I decided that I absolutely couldn't stay in this house for another minute. I grabbed one out of maybe twenty duffel bags from my closet and started piling random articles of clothing into it. I packed my phone charger and grabbed my toothbrush, patting my pockets for my phone, my wallet, and my keys. After doing a silent and rapid checklist, I opened my door once more, carrying the bag over my shoulder.

I didn't even glance into the kitchen before slipping on my shoes and then artfully exiting.

I don't know if it was mother's instinct or what, but literally ten minutes into my drive to nowhere, my mother called me.

"What?" I answered irritably.

"Well, sorry," Mom replied. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No, Mom," I said with a sigh. "Sorry."

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" she asked, sounding genuinely concerned and caring.

"Mind if I visit you?"

When I finally arrived at my mother's house, I'd ignored two calls and three texts from Clint. He was going to ask me to go back to the apartment, and I wasn't doing that. Not now. Hopefully not ever.

My anger had burned out slightly, thanks to some loud music to help me forget my thoughts. But still, when I entered my childhood home, I felt like punching something.

"She doesn't trust me," was the only thing I could say for a good five minutes. I just kept repeating it, over and over, trying to let the words settle in and become more of a fact rather than an idle thought.

Eventually, Mom muttered, "Yeah, I got that part."

"Mom?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"I think Annabeth and I had a really bad fight," I said, dropping my head into my hands. "I mean, we fight all the time, but this was different. I can't even remember half the things I said," I admitted. "I was so mad."

Mom started rubbing comforting circles on my back. "Oh, Percy," she said sympathetically. "What was it about? Besides her not trusting you?"

I gave a bittersweet smile. "I honestly couldn't tell you. It's all a blur, really." Mom seemed to understand, nodding. There was a few moments of silence in which I tried to breathe deeply. There was no need in blowing up on my mom, the absolute best person on Earth.

After a few minutes, Mom started speaking. "I remember me and your father's first fight," she said with a small laugh. "It was about tartar sauce."

"Tartar sauce," I repeated.

She nodded, a silent confirmation. "I swore that I bought some. I can almost remember picking it up off the shelf," Mom said, lost in thought. "But apparently I didn't. It started out small, you know? Fights usually do. Then they just...escalate. You start yelling louder, you say things you don't mean, and you probably curse," Mom summed up. "They're going to happen, sweetheart. You can't run away every time they do."

"I don't, usually," I told her, trying not to think about the fact that I had once or twice before. "I just...I hate it, Mom. Because I care about her a ridiculous amount, but she just—doesn't trust me. And it hurts, because I try to be so honest with her. I open up to her—which really isn't that easy for guys—and I tell her things I've never told *anyone*, but she can't even tell me her father's name for Christ's sake." I pressed my palms into my eyes. "She always calls me 'temporary' and thinks I'm going to leave her, Mom. But I can't. Probably never will be able to."

"Trust issues," Mom said with recognition. "She just has trust issues."

"Well, I want them to go away," I said irritably. "Because I really freaking care about her, and I would like to know a few details."

Mom put her arm over my shoulder, pulling me in for a side hug. "Well, you can't *make* her trust you. You have to prove you're worthy," she said, carefully. "I may be reading Annabeth wrong, but she's a bit high maintenance, I'm guessing?"

"Understatement," I affirmed.

"Right. So, you just have to show that you aren't planning on leaving anytime soon. And running away from home when you two squabble..." Mom gave me a helpless look. "That doesn't exhibit the best qualities."

"I would have punched her if I stayed," I stated bluntly.

Mom shook her head. "You wouldn't have." I raised an eyebrow in silent questioning. "You have too many morals. And you love her way too much; you'd never intentionally give her a serious injury." I blinked, looking away.

"It's going to be embarrassing—going back, I mean," I muttered. "She's going to be rude about it."

"Maybe," Mom agreed. "But you have to accept that and move on. You both said some things that probably weren't the nicest."

I nodded. "Yeah."

"And there you have it. Kiss her and tell her you love her and maybe buy her something. She'll be fine," Mom said, waving her hand carelessly. "It's seven-thirty. Are you going home?"

"Do I have a choice?"

“Not really,” Mom said irrefutably. “Because I won't let you sleep here. Never go to sleep on an argument.”

I groaned slightly, rubbing my forehead. “I hate when people say smart things. They make me feel small.”

“Well, you're going to feel that way all of your life, around Annabeth, anyways. She's a smart one,” Mom complimented.

“I know,” I grumbled, shooting her a dirty look.

“I'll make you some coffee for the road,” Mom said, standing curtly. I gave my thanks and stared at my toes, thinking of how I could apologize eloquently.

By the time I got home, since I decided on the long way, it was around nine forty-five. I sat parked in the driveway for a good ten minutes, wondering if it was too late to go back to Mom's. She'd probably kill me.

On second thought, Annabeth probably was going to as well.

“Death by Mom or fake-girlfriend?” I asked myself twistedly. I stared at the windows of our apartment, scowling when I saw the kitchen light flicker on.

Deciding that I really couldn't procrastinate any more, I opened the door to my Land Rover. I hesitated at the door, putting my hand on the doorknob and removing it just as quickly. Finally, with a deep breath and a quiet litany of cuss words, I pushed the door open, instantly regretting my decision.

I thought about backing out of the door slowly and getting back into my Land Rover, but at that exact moment, Annabeth called out, “Percy?”

So, I dropped my head against the door for a few seconds, groaning under my breath in annoyance before closing the door. “Hey,” I called back. I belatedly realized that I left my bag in the car.

She appeared in the front room as I kicked off my second Converse, and I waved awkwardly at her, not sure when to start apologizing.

Before I could even form an appropriate sentence in my head, Annabeth rushed towards me. At first, I thought she was going to punch me, but instead she stood on her tiptoes and hugged me, saying 'I'm sorry' against my neck and making me want to shiver. I closed my eyes, trying to channel my earlier anger so that I wouldn't forgive her so easily, but it proved to be pretty hard because her lips were suddenly on my cheek.

And I tried really, really hard not to blush, but failed massively. Much to my relief, Annabeth just buried her face in my neck once more.

I didn't really feel like standing, so I lifted her up with ease, not breaking her hug in the slightest before I fell onto a couch. She was more or less straddling my lap, but I entertained myself with my designated favorite curl. “I'm sorry,” Annabeth said again. “I do trust you.”

I looked away from the curl and into her earnest eyes. “I'm sure you do,” I replied. “I just don't *fee*/like you actually do.”

"My mom's an alcoholic, but I used to love her a lot. She was a great mom and always gave me advice about my crushes. She packed my lunch every day and let me sing loud in the car. She fixed my hair every morning. She was a mom. But then she started drinking—depression as her motive—and told me that I was the reason my dad wasn't around. She lashed out on me all the time, when she was home anyways. Half the time she was out with other guys, different ones every night. I had to get a job just so I could pay for things like bread or shampoo. It was ridiculous, but I wasn't about to report her or anything. That would just be another thing for her to complain about," Annabeth said quickly and suddenly, the words spilling from her mouth and her voice shaking only slightly. I took hold of both of her hands—though I wasn't sure if it was for myself or to comfort her. I convinced myself that it was the second one. "And Dad—he's irrelevant. Never really there in the first place. They're the reason why it's so hard to trust people for me," Annabeth admitted. "Mom left me to fend for myself, so I became really independent. I find it extremely impossible on someone else. And Dad, well the fact that he was never there speaks for itself. Dad didn't even want me," Annabeth said with a fake laugh. "I just—I trust you, okay? Sometimes, I just don't know how to say things, like how I feel, or what I appreciate. Because how I grew up, if you liked anything, it always ended up being stolen away. And I don't want you to think that I don't care about you or something stupid like that because I do, I really do, and you *are* my best friend, and I really do trust you..." Annabeth trailed off, staring at me. I leaned up, giving her an impulsive and chaste kiss. "Percy," she started. I shook my head.

"I know. It was more of a comfort thing. You don't have to think of it in that way if you don't want to. But thank you, for telling me," I said, kissing her cheek this time. "It means a lot."

"I'm sorry," Annabeth said, biting her lip. "I just—I was probably talking too much, wasn't I? You probably didn't really want my life story, god, I'm sorry—"

"You know," I told her with a smile, "I used to get so irritated when you didn't apologize, but now that you are, I don't think I like it." She smiled softly and I absently fidgeted with her hands. "I love hearing you tell me about your life. What are friends for, anyways?"

"Friends," Annabeth repeated.

"The best," I replied, sweetly, letting my face fit into the crook of her neck. "Missed you."

"For what, the few hours we were fighting?" she asked with a laugh, jumping when I laughed against her skin.

"You okay?" I asked with humor.

"Yeah," Annabeth replied. "You just surprised me."

"Mhm," I hummed. "I'll pretend to believe that." She slapped my back half-heartedly and I smiled. "M sorry, too," I told her. She nodded, and I sighed, raising an eyebrow when she got goosebumps. "Cold?"

"Yeah," she responded, and I knew it was a lie. "It's late. I should go to bed."

"Me too," I replied, knocking my forehead lightly against hers. "But coincidentally, I have a hot blonde sitting on my lap."

"Shut up," Annabeth growled, pinching my side. I squirmed a bit, smiling at her ultimately as she got up. We walked down the hallway together, and I stopped at Annabeth's door, giving her a hug.

"Night," I said, already feeling half-asleep. Carelessly yet carefully, I kissed Annabeth and went to my respective room. Two seconds after I shut my door, my eyes widened comically. *I kissed Annabeth.*

Again. I leaned back out my door to apologize, but Annabeth's door was just closing. I sighed, shutting my door again and pinching the bridge of my nose. "You're doing great at keeping this whole 'I actually like Annabeth' thing on the down low, aren't you, Percy?" I asked myself rhetorically as I removed my shirt and jeans. "You're the most stealthy person in the world. She won't have a single freaking clue," I mumbled to myself, falling on my bed and deciding to disappear and lose myself in dreams, where I couldn't possibly be as stupid as I was in real life.

I stared after Percy for a second, trying to remember how to breathe.

That's twice, I thought. And not even within ten minutes of each other.

Finally, I turned and closed the door to my room, sinking down against my door. My lips felt like they were on fire, and my stomach had these ridiculous juvenile butterflies. Rubbing my temple, I sighed to myself. *I don't think I've ever been this emotionally affected by someone, I thought. Ever.*

I considered what they could have meant, but I was frightened by the answers I received.

He drops little hints, the much more detective-like part of my brain whispered. I considered it. “*Maybe I came to terms with it a long time ago,*” I muttered aloud, quoting Percy from the day of Tyler Taylor. I let my head fall back not so softly against my bedroom door. “Twice,” I mumbled, a bit dazed and confused. The first time, he claimed it was for comfort.

What was the second time for, then?

I toyed with the thought of sneaking out of my room, softly approaching his and knocking on the door. But somehow, I just knew that it wouldn't end up well. I had this itching, tempting, terrible feeling that *something* would happen. The kind of something that I swore to myself *wouldn't* again.

Deciding that I really needed sleep—my brain wasn't being all that productive, anyways—I stood from my slumped position on the floor and bundled myself up under the blankets. “It was probably an accident,” I whispered to myself, trying not to think about how often I'd been talking to myself. “Affection is so easy, we just forget sometimes. That's all.”

Still, it took me at least an hour of tossing and turning to fall asleep.

When I woke up the next morning, the apartment was soundless and peaceful. I glanced at my alarm clock, leaning up on my elbow, noting that it was exactly eight in the morning. Percy wouldn't be up for at least another hour or two. I collapsed back on my bed, nearly groaning in despair at the memories of late last night.

I bared my soul to Percy.

And Percy kissed me. Twice.

I still wasn't sure about my feelings on those two signs of affection, but I decided to immerse myself in making coffee for the moment. I threw my sheets off, making my bed right after, and wandered into the kitchen, being sure to stay quiet. I couldn't avoid the conversation forever, but I could procrastinate all I wanted.

Apparently, fate was conspiring against me. Rather than walking into an empty kitchen as expected, I was met with a very much awake Percy who was talking in a hushed manner with my very concerned looking manager. Before they could notice that I was there, and trying not to think about how incredibly *wrong* this was, I pulled myself back around the corner and started listening in.

"Just worried...out of hand," I heard, only catching bits and pieces of Clint's quiet words.

"No...fine. It was...that's all. I didn't know...trust you, I guess." That was definitely Percy talking.

"I'm glad...I wouldn't...were you. Be careful," Clint replied to whatever Percy'd said.

Be careful, I thought to myself. It sparked my memory. Clint was always telling Percy to be careful in his text messages. I strained my ears to hear more, before realizing that they weren't talking anymore. Hearing footsteps, I hurriedly walked a bit further away, making my steps not-so-noiseless and yawning.

When I entered the kitchen, Percy was rummaging through the fridge and Clint seemed to be enamored with the stack of sticky notes on the counter. Percy turned and smiled, but I knew something wasn't right. His eyes didn't sparkle with the joy they always did as he grinned. "Goodmorning, dearest best friend."

"Why are you up so early?" I questioned, making a beeline for the coffee pot—my original plan. Percy finally gave up on the fridge and began to examine the pantry.

"No reason," Percy replied airily. "Didn't sleep fabulously last night, and I woke up about eight when this loser sent me a text about a meeting. I just told him to come over, that way we didn't have to leave the house." Seemingly thinking better of his decision, he turned and looked to me. "Is that okay?"

I smiled. "Percy, it's *our* house. It's okay to invite people over. You co-own it, too; and it was all yours before me."

"I don't like the way that sounds," Percy said after a few seconds of silence. "'Before you.' That was the dark age." He winked at me, and I turned back to the coffee pot, adamantly convincing myself that my smile was only because I was having a good morning.

I poured Percy a cup of coffee moments later, preparing it to perfection. He was at the table pouring two bowls of cereal and gave me a genuine smile when I set it down at his typical seat. He pushed one of the bowls of cereal over to where I usually sat, and looked expectantly at Clint. "If you're hungry, you know where the bowls are."

Clint's eyes widened. "You made Annabeth's cereal!"

"Duh," Percy said with an eyeroll. "Haven't you heard? I'm *whipped*, apparently." I snorted in laughter, and Percy raised an eyebrow. "I'm not whipped. Am I?"

"You do kind of do everything she says," Clint answered. "I'd say yes."

"Of course you aren't, dearest," I replied, patting Percy's hand in a domestic way. He caught my hand, kissing it lightly before returning it to the original place on the table, and I tried not to be charmed.

"Agenda," Clint interrupted suddenly, just as I was about to ask Percy where the whole 'whipped' nonsense originated. "Today, you can do pretty much whatever you'd like, but I don't recommend going out if you don't need to," Clint advised.

"You can never have too much publicity," Percy countered.

"But people *can* and *will* get tired of you," Clint quipped. "I say you guys take a resting day. Sleep, catch up on your horrible daytime television, *bake*," Clint listed, giving Percy a humored look at the last suggestion.

"Baking is actually very fun, I'll have you know," Percy said, narrowing his eyes at Clint.

I nodded. "He's good at it, too."

"Thanks, babe!" Percy said happily. "This is why we're good best friends. You always have my back." He grinned winningly at Clint. "Two against one; you're the outcast."

"Whatever," Clint muttered, practically inhaling his cereal at an inhumane speed. "I gotta go anyways. Visiting my sister today."

"Tell her that we say hello!" Percy called after Clint, who waved over his shoulder before exiting.

"Something up?" I asked, nonchalantly.

Percy cocked his head to the side, picking up a spoonful of milk before letting it pour back into the bowl again. "What do you mean?"

"Not sure," I answered, knowing exactly what I meant. "Clint was acting weird."

"Probably nervous. It's been awhile since he's seen family," Percy shrugged. "Who knows?"

You know, I wanted to say. I bit my tongue, literally, resisting the urge of giving into my growing curiosity.

"Movie time?" Percy suggested, with a smile so enticing, I'm not sure I could have said no, even if I wanted to.

It's two months later, and we have yet to acknowledge that night. Percy's still affectionate, but he hasn't kissed me since then. Not even for cameras in public.

And I was just starting to think that I'm done something wrong—something that messed everything up for us—when the first show on our tour happened.

It snuck up on us, like graduation when you're a senior, or school after three months of shining summer. I woke up one morning, and, *wow*, tomorrow was my first performance on tour. Ever.

We got an early start, Clint ringing the doorbell relentlessly at five in the morning—a time that was much too early, even in my opinion—and Percy had nearly punched the brunette manager in the face. I'd slumped into the room, seeing an energetic Clint, and an absolutely annoyed Percy. He smiled lazily at me and waved.

We'd been through this rehearsal a million times. We even did a run-through of the whole first day, waking up at five in the morning and preparing until eight at night, where we did our mock performance. Percy had been a grouch until Clint and I had double-teamed him with energy drinks and sugary food.

I knew every step I was supposed to take by heart. I knew every cue, every signal, and every note to all of my songs. If held at gunpoint, I'm almost positive that I could recite Percy's as well.

"Goodmorning, popstars!" Clint said brightly. Percy groaned and I patted his shoulder sympathetically. "Gather your necessities, it's time for more rehearsal and—get pumped—soundcheck!"

“Stop,” I said, pushing Clint's much too alert face away with an open palm.

“Don't want to get behind schedule, do we, Dear Annabeth?” Clint said, almost threateningly. I narrowed my eyes and huffed before exiting the kitchen. I grabbed my cell phone and its charger, pushing them into a random bag of mine. I checked to make sure I had all of my bracelets—Percy's and the many I've received from fans—and made sure to pack my toothbrush. Hygiene could always stabilize me if I started to get nervous. Which I wouldn't.

“Babe,” Percy called, obviously still in his room. “What are you wearing?”

I made my way into his room, wrinkling my nose at the mess. “Nothing,” I said sarcastically.

Percy shook his head, glancing over at me. “That would cause a riot.”

“Shut up,” I replied simply. “And I'm wearing sweatpants and a hoodie. Just like our other rehearsals.”

“Oh,” Percy said, as though the thought never occurred to him. “Okay.”

“Make sure to get your phone and your charger,” I ordered. “And don't bring any clothes; they're already backstage.”

“I know,” Percy grumbled, still peeved from being awoken early.

“Ready?” I asked, taking Percy's phone charger from him and storing it in my bag.

“Yeah,” Percy said, nodding and glancing around. I watched him look to his wrist, nodding again when he saw our best friend bracelet. I smiled. “Yeah,” he repeated.

I turned on my heel and led us back into the kitchen, where Clint was doodling on a scrap sheet of paper. I snorted at the elementary drawing of Percy. Glaring slightly, Percy flicked Clint on the forehead. Clint pouted before clapping his hands together. “Ready to go, children?”

“You're *two* years older than us,” Percy pointed out.

“Right,” Clint said. “So, *children*,” Percy and I sighed, “are you ready to go?”

“Yes,” Percy and I replied in sync.

“Excellent!” Clint enthused. He started half-skipping, half-dancing to the door, singing some off-beat song about how it was tour day. Percy grabbed my hand, almost a reflex to going outside, and I swung our hands slightly.

“You think we're ready?” I asked, as Percy helped me into the van. Our tour band was already crowding the other two backseats. “Hi, guys!” I said, waving brightly. They were honestly some of my favorite people on earth. Percy greeted them as well before taking his seat next to me. I tried not to smile, due to the fact that he could have taken the seat on the right, but instead decided in the middle to sit next to me.

“I think we'll be fine. The fans will be excited when they find out we're doing a few duets,” Percy answered, settling his arm on the back of the seat. He tapped my shoulder, making me instinctively turn towards the window, although I knew there wouldn't be anyone there. He started laughing almost hysterically. “I cannot believe you fell for that!”

I scowled, punching his chest. “Are you five?”

“On a scale of one to ten? That's harsh, babe,” Percy teased with a wink. The band laughed as though they were Percy's very own live audience. My scowl deepened. Percy grinned winningly at me. I sighed. It was really too early for everyone to gang up on me. Percy, however, pulled me closer so that I was almost forced to lay my head on his shoulder. He kissed my forehead as an apology, and the whole band cooed.

“Adorable,” Miranda said, interlacing her hands and grinning. I think I may have hit her, if she wasn't such an amazing keyboarder. Everyone agreed with her, making me roll my eyes. Percy set about examining my curls, one by one, carefully. I'd never understand his obsession with them. He'd once said that it was simply because he *didn't* have curly hair. People with curly hair wanted straight hair, and people with straight hair wished for the voluminous curls.

Percy started humming to himself, as he typically did. We were doing three duets for this tour, all of which would be covers. We haven't recorded any in the studio together, so Clint allowed us to pick three songs we'd like to cover, and preferably have them “couple-y.” I chose 'I Won't Give Up' by Jason Mraz, seeing as it was practically the only song I'd been listening to in the past few months. Percy, the cheesy loser he is, said that we absolutely *had* to do 'I'll Be' by Edwin McCain. I'd refused several times, but finally relented when he started pouting like a child. And, as our final cover. . . Well, I lost a bet.

Percy and I both had different choices for what our third song should be. I recommended something more relationship-based, as Clint requested. I wanted to sing 'Lucky' by Jason Mraz and Colbie Calliat, despite the fact that we'd be singing a second Jason Mraz song. I'd seen several fans on Twitter agreeing that it was a perfect song for us, but Percy—outrageous as always—suggested 'Your Love Is My Drug' by Ke\$ha.

I'd immediately shot the idea down with an “*absolutely* not.” Percy reasoned that if he tweeted the lyrics, and it didn't get more than ten-thousand retweets, we'd perform my choice.

I underestimated the dedication of Percy's fans.

The tweet had been an overachiever, getting fifteen-thousand retweets. He'd smiled, shoving his phone in my face the very next morning.

And that's how we ended up covering a Ke\$ha song on this tour. We changed the words sometimes, to make it a bit more fitting. Percy'd even gone as far as saying, “I like your curls” with a wink at a rehearsal once.

“It's go time!” Clint called from the front seat, bringing me out of my reminiscing and into the present. I sat up straight, retrieving my bag from next to my foot, and waited for Percy to get out of the van. We were in somewhat of a back entrance to the Los Angeles Sports Arena (the place of our concert, prepared with 16,000 seats). It seemed to be much too early for any fan of ours to be around, yet we were still rushed inside. “We'll have a tour bus prepared by the next concert, in two days.”

“Right,” Percy said dazedly, looking confused. “Why am I at the front? I don't know where to go!”

Clint sighed, pushing past the throng of band members and me. “This way, children,” Clint ordered, taking an immediate right. We had to walk up some stairs, but before we knew it, we were in a makeshift backstage area. I dropped my bag on a table close-by, and Percy immediately latched onto my hand, running to the stage. “No running!” Clint called, like the dutiful 'father' he is. Percy slowed our pace a bit, but we still burst through the curtains at a high speed.

The view took my breath away.

“Endstage layout,” Percy announced. “Sixteen thousand seats, sixteen thousand fans, two gorgeous popstars.” He winked at me, throwing an arm over my shoulder. “We got this.”

“This is a lot of seats,” I muttered, glancing around worriedly.

“Maybe,” Percy shrugged. “But we're awesome. Get cocky, Annabeth! Sixteen thousand people bought tickets to a concert to see *you*.”

“Or *you*,” I corrected. “Half of them might not even arrive until you're on stage.”

“Not true,” Percy said, rolling his eyes, just as Clint walked on from backstage. He fished in his pocket for his cell phone, unlocking it with ease, and handed it over to Clint. “Be a dear,” Percy joked, clicking on the camera application for him. “Picture,” he ordered, gesturing for me to move closer. “This one's for us,” he said, throwing his arm over my shoulder and smiling. I smiled as well, putting my arm around his waist. “A second one,” Percy called to Clint, who'd backed up to get more of the seats in the photo. “This one's for Twitter,” Percy announced quietly, turning and kissing my cheek. I was smiling softly, but not full-on grinning. I couldn't find the heart to smile fully when it was all for the public.

Percy skipped energetically over to Clint, obviously much more awake than he'd been that morning. He ruffled Clint's hair, earning a deadly leer, and jogged back to me. “Aww, we're so cute,” he cooed, showing me the pictures. “This one's better, though,” Percy muttered, almost to himself, tapping the one that was for us. With practiced ease, he set it as his lock screen, and uploaded the second picture on Twitter, tacking on a simple, *'you guys ready for this?'*

We read the replies, most in all caps, before Clint confiscated the phone. “Practice,” he ordered sternly. “Now. From the top.” Luckily, the stage had already been set up the previous day, everyone wanting to be overly prepared for the first concert. Our band was already in their places, giving us excited grins and cheesy thumbs-ups.

“Ready?” Percy asked as we walked back stage together. “You first, remember?”

“I know, Percy,” I said drily. “I sing my eight songs, then you sing your three billion songs, then we do our three duets.”

“It's thirteen songs,” Percy frowned. “Two of which are throwbacks from my older albums.”

“Really? Please, tell me more,” I sassed, shooting him a look.

“Annabeth!” Clint whisper-yelled, waving me off.

“Good luck, babe,” Percy said, smiling, and obviously forgetting the small spat from moments ago. “Last practice.”

“Right,” I assured myself as the technicians turned the stage lights on. “I've got this.”

“Yes you do,” Percy rushed. “Go!”

I jogged out onto the stage, trying to imagine how loud it would be. The band started playing a song, one of my less popular ones, right off the bat. I took a deep breath, and I sang.

I collapsed on the barstool on stage directly after Percy sang the last bit. We were both a bit out of breath; seeing as our final number was a high energy song. “Great,” Percy breathed. “We're great.”

"You're great," I said with a scrunched up nose. "I went flat a few times in my last song."

"Nerves," Percy dismissed. "You'll be perfect in a few hours."

"What time is it?" I asked, waiting for Percy to check his phone.

"Precisely five o'clock. Rehearsal usually won't take this long for other shows, but it's just because of the times we stopped to clarify things or hear the input of others," Percy explained to me. I nodded. He stuffed his phone back into his pocket, standing up from his chair. "Clinty-boy," he said into the microphone, glancing around the room curiously. Clint had been moving around his seat almost every song, just to make sure that he could hear us well from every spot. Percy and I had made it somewhat of a 'Where's Waldo?' game during our covers.

"That was great, guys!" Clint exclaimed, making us both jump. He walked onto the stage, standing next to me. "It was perfect. All of the practice paid off!"

"But, I—"

"Was flawless," Percy interjected, shooting me a look. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Annabeth," he added, a bit softly. I looked away. "Food sounds great," Percy announced randomly, giving Clint a look.

"Sure," Clint sighed. "What do you guys want?"

"Whatever," I decided with a shrug. "Percy always gets the last say, anyways."

"That's because I'm the fat kid in this friendship. I *always* should get to choose food," he reasoned. I shook my head fondly, taking my hair down. I'd put it up about halfway through my second song, although I'd probably have it down for most of the concert.

"Wait," Clint said, holding his hands up dramatically. "What happens before the duets?"

"Twitter questions," Percy and I recited with a resigned tone to match. We'd repeated the answer to Clint innumerable times.

"Right," Clint agreed. "And what does Percy do?"

"I welcome Annabeth back onto the stage, but actually go *off-stage* and get her because we're supposed to walk on holding hands," Percy reported, saluting him.

"Good," Clint said, sounding relieved. "And we've already picked the questions."

"Can we see them?" I inquired, wanting to be prepared.

"No," Clint denied. "And you won't for any other concert, either. It's going to catch you off guard *every—single—time*."

My eyes widened. "I never agreed to that!"

Clint tutted sympathetically. "Well, isn't that a drag! Sadly, it's already been decided."

"This will be so much fun," Percy said with a laugh. "I can't imagine the crazy things they'll ask. How come we never did this on my other tours?" Percy questioned, pouting.

"Never thought of it," Clint shrugged. "Plus, you and the others on tour with you would always gather around that one ratty couch and sing random songs, sometimes by request. And you answered questions sometimes."

"But it wasn't cool like this!" Percy argued, gesturing up to the screen, where they were testing out the slideshow technology. The slides were blank—Clint was obviously very adamant about us being surprised.

"And now it is," Clint retorted. "So stop being a drama queen and tell me what you guys would like to eat."

It was two hours and thirty minutes later when I started to feel sick. There was thirty minutes until the show, and it was already halfway full, if recent pictures are anything to go by. I brushed my teeth twice, and was starting to feel more relieved, but then I heard the crowd start singing some of the pre-show music, and *holy god* it sounded like the whole city of Los Angeles was out there.

I took three deep breaths, trying to think of calming things. *Light snow falling. The sound of a waterfall. Hot tea. Writing lists. Listening to classical music. Percy's hugs.*

Percy's hugs? I inwardly asked myself. *Percy's hugs*, my inner self affirmed. I sighed, resigned.

"You okay, babe?"

I jumped, feeling awful frantic. "Huh? Yeah. Perfect. Fine."

"Were you...brushing your teeth?" Percy questioned, this irritatingly adorable confused expression on his face.

"Yeah," I replied. "Helps me feel better."

"By brushing your teeth," Percy deadpanned.

I scowled. Now that I thought about it, brushing my teeth sounded like a fairly laughable way to calm down. "Shut up."

"Are you nervous?" Percy asked, raising an eyebrow.

I sighed. "Maybe."

He pushed himself up on the counter in the bathroom. I scolded myself for not closing the door.

"That's not a problem, you know. It's normal. I'm nervous all the time before first shows, every year." I scowled, giving him an odd look. "What?" he asked, a small smile playing at his lips. "Did you think I just *didn't* get nervous or something?"

I shrugged. "Possibly. You just seem so...confident. And calm."

Percy pursed his lips. "Would you laugh if I said that I pretend for your benefit?"

I raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Percy explained, "I sometimes act like I'm calm so that you can...rely on me. If I were to be unstable all the time, you'd never trust me, or come to me for comfort. And, I mean, I like that. That

you come to me for comfort. Is that weird?" he finished, biting his bottom lip slightly and giving me a hesitant look.

"No," I said, almost immediately. "No, not at all. It's...nice."

"Cool," Percy said, smiling. "Hug?" he asked, holding his arms out in invitation. I sighed, as though it were a chore, but I'd honestly been hoping he'd offer all along. Percy pulled me into his arms in a tight, comfortable embrace. I closed my eyes, trying to let this hug make an impression. I'd be imagining it on stage when I got nervous.

He ran his hands through my hair, a bit staggered, seeing as my curls were wild and knotted. "You'll be great," he reassured me, rubbing my back. "I swear. And if you freeze up, I'll run out on stage and save you like the superhero I am," he joked. I smiled into his shoulder.

I pulled back, still in his embrace, just loosely. "You're looking sharp," I complimented, brushing imaginary lint off of his shoulder. "This is a nice tuxedo."

"I change into normal clothes after three songs," Percy shrugged.

"You still look nice," I said.

"Thanks, baby," Percy said teasingly, giving me a sudden Eskimo kiss. I tried to suppress a smile that would surely be blinding. "Now, go on. You'll be great. Ten minutes."

"Ten," I repeated.

"Ten," Percy confirmed.

"Oh, god," I muttered, rubbing my temple. Percy shoved me away softly before slipping off the counter. He grabbed my hand.

"I'll walk you," Percy offered, glancing at my toothbrush and toothpaste. "You gonna get that?"

I nodded, picking up my dental products and clenching them in my free hand. "How many people are out there?"

"Sixteen thousand," Percy replied with a smile, leading me down the hall. "I hear it's a full house. All for you."

"And you," I added.

He shrugged. "I, personally, would be more of an Annabeth fan." I gave him a dry look and he squeezed my hand, stopping at a nearby table so I could put my stuff in my bag. "Eight minutes," Percy said, checking his phone.

"I'm nervous," I blurted. My stomach was in knots, but saying it out loud somehow made it better.

"Me too," Percy sympathized, taking a deep breath. "Breathe." I followed his directions, suddenly hearing the crowd roar. My eyes widened. "No, no, no," Percy ordered. "Don't focus on that. Think about your songs. Calm things. Things that make you happy."

I nodded as Percy walked me to the place where I was supposed to run out from. I could see a portion of the crowd, cameras already flashing and people singing and dancing in harmony. I smiled, laughing in complete mirth as I saw a huge group of girls sitting together and wearing shirts with my face and name

plastered on them. Looking further down their line, I saw two guys making fools of themselves, obviously being in the same group.

“Well, look at that,” Percy said. “People here for you.”

“Five minutes!” someone yelled around the backstage area. Clint materialized at my side.

“You okay?”

“She's fine,” Percy answered. “I got her calmed.”

“Good,” Clint sighed. “Don't need a repeat of how I heard *your* first concert went.”

Percy scowled. “What happened?” I asked, glancing curiously between the two of them.

“Another time,” Clint yelled over the crowd. “There's a five minute countdown out there!”

“That's why it's so loud,” Percy whispered in my ear.

“Oh,” I said, at a loss for words due to the cheering. Percy gave me a smile, his eyes crinkling.

“You'll be great,” he mouthed. I nodded.

“Three minutes!” someone called. “Places!”

My stomach flipped relentlessly. I tried to breathe deeply, and Percy held my hand tighter. Clint helped my with my earpiece before he clapped my back encouragingly before jogging off to talk to another backstage person.

“Two!”

“Why is time passing so fast?” I said, though I don't know why. Percy couldn't hear me if I yelled at the top of my voice. He adjusted my dark blue dress I was wearing, which fell just above my knee. It was comfortable, and only slightly softer than the white blazer I had over it. Percy aligned all my bracelets, smiling at the best friends' one.

“60 seconds!” several people yelled in unison.

Percy pushed me closer to the entrance as the crowd started chanting a countdown. I focused on breathing and trying to calm my butterflies. I muttered lyrics to myself. At ten seconds, the lights black out. That's what Clint said.

The lights vanished, bathing me in darkness. I sucked in a breath as the cheering intensified.

“It's all you, babe,” Percy whispered in my ear. He thrust a microphone into my hand.

The last thing I felt was a soft pressure on my lips, then I was shoved lightly onto the stage. The drum. That was my cue.

Springing into action, I ran out onto the stage, waving at the crowd and singing the lyrics I knew by heart and trying not to be overwhelmed by the deafening screams and the flashing lights from cameras and cell phones.

After my first song, there was a pause where I was supposed to greet the crowd. I stopped, simply staring at everyone and taking it in with a ridiculous grin. “Hello, Los Angeles! I’m Annabeth Chase, and I’ll be your opening act for the night!”

I hurried offstage after giving my thanks to everyone and saying my goodbyes. As soon as I stepped backstage, I ran right into Clint. He smiled winningly at me. “You were perfect!” he called over the audience.

“Thanks,” I replied, absolutely buzzing. I stood on my tiptoes, looking for Percy, and gasping as someone picked me up from behind.

“Oh my god!” I heard Percy yell as he spun us in circles. He finally set me down, his eyes brighter than I’d ever seen them. “That was perfect—you—you’re perfect. I don’t know how I’m supposed to follow that!”

“It wasn’t that great,” I said, blushing slightly from the compliment, and slightly from remembering the moment before I was on stage. “Did you...um, did you kiss me?”

“Yeah,” Percy said, managing to look bashful and confident at the same time.

“Why?” I asked, looking anywhere but him.

“Because I wanted to,” he said bluntly, tugging on a curl. Someone called his name, sounding distressed. “Gotta go,” he apologized. “We can continue this later. Or not. Whatever.” He waved with a lopsided smile before jogging off to a woman who started shoving an earpiece in his ear.

I scowled slightly, wondering how he could be so flippant about *big* things. He just acted like the kiss was nothing. That’s the first time he’d kissed me in literal months. *Maybe it’s because the kiss was nothing to him*, some pessimistic side of my brain whispered. I decided to ignore it. I really didn’t care for that idea.

Percy performed his way through the set list with ease, and it was the first time I’d ever seen Percy totally and completely in his element. He made remarks in between every song, dedicating one especially cheesy one to me. The teenage girl screams were shrill and never-ending, but Percy was enjoying himself. I watched him from offstage, drinking lots of water for my dry throat.

Percy belonged on stage. He had the energy, the wits, and the looks. He had a way of making you feel like you were at a private concert, even though you were in a room full of other teenage girls who loved him just as much as you do, if not more.

Except for me. Because I didn’t love Percy. Not like *that*, anyways. I loved him as my best friend.

Before I knew it, he was jogging over to me with a positively charming smile and latching onto my hand. He pulled me on stage and I beamed at the obstreperous screams due to my arrival, or maybe the chants of ‘Percabeth!’ We both stood in front of the crowd, hands intertwined, and bowed at the cheering. Off to the right, in a corner between sets, there were two barstools. Percy left his microphone in my possession and set the two barstools up for us. I sat down carefully, crossing my legs and assuring that the barstool was stable.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Percy teased with a wink. “I’ll catch you if you fall.”

The audience cheered even louder, and I rolled my eyes at Percy. He grinned, looking out at the crowd. "You guys have been the best crowd, ever! This is definitely my favorite performance that I've ever done. But, for this next bit, you'll have to quiet down!"

At Percy's words, the screen behind us lit up with our first question.

"This is a new addition to the Percy J tour, much like my Annabeth Chase," Percy announced. The crowd had quieted much more, but there was still a lot of talking and a few screams. "We'll be answering five questions that you all have so graciously tweeted!"

The crowd roared at his words, and he signaled for them to politely settle down. I was amazed at the power he had over the crowd. There was still noise of course, and it was still loud, but compared to the deafening screams, it was a great improvement.

Percy turned his head, reading the question out loud. "To Percy," he started, turning towards the crowd with a goofy smile. "That's *me*." I shook my head at him, averting my eyes to the top rows, but smiled fondly. "What made you start liking Annabeth? This is from Emily T. Hey, babe!" He waved vaguely at the crowd, sure that she was there, but not sure of her seat.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Even I'm interested in this one," I announced, giving him an expectant look.

He grinned at me. "She's sassy," Percy listed. "I liked it. Still do." He kicked my foot lightly, and maybe even accidentally since he was swinging his feet. "And she's beautiful," lots of whistles and cheers from the crowd, "*and* she gives perfect hugs."

I felt blush rise on my cheeks, and I cursed myself.

"Oh!" Percy exclaimed suddenly. "I almost forgot. I also started liking Annabeth because she didn't think I was the best thing ever. It was a breath of fresh air. A challenge. And guys never back down from a challenge, do we?" He raised an eyebrow at the crowd, getting a fair amount of response from the guys present. "Wow, there's a lot of dudes here," Percy noted. "Annabeth fans?"

His question was followed by quite a few whistles and one, "hell yeah!" Percy chuckled, starting a game of footsies with me. I kicked him and he glared at me.

"Next question!" Percy proclaimed. The screen switched. "Each of you tell us your best joke! Thank you, at-PercabethEternal. I like this one, babe. And, nice Twitter handle you've got there." He winked, playing the crowd in a way that was so easy for him.

"You first," I offered.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "That sounds like a challenge, Chase," Percy said, tapping his bracelet on his wrist, almost nominally. Still, I felt like he meant something by it.

"I bet mine will be better," I replied.

"Don't be so cocky, Annabeth," Percy teased. "How do you organize a space party?"

The crowd was silent for a moment.

"You *planet*," Percy answered, giving possibly the worst joke in history. I chuckled as James, our drummer, did the classic rim shot.

“That was horrible!” I laughed, wincing.

“So, you have a better joke?” Percy asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Hm...A joke? *Percy Jackson*,” I replied, giving him a sassy look. He laughed, biting his lip as the crowd 'ooh'ed. I grinned as my remark got more response. “I win,” I taunted.

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever.” I smiled and kicked him, jokingly. He pouted, turning back to the screen. “Number three,” he voiced. “What's Percy's worst habit, Annabeth? Asked by Shawn P. 'Sup, man?” He turned to me expectantly.

“Hello, Shawn!” I addressed. “As for his worst habit...” I thought aloud, biting the inside of my cheek. *Running away during a fight*. “I'd say singing loudly in the shower, definitely.” The crowd laughed, and Percy laughed with them, a boyish blush rising on his face.

“Number four,” I called out. “From Daphne—gorgeous name, by the way—what's the first song you guys sang together?”

“Well, this is convenient,” Percy stated, beaming. “Hold on to your seat, Miss Daphne. We might just sing it in a few moments.”

Clamorous screams arose in the crowd. The duets were a surprise. I smiled in anticipation.

“Fifth and final,” Percy declared. “This is from a beaut who calls herself at-iLovePercyJ. Love you, too,” he said happily, grinning at the audience. Clearing his throat, he read, “Who's the household cook?”

“Percy bakes!” I shouted, before he could a word in edgewise.

He shot me a disbelieving look. “Babe!”

The crowd laughed at our interaction, and I smiled sweetly at him. “He's wonderful at it, though.”

“Gee, thanks,” Percy said sarcastically. “Betray me, then compliment me.”

“Love you,” I sing-songed, smiling at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Love you, too,” he muttered begrudgingly. The crowd 'aww'ed on cue.

“What's next?” I asked excitedly, smiling at him.

“Oh, right!” he enthused. “We have a surprise for you guys!” The response was vociferous.

“And it's a good one, too,” I added. Percy grinned as a person just in front of the stage set up a double microphone for Percy—one for his guitar and one for his voice. Percy went back to the on-stage “corner,” which was behind the box on which James was set up.

He resurfaced with a guitar, making his way back to his seat. “Recently,” he spoke into his microphone, “a very pretty blonde helped me master guitar.” I smiled slightly. “And so,” he continued, adjusting the microphones a bit, “we're going to give you a small demonstration.”

The response was ear-piercing as Percy played the opening chords to 'I Won't Give Up.' We more or less serenaded each other, and I found myself tapping my bracelet on certain parts, that I found relevant—relationship or no relationship. He smiled every time I did, and I had a feeling he knew. I

loved that about us, how we could pick up on things so easily. It was almost as if we were on the same wavelength.

He allowed the crowd to give it's positive response to the first of three duets. As soon as it calmed down, Percy started speaking. "*This*, dearest Daphne, is the first song we sang together."

He played 'I'll Be' flawlessly, just like he'd done at rehearsal this morning. We shared smiles and exchanged looks throughout the song. Most would see it as us being in love, but Percy and I knew it was simply us remembering the inside jokes attached to it. People swayed in the crowds, waving cell phones and singing along. Our voices blended together, almost the perfect fit, and I could barely keep from smiling through the whole song. I was full of energy, the crowds' uproarious excitement energizing me.

"For this last one," Percy declared, putting his guitar back. "I would like to publically announce that Annabeth Chase lost a bet." He refrained from sitting on his barstool, so I hopped off of mine, standing by him. He threw an arm over my shoulder, and the audience went crazy. "Didn't you, babe?"

I huffed. "No."

"Of course not," Percy responded with a fond smile. "When choosing a song for our third and final duet, Annabeth said that if I tweeted some lyrics from my song choice, and it got more than ten-thousand retweets, we could perform my choice. So, guys, it's all because of *you* that we get to perform this song. Sing along if you know the words!"

Percy and I gave our final performance for the night, making it quite comical. After we finished the actual song, Percy pulled me close with a small smile. "I like your curls," he finished, pulling on one. Laughter arose from people who understood the reference. Percy turned to the sixteen thousand fans and parents present. "Thank you, L.A.! You've definitely made this a memorable first show! It's actually my all-time favorite!"

"Me too! We love you!" I called, waving and smiling at every individual face I could make out. My hands were almost shaking with the thrill coursing through my veins. Percy grabbed my hand, and we gave a final bow as the lights extinguished and left us in a blanket of darkness. We bounded off the stage, laughing and nearly bouncing up and down.

"That was amazing!" I exclaimed, ignoring all of the backstage workers shuffling around.

"I know!" Percy agreed. "Honestly my favorite show, *ever*." I tried to stop my hands from shaking due to a lot of adrenaline. I had a lot of overly-excited emotions at the moment. I wanted to scream, jump, laugh, or—

Suddenly, I was being pulled by the hand down a side hallway. I figured it was Clint trying to get us out of the venue, and I followed willingly. Then we stopped, and I was backed up against a wall, and *again*, I found myself kissing Percy Jackson.

Instinctively, I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, pulling us closer together. "We shouldn't be doing this," I managed in between breathless kisses.

"Don't care," Percy replied.

"Clint will be pissed," I pressed, my words contradicting the way I kissed him back.

“Once again, don't care,” Percy muttered, deepening the kiss. I wasn't getting enough oxygen, obviously, since my train of thought was entirely out of whack.

I accidentally-on-purpose pulled Percy's hair, and he pulled back with shining eyes. “Oops,” I said, with a very uncharacteristic giggle. Percy smiled, laughing and kissing me a bit less desperately and a bit more calmly.

“Percy!”

I pushed him back slightly, breaking the devastatingly heart-melting kiss and pausing, allowing some sense to return to my brain. “That was Clint.”

“That was Clint,” Percy repeated, a bit dazed. “Clint, he's looking for us!” he said in realization, taking my hand immediately and scurrying down the hallway. “Clinton!” Percy shouted.

“Where were you?” Clint asked, making Percy and I both jump and turn to our right.

“In search of water,” Percy lied smoothly. “Couldn't find it out here.”

“Oh,” Clint said, giving Percy an odd glance, before shrugging. “There's water in the van. Go through that hallway,” Clint ordered, causing me to blush as I realized it was the hallway Percy and I were previously occupying. “Take the first left. It'll lead you back the same way we entered.”

“I remember how to get there,” I offered, shuffling through my early morning memories and nodding.

“Great. And you guys were perfect tonight,” Clint complimented. “Really great. I'd hurry before the van is raided by fans.”

“Thanks!” I replied brusquely, heading to where I knew the van was. We rushed down the hallway and Percy intertwined our hands, following behind me. I tried not to think about it too hard.

“Memorable first show, huh?” Percy asked, the second we were safe and sound in the black box-like van.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Really.” He squeezed my hand in a comforting I-swear-we'll-talk-about-it-later manner before releasing it. I missed the warmth, as I'd become accustomed to having Percy's hand in mine, but I figured we were walking on fragile glass.

I decided that it really couldn't get any more delicate and messed up, so I reached over carefully and took Percy's hand once more, lacing our fingers and holding on tightly.

“Remember to get all of your things you want on tour with you together. We leave early, first thing tomorrow. No time to wait for your last minute packing, Perce,” Clint said sternly through the phone. We’d just walked through the door, and I’d been ordered to put my phone on speaker for Annabeth to hear as well.

I placed my phone on the counter as Annabeth responded to Clint, who was still advising her thoroughly. I watched as she rolled her eyes and felt a surprising surge of affection for the blonde-haired girl standing next to me. When she raised her eyes and caught me staring, I tried to glance away rapidly, but by the way I felt my cheeks warm, I was sure that she connected the dots and knew that I was watching her.

Simply thinking about having a conversation about what happened earlier made my stomach turn. I didn’t want to ruin such a perfect day by talking about a certain subject that could do one of two things: make me ecstatic, or make me want to consume so much alcohol that I forgot.

So, when Annabeth finally ended the call with Clint, I turned on my heel and left the room, knowing that she wouldn’t be far behind me.

Identical to my prediction, I heard Annabeth’s footsteps behind me. “Percy, can we—?”

I stopped in my tracks, knowing that it was inevitable, but not wanting it to happen just yet. “Later?” I asked her, a small bit of pleading in my voice. I took the few steps to her and tried to take a deep breath, but I was instead met with a shaky, unstable one.

It really wasn’t fair. The way she could do absolutely *nothing* and make my heart beat faster. The way I constantly felt the need to hold her hand, or wrap her in a tight embrace. Sometimes, I felt like I would die if I didn’t make some sort of contact with her. And it wasn’t fair that I cared for her so desperately, but she obviously didn’t plan on us ever having anything real.

And sure, that stung a little. It’s part of the reason why I was so hesitant to talk about *us*. Rejection hurts, no matter who you are or what you’ve been through, and I didn’t want to feel it.

“I mean...” I started, after realizing that there had been a prolonged silence, “I just—later, yeah? We can talk about it later.”

Annabeth’s eyes were a bit guarded, and I could tell that she didn’t agree with me. I looked earnestly into her eyes, trying to convey all the words I couldn’t say aloud.

I need you, so much that it scares me. I’m afraid that I’ll lose you when we do talk about it, because I feel more than you do. I just want to go to sleep, preferably with you, and not bring sadness to such an amazing day. Please.

Annabeth looked away sharply, and I tried not to take it personally. “Fine. But tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I nodded.

“Go pack,” Annabeth ordered. “I packed in advanced, but I know you aren’t done.”

I smiled. "Help me?" I suggested carefully. Annabeth sighed. "Please, babe. I seriously haven't packed at all, and I'll be up all night if you don't offer your amazing skills of organization."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Annabeth muttered, shouldering past me. I grinned to myself for a few moments before following after her.

I zipped up my last of six duffel bags and sighed contently, falling flat on my back. Annabeth did the same thing, staring at my ceiling.

"We leave tomorrow," she stated.

"Yep," I sighed.

"For five months."

"Mhm."

"On a tour bus."

"Yeah."

"Where do we sleep?"

"There are typically beds on the bus," I explained. "But if we stay in one city for an extended amount of time we'll get a hotel room."

"And how does food work?" she inquired.

"There *should* be food on the bus," I told her. "Maybe we should pack a bag of food just in case." I could almost hear her roll her eyes, and I smiled. "Five months."

"Think we can do this?" Annabeth asked, sounding pretty confident herself. I turned my head and watched her blink twice at my ceiling before turning to me.

I love your eyes, I thought. "Of course," I said.

She bit her lip, which in turn drew attention to her mouth, which made me want to kiss her. I considered it, but ultimately decided against it when I caught the look in her eyes.

"You okay?" I asked, leaning up to fall back on my elbows.

"Always," Annabeth replied.

"Your tone is off," I informed her. "Is it about the thing or about going away for five months?"

"Maybe both," she answered quietly. "I'm going to miss home, though."

"Home as in *here*, or home as in San Fran?" I asked her. I glanced at her briefly, wondering if it would be completely out of line for us to sleep in the same bed. I always slept better when she was there, and I'm not sure if it's because I was warmer or just because I knew she was out of harm's way.

"Here," Annabeth said, looking at me. "Here, as in with you."

I prayed to whatever god would have mercy on me that I didn't blush. I tried to push down the way her simple words made my stomach twist a bit. "I'll still be with you," I responded with a slightly forced laugh.

She shook her head, eyes returning to my ceiling. "No, I mean...like, having movie nights with you. And waking up to your obnoxious singing," Annabeth said with a laugh. I smiled as well. "I'll just miss hanging out with you, as in just...us." She sounded hesitant suddenly, and I had to lay back down, hands beneath my back, to keep from reaching out and intertwining our fingers. "For these next few months...we aren't going to have very much 'us' time, are we? As in the best friend 'us,'" she clarified.

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "Sadly, no. I mean, obviously, we'll have our days off, but Management usually makes me go out on those days. Raise awareness of the concerts, or to just get publicity. Mornings before concerts are usually spent with either rehearsal, always sound check, and most of the time interviews."

"Busy," Annabeth sighed.

"One of the downsides of being famous," I replied with a shrug. "Or it's an upside. Being busy keeps you from thinking."

"And you don't want to think?" Annabeth asked, still staring intently at the ceiling.

I shrugged. "Sometimes thoughts can be a bit...suffocating. Can't run from the thoughts in your own mind, unless you replace them with other ones. Interviews ask you questions, you think about the answers. You can procrastinate on the real problems for longer."

"Real problems," Annabeth repeated. "Like..."

Us. What we are. If we'll ever be anything more. "Just...everything, I guess. Your worries about life and family, and the future. Your past."

"So, all the mindless tasks of being famous help you forget?" Annabeth summed up.

"No," I corrected. "The mindless tasks of being famous help you become numb. You get so used to avoiding things that when pressing matters come up...it's hard to make decisions."

Annabeth turned to me, and I faced her. "This isn't the first time you've thought about all this, is it?" she questioned softly.

With somewhat of a bittersweet smile, I shook my head. "I get a mild case of insomnia while on tour. I guess it takes longer for adrenaline to leave my body or something."

"So you stay up and think?"

I nodded. "I always found it easier to think later at night. It's kind of like...you're halfway in dream-land, so impossible thoughts come to mind. You think things that you normally wouldn't. I get oddly philosophical."

"Like now," Annabeth suggested.

"Like now," I affirmed. "What time is it anyways?"

"One," Annabeth replied with a sigh. "I should go to bed. Early morning, right?"

“Um, yeah,” I replied, a bit tactlessly. “But, you know, my bed's closer. And it *is* our last night in this house.”

“So, by all means, we should sleep in the same bed,” Annabeth finished sardonically, rolling her eyes.

“Guess I'm not as smooth as I think I am?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Not hardly,” she replied easily.

“So...”

“It *is* our last night,” Annabeth muttered.

My heart fluttered in a not-so-masculine manner. “Yeah,” I said, clearing my throat. “And, uh, I sleep better. When you're there. With me.”

Annabeth looked at me. “Really now?”

“Yeah,” I repeated. “I guess I feel...safer?”

“Typically, the *girl* feels safer when sleeping with a *guy*,” Annabeth mentioned. Her eyes twinkled with amusement, and I tried not to think about how pretty it made her look.

“Maybe,” I agreed. “But the guy feels safer, too, just by knowing that the girl is safe.”

“Surely no guy is as sappy as you,” Annabeth said with a laugh.

I gave her a dirty look. “I'm a hopeless romantic.”

“I noticed,” Annabeth responded. “Don't worry. *It's all part of your charm*,” she teased.

“And charm is something I have much of,” I quipped with a wink. She looked away, but I caught a small smile. It made me feel triumphant. “So, sleep with me?” Annabeth opened her mouth, and I could practically feel the rejection already. “I won't try anything, I swear,” I found myself saying, before I could truly stop myself. “Just sleeping. Maybe cuddling. They're a package deal.”

“Who said I thought you were going to try something?” Annabeth asked, elbowing me.

“I-I thought you were going to say no,” I answered honestly. “And I figured it would be because of *that*.”

“What *is* 'that'?” Annabeth inquired suddenly. “Is it the kiss, or something else?”

My stomach turned at the thought of the kiss—but not in a bad way. In an almost longing, wistful way. “Not tonight,” I said lightly, standing up. *But for the record*, I added silently, *'that' isn't really the kiss. It's more like these scary, unresolved, and overwhelming feelings I get around you sometimes.*

“Right,” she said, almost to herself, standing up. I pushed my duffel bags over to the door with my feet as Annabeth tied up her hair. Carefully, just as her hand dropped back down, I pulled her into a hug.

“I'm not trying anything—”

“Stop assuming that's what I'm thinking,” Annabeth ordered through a laugh, returning the hug. “We hug all the time.”

"I'm just really proud of you, you know?" I sighed, hugging her tighter. "You did amazing—perfect. I wish I could have been in the crowd and watched you."

"Thanks," Annabeth replied softly, pulling away from the hug, but only a little bit. "Sleep?" I nodded wordlessly, my hand flinching to grab hers. I instead fidgeted with the hem of my shirt before falling onto my bed, face-first. "Did you know that you *always* get into bed that way?"

"It's easiest," I replied, speaking into my pillow. I heard Annabeth laugh, and I was extremely thankful that my face was buried in my pillow, because I smiled unnecessarily big. After she was settled in bed, I turned so that I was lying on my back and pulled her closer until her head was resting on my chest. I pulled on a curl, knowing that she hated it when I did that, but unable to stop myself anyways.

And there was silence. Annabeth's breathing deepened, and I knew that she was falling asleep much quicker than I was, contrary to the usual. I continued to play with her hair, sometimes twirling a curl around my finger. The quietness left me too much space to think, and that wasn't really something I'd planned on doing tonight. I'd planned on falling asleep, warm and content and happy because of Annabeth.

I tried to think of anything, but everything led back to Annabeth. It annoyed me that she consumed every one of my thoughts, but I doubted that I was ever on her mind—at least not in the way she was on mine.

I close my eyes, and scenes play back in my mind. Annabeth laughing, Annabeth smiling, Annabeth teasing me, Annabeth greeting me in the morning. *This is creepy*, I told myself. *Stop*.

And almost as if those were the magic words, Annabeth shifted only slightly closer to me, her hand clawing slightly at my shirt, and I wrapped my arm around her back. I closed my eyes, this time feeling a wave of complete exhaustion.

And just like that, I fell asleep.

"Percy!"

"What?" I grumbled, rubbing my eyes. I felt something hit my chest, and I realized it was a fist.

"What?" I asked again, irritated this time.

"Wake up; we're going to be late!" Annabeth stressed.

"You always say that," I accused sleepily, pouting.

"Jackson, I *swear*, if you do not get up right this instant, I will personally make sure that I tweet one of the very incriminating and embarrassing pictures I have of you," Annabeth threatened.

I opened one eye, not appreciating the tone of her voice. "Like what?" She raised an eyebrow in response. "Oh, really? You're gonna play *that* game?"

"Jackson, I have photographic evidence of you watching Mean Girls and that Barbie princess movie we watched; do you really want the world to know that you're a closet *girl*?" Annabeth questioned, pushing me once more.

"Stop pushing me," I groaned, shoving her back.

"Percy, I will kill you," Annabeth said with a straight face. I sighed, sitting up slowly and rubbing my face.

"I'm sleepy," I whined.

"I don't care," Annabeth replied heartlessly. "Clint is going to murder the both of us if you don't *get up*," Annabeth added, throwing a pile of clothes at me, soon followed by a towel. "Shower, now."

"Yes, *mom*," I said sarcastically, rolling my eyes and trudging into the bathroom. "You're mean in the mornings!"

"You're stupid in the morn—my bad, *all* the time," Annabeth called through the closed door. "Now hurry! Five minutes, tops!"

"I will shower for as long as I want!" I yelled, starting the water.

"Percy, if you think I'm afraid of *personally* walking into your bathroom and pulling your out of the shower, stark naked or not, you are sadly mistaken," she shouted. "So, hurry!" I scowled blearily, stripping and showering in under five minutes, nonetheless.

When I emerged from my bathroom, buttoning up the plaid shirt Annabeth chucked at me earlier, she was sitting on my bed and nodding with her phone pressed to her ear. "Yeah, we're ready. He's right here. Yes, he's dressed. No. Hold on." Putting her hand over the bottom of her phone, Annabeth looked up at me. "Are you okay with breakfast from Wendy's?"

"Breakfast is breakfast," I replied with a shrug. She continued speaking into the phone for a few more moments before hanging up and throwing the device on the bed. It bounced, and we both watched it fall flat on the carpet.

"Oops," Annabeth muttered, falling back on my bed. "I feel like I'm forgetting something."

"Clothing?" I questioned. She nodded. "Toothpaste, toothbrush, deodorant, etc.?" Another nod. "Me?" She rolled her eyes, nodding. "That's all you need, babe," I told her with a laugh. Annabeth sighed, shaking her head.

"Did you pack that one hoodie?" she asked suddenly.

"Care to elaborate?" I suggested, sitting on the bed next to her, accidentally closer than I intended to. I inched away, hopefully unnoticeably.

"The green one? My favorite one?" Annabeth added.

I cocked my head to the side, thinking. "No," I said, shaking my head. "I don't remember seeing it."

"Do I still have it?" Annabeth asked herself. "Maybe the laundry room..."

"Well, you can check up on that," I told her. "But I'm going to go find something to drink." I turned on my heel and walked slowly into the kitchen, my eyes widening at the time. "Why in god's name are we up at four in the morning?" I shouted.

Annabeth entered the kitchen, pulling a cup out of the cabinet and getting a glass of water. "Early start, I told you. We have to drive five hours to San Jose," Annabeth informed me. "It's our last show in Cali."

“Oh,” I replied stupidly, taking her water and drinking the rest of it. She seemed as though she would expect no less, and I grinned at her. “Cool.”

“What happens if I forget something?” Annabeth inquired, rubbing her temples.

“You buy a new one,” I said simply. “Annabeth, are you not realizing how much money you have now?”

“I know,” she answered. “I know. I’m just...stingy.”

“Well, then *I’ll* buy it for you. Make sure you have your iPod though; tour buses can sometimes be loud, especially if there’s fans. Or they can be really quiet. So, iPod.”

“Got it,” Annabeth said, and I imagined that she was mentally going through her packing and making sure that she knew its exact location before relaxing. “And I found my hoodie.”

“*My* hoodie,” I corrected with a fond smile.

“My hoodie,” Annabeth repeated, grinning. “I’m officially claiming it as mine.”

“You owe me something, then,” I told her. “I deserve something of yours.”

“You can have one of my hoodies. I think I have a pink one—”

“So *not* what I meant,” I interjected with a laugh. “No, thank you. I meant more along the lines of bracelet, or something?” Annabeth started examining her arm carefully, her eyes flickering over the multitude of bracelets, some purchased by her and some from loving fans.

“Ah, *this* one is perfect,” she decided finally, untying one from around her wrist. I tried to see what it was, but she concealed her wrist from my view. “Close your eyes,” Annabeth ordered, and I followed directions. I felt her tying a bracelet around my wrist, and there was a knock at the door. “Not yet,” Annabeth said, stopping me from opening my eyes. A few seconds later, she patted my shoulder. “Good to go.” She left, presumably to get the door.

I glanced down at my wrist, seeing the new addition to my not-as-plentiful collection of bracelets. It was hot pink and said ‘Percabeth.’ I’d never understand how talented our fans were—they should be the famous ones, really. “Very funny, Annabeth,” I called after her. I heard her greet the person at the door, Clint, I acknowledged, after recognizing his voice. I twisted the bracelet so that the knot was face up, but it was a very different knot that what I was used to.

“Nearly impossible to untie,” Annabeth boasted. “Only those who know how to tie it can untie it.”

“Get this off my wrist,” I ordered, glaring at her.

“Pink is really your color, Jackson,” Annabeth said with a wicked smile, pinching my cheek. I leered at her before sighing in defeat.

“Like I need more gay jokes,” I muttered, adjusting the bracelet. “Hey, Clint.”

“We gotta get a move on,” Clint ordered. “As in, now.”

“Food?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“In the van! Now come on, we still have a ten minute drive to the tour bus.”

Annabeth and I gathered our bags, me offering more than once to help her, and her refusing each and every time. After we piled them all in the trunk of the van, I opened the door for Annabeth and she rolled her eyes at me. “You know,” I said, after closing the doors behind me, “I have the feeling that you’re *that* girl. The one who complains when I am a gentleman, but if I wasn’t one, you’d be pissed.”

“Your feelings are accurate,” Annabeth owned up.

I smiled at her, chuckling. “Well, at least you aren’t one of those girls who act like they aren’t high maintenance.”

“Whoa,” Annabeth said. “I am *not* high maintenance. That was never in the conversation.”

Rather than replying, I rolled my eyes, admittedly with admiration, and pulled my phone out of my pocket, scrolling through Twitter. I checked my mentions, responding to a few tweets, then sending Annabeth one. A few moments later, Annabeth started speaking aloud. “I can see you,” she read drily. “Really, Percy?” I gave her a winning grin. “You are a loser.”

I refreshed my mentions and started scrolling through them again, eventually seeing Annabeth’s reply. *Really now? You know, I may be wrong, but I think it’s because we’re in the same car...*

Don’t be sarcastic. You look beautiful today. x’

And when Annabeth shoved me a few moments later, asking what *that* tweet was all about, I’d lie and say it was for the benefit of Management.

It’s thirty minutes later, when we’ve just settled in on our tour bus and started unpacking that Annabeth says, “When are we going to talk about it?”

So, of course, I was caught off guard and ended up dropping my phone, as well as my sunglasses. The sunglasses broke, much to my dismay, but my phone was unscathed. I looked up at her from my bed—thank god there was two separate beds—and sighed. “I’m guessing now is the time?”

“You guessed correctly,” Annabeth said, sitting on the bed across from me. The beds were narrow, and so was the fairly small cabin, but it left a larger space for lounging out in the main area—a small kitchenette and a loveseat, as well as a few beanbags. There was a night stand separating our two beds, but her feet still ended up being toe-to-toe with mine. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “So? Want to give your side of the story?”

“Will you give yours?” I asked, meeting her eyes carefully. She nodded. “Then yeah, sure.” I sighed, running my hands through my tangled hair. “Um, so, the show was over.”

“Right,” Annabeth prompted, gesturing for me to carry on.

I sighed, not able to look at her. “And I had a lot of adrenaline. And, um—a lot of...emotions? That makes me sound like a girl, but really, that’s how I felt,” I confided. “I was just...really happy, and proud, and excited, and just...yeah. So. Those feelings had to be taken out on *someone*, and you...”

“Were just the closest person,” Annabeth finished.

I shook my head adamantly. “No! Annabeth, *seriously*? That makes me sound like such an asshole. No. I just...It’s like our fight in the park. Just. A lot of tension. And I needed to get rid of it.”

"So, there was tension after the show?" Annabeth questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know," I replied with a sigh, probably blushing. "Maybe? I think it was more excited tension than angry tension, but yeah. There was something."

"And so, you...?"

"Uh, kissed you," I filled in, "to get rid of said tension."

"That's why you kissed me?"

No. "Yes."

"Okay," Annabeth replied with a nod. "Makes sense."

"And your side of the story?" I questioned.

"Kind of the same as yours, I guess," Annabeth answered with a shrug. "Lots of adrenaline and emotions, you started kissing me...and it just kind of went from there."

"And—um, I—well, that's not—it wasn't *just* because of tension—maybe. I guess. I don't know," I managed, stuttering and sputtering and probably blood red. I put my hands over my face, which was warm against my palms. *Lovely, I'm blushing.*

"What do you mean?"

"Like...maybe there were other motives," I mumbled, with a shrug, pleading with my face to turn back to its normal tan color.

"Like what?" Annabeth interrogated, dragging the question out and pulling my hands away from my definitely still red face.

"I can't *say* it," I admitted. "It's hard. And weird. And probably a bit—"

"Percy, do you like me?"

"Of course," I replied instantly. "You're my best friend." Even as I gave my response, I knew that wasn't what she meant at all. I felt my heart start racing at the thought that she'd already guessed it. *I must be a lot worse at hiding crushes than I thought.*

"No, Percy," Annabeth said, shaking her head. "That's not what I meant." She leveled our gazes, and I couldn't look away. Slowly, my heart still beating faster than what was probably considered healthy and my lip being bit to pieces, I nodded. There was a tense silence—definitely an awkward one, so unlike our typical silences, in which I dropped my gaze to the ground and Annabeth looked at god knows what. "Oh," she said softly.

I groaned, dropping my head into my palms. "This is why I didn't want you to know—things are weird now. I was planning on just waiting it out until it went away," I half-lied. "It's not a big deal, I swear." There was a long silence, and I finally mustered up the courage to look at Annabeth. She was staring at me, and I tried to tell myself that it was because of my confession, but hope took over and assumed that it was due to reciprocated feelings.

"Percy, I—"

"I know," I said, bitterness tinting my voice slightly. "'We can't' and all that. I know, okay?" I stood from my bed, leaving the small confined room—if you could even call it a room. I prayed that she didn't follow me; I was more than ready for this conversation to be over.

I really should have known better though, since Annabeth hardly ever leaves an argument unresolved. Just as I laid down on the couch and pulled out my phone, Annabeth entered the lounging area. I suppressed an eye roll and hoped that if I ignored her existence long enough, she'd leave. Sadly, she only cleared her throat three different times until I was forced to look up at her.

With a half-resigned, half-annoyed sigh, I glanced up at her. "Yes?"

"We need to finish talking about this," she said simply, sitting on the ground next to the couch. "If we don't, things will be awkward."

"Yeah, and if I tell you all about my crush, that will make it *so* much better," I muttered.

"Percy, don't act like this," she said, putting pressure on her temple. "This isn't an easy conversation for either of us."

"It's much easier to be the *rejecter* rather than the *rejectee*," I told her, scrolling through Twitter without reading a single thing. My phone was snatched from my grasp, and I turned, glaring at Annabeth. "Excuse you."

"When did anyone say the word 'rejection'?" Annabeth asked, shooting me a dirty look. "Don't make me the bad guy, Percy. I'm just staying true to the rules."

"Aren't you always? That's *all* you do. You'd never take a chance on a *single* thing that might be worth your time because you're always sticking to rules! Don't you think I *know* that I'm not supposed to like you? I am well aware. More than aware. I'm reminded every—single—moment. Maybe, if you stopped paying attention to rules for *five* minutes, you'd realize that you aren't the only person on Earth who's hurting," I snapped, feeling venom practically dripping off of my words. I met Annabeth's eyes, giving her a hateful look.

It wasn't Annabeth I hated—never. More than anything, I hated fate. Fate could sometimes bring you the greatest happiness, and other times, it could just make your life complete shit. Like now, for example. "You don't know what you're saying," Annabeth finally answered in a slightly shaky voice. "You're just lashing out."

"I know *exactly* what I'm saying," I added, my voice rocky and ragged from being upset. I stood up from the couch. "You just can't handle the truth."

"That's not true!" Annabeth denied, standing up herself. "Take your own advice, *Percy*," Annabeth spat. "You aren't the only one hurting."

"Why would you be hurting?" I asked with a bitter laugh. "All you have to do is say how you don't care about me the way I care for you, but it's definitely not *my* fault, and I shouldn't take it personally." I shook my head in a bewildered manner. "That's not that hard."

"It is when those aren't the things I *want* to say!" Annabeth yelled. "It wouldn't *matter* if I cared for you in that way, because I *can't*. It's not easy, Percy! It's not supposed to be real. It was *never* supposed to be real."

“*Shit—happens*,” I answered, setting my jaw. “Please, tell me the last time it was all ‘fake,’ Annabeth. Because I honestly can’t remember. It’s been real for a long time, at least for me.” My chest was heaving, and I knew my face was red—but not from embarrassment. This was anger.

Annabeth started shaking her head, closing her eyes. “No, no, *no*. It’s not real, Percy. You don’t really like me; I’m just the closest person to you. You’re mixing up the affection—you have to like me as your best friend, not more. Please, say you’re just mixed up.”

“If I did,” I enunciated, “I would be lying.”

“Stop,” Annabeth ordered. “Think about it. You can’t like me. You don’t.”

I laughed, disbelievingly. “Seriously? You think that you can just *say* that I don’t like you and my feelings will go away? That’s not how it works, Annabeth. And here’s the real kicker,” I said, my voice twisting with surprising venom. “I don’t just *like* you, Annabeth—”

“Stop.”

“—I’m *falling* for you. Freaking believe it or not.”

“You’re confused,” Annabeth said again, softer.

“That’s what you’re trying to convince yourself about,” I answered. “You don’t want me to like you,” I said with realization, my voice softening a bit. The fight had decelerated, but it was far from over.

“Why?”

“You *can’t*,” she repeated.

“I *do*,” I corrected. “So, give me a better answer.”

“It’s against the rules.”

“Nowhere in that contract did it say that I couldn’t like you.”

“But Clint said—”

“Why does that matter?” I asked, my voice rising once more. I stood, pulling on my hair. “God, Annabeth, what do I have to say to get it through your head? There’s nothing *wrong* with this,” I told her, gesturing between us. “It’s *unconventional*, sure, and Clint would be pissed, but it doesn’t matter!”

“He told you not to fall for me! He told you not to!” Annabeth yelled suddenly, pointing an accusing finger at me.

I raised an eyebrow. “How would you know?”

“I read it on your phone!” She shoved my chest, and I felt my blood pressure rise.

“*You were reading my texts?*” I asked, my voice shocked and infuriated. “Seriously? Going for an all new low, Annabeth?”

“I was doing it because *I care*!” Annabeth shouted at me, punching my chest. I hardly felt it. “He—said—not—to!” Every word was stressed with another punch, and I was having trouble restraining myself from hitting her back. “Why don’t you ever listen, Percy? Why?”

"I do listen," I seethed, catching both of her wrists. "I listen *all the time*. It's not my *fault* that I like you!"

"What, are you going to pull the whole 'you can't help who you fall in love with card'?" Annabeth snapped.

"*No*," I said through clenched teeth, dropping her wrists. "I'm pulling the 'it's all *your* fault because you're *you*' card."

"What does that even mean?" Annabeth hissed.

"It means," I said, stepping closer to her, "that this is all your fault. If you weren't *you*, we wouldn't be having this argument."

"Because I'm *me*?" Annabeth asked, affronted. "Are you seriously blaming *me*?"

"You were blaming *me*!"

Annabeth opened her mouth to speak, but instead the loud ringing of a cell phone cut her off. I sighed loudly, shooting her a dirty look before grabbing my phone off the couch and answering without checking the caller ID.

"Hey," the voice said cautiously. I closed my eyes in anger.

"What, Clint?" I snapped.

"Okay, Mr. Driver wasn't lying. I hear word that there's a small argument?" I met Annabeth's eyes, and I knew that if looks could kill, we'd both be dead.

"Small argument," I said with a bitter laugh. "Yep. It's *small*. Meaningless, actually." Annabeth's jaw clenched and I sent her a rude smirk.

"Are you guys okay? I mean...he said it was pretty loud," Clint said carefully.

"Nope," I denied. "The argument's over now. We aren't talking about it anymore, actually. We're going to pretend like it *never—even—happened*." Annabeth narrowed her eyes at me, her jaw still very much strong and prominent. "We're forgetting about the whole thing. Don't worry—"

Annabeth unexpectedly snatched my phone from my hand, hanging up on Clint. "We aren't done."

"*We are*," I said harshly. I moved to step around her, but Annabeth pushed me back into place, just as the tour bus rounded a corner, which in turn made me fall back clumsily against the wall. I glared at her. "Gee, thanks—"

"Shut up."

And then it was another one of those situations at the park—except I wasn't dominating this kiss. Annabeth had full control as she brutally pushed my back against the wall, leaning in and kissing me in the same bittersweet way. My bones ached to push her away, but my heart and mind begged me to pull her closer. Instead, I pushed her away and flipped our positions. My hands pinned her shoulders to the wall and I stared her down. "I don't get it," I said, almost to myself.

Annabeth rolled her eyes, resting her hand in my hair and pulling me closer, making our lips meet roughly. I heard my phone start ringing again, probably a second—or maybe third?—call from Clint,

but it was hardly discernible over the pounding of my blood in my ears. I felt like I was shaking—god knows if it was from anger, high blood pressure, or the fact that I was kissing Annabeth, again—and I knew that my heart was beating too fast again.

Annabeth pulled my hair, and rather than feeling good, I just felt like hitting her. I instead hit the wall behind her harshly, but luckily, it didn't break. I heard my phone start ringing again, and I pulled myself away from her fully—partially because I needed air and partially because I was still really confused about how this happened again. I practically fell onto the couch as I answered my phone with a superbly breathless and rough voice. “Yeah?”

“Something break? Worried driver just heard a loud slam of some sort,” Clint said, sounding like the fretful 'father' he is.

I collapsed on the couch, still breathing quickly. I tried not to sound like it though, as I replied, “No, everything's good.” *Except my lips*, I thought offhandedly, touching them gently. Definitely bruised. As I pulled my hand back though, I noticed there was blood on it. I licked my bottom lip, and *yep*, it was definitely bleeding. I spared a glance at Annabeth, who was now leaning against the wall with her hand on her forehead.

“Am I...interrupting something?”

“Kind of,” I answered, glad that I wasn't sounding as breathy anymore. “Annabeth and I just got done yelling,” I lied easily. I met Annabeth's eyes in a quick glance before looking away.

“Really?” Clint asked, sounding amused. “Mr. Driver said the yelling stopped quite a few minutes ago.”

“We were whisper-yelling so that we didn't bother him,” I fibbed once more. Annabeth shot me an amused look, and I tried not to pay her any attention.

“Ah,” Clint said, not sounding like he believed me in the slightest. “I see. What was the fight about?”

“Um, the fight was about...” I gave Annabeth a panicked look, gesturing wildly for her to help with my hands. I was fresh out of lies.

“About...? Percy, you there?”

“Sorry, I got distracted by a dog,” I blurted. Annabeth snorted in laughter and I glared at her. “The fight was about...the, um, beds.”

“What?” Clint questioned, not understanding. Annabeth snorted in laughter again and I just barely restrained from tossing her out the closest window.

“We couldn't decide who got which bed,” I continued. “And then Annabeth made a rude remark,” I said bitterly, shooting her a dirty look. “And it all just escalated from there.”

“Ah, the whole 'you start yelling about things you don't really mean' deal?”

“Yeah,” I said, a bit softly. “A few things were said that we didn't really mean.” Annabeth raised an eyebrow and I looked away from her quickly. “Well, are we done here?”

“Oh, sure,” Clint said. “Yeah. Try not to scare Mr. Driver, though?”

"Yeah, sure," I replied, nodding. "Bye." Clint muttered a goodbye and I hung up, staring at my phone for a few moments. I glanced at my knuckles, noticing that they were a bit swollen. I touched them carefully, wincing. "Ouch."

"Yeah, a smart person wouldn't punch a wall," Annabeth said sarcastically.

"A smart person wouldn't pull an already beyond mad person's hair when they can't hit the person back," I retorted, not really understanding what I said. Apparently, Annabeth didn't get it either because she stayed quiet. "Sorry," I muttered. "Still a bit riled up."

"Obviously," Annabeth said. I shot her a glare and she shrugged helplessly.

"We've got to stop doing that," I said after a few moments.

"What?"

"Fighting—or performing—and then doing *that*," I clarified.

"Why do you always skirt around the word 'kiss' or 'make-out'?" Annabeth asked suddenly. "You always call it 'that' like it's the big nasty or something."

I laughed. "The big nasty? That's rich." I sighed. "But I'm not really sure. I just get a little uncomfortable...after." I felt really light at the moment though, and I couldn't tell if it was due to the now very much *resolved* tension or from kissing Annabeth.

"You did it again," Annabeth mumbled.

"Uh, Annabeth?"

"Yeah?" she said, chipper.

"Why'd you kiss me?" I asked, hesitantly.

"To resolve tension, of course. And who knows, maybe for another reason," she said with a shrug. "I'm going to go get some reading done before we arrive in San Jose in a few hours." Annabeth turned and left without another word, and I was left staring after her, and wondering *what the hell?*

"You have arrived!" Clint announced, throwing open the door to our tour bus. I heard screams from my place on the couch, and peeked through the blinds. "Lots of fans here to greet you. Where's the lovely Annabeth?"

"Annabeth!" I shouted.

"Coming," she called back. Materializing only seconds later, Annabeth grabbed my upper arm and lifted me from the couch. I briefly raised an eyebrow at her strength before looking back to my manager. "What's the game plan?"

"Get your necessities," Clint advised. "Cellphones, basically. We'll get the rest. And then follow me to your car." I nodded, shoving my phone in my pocket, and Annabeth put her phone in my pocket as well.

"My pockets aren't big enough," she said with a shrug, as Clint pushed open the door. I hesitated before grabbing her hand with much caution. I intertwined our fingers, and Annabeth tightened her grip on my hand. It somehow reassured me that things would be okay—that *we* would be okay.

"Don't let go of my hand," I ordered. "Crowds on tour can be really bad."

"I'll be fine," Annabeth said as we stepped outside.

I instead dropped her hand, putting my arm over her shoulder. The main reason was to keep her closer—and more importantly, *safer*—to me. However, just before Clint started leading us through the winding cloud—just before it all became a manifested show for the public—I turned and whispered an apology in Annabeth's ear. Her grip on me tightened only slightly, and I knew that it was her way of saying it back.

Kissing her cheek quickly, and raising an eyebrow at the rapid and vociferous response it got, we followed dutifully after Clint, a herd of giant bodyguards following us.

It was an hour later, during a quick interview, that I realized Annabeth was actually perfect in every aspect.

"So, guys, every relationship has its issues. Do you guys ever have lover's quarrels?"

I tensed at the question, thinking back on what'd happened this morning. I hoped that Annabeth would be graceful as ever, and have mercy on me, answering this one. I turned to look at her, pasting a smile on my face and raising my eyebrows. She surprised me by taking hold of my hand gently. "Of course," she told the interviewer. "We fight all the time. It's usually about pointless things; things that won't matter an hour later."

"And how do you guys handle those spats?" she asked, taking careful notes on small lined paper.

Annabeth smiled, almost begrudgingly and absolutely beautifully. "This loser usually does something really...*him*. And then I'm forced to forgive him, because..." Annabeth trailed off, grinning, and I squeezed her hand, biting back a smile of my own. When I glanced down at our hands, I saw her tapping our bracelet lightly. "Well, it's hard to stay mad at someone you really care about." A small smile finally made its way onto my lips and I turned away from Annabeth, though the interviewer probably saw me.

"Cute," the interviewer commented. "You guys are. I feel like I'm talking to blushing kindergarteners with a crush," she admitted with a laugh. "Anything else to add?"

We both shook our heads dutifully, having another interviewer enter the room in a few moments. Management had decided on trying another tactic. Rather than us moving around to a million interviews, the interviewers would come to us. As soon as the girl left, a guy who looked to be about mid-thirties entered.

He introduced himself as Gabriel Winnetaker, and said that he was from some magazine I failed to catch the name of. We smiled and answered another set of questions that were the usuals. You'd think that people would get tired of hearing the same thing over and over. A plethora of interviewers, asking the same hackneyed questions entered and exited the room, leaving Annabeth and me mere seconds to speak before the next journalist arrived.

Finally, Clint announced that we had a ten minute break in which Annabeth and I migrated over to a table of refreshments. I drank water, absolutely parched from all of my talking, and grabbed an extra water bottle to cart back to the table with me. "This is fun," Annabeth said suddenly, examining a strawberry before taking a delicate bite. "I like interviews."

"Why?" I asked, a probably not-so-attractive confused expression taking over my face.

"Because," Annabeth replied lightly, "they ask questions I know the answers to."

I raised an eyebrow. "What does that mean?" I questioned, chewing thoughtfully on a chocolate chip cookie. They weren't better than Mom's, not by a long shot.

"That sometimes you ask me things I can't answer," Annabeth said finally, with a hint of exasperation and a sigh. "And it's not because I'm 'refusing' to. It's because...I just *can't*. I *don't* know."

I noticed how hard it was for Annabeth to say the things she was saying, if only because she was adamantly staring and a piece of fruit and avoiding my eyes. I kicked her foot softly, making her look up at me on instinct before glancing away once more. I held onto her wrist loosely, not wanting to get the weary look I surely would if I'd taken her hand. "Okay," I said softly, nodding. "I get it." She sighed again. "But can you just do one thing for me?" Annabeth gave me a weary look. "Can we try not to let all *this*," I asked vaguely, "mess us this?" I finished, gesturing between us.

"Try," Annabeth repeated. "I can try, maybe. But...things *have* changed, you know."

"Obviously," I said with a smile. "You know about my creepy crush and I know that you kiss better when you're angry."

Annabeth's eyes widened and she shoved me. "Percy!"

I laughed joyously. "It's true, *baby*," mocked. "You're much more...motivated. It's nice." I wagged my eyebrows at her suggestively and smiled winningly at the blush on her cheeks. "You're blushing!" I accused, poking her cheek. "That's cute, babe!"

"Stop," Annabeth grumbled, shoving my hands away. "I am *not* blushing."

"That's some harsh sunburn, then," I joked. She glared at me, and I smiled stupidly at her. "You have pretty eyes," I found myself saying, accidentally. I bit my lip and glanced away quickly before looking back at her.

She was examining fruit once more; blush much more prominent than it was originally. I let myself inwardly high five myself before taking her hand and pulling her back to the table in the sitting room, just as Clint announced the next interviewer.

I pretended not to stare at Annabeth the whole time, and she pretended not to notice.

Our concert that night was even better than the first. The previous concert had a few moments of nerves, or uncertainty, but this one was buzzing with confidence and feeling at home on the stage. Annabeth pulled on my tie just as we finished, kissing my cheek softly and whispering, "You did amazing."

It was probably a little unnecessary, and it made me lose my train of thought, but the outrageous response from the crowd fueled my adrenaline. I kissed her cheek as well, grinning at her and mouthing, “you, too.”

We said our farewell to the crowd, and I paused to take it all in for a few moments. All of the posters, all of the shirts, all of the diehard fans screaming their lungs out. I smiled, waving to all areas in the arena, making sure to point up at the higher levels and give my acknowledgement. “We love you!” I shouted, the lights blacking out and the screams becoming louder as we sprinted off stage.

We both started laughing breathlessly and hysterically, gladly accepting the water Clint—truly a saint—brought us. I downed almost all of it in a surprising amount of time. The screams lessened until they were no more, instead replaced by the sounds of shuffling and talking. Annabeth and I both tried to breathe a little, still out of breath from the show.

Adrenaline was searing through my veins, making me feel light-headed, giddy, and very energetic. I laughed again, running my hands through my hair. “God, this is so crazy,” I muttered to myself.

“I know,” Annabeth replied, removing her earpiece and shifting her microphone between her hands. “It really is.”

“We're lucky, aren't we?” I asked, staring into her shining eyes. “Really, really lucky.”

Annabeth grinned. “Yeah. We are.”

Clint appeared at my side. I hugged him furiously. “Clint, baby!” I shouted. He rolled his eyes, pushing us both off to the dressing room. “Change quick,” he suggested, closing the door behind us. Annabeth and I turned our backs to each other out of respect, throwing off the concert-wear and pulling on sweatpants and t-shirts. Annabeth was finished before me, somehow, and started pulling me toward back exit. My shirt was in my hand, and I assumed that I wasn't going to have any time to put it on.

Clint met us at the door, handing over our cellphones. I shoved mine into my pocket. “No autographs, the crowd's too big,” he ordered sternly. I nodded. “You can wave, but straight to the black van. Joe will be with you,” he assured, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the beefy guard. I nodded to Joe, and then smiled at Clint.

“I'll miss you!” I proclaimed, dropping a sloppy kiss to his cheek before turning and walking out with Annabeth's hand wrapped in mine.

“He hates you,” Annabeth said with a laugh, her eyes still bright. I decided that Annabeth's eyes after a concert was my favorite version of her eyes.

I shrugged. “Probably.” We waved to the fans holding out scraps of paper and notebooks, as well as cameras. They were asking for photos and autographs, and my heart dropped. I smiled and waved a bit sadly at them with a shrug. “Thank you! I love you guys!” I called loudly, getting a lot of replies I couldn't make out over all the others.

Joe hurried us into the van and I sighed in annoyance. “It's for your safety,” he said apologetically.

“I know,” I answered, nodding at him graciously. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” he replied gruffly, closing the door behind us. We were carted back to our tour bus in the parking garage, fenced off to deter some of the more dedicated fans.

When the van rolled to a stop, I called a quick thanks to the driver before opening the door and hurrying to the bus with Annabeth. I heard more screams, which alerted me that they saw us, so I waved over my shoulder as we got on.

While I was securing the door behind us, I heard Annabeth collapse on the couch. "I think all of your fans just died."

"Why?" I questioned, finally having a moment to breathe and pull my shirt over my head.

"Percy Jackson," she mocked. "Sans-shirt. That's a big deal."

"And why is that?" I asked, quirking an eyebrow and grinning at her. She threw a pillow from the couch at me.

"Shut up, you cocky, insufferable—"

"Person," I intervened. "Keep it G-rated, Chase."

"For the benefit of whom?" she questioned, glancing around the room, her eyes finally falling on me. "*Oh*. Sorry. I forgot there was a *child* in the room."

I grinned at her, pushing her feet out of the way so I could sit on the couch. She replaced her feet in my lap, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. "Is there a TV?" Annabeth asked suddenly.

I glanced obviously at the wall where a flat screen was. "No clue," I said sarcastically. Annabeth rolled her eyes finding the remote in a box next to the couch. I heard the engine to the tour bus start up, and I closed my eyes. "And we're off."

"Long drive," she mumbled, channel-surfing. She stopped on CSI, turning it up. She changed her position, instead laying her head in my lap. "We're switching for today," she said determinedly. "I want *you* to play with *my* hair."

I grinned down at her, though she was focused on the TV. "Yes ma'am," I replied, choosing a curl and twirling it around my finger.

"I guess we do still have time for best friend us," Annabeth said after a few moments, catching me off guard as she caught my freehand from its resting place on the back of the couch. She started tracing the lines on my hand, and I watched her movements, hardly breathing. "Percy?"

"Yeah, what's up?" I asked hurriedly, half-coughing. I set my sights intently on the television.

"Are you okay?" Annabeth questioned with a laugh. I glanced down to her. "Thought you stop breathing for a moment there."

I did. "Nah. I'm good. I just..." Biting my lip, I looked back to the television and decided not to finish my sentence. She squeezed my hand with a pleading look and I sighed. "I thought maybe you wouldn't let us be like this anymore," I confessed after a few moments of me watching at her golden hair and watching Annabeth stare at me out of my peripherals.

"Why's that?" she inquired, scowling.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I just thought things would be weird after the whole unrequited love thing."

“Percy, what does 'unrequited' mean?” Annabeth asked, her scowl deepening.

My eyebrows furrowed. “When the feelings aren't returned, right?”

“Yeah,” Annabeth affirmed. She gave me a look, as though she was waiting for me to continue, but I hadn't a clue what she wanted from me.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Annabeth replied easily, looking back at the crime show and still making nervous butterflies move restlessly in my stomach as she interlaced our fingers, then disentangled them, only to intertwine them once more.

The next day was a “free” day, so Annabeth and I got an early start. We were “free to do whatever” but we needed to go out into the public eye and get Starbucks, since people had dubbed that as something intrinsic to our relationship.

Late last night, we'd checked into a hotel, deciding to share one by unanimous consent. It was better for the public's view, and probably better for us. Or for me, anyways. I preferred to have her close to me, no matter how selfish that was.

We left the hotel, equipped with two bodyguards to help us through the crowd. We signed as many autographs as we could, took quick pictures, and I kissed probably ten girls on the cheek. Clint, the saint he was, had issued us a rental car so that we didn't get ambushed walking down the road. I thought we'd be fine, but Clint refused. So, that's how Annabeth and I ended up driving a charcoal Acura down the road in Phoenix, Arizona. It was our only show in Arizona, and we'd be hitting the stage at some theatre tonight at eight o'clock.

Just as I put the car in park, Annabeth started laughing. The sound made me smile slightly and I turned to her in question. She looked like she was trying to gain her breath as she typed out a reply to whoever she was texting and I looked on with growing curiosity.

When it became evident that this was a lengthy text, I sighed. “Who're you texting?” I asked casually.

“Just this guy...” Annabeth muttered, eyes locked on her phone.

“Oh...” That didn't settle well with me. My stomach twisted in pathetic jealousy and I had a strong urge to punch whatever guy was talking to *my* Annabeth and making her laugh like that. That was my job.

Before I could linger on the fact that I'd referred to her as '*my*' Annabeth, she snickered again. “Tone down the testosterone, Percy.” She looked at me with a glint in her eye. “I lied. I'm talking to Thalia.”

I tried to be nonchalant about it, but I think Annabeth noticed how much relief I was experiencing. “Why'd you lie?”

“To see your reaction,” Annabeth answered smoothly. “And you were jealous. Very jealous. Probably would have set out to punch the guy if I'd given you a name.”

I tried to ignore how dead-on she was. “I wasn't jealous.” Denial was always easiest. Hadn't I confessed enough the past few days?

“Yes, you were,” Annabeth disagreed simply, opening her door and exiting the car. I scowled at her before patting my pocket to check for my phone and my wallet. I got the keys, stepping out myself.

“I wasn't,” I said adamantly, meeting Annabeth at the front of the car.

“You were,” she said firmly, placing one hand on my cheek gently, only to pinch it teasingly a few moments later. I pouted, catching her hand and dropping it between us so that I could hold her hand.

I'd noticed that. Slowly but surely, my actions around Annabeth became less of an act for the public and more of a way to fulfill my own needs.

“I still want to know why you kissed me,” I mumbled in a low voice.

“I already told you,” Annabeth replied quickly.

I shook my head. “You didn't. Not really.”

“Tension. Got rid of it, didn't I?” Annabeth inquired with a quirked eyebrow, opening the door herself, despite my reaching for it.

“Yeah, but—”

A loud gasp cut me off, and just our luck, there was a table with about six teenagers of both genders in the Starbucks. I pasted on a charming smile and waved. “We'll say hi to them after we get our drinks, yeah?”

“Mhm,” I hummed. “But we aren't done with that conversation.” Annabeth rolled her eyes as though I were making a huge deal out of nothing.

We ordered our drinks with practiced ease, me whispering some cheesy joke in Annabeth's ear because I could, and Annabeth therefore stumbling through her order as she tried not to laugh. As soon as the slightly awestruck barista handed our drinks over, I grinned at her. “Thanks, babe.” Annabeth pinched my side, knowing that I was laying the charm on like a thick layer of mortar over brick. I winked at her, pulling her hand toward the table of teens.

“Uh, hi,” one of the guys said dumbly, after being shoved by a girl. “You guys...are Percy and Annabeth?”

Annabeth laughed in her completely beautiful way—and it was the laugh where she didn't make you feel insignificant, but instead let you know that everything was fine. I'd heard that laugh a million times. “We are.”

“Told you!” one of the girls said, in a poor attempt of whispering.

“I must say, Ms. Chase,” an unctuous looking guy, obviously the flirt of their group, “you are even more lovely in person.”

I laughed, noting that the kid was no harm, but throwing my arm over Annabeth's shoulder and pulling her close to me. “A brave soul,” I proclaimed. “Advancing on my own woman in front of me.” The smug guy had the grace to look a tad apologetic. “No harm done. I'll give you a freebie. Any of you guys going to the concert tonight?”

One of the girls finally found her voice. “Yeah,” she stuttered. “Um, if you want—I mean you don't have to—but you guys can have a seat—”

Annabeth gave her a smile, one of those enchanting, calming smiles. "Sure."

We found our seat in two out of the three extra chairs crowded around their table. "This is weird," a boy with cropped hair announced. "You guys are like normal human beings."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Well, I would hope so. I try not to be an uptight asshole about fame."

"You curse," a girl said happily.

"I do," I said with a shrug. "Once more, just a normal guy."

"A normal guy," a girl with dark hair said with a snort. "Please. You have to know how horribly *flawless* you are."

"Well, thanks," I replied a bit awkwardly. I'd never gotten used to the compliments that being famous got me. "But I'm not."

"Yeah, he gets acne. And has bedhead. And morning breath before he brushes his teeth," Annabeth teased, elbowing me.

I frowned at her. "Babe!"

"Just adding to your cause," she said with a sweet smile that kind of made me forget where I was for a moment. I smiled at her stupidly for a few moments as she took a sip of her drink. She met my eyes again. "You're staring," Annabeth mouthed, making me laugh.

The girl who'd promised me that she was going to the concert squeaked lightly, and everyone gave her an odd look. "Sorry," she managed. "You two are just so cute."

"You are quite cute," Annabeth said, pinching my cheek and making me slap her hand away.

"Babe," I deadpanned. "Stop."

The girls at the table giggled and most of the guys managed a smile. "Hey," Annabeth said after the commotion calmed. "Who's going to the concert again?"

The same girl from earlier raised her hand a bit nervously. "Me."

"What's your name? We'll give you a small shout out during the Twitter questions," I said, immediately latching onto Annabeth's train of thought.

The girl's eyes widened. "What? You'd do that?"

"Sure," I replied with a shrug.

"Why not?" Annabeth asked.

"I don't know... I mean you guys are—oh! My name is Allison Steele," she said, mid-sentence.

"Allison Steele," I repeated, committing the name to memory. "I give you all rights to hate me if I forget."

"Can we—um," Allison said nervously, holding up her phone.

"Yeah, 'course," I said, standing. "Who with?"

"Well, I want one of all of us," she said shyly, gesturing over the whole group.

"I'll take it," Annabeth offered immediately.

I caught her wrist from reaching out. "No way," I declined. "We're all in this together."

"High School Musical? Really?" Annabeth asked, rolling her eyes.

"You should be just as annoyed with yourself for knowing that," I retorted. Annabeth rolled her eyes and I set my sights on a nearby table. Taking a knee next to a middle-aged woman reading a book, I gave her a charming smile. "Can we borrow your beautiful self for a moment? We're short one hand to take a picture."

The woman smiled softly, the same smile my mother gives, and nodded. "Of course."

I gave her an indulgent grin, leading her back over to our group. "This lovely young lady says she will assist us."

Annabeth elbowed me, rolling her eyes. "You and your charm," she muttered, low enough so only I can hear.

"Don't worry," I said teasingly, "I don't date older women."

"Shut up," Annabeth scoffed. Everyone began to line up in the photo, and I wrapped my arms around Annabeth and Allison.

"Now just one with Annabeth," Allison said happily.

"Not Percy?" Annabeth questioned.

"No offense, Percy Jackson, but I'm more of an Annabeth fan," Allison admitted. "I love you, too, but—"

"Don't worry about it," I interjected, winking at her. "I'm more of an Annabeth fan myself."

Annabeth smiled extra bright in that picture, and as much as I wished it was for me, I knew that it was only because she'd met an Annabeth fan.

In all honesty, I'd been an Annabeth fan for quite a while. She had a way of making her actions all seem intentional; even it was tripping or dropping something on the ground. I loved the way she wouldn't settle for anything less than perfection. It was endearing. And *sure*, it could be a bit much at times, but it was everything that made her...*her*.

When Annabeth turned back to me, raising an eyebrow and holding at her arm for another picture I was to be included in, I nearly tripped over a chair in my haste to leave the building.

My heart was racing like crazy as I sunk down in a chair outside. I tried taking deep breaths of fresh air, but it wasn't helping.

I'd just had a revelation of sorts.

Fuck.

I loved her.

I scowled at Percy as he rushed from the coffee shop, and collapsed into a chair. I looked back to the fans, who looked extremely confused if not a bit hurt. "Is he...okay?"

"Not sure," I replied easily. "It was great meeting you guys, though!" I said happily, giving everyone in the group a quick hug. "Love you guys," I called breezily over my shoulder, trying not to run to Percy.

When I finally made it outside, I heard him taking deep breaths, as though he were trying to stop himself from hyperventilating. I knelt down in front of him, haphazardly steadying myself on his knees. He'd been leaning his head into one hand, his eyes closed, but after noticing my presence, he jumped slightly. Percy's eyes opened, wide and alert and—*scared*?

"Hi," I said cautiously, taking my hands off his knees, somewhat belatedly. "Are you okay?"

Percy smiled convincingly. "Yeah. Just felt a bit nauseous."

"Really?" I asked, giving him a skeptical look.

He leaned forward, tucking my hair behind my ear. It was the first time I'd sensed hesitation in our minuscule interactions in a while. "M fine," Percy mumbled, examining me carefully and looking mildly puzzled. I raised an eyebrow in question, but he only smiled and pushed his chair back. He stood up easily, offering me a helping hand, but I shoved it away as always.

"Are you *sure*?" I questioned. I was fairly good at reading emotions, and I had a feeling that Percy wasn't all that *okay*. My judgment wasn't the most trustworthy of things, as of late.

As we started making our way to the rental car, Percy nodded firmly. "Yeah."

"I'm going to kill you if I find out you're lying," I warned, catching his eyes.

He gave me a wan smile, stopping and holding my shoulders at arm's length. "I *swear*. I'm fine. Just felt a bit dizzy. It's probably because I'm hungry." Percy shrugged one shoulder, making me scowl. His adamant nonchalance about this bothered me. "What?" Percy asked, taking note of my expression.

"I just feel like there's something you aren't telling me," I voiced boldly. "Tell me."

Percy laughed airily, and very believably, if I weren't his best friend. "I felt dizzy, Annabeth. I don't know what you want from me." He gave me an odd look, stopping to open the car door for me. I sighed in annoyance. Before I could even voice my opinions, Percy said, "I know, I know. You can't stand my gentlemanly gestures."

I shrugged. "I just don't need any help."

He gave me a cryptic expression, one that I don't think I'd ever seen on him before. He made his way around the car and got into his own respective seat. "Everyone needs help at some point, Annabeth," he said seriously. Starting the car and turning to me, all in one motion, his face became sincere. "You know that you can talk to me, right?"

“Course,” I muttered, uncomfortable. I’d never been good at talking about anything I actually needed help with. Sometimes, I wondered if I was too independent for my own good. “You swear you aren’t hiding anything from me?”

“I promise,” Percy stressed. “Come on, Annabeth. You know me. I’m not lying.”

But there was something in the air, something light—or maybe heavy—that made me feel off. Even as Percy gave me another charming smile and patted my hand lightly. Even as we drove to a random restaurant on the highway we were on. Even as we sat down at the table, eating and trying to pretend we weren’t being gawked at. And even when we performed at the concert that night.

I started to wonder if I was making it up in my head, or if it was my own feelings that were throwing me off. Percy had an aura of tranquility and freedom about him. I simply couldn’t comprehend how feeling nauseous could spark that air around him. The air that advertised his overdone insouciant manner. I narrowed my eyes at him, still not believing him no matter how much his smile wanted me to.

He gave me another carefree smile before turning on the radio and humming along the whole way to our hotel.

After our concert, we stumbled into our hotel. It had to be somewhere around eleven, thanks to the meet-and-greet after. I tossed my offending heels in the corner, glaring at them harshly. We hadn’t been given a moment to change out of our concert clothes, and I’d been in them for much too long. “I don’t understand why you don’t just ask Sherry to change your shoes. She’d find you something else.”

I spun around to face him, sighing. “That’s too much trouble.” He shook his head at me, pulling his shirt over his head as he walked to the bathroom.

“I’m showering,” Percy announced.

“Get your clothes first; you aren’t changing in here,” I ordered, snapping my fingers and pointing to his suitcase. He rolled his eyes at me, sticking his tongue out childishly before following directions regardless. He disappeared into the bathroom without another word, and moments later I heard the water running.

I sat on my bed—the one closest to the window, of course—staring out at the city. Phoenix was beautiful—still bright and alive with lights and shuffling with movement despite the time. After a moment of loosening the lock, I pushed the window open in order to hear the sounds of the city.

I looked around for my cellphone before realizing it was still in Percy’s pocket, more likely than not. With a resigned sigh, I searched through my suitcase, careful not to jostle anything so much that it was unfolded, eventually finding my laptop. I skillfully slipped it out, sitting on my bed, leaning back against the luxurious pillows. This hotel was nice—the nicest I’d even been in.

I connected to the complimentary Wi-Fi, immediately logging into Twitter. The smile on my face was hardly suppressible as I read the responses to the concert—chock full of teenagers raving over our amount of “chemistry”—eventually seeing one from Allison Steele. I smiled, deciding to follow her simply because she’d been a sweet girl. Her latest tweets were about the concert, claiming that she could die happy after getting a shout out from Percabeth.

I went back to my news feed, laughing at some of the things I saw there. One girl simply wrote 'Percy Jackson is so hot,' which I immediately retweeted, maybe more for a laugh between Percy and me than for management.

My mentions blew up once more, but I exited out of the tab, deciding to simply Google my name out of curiosity.

I spent a few moments scrolling through news articles, some very true, and some very ridiculous. Percy emerged from the bathroom just as I read the craziest one yet. "Hey, did you know that I'm going to adopt a pet ostrich?"

Percy snorted in laughter. "Don't worry. I adopted a tiger once, apparently." He grinned at me, and I smiled. "Hey, babe, you mind if I use your laptop for a bit? I forgot to pack mine."

I rolled my eyes, admittedly a bit fondly. "Of course you did. And yes, you may." I pushed my laptop off my lap, standing and stretching. "I'm showering, so have at it."

"Get your clothes; you aren't changing in here," Percy mocked, snapping his fingers and pointing in the direction of my suitcase. I sent him a positively arid look, followed by a sarcastic smile. Gathering my clothing, making sure to snatch up my green hoodie, I made my way into the bathroom. I sighed in annoyance after seeing that my make-up was more or less half-way down my face. "Lovely," I grumbled.

I made a futile attempt of fixing it, no matter the fact that I'd be showering in a moment. I saw that my phone was laid on the counter, along with Percy's, and I made sure that I didn't have any messages before locking it and replacing it.

I took a long shower, the searing hot water temporarily lifting the ache in my back from the horrible shoes. I washed my hair twice, only as an excuse to stay underneath the warm water for longer.

When I finally exited the bathroom, being swallowed up by my hoodie and carrying our phones, Percy was nodding and smiling at the computer. He noticed my presence and patted the place next to him. "Looks like you will get to see Annabeth!"

I heard an excited response through the computer, and sent Percy a panicked look. "Skype," he clarified.

"With who?" I mouthed.

"Mom," Percy answered, rolling his eyes.

"Oh," I said happily, falling onto my bed next to him. "Hi, Sally!"

"Hey, sweetie," she cooed. "How are you?"

"My back's hurting a bit from these heels I have to wear, but other than that, I'm perfect," I told her. "And you?"

"Oh, just the usual. Folding clothes and writing on the side." I smiled at her. "Oh, and two ibuprofen and a cup of hot tea will cure your back ache in a jiffy," she nursed. I nodded gratefully.

"I'll get that for you after we're done talking to Mom," Percy promised, turning back to her. "What were you saying about Paul, before?"

"Oh, not much. He's in Jersey for the week, trying to schmooze some artists into joining the record label he works for," Sally answered with a shrug. "Don't really know what to do with myself. It's a bit quiet here, with you *and* Paul's absence."

I laughed. "I'm sure. Percy has enough 'loud' to cover for the whole mute community."

Percy scoffed, shoving me. "And you've got enough sass for...everyone!"

"Weak," I graded. "That was weak, Jackson." He narrowed his eyes at me teasingly. I smirked. After a moment, I set my eyes on the computer screen, watching Sally's expression shift from knowing to reminiscent.

"I remember those days," Sally muttered to herself. I tried not to notice that Percy was still looking at me. "Teenage love may be the strongest love there is, if you ask me."

I smiled. It shocked me, how easy it was for people to think Percy and I were. Regardless of my lack of acting lessons, we had to be pretty good at pretending to be in love.

My thoughts drifted back to earlier this morning, when I'd kissed Percy to 'relieve tension.' Sure, that was part of it, since attacking each other seemed to be the only way we could get rid of said tension. Still, I remembered the words that I'd said without thinking, the words that told him that maybe it wasn't the sole reason. I wasn't even sure what I'd been talking about at the time, seeing as I was lightheaded from both lack of air and Percy in general.

I looked to him now, as he answered one of his Mom's questions, gesturing wildly. He was devastatingly attractive, just as he'd been on the first day he'd stumbled into Stan's office. Even though his hair was its natural color, and his eyes were no longer washed out by brown contacts, Percy was still gorgeous. His skin was unfairly tan, and his eyelashes longer than mine. The way he looked right now, hair damp and falling in his eyes from his shower, eyes bright and alert as he spoke to his mom, I wondered why I ever denied his utter *beauty* to begin with. And maybe it wasn't the *best* word I could use to describe a guy's looks, but through and through, Percy really was beautiful.

He turned to me then, probably noticing that I was staring. I was accidentally closer than I'd planned, and his nose bumped mine.

I turned away immediately, embarrassed and kicking myself for leaning in at a much too close proximity to speak to his mom. I blushed after I took into account both my thoughts and our noses touching, and soon after cursed myself for it. Percy simply kissed my warmed cheek, making his mother coo, soon followed by her goodbyes. I gave her my farewell, too, thereafter seizing my computer and absentmindedly logging into Twitter again.

"What was that all about?" Percy questioned, smugness lacing his voice.

"What do you mean?" I replied, refraining from rolling my eyes and maintaining an aura of innocence.

"You. Staring. Being close to my face. Then after I turned to you, getting all flustered," Percy said, giving a play-by-play.

"I wasn't flustered," I snapped. "I'm probably still overheated from the shower—"

"*Sure.*"

“—and besides, we've been closer,” I continued, acting as though he'd never made a comment at all. I scrolled aimlessly through Twitter, seeing what was occupying every other celebrity's time. My answer seemed to have shut Percy up. He leaned over me, grabbing the thankfully wireless hotel phone and calling the front desk.

“Yeah, hi. I was wondering if there was any way I could get some ibuprofen? I don't mind if I have to personally get it, I was just wondering if the hotel had it. Yeah. Uh, I think it's room 218,” Percy said hesitantly.

“216,” I corrected, automatically. He changed his answer and repeated it to the person on the other line, soon after confirming that he *was* Percy Jackson.

Not even two minutes later, there was a knock on our door. Percy answered it, thanking the woman and bringing me a tray with a whole bottle of ibuprofen and enough tea to quench the thirst of all the crew on our tour, piping hot kettle and all. My eyes widened, and Percy shrugged. “The perks of being famous,” he muttered placing the tray on the currently unused dresser.

He made me tea, asking me several times for directions, but refusing each time I offered to take care of it myself. After a few minutes, he brought me a light, cream colored coffee cup with a gold rim and two reddish pills. “There you are, babe,” Percy said, dropping the pills into my hand. I hummed with approbation after sipping my tea and Percy smiled winningly, making a cup for himself.

I took the pills, sighing and shifting, hoping that Sally would be right about the pain going away. “What now?” I asked, sadly not tired in the slightest, no matter if the time was one in the morning.

Percy shrugged, carefully taking a seat next to me once more, taking extra caution not to spill his tea. “We can watch TV,” he offered. “Or Netflix, since we have a laptop. For that matter, we can keep scrolling through Twitter. Or we can talk. Or listen to music. Or—”

I chuckled. “Didn't need a book, Perce.”

He shrugged, bashful and childish smile adorning his face. I looked away. “Sorry.”

“Netflix?” I suggested, after a moment of consideration. He agreed immediately, taking the computer and logging into his account. We ended up not being able to choose a movie, me torn between two psychological thrillers and Percy arguing that Adventure Time was a million times more interesting.

In the end, we resulted in taking a poll, asking our fans on Twitter.

We ended up watching the mindless cartoon, regardless of my protests, and Percy laughed at nearly every small occurrence on the show.

Eventually, after my tea was long gone and my back pain completely absent, I laid my head on Percy's chest, falling asleep.

When I woke up, to the alarm set on my phone, I mentally groaned. Regardless of my disappointment at having to wake up, I did, standing and stretching. Percy was sprawled out over his bed, limbs everywhere, making me laugh and practically begging me to take a picture for future blackmail.

One picture, three shakes to the shoulder, two barely dodged fists, and on final, brutal, punch to his shoulder. Percy groaned and his eyes fluttered. “What, woman?” he mumbled thickly.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Wake up. And thanks, for throwing a punch at me *twice*."

He smiled sleepily at me, and I tried to ignore the way my heart warmed. "Sorry, babe."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't you 'babe' me. Now get dressed. We're on the tour bus in one hour."

"The tour bus is fifteen minutes away," Percy deadpanned.

"Obviously," I replied with an eye roll. "Now get up."

"No," Percy argued. "We have at least thirty more minutes, and I am using them."

"Percy," I sighed. "Please. Just get up."

"Don't use that distressed victim voice on me," Percy ordered, sticking his tongue out childishly, his eyes still closed.

"I'm about to use my fists on you," I threatened.

"You already did this morning," he quipped, burying his face in his pillows.

"Percy," I said pleadingly.

"Annabeth," he answered sweetly. "You know, you could go back to sleep, too. And I know you're tired."

I scowled. "How would you know?"

"Because I know you."

Percy said the words easily, in a carefree, honest manner, but I stumbled slightly, having to sit down on my bed. I'd never considered the thought until now, and his innocent, breezy words had been the ones that made my head swim in realization. "You really do *know* me, don't you?" I said softly, almost to myself.

Percy seemed to notice my change on demeanor, despite his closed eyes. He turned on his side, hair mussed in every direction. Giving me an annoyingly adorable smile, he nodded. "Of course I do."

I managed a smile back, not wanting him to know how much his words were making me *feel*. It was so rare that I told anyone even the smallest personal detail, and yet here sat Percy, knowing everything about me—my past, my present, my hopes for the future. He was my best friend, yet he knew how I kissed, what I liked and what I didn't, how I reacted to every little thing.

And that was probably the most unnerved I'd ever felt in my life.

Because sure, earlier I'd admitted to myself and Percy that I trusted him, despite my issues with the subject, but this was the first time I'd ever *felt* that trust. And it made me scared, happy, and mad all at the same time.

"You okay?" Percy asked into the silence, cutting off my racing inner thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just felt nauseous," I quoted.

He rolled his eyes, soon after closing them with a lazy smile. "I really did."

“Why, though? Just out of nowhere, you felt nauseous?” I questioned, my impatience lacing my voice.

Percy opened his eyes, the horrible blue-green ones that I found oddly easy to get lost in. The color of them—especially now, in the morning light, where they shined with unnatural clarity—made me want to both hit him, and stare at him until the end of time. “Yeah. Something like that.”

“Why can't you just tell me? All of these cryptic answers are annoying. It can't be *that* bad,” I reasoned.

However, Percy's eyes locked with mine, honesty and a bit of fear bleeding through. Percy's eyes had always been his tell. They made his emotions so utterly obvious, it was impossible not to know how he felt. He took a deep breath, still meeting my gaze as he stated, “It is.”

Two weeks later, after performing in seven different cities to over one-hundred thousand fans, total, Percy and I were alerted that we had a week to relax. Apparently, the rest week had been established after Percy's first year of touring, when he'd desperately needed to be put on vocal rest—but, no such luck—and time didn't permit. Therefore, Management decided that from there on out, there would be a week where he would refrain from exercising his vocal chords as much as possible.

Now that I was an addition to Percy's tour, I was also included in this week of lounging.

As soon as Clint had called us, at ten in the morning no less, announcing that it was break week, Percy'd woken up at an alarming speed. It was honestly the quickest I'd ever seen Percy Jackson arise from the dead. “We're going to the beach,” he proclaimed, leaving no room for arguing as he made a beeline for the bathroom, towel tossed over his shoulder and clothes in his arms. I stared after him, shocked for a moment.

Deciding that it was better to be ready by the time that he exited the bathroom, I threw on my bathing suit, pulling a beach dress over it. Sherry had generously bought me one, after I shared with her that I only owned guy board shorts and ratty t-shirts as far as beach attire went. After adjusting it for only a moment, I tied my hair up and searched for my book in my suitcase.

In the end, I only slotted in about fifteen minutes of reading, since Percy nearly jogged out of the bathroom in his haste to get to the beach. I was still slipping on my shoes with one hand as he relentlessly pulled my hand, whining like a small child about how long I was taking. Gratefully that I finally had an outfit with pockets, I shoved my phone into my pocket and my keycard in the other.

Barely managing to close the door behind me, Percy continued walking at the fastest speed possible without being scolded for running. He sighed impatiently as the elevator took longer than point-two seconds to open. When it finally opened, he rushed inside, bouncing on his heels. “Come on,” he groaned in annoyance as the doors took absolute “ages” to close.

Finally, after much too long, according to Percy, we were speed-walking through the lobby, getting odd looks from everyone else. Percy's face was lit up in childlike exuberance as he all but shoved me into the passenger seat and jogged to the driver's side. He started the car before he even closed his door, putting his seatbelt on as he navigated his way out of the parking lot.

I focused on catching my breath as Percy threw me his phone, asking me to search for the closest beach. Since Phoenix, we'd performed in Albuquerque, New Mexico; both Austin and Dallas, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Little Rock, Arkansas; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and Jackson, Mississippi. That night, in Jackson, had been full of horrible puns on Percy's name. We were in Mobile, Alabama, and planned on

hitting Georgia, South Carolina and Florida before circling back around and making our way back west, temporarily.

"It's over an hour away," I announced, raising an eyebrow at him. He nodded. "You know?"

"Well, yeah," Percy answered with a shrug. "It's... West End, right?"

"Yeah," I replied skeptically. "How'd you know?"

"I've been there before," Percy admitted. "Once. On a... business trip."

"Oh," I said in realization. "Isn't that a bit far from New York?"

"Maybe," Percy shrugged. "But not really, if you have a completely *loaded* client who's willing to pay any kind of money for his shipment."

"Were you in drug trafficking or something?" I asked suddenly, not being able to refrain from asking the question. I handed Percy his phone back after setting up the navigation for him.

He snorted in laughter, as though the question were ridiculous. "Couldn't tell you. We never got to see what was actually *in* the package we delivered. Could have been cupcakes, for all I know."

I laughed at the thought, shaking my head. He smiled at me for a moment before making sure he was going the right way. "And he lived on West End?"

"Close to it," Percy affirmed, nodding. "I was with Grover, and... ah, I can't even remember her name. Is that bad?" He shook his head, almost to himself. "Basically, we were ordered to get the shipment from point A to point B. It wasn't difficult, not really. Unless the client had guard dogs," Percy added with a laugh. He glanced at me, and then looked down at his hands on the wheel for a moment. "Uh, sorry. You probably don't want to hear about that."

"No," I assured him. "It's fine. I think we both could do with learning about each other's pasts a bit more."

"Well, look at this convenient hour-long trip we have," Percy mentioned slyly. "And, I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but I feel like I know a whole lot less about your past compared to how much you know about mine."

"I don't know *that* much," I argued, knowing it was a lie. As far as secrets go, I knew loads more about Percy.

"Annabeth," he said with a sigh. "I hate to go off on a minor speech, but honestly. Give me one good reason why you *shouldn't* tell me. I trust you, and you trust me. We're best friends. I care about you more than I care about myself. So, please, can you just tell me a *little* bit more about your past?"

I stared out the window in silence, determined not to meet his eyes while I was still trying to get rid of the stinging and burning sensation behind them. Finally, when I had my emotions under control, my mostly impassive expression adorning my face, I turned back to him. "Fine. Ask me anything. I'll answer *how I want to*," I stressed. He nodded, agreeing to the terms. "And," I added in a less harsh tone, "thank you." I reached over and put my hand on his forearm as I said it, just so that he would know I meant my words. He placed his other hand over mine for just a brief moment before returning it to the wheel as he took a left. I replaced my hand in my lap, fidgeting with my hands.

"Why'd your mom become an alcoholic?" Percy asked, right off the bat.

I shrugged, though his eyes were on the road. "Pressure? I'm not sure. Dad was gone; her fame was on a downward route. She had drank before then, at parties, so she knew how it felt. And she wanted that feeling, I guess."

Percy nodded in understanding. "I used to drink a lot, too. It's numbing, I suppose."

I turned to him. "Really?"

"Yep. But not a bit of alcohol has touched my lips in three years, unless some drunken girl threw herself at me, that is," Percy replied. "Being an alcoholic isn't fun. I was running around, drinking at fourteen."

"Fourteen?" I gasped. "Jesus, Perce."

"And there were kids younger than me there who were alcoholics, too. And drug addicts," he added.

I raised an eyebrow. "You didn't ever..."

"No," Percy negated. "Never."

"Well, that's a relief. I would never date a druggie," I informed him, mindlessly shuffling through the never-ending collection of CDs in the storage binder we'd placed in the car yesterday. Luckily, he'd had enough sense to pack good music.

"But we're not really dating," Percy said, questioningly.

"I know," I quickly said, hoping I didn't sound embarrassed. "Just talking out loud."

"Oh," Percy replied, laughing a bit. "Um, where's she at now?"

"Mom?" I questioned. He nodded in confirmation. I looked back to the storage binder, running my hands over a The Fray CD. "Not sure. Probably at a guy's house."

"Is that where she usually was?" Percy asked, sending me a glance as we stopped at a red light. "With guys and such?"

"Yeah," I answered. "That or with her druggie friends."

"Hey, you know, I'm sorry," Percy said suddenly, softly. "I mean, I know you probably don't want to hear it, but I am sorry. I wish there's something I could do."

"Don't do that," I ordered. "I can tell you're trying to blame yourself. Believe it or not, Percy, every little bad thing that happens *isn't* your fault. You can't do that to yourself. You'll fall apart."

Percy snorted good-naturedly. "And you're one to talk about putting too much pressure on oneself."

"I care about you more than myself," I quipped, quoting him. He pursed his lips, keeping his eyes on the road. "I mean that, you know. I'm not mocking you."

"Really?" Percy asked, setting his eyes on me as the traffic left us stopped behind a large truck. "Like, you really care about me?"

I shook my head and almost laughed. "Of course I do, Percy," I told him. "You're an idiot if you think otherwise."

“You're not very good at communicating your positive emotions,” Percy mentioned, smiling at me. “And I mean that in the fondest way possible.” I caught myself staring at his eyes as the sunlight caught them; making them look impossibly clearer.

After realizing his words, I scowled. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“That you aren't very good at expressing your appreciation, or love, or support towards me,” Percy answered. “But I'm okay with that. I get that it's...*you*.”

“I always tell you how good you do at concerts!” I argued. “And I just told you *not* to put pressure on yourself. That's support. Kind of.” He smiled, somewhat bittersweetly, and I wondered what that was about. “And I hug you all the time. That's love. And I say 'thank you' when you cook for me. That's appreciation.” I smiled triumphantly.

“Hugs are usually for the public,” Percy responded indifferently.

“But not always,” I countered.

“But *usually*,” Percy repeated. “So, your love is flawed.”

“And like yours is any better,” I scoffed. He was silent for a moment, not shooting back a quick comment to add to our endless banter. “Or...is it?” I asked hesitantly.

“Probably not,” Percy admitted. “But if you ask me, I'm still standing true to my argument from a few weeks ago. Best friend 'us' and best friends in love 'us' are kind of...integrating.”

“And what makes you say that?” I inquired, turning another page in the CD binder, and already knowing part of the answer.

“Well, for one, my actual liking of you. And your yet-to-be voiced actual liking of me,” Percy mentioned slyly. I shoved him, and he only winked at me. “Um, the thing after the concert that one time. And the thing on the tour bus—”

“You're skirting around the word again,” I muttered.

“— and sleeping together. Not like, *sleeping* together, but cuddling and such.”

“Best friends do that,” I retaliated.

“Maybe,” Percy agreed. “But we're a very different version of best friends. If anything, we're more like friends with benefits. Except it's not sex. It's more like the normal things in a relationship. Kisses on the cheek in the morning—”

“Accidental kisses goodnight,” I listed. “Sympathy kisses. Tension-relieving kisses.”

“That really was an accident,” Percy told me, blushing. “I was half-asleep.”

“Don't worry about it,” I waved it off. “It's whatever.”

“'Whatever' as in 'it meant nothing' or 'whatever' as in 'I'm used to it'?”

“The second one,” I replied. “Why the sudden analyzing of our relationship?” I questioned, looking up at him. He met my eyes for a brief moment before returning his eyes to the road.

"I guess... I just wanted to know what *it* was, maybe," he mumbled quietly and hurriedly. His words slurred together. "If there even is an *it*. And I wanted to know what meant something and what didn't," Percy admitted.

I was silent, mulling over his words. *Did that mean he wanted there to be an 'it'?* "Percy," I started carefully, deciding not to talk about his previous words. "Did you mean it? When we were arguing, and you said that there was nothing wrong with *us*?"

"Of course I did," Percy answered earnestly. "And there *isn't*, you know."

"Clint said—"

"Clint says a lot of things," Percy said easily. I could tell by the way his knuckles were white that he wasn't feeling very carefree, however.

"I just—think it's better. For both of us. To not to," I said suddenly.

"How—in any way—could that be *better*?"

"It's not a real relationship, Percy," I told him softly. And yet, even as I uttered the words, my stomach twisted the way it always did when I told a lie—leaving me more confused than ever. That wasn't a lie, not in the slightest. We had a contract. We made a deal.

"*Was* not," Percy corrected. "You have to agree with me," he pleaded. "You know that it's not all fake."

I shook my head, resting my head in my right hand. "It is," I persisted. My stomach twisted again.

"You can't honestly mean that," Percy said. "You can't honestly mean that with all of your heart, Annabeth. I know there's something—"

"There's not," I snapped, unintentionally sounding much ruder than I'd planned on. He bit his lip, his jaw setting and transforming into a sharp and severe line.

"You're lying," Percy denied, probably trying to sound firm, but I heard the way his voice shook. "You have to be." He jerked the wheel, taking an immediate right and pulling into a parking spot. "Right here, right now. I want to kiss you, and then I want you to look me in the eye and tell me that it doesn't mean a *single thing* to me."

I rubbed my temple. "Seriously, Percy—"

He leaned forward suddenly, pressing his lips to mine. My breath caught in my throat nonetheless, and I instinctively pulled away, even as I gripped his shirt. However, Percy stopped me with a gentle hand on the back of my neck, deepening the kiss and making my stomach twist—but not in the same way as when I told away. I cursed the fluttering in my heart and the involuntary curling of my toes as I shakily held his shirt tighter.

He'd never kissed me like this. This was different.

Percy pulled back, but only enough to catch his breath and let me catch mine before kissing me again, making my pulse pound in my ears so that I couldn't hear the rational thoughts in my mind. Throwing caution to the wind, I took initiative and intensified the kiss myself, smirking against his lips as he gasped.

Merely seconds later, as Percy's grip loosened on my neck and I leaned back for air, Percy shook his head at me, still breathing shallowly. "Now," he breathed. "Tell me that meant nothing."

And try as I might, staring into his blue-green eyes, ones that seemed to change color day-by-day, taking in the way his pupils were dilated and his cheeks only slightly flushed, I knew I couldn't for a moment longer. Rather than ruining the moment, if it was even a moment, I looked away from him, and down at the console between us. I realized that my hands were still twisted in his shirt, and pulled them back. Smoothing out the fabric carefully after, I cleared my throat and looked to him once more.

Despite the 'I told you so' I was expecting he was smiling crazy big. Falling back into his seat, Percy closed his eyes. "Jesus, so I was actually right? It actually means something to you? You *actually* like me?"

I scowled at the word 'like.' It seemed offensive. I had thought that our relationship was more than 'like.' But at the same time, I couldn't possibly—

"Annabeth," Percy said, pulling me out of my frantic inner turmoil.

"Yeah," I answered, clearing my throat again after noticing the roughness of my voice. Percy smirked and I scowled. "Shut up." This only made him laugh, and I caught myself wanting to smile for a second, but I bit it back.

"So...you like me?"

Deciding not to rant about how the word 'like' seemed insufficient, I shrugged. "Maybe."

He rolled his eyes, smile never faltering. "Whatever. I don't care if you don't like me. As long as you keep kissing me like that, you can feel however you want about me, babe," Percy said, winking at me. I tried not to blush, but probably failed.

"That's the first time you've actually acknowledged our kissing by actually saying 'kissing,'" I muttered, hoping to avoid the topic.

"Because that was the first time I was positive it was real," Percy informed me. "All the other times...maybe they really were for 'tension-relieving' and for the public. But that was different."

I nodded in agreement. "It was. You were acting different."

"I guess that's...Was it a bad different?" Percy questioned, not finishing his original words.

"Not bad," I told him, shaking my head.

"But let me guess, it wasn't a good different, either? You and your pride, Chase," Percy said through a laugh, lazily backing out of the parking spot.

"No," I said, deciding that I would give him this one. Anything that emotionally...inspired deserved the truth. "It's a good different."

Percy smile widened, and he shook his head. "I am so happy right now. You don't even know."

And yeah, I really didn't. Because at the moment, I was busy having a war with myself over my feelings for Percy and my morals. The contracts may not have outright said it, but it's clear that the relationship was to remain under false pretenses. And deciding that I more-than-liked Percy was not very 'false.' I hated breaking the rules, and I could already feel Clint's disapproving stare.

Percy seemed to notice my mood wasn't nearly as spirited as his, and made me jump when he grabbed my hand. I wanted to yank it back, and tell him that this *couldn't* be a thing, but his eyes seemed honest. "Look, I know exactly what's going through your head right now," he started, turning his eyes to the road once more. "But *please*, just give me today. *Please*," Percy begged, squeezing my hand. "And don't think about all of that other mess, and just be happy with me. Because I know you want to be. Some part of you has to feel like you should be ecstatic right now."

Just the irrational part, I thought wryly.

"Please," Percy continued. "And tomorrow we can go back to thinking about all the negatives of this, but for now, smile for me, and tell me that you'll stop thinking about it." He caught my gaze at the current stop sign, squeezing my hand to the point that it was almost painful. His eyes pleaded with me—the eyes I couldn't lie to, and the eyes that had never been able to lie to me.

Without a second thought, I found myself nodding. "I promise not to think about it. For today," I promised.

"Good," Percy said with a relieved sigh, refusing to drop my hand. His eyes sparkled, brighter than I'd ever seen them. Brighter than after our first concert. Percy's smile was relaxed and satisfied and so ridiculously blissful that I fought the urge to kiss him again, right then and there. "Because by the end of the day, I'm determined to have you believing that there's nothing wrong with this."

I refused to let go of her hand the entire journey to West End.

Maybe it was selfish, or assumptious, or a million other *wrong* things, but it felt right to me, right here, right now. Affection with Annabeth, in recent months, had been nothing but instinct. She never complained about it either, so I assumed that she was either indifferent toward it or wanted to hold my hand.

I hoped desperately for the second one.

By the time we arrived at the Alabama beach, I was nearly vibrating with anticipation. I only had a few hours to show her that we were a great couple, prove that she should instantly drop her apprehension and force her to confront her real feelings. Which, I hoped that was what her feelings were—real. Still, paired with the anticipation was a horrible feeling of dread. I was distressed beyond belief, knowing that the pressure was on. If this didn't work, nothing would.

I deftly removed the key from the ignition, turning to Annabeth. Her facial expression looked relaxed, making me feel relieved, but regardless, I took hold of her chin and forced her to look me in the eyes.

“Annabeth,” I addressed.

“Percy,” she replied evenly.

“Remember your promise, yeah?” I reminded her casually. With earnest evident in her eyes as she nodded, I smiled in a satisfied manner and got out of the car. She copied my actions, sunglasses already atop her head and bag hiked up her shoulder. I stared at her stupidly, unable to resist as she tied her hair up again.

Her hair looked impossibly golden in the sunlight, and she looked like she was in her element. The sun looked natural on Annabeth, seeing that she was a California-native—her tan skin to prove it. Annabeth surely hadn't been one of those girls who had been at the beach simply for appearances. I expected that she had been just like her character in our fabricated story of how we met. She'd be sitting at the beach, curled up in a chair and reading. Annabeth was the type to like the beach for the scenery, the essence, the sound of the waves. She looked at me suddenly, as if just noticing my stare, and I looked away in a futile attempt of fooling her into believing that I hadn't been observing her.

“I saw you,” Annabeth informed me.

“Doing what?” I questioned with innocence, grabbing my own pair of sunglasses. Closing my door and locking the car behind me, I fell into step next to her.

“Staring,” she accused. “You were staring.”

“Well, stop being so pretty,” I replied with an overdramatic wink. She rolled her eyes, used to my habitual flirting, but I slipped my hand into hers with confidence. One of us had to be headstrong about *this*, and I was more than happy to do so. Still, I breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't pull away.

As we walked, quite a few people stared, many took pictures, but only a few approached us to ask for autographs. I didn't mind—I *never* minded when there were fans—but this was Annabeth's day. Or, my day, I suppose, to help her realize how she felt about me—or rather, how I *thought* she felt about me. If Annabeth was on a fence, teetering from side to side between her disapproval of a proper relationship with me and her caring of me, I was determined to make her fall completely off the fence and onto the side of adoration.

“Here,” Annabeth proclaimed suddenly, stopping in her tracks and extracting two carefully folded beach towels from her bag. I checked out the location, which was conveniently far enough back that we weren't in the swarm of people just before the water, but at the same time, the crashing waves weren't a far distance away.

As soon as she set her bag down, I removed my shirt and tossed it onto my towel. “Come on,” I ordered.

She scowled. “Don't tell me what to do.”

I laughed, grabbing both of her hands and kneeling before her. “Please, Annabeth Chase, let this noble knight—he's very attractive, I might add—be blessed with your company down to the...uh, water.”

Annabeth snorted in laughter. “You started good, but that ending needs some work.” I pouted, and she rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine.” I grinned happily and kissed her hand simply because I wanted to before standing once more. Although I'd be seeing Annabeth in her bathing suit in a matter of moments, and there was no point in me turning my back to give her privacy, I did so anyways. I could practically hear Annabeth rolling her eyes at me.

Then, suddenly, there were two hands putting slight pressure on my shoulders and a whispered, “race you” in my ear. I turned my head belatedly, still in a daze from her proximity before jogging after Annabeth and loudly accusing her of cheating.

Sets of eyes turned my way, but I was used to it—allowing me to easily ignore the attention. Annabeth stopped running just as the water reached her ankles.

“Jackson, you're slacking,” she teased, as I finally arrived at her side.

“You cheated!” I complained. “I totally would have beaten you if you hadn't...” I trailed off slowly, after the thought that *Annabeth Chase was in a bathing suit in front of me* registered. I glanced her up and down, not so conspicuously, and ended up blushing and choking on air.

Annabeth punched my arm seconds later, leaving me gasping for breath *and* in pain. “You checked me out!” she whisper-yelled.

“It's the first time I've seen you in this—the—a low amount of clothing!” I stuttered, returning my answer in the same tone. “I am a teenage boy and you are pretty—so, sue me.” Annabeth was still staring at me in an accusatory manner as I continued, “And let's not pretend you didn't check *me* out the first time you saw me shirtless.”

It was Annabeth's turn to blush and look away without much aplomb. I kissed her cheek easily, laughing slightly and walking backwards into the water. “Joining me, Chase?” I challenged, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Annabeth answered defensively, making her way towards me. She winced. “It's cold.” Despite her complaint, she waded further into the ocean.

“Then hurry up and get closer to me, baby,” I teased with a wink. “I’ll warm you right up.” Annabeth gave me an incredulous look as I laughed openly, narrowing my eyes at her when she sent a fair amount of salt-water flying at me. “Are you declaring *war*?” I asked.

Rather than an answer, Annabeth approached me, seemingly overcoming her hesitance to the cold. She stood unnervingly close, and I nearly had another coughing fit. “I am,” she said with a sugary smile, flicking water at my face.

I returned the attack, which spurred a fairly intense water fight. Smiling every single time Annabeth’s face scrunched up from the salt water, I don’t think I could have been happier. After a few minutes, I found my footing, put my hands up to signal defeat and gathered her into a hug. “Are you having fun?” I inquired, not positive if I really wanted the answer. Being rejected wasn’t one of the things on my bucket list.

“Surprisingly, yes,” Annabeth said after a moment. I pulled back with what must have been a manic smile. Praying that I wasn’t crossing any lines, I leaned forward and kissed her softly, silly grin still halfway on my face. She kissed me back, making my heart leap into my throat in a very *not*-masculine fashion. When I gently pulled away, Annabeth licked her lips and made a face. “Salty—definitely not the most appealing thing.” I laughed, absentmindedly brushing a fallen eyelash off of her cheek.

“Noted,” I told her with a nod. “I picked our first activity, you next.”

“Pier,” Annabeth said without hesitation.

I cocked my head to the side thoughtfully. “That will be a trip down memory lane,” I said, “except this time we’ll kiss for real.”

“Oh, will we?” Annabeth asked, already walking back to the shore. Moving to catch up with her, I nodded. “If you really want ‘a trip down memory lane,’ *I’ll* have to be the one kissing *you*,” Annabeth mentioned.

“You will,” I said confidently.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I’m charming,” I answered, nudging her with a doting grin.

“You may be charming,” Annabeth allowed. “But I’m very stubborn.”

“And I’m very persistent,” I quipped.

“Fair enough,” Annabeth said resolutely, shrugging. We stepped foot on the dry sand, coating our feet in the crystal-like, fine, light shade of brown. This time, Annabeth took hold of my hand, and I couldn’t stop smiling. It was completely ridiculous—such a small show of affection—and yet it had me going crazy.

I almost told her that I loved her, right then and there, because I could almost *feel* it bubbling up in my chest and begging to be said. However, I knew that despite the comfortableness, we were treading on fragile land, so I resulted to simply tightening my grip on her hand. We stopped by our towels for a moment, Annabeth putting her dress on, despite my hopeful protests.

She’d scoffed and shoved me, laughing in a disbelieving manner. “I can’t believe you, Jackson,” Annabeth stated, falling back into step with me. “You’re absolutely scandalous.”

"I prefer 'shameless,'" I shared with a smile. She returned it, shaking her head, and I couldn't help but think about how natural this felt. Walking with her, not worried about appearances or who was taking a picture, but just... *being*. It was great—perfect, even. I held my arm out impulsively, effectively stopping her from taking another step. "We're doing a rematch on that race," I informed her. "One, two—"

"Three!" Annabeth shouted, sprinting ahead of me. I called after her, despite being close on her heels, once more proclaiming that she was a cheater. "No! I'm just better than you!"

A smug smile appeared on my face as I quickened my pace. "Really now?" I questioned, several steps ahead of her.

"You look sexy right now."

Annabeth said it lightly, in a very careless manner, but I stumbled, which slowed me down. I heard Annabeth's free and gorgeous laughter, which almost made me fall behind even more. She was further ahead of me now. Despite my usual aggressiveness when it came to competitions, I found myself smiling fondly after her; only scowling at her once we met at the edge of the pier, both out of breath and slightly flushed.

"You are not only a cheater," I declared, "you are a manipulative person."

"You're easily manipulated," Annabeth managed to say, still evening out her breath. People standing along the pier were giving us aghast looks—either alarmed by how loud we were, or because of *who* we were. I waved, only getting a few waves in response, and grinned at Annabeth.

"Only when it comes to you," I grumbled. "And that's only because you know what throws me off."

"You really do look sexy, though," Annabeth said thoughtfully, she rested a hand on my shoulder, letting it trail down for only three seconds—trust me, *I counted*—and then smirking at me.

"Stop," I ordered, pushing her hand away and trying to refrain from blushing.

By the way Annabeth pinched my cheek and smiled, I could tell that it didn't work. "Aww!" she cooed.

I rolled my eyes, batting her hand away once more. "Why are you determined to strip me of my manhood?" I asked her with narrowed eyes.

Annabeth snorted in laughter. "What?"

I reconsidered my words, wincing. *Would it hurt to think just a little before you spoke, Percy?* "Well, you make me blush."

"Obviously," Annabeth said. I got distracted by her smile for a moment—it was so *bright*—before continuing.

"And other things."

"Like?" Annabeth prompted. "What? Do you inwardly squeal every time we kiss like a schoolgirl?" She was teasing, but she had no clue how dead on she was.

Tossing caution carelessly to the wind, I nodded. "More or less. And I get butterflies. So, stop it, Chase."

Her smile widened. “Really?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly, running my hand through my hair and probably blushing worse. “So, can we just—you know—” I stopped speaking, deciding that I sounded like a fool, and gestured down the length of the pier. *Can I please go five minutes without embarrassing myself?*

Annabeth beamed, grabbing my hand. “You’re cute, you know,” she said softly, shaking her head. I barely restrained from falling over and dying of nervousness and overwhelming emotion, but I steadied myself by holding onto her hand.

“Thanks,” I replied, sighing in relief after hearing that my voice was steady.

“This is...nice,” Annabeth said after a few moments of comfortable silence. She looked up at me carefully. “I mean, it’s not *terrible*.”

I grinned, reading her eyes easily and knowing that she was ecstatic. She was enjoying herself, and I couldn’t help the hopefulness that bloomed in my chest. *This has to sway her*, I thought. I released her hand, only to wrap my arm around her waist. I kissed her hair, sighing with utter happiness. Anyone—even the most elated person on earth—would find my mirth sickening.

And when we reached the end of the pier, several people clearing out as we approached, Annabeth smiled something that made my hands tingle before leaning up and pressing her lips to mine. It was nothing like any of our previous kisses—not at all. This was innocent, and soft, and affectionate, and just really *nice*. I struggled to find the words to explain it, even to myself. I smiled against her lips, my face almost quaking from how badly it wished to bring out a full smile.

Then she leaned back, the flawless image of apathy. “You kissed me,” I informed her.

“Really? I had no clue,” Annabeth sassed.

“Don’t be like that,” I told her with an eye roll. “If I recall, you were claiming that you *wouldn’t* not so long ago.”

“I never said that I *wouldn’t*,” Annabeth protested.

“You implied it, though,” I stated.

“I didn’t. I only said that I was stubborn,” Annabeth corrected. “I never said that I wouldn’t.”

“Why so defensive?” I questioned, raising an amused eyebrow.

“Because you’re putting words in my mouth!”

“Only because you put your tongue in mine,” I teased, snorting in laughter at my own comment.

She blushed, looking affronted, and punched my chest. “I did not!”

“I know,” I assured her. “Not that time, anyways.”

“Shut up!” Annabeth whispered urgently.

“Would it be assumptious to say ‘make me?’” I smiled at her, and she scowled at me. Leaning forward and kissing her nose, which made her expression soften, I sighed, sounding admittedly lovestruck.

I grinned at her as she stared adamantly out at the horizon, and moved to stand behind her, hooking my chin over her shoulder, wrapping my arms around her and humming 'I Won't Give Up' in Annabeth's ear. She leaned back against me, elbowing me harshly as her revenge, and I thought I might die of bliss.

I'm going to die, I thought. I'm going to explode into a million pieces but there's not going to be any blood. I'm pretty sure I'd bleed rainbows and unicorns and cupcakes and a million other happy things right now.

The sky was a bright, clear blue—the same color I was often clothed in. Clouds were in the sky, but they were a crisp white, not a stormy grey like Annabeth's eyes. I closed my eyes, breathing in the scent of the ocean and relishing in the sounds of the beach. If anything was home, it had to be this. The water and Annabeth.

I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, my mind screamed. I kissed her shoulder and kept my lips there, scared that I'd actually say it aloud if they didn't stay busy. That didn't stop me from tracing every individual letter on her hand which was resting beneath mine on the wooden railing. I repeated the process multiple times, and it made my conscious rest a bit easier. It got the words off my chest, even if I wasn't outright saying them.

"Do you?"

"What?" I asked, lost in my own world of thought. "Sorry, I missed the first part of that sentence," I told her apologetically.

"There wasn't a first part," Annabeth said, her voice suddenly intensifying. "Do you?"

"Do I... What are you talking about?" I questioned, my brow furrowing. She turned around in arms, which led to me resting both hands on the railing, trapping her, in a way.

"You were... spelling things on my hand," Annabeth answered, seemingly less sure of herself. My face paled slightly, my chest quivering a bit from the strangled breath I let out. "Right?"

"Uh," I stalled. *How could I deny it without using a horrible lie? I should have known that she would notice what I was spelling! I know Annabeth's not stupid!* "Well, you see..." I grasped at thin air, wishing that I had a brain that thought much quicker than the one I currently had between my ears. I looked at the water, wondering if it would hurt if I leaped over the railing to escape this conversation and put an end to my stuttering. If I dived, it wouldn't hurt too badly. There weren't many rocks. I wouldn't die.

"You were," Annabeth stated. "I can tell. You never were a very good liar, Percy..." She looked down, and I thought maybe my stomach dropped. I felt like I was going to throw up from nerves, die of embarrassment, and sigh in relief because it was finally out in the open—all at the same time. "You were spelling 'I love you,'" Annabeth informed me.

I squeezed my eyes tight. *Definitely about to jump off the pier. I hope there's a sharp rock that will stab all of the idiocy out of me.* "I know," I said softly, refusing to open my eyes. This was too much. That emotion was too much. She's hardly deciding if she liked me for real, and I *love* her. I ruined it; me and my ridiculous impulses. I wanted to hit myself more than anything in that moment, because I'd always been so ridiculously *shit* at hiding my emotions. No matter how hard I tried to conceal them, they were always outed one way or another. And I didn't want this out there—not yet—because I'd just gotten her, if only for the day, and it wasn't fair.

All's fair in love and war, some philosophical part of my brain whispered. It made me scowl.

Jumping in alarm as lithe arms found their way around me, I opened my eyes to see Annabeth leaning her head against my chest and just—*hugging* me. My stomach swooped once more, and I thought I'd throw up once more—this time in relief. “Do you?” she asked a third time.

“I—uh—yeah,” I sputtered, with not even the smallest smidgen of grace. I closed my eyes again as Annabeth hugged me tighter. Suddenly, I was glad that I didn't hurl myself over the wooden support.

“Okay,” she responded.

“Okay?” I asked incredulously, hoping I could get a bit more of a reply than that.

“It's sweet,” Annabeth elaborated. I could already feel the whole 'you're sweet but I just don't feel the same way' speech coming on. I'd gotten it a million times; most guys have. “But I'm not there yet, so I don't want to say it back.”

I repeated her words in my mind probably close to thirty times, since I hadn't gotten a speech, like I'd expected. “Yet,” I muttered, almost to myself after a second.

“Yet,” Annabeth affirmed.

“So you—”

“Yes,” she interjected, already knowing my question. “I think I have for a while, but...today made me realize it.”

“It worked,” I said, laughing something halfway between relief and glee. “It actually worked.”

“What did?” Annabeth inquired, stepping back, but only slightly.

“This day,” I told her, moving my hand to cup the back of my neck subconsciously. I'd been told that it was my nervous habit. “I was planning on making you realize that you liked me...and you did.”

“You were trying to seduce me,” Annabeth deadpanned, light in her eyes. I knew she was only joking with me, but I needed to let her know that my intentions weren't like that.

“No!” I denied. “No, no, no, *no*. That sounds so much worse. I just wanted you to notice that I cared and that you did, too, so that you could see that we're good for each other and it doesn't matter what Clint says, or the contracts,” I said, lowering my voice even more to keep my words a mystery to any eavesdroppers. We'd been speaking in hushed voices ever since she'd asked me if I loved her, and I prayed that no one had superhuman ears. “We just...work. And I don't know why, but we do,” I finished, my oh-so-eloquent speech ending.

“And I see that now,” Annabeth said softly. “I just can't help but think...”

“You promised not to,” I warned her.

“That was before you said you loved me,” she countered. “The situation has changed.”

“I never actually said it,” I muttered.

“But it's true,” Annabeth answered, in a light tone. “And...promise me something?”

“Anything,” I offered without hesitation.

She smiled, in a way that made me curl my toes. Was it even fair for one person to be so gorgeous?
“Don't say it until I can say it back.”

“Deal,” I agreed, reaching out to shake her hand. She gave me an odd look, before sealing our deal with a kiss.

By the time it was nearing one in the afternoon, I was whining about how hungry I was, but Annabeth was losing her patience. I'd collapsed on my towel about an hour earlier, tired and ready to lie in the sun. It may be more of a girl-thing, sunbathing, but I really just enjoying the feeling of the heat paired with the sound of the waves. Annabeth was reading—*still*—and I'd been bothering her for a good minute.

“Percy, I am on my *last* page, so help me god,” she practically growled through clenched teeth. I sighed, leaning on her shoulder and reading some of it. Something about a boy with bread. Impatiently, I jostle her. “*Jesus*, the last sentence, Percy!” Annabeth snapped. Blowing air out my mouth in a quick gust, I tapped my fingers on my knee.

After what must have been hours, she closed her book, staring at the cover in silence. “I'm not sure what to do with my life,” Annabeth confessed.

“The Hunger Games,” I read, looking at the title. “Starving people?”

Annabeth pinched the bridge of her nose. “My god.”

“Speaking of starving people...” I gave her a look.

“This is the first fiction book I've finished,” Annabeth told me, acting as though I'd never spoken. “I didn't even know there was good *fiction* out there.”

“Well, look at that!” I remarked. “You know what else is good? Food. We should get some.”

“Why did she end it like that?” she spoke aloud, now sounding bitter. “You can't end a book like that.”

“Annabeth,” I groaned. “I am *so* hungry, and you are talking about a stupid book.”

“It's not stupid!” Annabeth shouted, giving me a sharp look.

I held my hands up in defeat. “Still, my point stands. I'm starved.” She rolled her eyes, burying the book in the beach bag she'd lugged along with us. Dropping her sunglasses—aviators, which matched mine—to cover her eyes, she stood.

“Get the towels,” Annabeth commanded. “Please.”

“So bossy,” I grumbled, my hunger making me moody. “You're always so bossy.”

“And you're needy!” Annabeth returned as I gathered up the towels.

“I'm a *human being*,” I stressed. “I know it's a foreign concept for you.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Annabeth questioned with a hint of anger.

“That you are heartless,” I said, lashing out. “Without a heart. Of a completely different species.”

"If I was heartless," Annabeth replied after a moment, "then I wouldn't have any feelings for you at all. So, obviously, that's not true." I stumbled slightly at her words; even though we'd both made it clear that we *did* have feelings for each other, it still shocked me every time. "Your arguments are horrible," she continued, flippantly.

"I know you are but what am I?"

"Percy, if you think I have an inch of hesitancy with pushing you into the busy street so that you are pummeled by a car, you really shouldn't underestimate me," Annabeth warned.

I couldn't think of a good comeback, so I resorted to ignoring her last comment as asking, "What's for food?" I blinked at my question. "I can't even speak around you. Look what you do to me." Smiling at her, I pushed her slightly. "What would you like to eat?" I rephrased.

Annabeth smiled softly, shrugging. "Whatever."

I grinned back, happy that the air wasn't tense with the weight of a disagreement anymore. "What do you want?"

"World peace," Annabeth replied drily.

"I'll take that as 'tacos.'"

We arrived back home around four, since we sat down to eat and ended up taking back roads to waste time. It was break week, and we didn't want to waste it away in our hotel room.

No matter how often we said as much, we curled up on my bed and watched Netflix for the rest of the night, ordering room service once we got hungry. Annabeth was completely immersed in the series we'd recently started, her head resting comfortably on my chest. Combing my fingers through her hair lightly, I let my other hand rest between both of hers as she toyed with it. She'd been more affectionate than ever throughout the day, and I was floating on cloud nine. I leaned down, kissing her hair simply because I was happy, and Annabeth squeezed my hand in response.

I looked back to the laptop, trying to get into the show, but I was much too interested in Annabeth's fidgeting and how soft her hair was.

I jumped out of my skin when the door to our room opened, revealing our light brown-haired manager. I thought about maybe shifting away from Annabeth—it'd never occurred to me how close we were to each other—but I figured the damage was already done. Annabeth glanced up, but only because I'd started. Her eyes widened and she ducked out from underneath my arm.

It stung a bit, making me wince only slightly, but I knew why. Despite everything that had happened recently, she was still worried about Clint's freak out, which was bound to happen.

There were a few moments of tense silence, in which Clint's eyes flickered from me to Annabeth, and back to me again. I stared at Annabeth with a slightly sad but understanding expression, and Annabeth stared at Clint with fear.

"You guys are together, aren't you?"

I chose that moment in time to have a horrible coughing fit, which drew both sets of eyes to me, though Clint had addressed Annabeth. She looked at me with mild concern, and Clint looked apprehensive. I calmed my choking after a few seconds, hand resting on my chest.

“You are.”

“No!” Annabeth said suddenly. Then she glanced at me, and I shot her a hurt look. “I mean, yes,” she corrected after a moment. As though she thought she made have read me wrong, she spared me another look. *Labels*, I sighed forlornly. “Right?”

“If you...” I stopped my question after reading the answer in Annabeth's eyes. “Right. Uh, yeah. We are.”

“Are you sure? Because you guys don't seem to be,” Clint said, leaning against the door and crossing his arms. He gave me a look, one that screamed *what the actual fuck, man*, despite his illusion of composure.

I met Annabeth's eyes once more, just to confirm it one last time. I nodded, my eyes not leaving hers as I responded, “Yes, we are.” I grinned something ridiculous at her, my hands tingling again. I wondered if I should get that checked out. Was it a medical condition?

“Well,” Clint said with a smile, sanding his hands together. “This makes my news a lot easier.” I raised an eyebrow. “For one, I was going to ask you guys about the touchy-feely-ness at the beach, but now I see why,” he gave us both pointed looks. “And for two, I found out that your contracts are invalid.”

“What?” Annabeth and I asked in unison.

“Cute,” Clint muttered. “Saying things at the same time.”

“We did that before,” I pointed out.

Clint ignored me, continuing. “The extension contracts are invalid. I reread the first one, the four-month one, and Stan had slipped in that four months was the maximum,” he explained. “And also said, in not so many words, that an extension of contract was out of the question. I'm guessing that he did that for you, Annabeth, since you were very un-okay with the plan from the beginning.”

“Right,” Annabeth said, shuffling her feet.

“You *can* sit back down with Percy, you know,” Clint told her. She nodded and sat next to me again, and I shut the lid of her laptop, pushing it further down the bed and offering for Clint to have a seat. “Anyways,” he picked up, seating himself, “I was just going through some paperwork, and something possessed me to reread the contract—”

“It's your Papa Bear instincts kicking in,” I teased.

“—So, I did, and I realized that it made the extension completely illegitimate. Which would have given you guys both free will to walk away without a second thought,” Clint told us. He narrowed his eyes at me. “Don't call me 'Papa Bear.’”

“Alright, Papa Bear,” Annabeth joked. I reached my hand out for a quick high-five, and she slapped my hand with amusement.

“That's cute,” Clint mentioned. “Partners in crime.”

"Are you going to call everything we do cute now?" I asked, rolling my eyes.

"Probably," Clint admitted. "I've always thought you guys were cute."

"Then why did you tell Percy not to fall in love with me?" Annabeth questioned bluntly. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"How did you know about that?" Clint returned. I looked up and saw the confusion evident on his face.

"Read his texts," Annabeth owned up. "Why did you say that?"

"Being the creepy girlfriend that read her boyfriend's texts," Clint said, nodding. "Cute." Annabeth chucked a pillow at his face, but he only chuckled. "I said that because I thought..." He was weighing his words carefully, sensitive as always and not wanting to offend either of us. Clint glanced to me for help, or maybe permission to tell her, but I picked up on his response.

"That you wouldn't return the feelings and then I would get hurt, and my baby Clint doesn't want to see me broken-hearted," I finished, batting my eyelashes at Clint. The corners of his lips turned down slightly, a small disapproval of my nature.

"Oh," Annabeth said blankly. I smiled down at her. Every time she didn't know what to say, she always replied with an evident "oh."

"Cute," Clint said. "Smiling at the girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," I denied, kicking him.

"I'm not?" Annabeth asked.

"She's not?" Clint questioned, at the same time.

I raised my eyebrows. "Didn't know you...um, wanted to—you know—be *that*." My heart started racing at the prospect. *Did she? Did I really win her over that easily?*

"We already decided we were together, Percy. And are you going to start skirting around the word 'girlfriend,' too?" Annabeth inquired, a childish whine to her voice.

"Wait—what?" I said, not following. "So, you want to be?"

"Be what?" Annabeth prompted, wanting me to say it.

"My...girlfriend."

"Sure." She kissed my cheek brusquely, and I blushed for whatever reason.

Clint opened his mouth to say something—"cute," I presume—but I spoke first. "Why didn't Stan say something? He was at the meeting with the extension thing."

Clint shrugged helplessly. "He must have been too involved in the family affairs to notice. He did seem out of it, that day. On the phone for nearly all of the meeting, whether you two saw it or not."

"I did see him texting," I mentioned. "Didn't think anything of it."

"So, he wasn't listening the whole time," Annabeth deadpanned.

Clint looked apologetic. "Probably so."

"He wasn't a very good manager," she waved his sad look off. "Aren't you supposed to be mad?"

Clint gave us a sly smile. "Kind of thought something was going on ever since the second day of tour. The bus incident was...sketchy."

"Ah, I see," I responded, nodding my head. I nudged Annabeth—my *girlfriend*—with humor. "Remember that?"

"I do," Annabeth answered, a glint in her eye. "That was a good day."

"Phenomenal," I agreed.

"Feeling uncomfortable," Clint interjected.

"Oh," I said, blinking at him. "Sorry."

"*However*," Clint started, "I may not be upset, but fans *will* be if it gets out that *this*," he gestured between Annabeth and me, "wasn't real."

"Naturally," Annabeth commented. "We won't let it get out."

Clint nodded, apprehension pinching his expression. "Just...be careful, yeah?"

"Always," I assured him.

He stood, supposedly deciding his work was done here. Clint leaned down, giving me a man-hug and clapping my back. "Congrats, man. I know you've liked her forever." I shot him a panicked look, gesturing to Annabeth. *She is in the room, can we not talk about this!* was the exclamation I tried to communicate with my eyes. Clint blinked innocently. "She didn't already know?"

I sighed, putting my hands over my now burning face. *I am blushing excessive amounts lately. This has to be a medical condition. No human being blushes this often.* "She knows that I like her, but she didn't know about that."

"You've liked me for a while?" Annabeth asked, curiosity dripping from her voice.

I shrugged. "I don't know. For like a few weeks."

"It's been months," Clint tattled.

"Clint!" I shouted. "Why?"

"Why does it matter anyways?" I got up from the bed, guiding Clint not-so-caringly to the door, pushing him outside and shutting the door in his face. "I have a room key!" he shouted through the door.

I resulted to the best option—ignoring the traitor. "Have you really liked me for *months*?"

"Maybe," I shrugged, opening up the computer, hoping to drop the topic and continue with the marathon.

"Since when?" Annabeth persisted.

I sighed, biting my lip. "I don't know."

"Yes you do," she digressed.

"No, I don't," I snapped.

"Percy, you've never been a good liar."

"Sometime around the dinner at Mom's," I mumbled after a few moments. "No big deal." I glanced up at Annabeth, who was currently pursing her lips and looking guilty for whatever reason. I shifted slightly on the arm I was leaning back on, giving her a chaste kiss. "Don't worry about it."

"Are things going to be different now?" she asked suddenly. I sighed sullenly at the laptop screen. All thoughts of simply carrying on with watching Netflix were shoved brutally out a window.

"Yes," I answered honestly. "Things will be easier because we don't have to lie or feel guilty after making out and such." Annabeth was silent after my blatant response, so I looked up to her. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, still smiling. "You said 'making out.'"

"And?"

"You always say *'that'* like it's the plague," Annabeth replied, still grinning.

"Okay," I said with a nod.

"You know," Annabeth started, making me mentally groan. Every time the conversation lulled, she had to talk again. I was uncomfortable. "I feel like I should be freaking out about all of this. About *us*," she clarified. "But I feel oddly okay with it."

"Because we're adorable as fuck and great and cuddly and cute and perfect for each other. Now, can we please watch this show before I slowly start melting into a pile of glitter? Thank you," I responded, all in practically one breath. Annabeth's laughter told me that my response was just what she needed to hear as I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, both of us resuming the positions we'd had before Clint interrupted.

I fell asleep before Annabeth, which wasn't really much of a surprise. When I woke up at a fairly early hour—it had to be somewhere close to eight—due to my arm being in extreme pain, I smiled sleepily. Annabeth had decided to sleep in my bed, which was perfect, but the fact that all of Annabeth's weight was resting on my arm was anything *but* perfect. She wasn't heavy by any means, and I was positive that the majority of the pain was from the awkward angle my arm was twisted at.

I tried to extricate my arm from beneath her with agility and skill, but her eyes fluttered just as I freed it. I sighed, kissing her forehead and pulling her closer so that her head rested on my chest. "Go back to sleep. Sorry."

"S fine," she slurred, her breaths deepening once more within moments. The pain left my arm, which was replaced with the tingle left after one of your limbs falls asleep and starts to get it's feeling back.

After thirty minutes with no luck of being lulled back to sleep, I stared out the gratefully open window from my bed, examining all of the buildings I could see. Waking Annabeth up again was out of the question, but my ADHD left me antsy. *She was usually up by ten, right?*

I looked to the nightstand for my phone, but I would have to reach over Annabeth. In addition, my phone was nowhere to be seen; I must have left it in the bathroom after my shower. I knew that Annabeth kept her phone in her back pocket, though, and we were both currently sleeping in jeans—only now did I note how uncomfortable that was, who's idea was it to change into jeans anyways?—so I sighed in defeat. If she killed me, she killed me, but I was bored.

Praying that there was in fact a phone in her back pocket, so that she wouldn't think I was groping her, I ghosted my hands over her pockets carefully. My index finger brushed over what was definitely her phone, and I slid it out of her pocket swiftly, my eyes shooting to her face so that I could make sure she didn't wake.

After I was content that Annabeth was completely asleep, I unlocked her phone and played every game she had—three total, one of which was a brainiac game that I didn't stand a chance with. Light shone brightly through the windows, giving me enough lighting to take a picture without flash; flash was undoubtedly bright enough to wake her up. I took a picture, grinning as Annabeth slept on my chest, and instantly uploaded it on Twitter.

Looking through the replies busied me for a good twenty minutes before I reached the point of absolute boredom once more. Luckily, I didn't experience the sensation of thinking it would be more fun to watch paint dry for long. Annabeth shifted against my chest, barely, and I took this as a good sign.

From that day onward, if anyone ever asked me what my favorite thing in the world was, I would answer 'watching Annabeth wake up in the morning.' She always shuffled around for a few seconds with a slight scowl on her face as though she were trying to cling to sleep like a small child clings to its blanket. However, after a few moments, she sighs, blinks a few times, and then finally wakes up. She's all clear grey eyes bleary with sleep and pursed lips as she blinks.

She jumped when she glanced up to see that my eyes were alert. "Jesus, did you sleep at all?"

I shrugged. "Woke up around eight."

"Sorry," Annabeth mumbled. I smiled at her tired voice.

"Not your fault," I said, chipper, and glad for some human interaction. Being so bored had given me a newfound appreciation for people. Annabeth open-palmedly pushed my face away, telling me to shut up. I grinned at her, tugging a curl. "Annie."

"Don't call me Annie," Annabeth grumbled. "I will murder you."

"Someone's violent when sleepy," I teased, elbowing her. "Wake up."

"No," she refused, turning her back to me. I ran my hands across the planes of her back, tracing the lettering on the back of her shirt and hoping to coax her to life. "Stop." Annabeth shoved my hands away, and I sighed before leaning over her and getting the hotel phone.

I ordered room service, with enough breakfast for an army and excessive amounts of tea. Annabeth woke up sometime around when I requested several stacks of pancakes. She turned back to me, resting her cheek on my abdomen and staring up at me with wide eyes as I continued to order too much food. I smiled at her, waving. She rolled her eyes.

After I was done requesting food, I removed myself from my bed, and Annabeth almost fell face first onto the bed. Luckily, my hand was there. "I'll never let your head hit the bed, without my hand behind it," I sang, not missing her fond smile in the slightest.

"*Your Body Is A Wonderland*, John Mayer," Annabeth noted. "And you're never going to eat all of that food you ordered," was her muffled comment.

"I know, babe," I told her. "You're helping."

One much-too-big breakfast and two cups of tea later, Annabeth and I were brainstorming things to do today. I'd chosen the beach previously, so I suggested that Annabeth chose today.

Bad idea.

She wanted to plan out a whole itinerary, but I forced her to narrow it down. We'd visit some random museum and a historical site in the town. It wouldn't be all that interesting to me, but it was what she wanted, so I agreed.

The museum nearly bored me to tears, but Annabeth was talking so excitedly about everything that I could mostly focus on the way her eyes were alight rather than what she was actually saying. At some point, I kissed her in the middle of what she had been debating (one-sidedly) about, which confirmed to her that I wasn't listening, but the light blush that appeared after made it worth the risk of being admonished.

The historical site tour went in much of the same fashion, Annabeth being extremely pleased and me staring at her and watching every shift of her expression.

And despite the fact that I had about as much interest in history as I did with what my mother's ex-husband's cousin ate for breakfast, it was still nice. Just being with her, and holding her hand, and not feeling like I was living a lie.

And sure, there was things about me that Annabeth didn't know yet—like who my first girlfriend had been, or what my favorite food was as a child—but I felt honest trust for her settle deep in my chest.

These bursts of emotion *had* to be some sort of medical issue. I was starting to think that I was a hypochondriac.

However, as Annabeth turned to me with dimpled smile and crinkled eyes, I knew it was just what she did to me.

"You're a loser," I said fondly, elbowing Percy's side. He'd been attempting a casual aura as he yawned and put his arm over my shoulder. Our fans laughed in response to the interaction, and Percy beamed before kissing my cheek.

"Last question," he announced, turning and staring at the slideshow. "Abigail J. is asking us to describe our relationship in one word." With a twinkle in his eye, Percy set his sights on me. "Help me out here, babe."

"Our relationship in a word," I restated loudly over the screams. "I'd say...bipolar."

"Bipolar," Percy repeated through a laugh. "What's that mean?"

I rolled my eyes. "That half the time, I want to punch you," I told him. He smiled. "And for the other half, I want to kiss you."

The crowd cooed appropriately, and I couldn't stop smiling at Percy's embarrassed look. He always acted like this, lately. Any time we talked about our relationship in public, he was degraded into a blushing, bashful mess. Everyone—myself included—thought it was utterly adorable. "Sometimes you do both," Percy answered, slowly gravitating towards me as though he didn't notice that he was.

"Sometimes I do," I agreed, punching his arm. He pretended that he had been shot, and I kissed his cheek before skipping offstage and retrieving Percy's guitar. "There's going to be a bit of a change up," I proclaimed, adjusting the shoulder strap to fit me. "I'm probably not supposed to change the set," I admitted over the response. "But I'm doing it anyways."

Percy smiled at me, a twinkle in his eye that I didn't think I'd ever get used to. "You rebel," he chided lightly. "Planning on serenading me, Chase?" He took his tuxedo jacket off, leaving his classic black suspenders over a white button-up and a bowtie revealed.

I walked by him swiftly as he threw the jacket over the back of the couch. "Yes, actually," I whispered in his ear, snapping one of his suspenders. Percy jumped and scowled at me.

I gave him one of my sickeningly sweet smiles and started playing the opening chords to a song I knew he loved. I'd woken up to him singing it loudly, lying flat on the floor, no less. He'd stopped just as I stumbled into the room, but the song hadn't left my mind since.

Ever since I was thirteen, I'd loved the band Lifehouse. The lyrics, the beats, the vocals—everything. Since Percy belted *All In* that morning, it'd edged its way up on my list of favorite songs. I moved to sit on my bar stool, keeping a steady rhythm with the chords. I glanced at Percy, and by the way he was already blushing profusely, he recognized the song. "Sing along if you know the words!" I announced, nodding to Percy so that he knew he was permitted as well.

I smiled stupidly big throughout my whole performance of the song, getting chills every time Percy's voice joined with mine in the perfect harmony. It ended up sounding better than I thought it would, and the promising yet bashful smile Percy sent me after would be worth any amount of chastising I received later.

We grinned at each other before launching right into 'I Won't Give Up' and the rest of our covers. The ridiculous smile never dropped from Percy's face, which meant that I never stopped beaming.

After addressing our crowd for a final goodbye, and listening to the goosebump-evoking cheers, the lights blacked out and we both ran backstage. Clint patted us both on the back with a hasty “amazing job” before shoving us into a dressing room.

Percy groaned in frustration as his arm got tangled in his earpiece cord—he obviously *hadn't* had the foresight to take it out himself—and I helped him out of his mess after rolling my eyes. “You're an idiot.”

“You already said that tonight,” Percy answered, albeit a tad breathlessly. After he was extricated from his tangle of arms, shirt, and cords, he took my face in his hands and kissed me quickly, three times. “You are so perfect,” he muttered in a rush, his words not moving fast enough for his adrenaline-induced energy.

I smiled and shook my head, both of us turning our backs to each other in unison. I pulled a fresh, loose shirt over my head and tugged on my jeans. “What are we doing right now?” I asked.

“No meet-and-greet,” Percy mumbled. “We'll probably have some time with fans before being tossed onto the tour bus.”

“And by time—”

“I mean all of about three seconds,” he clarified. I sighed, having known the answer even before I asked. “Come on.”

I latched onto his arm, and we rushed out of the door just as an assistant brusquely entered—probably to retrieve our clothes. It made me feel a bit guilty; was I so famous now that I didn't even pick up after myself? However, she smiled excitedly and waved as we jogged past.

That had always warmed my heart—people being happy with what they had. Yet, at the same time, I wondered why they didn't push forward for more. “Babe,” Percy said suddenly, shoving me with our intertwined hands. I hummed in response, looking up at him in question. “You okay?”

“Perfect,” I told him honestly. Because things—odd as it was—really were perfect. Scarily perfect. But, a good perfect.

“I know you're perfect,” Percy said sweetly, shooting me a cheesy smile. “But I was asking if you felt okay.”

“I'm fine,” I corrected. I was lightheaded from performing, as always, and I felt like I was walking on air. Percy nodded and put his arm around my shoulder as we pushed open the backstage door.

We were instantly bombarded by camera flashes and ear-piercing screams. Joe moved from his post at the door and followed after us, pushing me along as I hurriedly scribbled my name on every sheet of paper or notebook I could reach.

“You're so lucky!” a girl close to me shouted. I shoved Joe back and gestured for him to wait a moment, *please*, as I addressed the girl. She held out a notebook, already branded with Percy's penmanship.

“What makes you say that?” I asked, signing my name beneath his.

"You have Percy," she said dubiously, looking shocked that I'd noticed her at all. She scrambled to say something else, and I felt Joe's insistent hand on my upper back. "You have Percy," she repeated, seemingly unable to muster any other phrase.

I smiled at the ground for a moment, relishing in the fact that *yeah, I did have Percy*. "I am lucky, aren't I?" The few people who heard my response squealed and giggled, and I signed one more paper before Joe finally managed to push me away from the crowd. I waved at them and smiled before catching Percy's hand. He nodded at Joe, who returned the nod before returning to the crowd to assist other guards in restraining them.

"What was that all about?" Percy questioned, after collapsing on the couch in the lounge of the tour bus. I waited for the usual roar of the engine, but it didn't reach my ears. Ignoring Percy, I frowned slightly.

"Hasn't the tour bus already started by now?" I looked out the one-sided windows and scowled. Just as I was about to ask the driver, the door to the bus was flung open. Clint, quite literally, fell inside. He remained on the floor, heaving and looking very exhausted. "You okay there?" I asked, moving to help him up.

He accepted the hand I offered, and then calmly sat on the couch next to Percy. "Christ," he muttered, throwing the back of his hand across his face. "I've developed a fanbase, I think."

"It was bound to happen, baby," Percy teased, kicking his leg. "You're a dashing young lad."

"Shut up," Clint groaned. He lifted up his shirt and revealed a small scratch. It was barely anything, compared to the nails Percy's encountered, but Clint's eyes widened. "Oh my god."

"That's nothing," Percy boasted, lifting his shirt and displaying a brutal mark. "A girl literally punched me while trying to hand me a pen."

"Perceivers gone wild," I muttered. Percy grinned at me, at the mention of the tag for his fans. We'd made it up together, saving them from the previous branding of simply a 'Percy fan.' He'd soon quipped that my fans were to be called 'Chasers,' which I had found annoying at the time, but I'd warmed up to it.

"I'm sure there were a few Chasers as well," Percy challenged. "My girls would never be so harsh with their nails. That's your bit."

"Meaning?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Percy gave me a sarcastic look. "Shall I show Clint the scratch marks I *still* have from the last show?" He addressed Clint with a cautious look. "Be careful with this one. She nearly scratched my back to pieces, after *attacking* me in the dressing room—"

"I just kissed you!" I argued.

Percy gave me a dry look. "Obviously. But it was...brutal."

"You liked it," I replied indignantly. He pulled my arm and sat me on the couch, tossing one of his legs over both of mine.

"Duh," he snorted. I smiled and he looked at me for a beat longer before setting his sights on Clint. In all of the havoc, I hadn't even noticed that the bus had started moving. "Why are you on the Percabeth-only tour bus, Clinton?"

"You know how to make a person feel welcome," Clint grumbled. "And don't call me that. I'm on this bus because I was allegedly kicked *off* of mine."

"On what grounds?" I inquired, trying not to smile when Percy tugged on one of my curls.

"I don't know," Clint answered with a shrug. "I was just told to ride with you guys." I finally smiled as Percy took one of my hands hostage and held it tightly. Clint groaned. "I can see that my gag reflex will be acting up *spectacularly*."

"Because we're so cute?" Percy questioned, kissing my hand lightly and giving my knuckles an Eskimo kiss.

Clint looked spiteful as he frowned. "Gross. God, yes. You guys are sickening."

I laughed, leaning back on Percy. "What was what all about?" I said, reviving Percy's question from earlier.

"The song change thing," he answered after a moment. "I mean—yeah—it was great, but, like, why?"

"You're so *graceful* with words," I joked, elbowing him. "And I don't know. It was stuck in my head and seemed relevant."

"Oh," Percy said softly. "Okay." He seemed to understand what I was trying to say: *I really like you and I meant every word*.

"Ew," Clint coughed. He turned on the television not a moment later, and I buried my face in Percy's chest, deciding that a revitalizing nap didn't sound bad at all.

Waking up had never been one of my favorite things. However, after I was awake, it was nearly impossible for me to drift back into dreamland. It made waking up a quick and painless process; while others moped, I jumped right into the morning and got started.

Waking up with Percy, however, was a completely different subject. If Percy was asleep, he latched onto the closest thing—whether it be an inanimate pillow or a human being—and held it close to him. If he wasn't awake too, you were more or less trapped in his arms until he lifted himself to consciousness.

That was my position at the moment, enveloped in arms that become a bit more like home every day. My face was pressed against his chest, just as it had been when I'd fallen asleep, and I sighed—partially in content, but somewhat in amazement.

Being *with* Percy—fully and completely and truly—was quite different. I could kiss him anytime, and let him kiss me without feeling like a fraud for breaching contract. I could give him the fond smiles that I used to bite back, and I could relish in the feeling that arose when he grinned at me. I could accept his caring looks as something palpable and true, rather than assuming everything was conjured up for the benefit of pressuring eyes.

In the same way, being in a legitimate relationship with Percy was also quite like before. We still held hands in public—maybe less now, after realizing how overboard often we did previously—and kissed

on occasion. We still flirted in public, though it's not as hard to do, since it's natural. We relentlessly argue, but rather than ending with a hurtful look and a slammed door, they are typically extinguished by a firm punch to the shoulder and a begrudging apology.

I considered the day in Starbucks, after our big fallout. I remember Percy saying "we're better this way." I couldn't agree more. This version of us—out of the many there were—was probably the best. Affectionate smiles and even more affectionate touches were routine, but now, they *meant* something. It's easy to see, in the deep green of Percy's eyes, that it's not just something to get tossed into the tabloids. It's real.

And maybe it's that saccharine, sickening, overly-sentimental kind of real, but isn't that always how it is when you start falling in love? Surely, there're days where you want nothing more than to forget about the forsaken person consuming all of your thoughts, but if everyone bothered to go a bit deeper, they'd see that it's all out of love.

Thinking about love, and the fact that the gorgeous guy asleep before me does actually *love* me, is such a transition. I'd gone from almost believing that love only existed in fairy tales, to getting my very own firsthand experience.

And I knew it wouldn't be easy. I knew there were a million things that could—and probably would, at some point—go wrong, but that's the thing about love. You act stupid, reckless, and oftentimes on impulse, but you find that you don't really care.

My thoughts were almost Lifetime-movie worthy as I waited for Percy to wake up. And when he finally did, they got that much worse.

"Morning," he mumbled, though it sounded more like gibberish. I removed my head from where it was tucked underneath his chin and he pressed his palms into his eyes.

"How'd you know I was awake?"

"You weren't sleep-breathing," Percy slurred. I laughed lightly. "Like, all deep and everything."

"Coffee?" I suggested.

"You're the best," was Percy's almost incoherent reply. I disentangled myself from him, trying not to feel guilty when he whined childishly about how he took it back, and how it was too cold.

I formulated his coffee to perfection, in the way I guess that only *I* really knew how to do, since Percy claimed that he would no longer entrust anyone with the *very* important task of making his coffee. When I turned back around from the small kitchenette in the lounge, Percy was leaning back on his elbows and glancing around as though he truly had no clue where he was. I snorted in laughter at how honestly confused he looked, supplying him with coffee fresh from the pot.

"Thanks," Percy said, in an almost curious manner. "Did we sleep here?"

"Did you suffer memory loss?" I teased. He narrowed his eyes at me. "Yes," I answered, returning to counter to make my own cup of coffee.

"Oh," he said softly. "Where's Clint?"

"Probably in one of our beds," I replied. "Why didn't you wake me up? We could have actually *slept* in our beds, you know."

Percy scowled at me. "Beds," he repeated. "As in, separate. How about no."

I smiled, my back still turned to him, and washed the lovesick expression from my face before joining him on the couch once more. "How'd you sleep?"

"My dream was *so* weird," Percy informed me. "Like, the weirdest dream I've ever had. I was holding hands with you, of course, but then when I looked at you, your face was Clint? But, I thought it was you?"

"Must just be your crush on Clint," I reassured him flippantly, clicking through channels on the television.

Percy kicked my leg, and I considered the pros and cons of pushing him off the couch. Deciding that it was much too early (and I didn't want a good cup of coffee to be wasted), I sighed and looked back to the show I'd decided on.

Ten minutes later, Clint entered the room freshly showered and sanding his hands together. "You guys ready?"

"For what?" we replied simultaneously.

"Interviews," Clint announced happily.

Percy groaned and I smiled. "Yay," I said excitedly.

"No," Percy huffed.

"Only two of them today," Clint assured, nodding to our room. "Get on with it, then. Clothes, showers, brush your teeth, et cetera."

"Me first!" I shouted, sprinting to the bathroom and locking the door before Percy had a chance to argue.

That's another thing about love, I thought off-handedly, the little things start mattering less, and other little things start mattering more.

Little things like the way Percy sighs when his coffee's perfect, or the way he absolutely *cannot* go a day without pulling on one of my curls. How he unconsciously bites his nails at the climax of a movie, even if it's one he's not interested in at all.

So, *maybe*, I loved him a little. Or a lot. Or something.

"Something sparkling happened at your most recent concert, I hear," the woman—who had to be in her mid-twenties, if not younger—enthused. "Fans say that Annabeth here sang Percy a song, hm?"

"Kind of," I allowed. "But, to be fair, both Percy *and* the fans helped me."

"Any particular reason for that song choice?"

"Not really," I lied. I rested a hand on Percy's wrist, slipping my finger underneath his gray bracelet monogrammed with my name. "Nothing in particular."

Percy smiled.

“Two hours until go time,” Clint alerted us, swinging his head inside our hotel room. “Joe will escort you to the van.”

Percy and I nodded dutifully, and I dropped my head back on the mattress. “Tired,” I mumbled. Our last interview had been interactive, making us have a dance-off and a very poorly constructed rap battle of sorts (which really just turned into a contest of who could bring up something more embarrassing). Percy hummed in agreement and fiddled with his phone, which I promptly stole from him.

I tried the typical password, but it didn't work. “I-I-I-I,” Percy shared, nodding.

“You might as well not have a password at all,” I said with a snort. “Way to pick one of the most common PIN numbers in history.”

Percy didn't seem bothered. “Take it off for me,” he offered. “Because I *trust* you.”

Lately, since I'd asked him not to say the L-word until I could say it back, Percy had resulted to telling me that I had his trust. It meant a lot, really, but knew that all the random times he said it was simply a poor replacement for a 'I love you.' “Only if you want me to,” I answered, glancing up at him for affirmation. He leaned over and kissed my nose.

“Do whatever you want on my phone,” Percy permitted, smiling at the ceiling. “I trust you.”

I took the password off, glad to be rid of the inconvenient time-waster, despite the fact that it wasn't my phone. I'd planned on playing a game, or writing some offensive note we'd both smile about later, but I ended up dropping it to my stomach. “Don't you think this is all going a bit—?”

“Too well?” Percy finished.

“Right,” I agreed.

He turned, looking at me with this weird expression. “No,” he said firmly. “Because before this, things weren't good for a long time. We deserve some perfect.”

And with his hair falling in his eyes just a little bit, one hand holding mine, and a small smile twisting on his lips, I couldn't agree more.

I knew that the euphoric, lovestruck state wouldn't last forever, but *now*, at three in the morning, was really *not* the time to start a fight.

“She doesn't deserve him.”

“Duh. Watch. She'll stay with him until she's famous enough to make it on her own.”

“What's so great about her anyways? You're *way* prettier.”

“And she's so rude! I'll bet even the *worst* celebrities are nicer.”

“She doesn't care about her fans *at all*!”

"I know! She never replies to tweets! And she never says thank you!"

"Like she has anything to be thankful for. Her voice is totally fake."

"Autotuned."

"Right? And she wears *so* much make-up. Percy's always said that he likes *natural* beauty. She's *fake*."

Apparently, Percy Jackson didn't get the memo.

"*Jesus Christ*," Percy muttered. His hand tightened in mine. "Are you *kidding* me?"

"Don't worry about it," I told him. "What a few fans say about me isn't anything."

Percy shook his head, snatching my laptop out of my lap. He replied to the tweet with a kind '*keep your opinions to yourself*.'" They tweeted me the link. They knew I would have access to it. That's outright rude."

"Reasons Why We Hate Annabeth Chase," I shrugged. "It's a stupid video. It really doesn't matter."

"I'm reporting them," Percy decided, scrolling back up to the offending tweet. I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. There was no reason for all of this trouble. It was honestly just a few girls who had nothing better to do. I took my laptop back and logged him out before he could make any rash decisions. "Annabeth!"

"It doesn't matter, Percy," I dismissed. "Really."

"It matters to me," Percy argued, reaching out to take the computer. I pushed it out of his reach. He scowled at me. "You know, as hard-shelled and stubborn as you are, I know this bothers you."

I rolled my eyes. "It doesn't," I reassured him. "It's just three girls who were bored and decided to make a video for attention."

"But they had no right to tweet it to me," Percy deadpanned. "That's rude, and you know it."

"Maybe," I answered with a shrug. "They're just trying to convince themselves that they're better for you than I am."

"They're not!" Percy exclaimed.

"I know," I replied, my patience wearing thin.

"If you know, then why can't I report them, or something? Don't you care about yourself at all?"

That's what did it. The impossible-to-reach spot between my shoulder blades began to itch, and I knew that I was angry. That was my tell.

"I do care about myself," I answered, rolling my eyes. I shut the laptop and glared at him. "Seriously? Why do you think I'm *not* letting you report that?" Percy opened his mouth to reply, but I spoke before him. "I don't need some *boyfriend* to fight my battles for me."

"Why'd you say it like that?" Percy asked, sounding highly-offended. "*Some boyfriend*? Is that all I am to you?"

"No, you idiot—"

"Call me names," Percy interjected. "That'll make all the difference."

"I'm not trying to make a difference!" I snapped. "I'm trying to explain to you that *I don't need your help!*"

"You never need my help!" Percy yelled. "All I want to do is help! You won't let me!"

"I can take care of myself," I said, dangerously even.

"You can't though," Percy replied, shaking his head. "Everyone needs some—"

"Shut up!" I shouted. "No, I don't! I've never needed anyone, in case you haven't noticed. I raised myself, Jackson, and I sure as hell don't need you starting a fight and telling me how to live my life."

"I'm not telling you what to do!"

"Then why are we arguing?" I said, venom nearly dripping off my words. "We *always* argue."

"Everyone does," Percy answered, his eyes growing wide for whatever reason. "Everyone fights."

"Not like this! Not this often! Percy—we just—we don't *work!*"

"No," Percy disagreed, standing. "You won't let us work." He raised a hand to my face, and I flinched—not away from his touch, but from the fear that he'd hit me. "*You think I'd hit you?*" Percy asked, scarily soft. "Jesus, Annabeth," he buried a hand in my hair and tried to hug me, but I resisted. "Annabeth," Percy repeated.

"I just—can you not stand so close to me?" He dropped his hands dramatically and took three steps back. He steadied himself on the counter and I grabbed the arm of the couch as we went around a bend.

"Why?" Percy questioned quietly. "Scared I'll hit you?" I was shocked to see his eyes shining, but in a horrible sad way that said he was two steps away from tears. "God, Annabeth. You should know me by now. I wouldn't ever—just the thought—"

"You scare me when you're angry," I told him evenly. "I...you get this *look*—"

"What look?"

"If you'd let me finish," I said, grinding my teeth. Percy sighed in defeat. "You look determined," I shared, after a few moments. "Like you'd do anything to get your way."

"But—*hit* you?" Percy inquired, astonished. "Annabeth, I *love* you—"

"Don't," I said softly.

"S a bit late for that," Percy muttered.

"No," I clarified. "I meant, don't bring that into this."

He gave me a look, a cross between painfully betrayed and hopelessly confused. "Why?" Percy laughed, half in disbelief. "How long is it going to take you to love me back, Annabeth?"

His voice broke slightly on my name, and I winced. "I do," I told him, honestly. "I have for a while. You know that I *can't* say it."

"The whole trust issues business," Percy said bitterly. "Is that really the only argument you have?"

"Do I need another one?" I questioned, annoyed. "Seriously, Percy. You *know* me. I can't; it's difficult."

"Things are supposed to get easier when you're in love! Everything's supposed to be happy, and bright, and *better!*" Percy ranted. "Why aren't we like that?"

"We aren't conventional," I defended. "We've never been conventional."

"*Why not?*" Percy managed. "Why not? Why can't we just be normal?"

I shook my head, laughing without a tinge of humor. "We're famous. And our relationship started under false pretenses. And we'll always be scrutinized. And we don't have a lot in common. And we fight. And—"

"Didn't need a book, babe," Percy said with a sad smile. I noticed that the heat behind his eyes had vanished, leaving behind devastatingly green, yet blue, orbs that radiated resignation. "I'm...sorry?"

"That's typically what you say after a fight," I teased, hoping to dissolve the last bit of tension. It worked—thankfully—and Percy approached me slowly.

"I'd *never* hit you," he told me. I hated myself for the disappointment in his eyes. "I really thought you knew that."

"I do," I admitted. "But..." I shrugged.

"Annabeth," Percy entreated cautiously. "Your mom didn't ever..."

I shook my head. "No, not really."

"Not...really?" Percy repeated softly, tucking my hair behind my ear and holding me steady when the bus turned.

I waved it off. "It was hardly anything."

"Annabeth," Percy deadpanned. "Did your mom ever hit you? Like more often than parents should? Without justification?"

I rolled my eyes. "No."

"You lied," Percy informed me. I scowled. "It gets harder to lie when two people know each other as well as we know each other."

"I'm not lying," I defended. "Seriously. I think the worst I ever got was this bruise on my side—"

"Why?" Percy demanded. I felt my eyes sting. Digging far back into my past wasn't one of my hobbies. Percy pulled me closer and I tried to hide away in the crook of his neck.

"Can't remember," I mumbled, answering with nothing but truth. "Probably drunk."

"Jesus," Percy breathed, trying to pull me even closer despite the shocking lack of space between us already. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I—it was normal," I whispered. "A lot of kids get physical punishment."

Percy shook his head, backing us up until we fell on the couch. "Not things like that."

I scowled. "It's nothing," I repeated. Percy didn't look especially convinced. "Don't you think I have enough weaknesses already? I don't need to inform anyone about the rest of them."

"It's okay to have weaknesses, Annabeth," Percy answered. He shuffled until he was leaning over me. "They're what help you become strong."

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "It's 4 AM, Perce. Your Dr. Phil is showing."

He grinned, pushing my hair out of my face. "You're prettier than that girl, you know."

I winced, laughing. "You're horrible. Ugh. I feel like you make everything so *sugary*."

"Cause I'm so sweet," Percy teased, leaning down and kissing me gently. "I like how our fights end." I scoffed and shoved him, but he didn't budge. He smiled and kissed me again, deeper, and I used that to my advantage, pushing him away to fall flat on his back next to the couch. Percy sighed in defeat. "*Baby, you should let me love you*," he started. After I laughed and leaned over the side of the couch, he winked. "*Let me be the one to give you everything you want and need*." I shook my head, scrunching up my nose. He was disgustingly adorable. "You should appreciate the Ne-Yo," Percy informed me. "He's classic."

"Classic is *The Beatles*," I digressed. "Or *Journey*, maybe. Not *Ne-Yo*."

"Name three songs by *The Beatles*," Percy ordered.

"All You Need Is Love,'" I listed, "'Hey Jude,' and 'We Can Work It Out.'"

"So, you're better than the average person," Percy admitted begrudgingly. "A lot of people only know one song. Fine. You win."

I grinned, making him move so that I could lie down next to him. "Sorry, about earlier."

Percy shrugged. "It *is* your choice, I guess. I can't protect someone who doesn't want to be protected."

"It's not that," I disagreed, elbowing him. "I like when you're protective. Jealous Percy was a hit—not only with the fans, but with me." I smiled and laughed when he scowled. "Did you like me then?"

"Nah," Percy said, shaking his head. Then he licked his lips. "I mean, I guess that was around the time I started getting some...*conflicting* feelings."

"The first kiss at the pier," I brought up. "The second time you kissed me—"

"That was for me," Percy admitted with a laugh. "I didn't feel *anything* when we kissed. It was so weird. I wanted to make I wasn't delusional, or something."

"You didn't feel anything?" I questioned, my chest feeling oddly hollow at the thought. "What do you mean?"

"I guess," Percy said, after a moment's deliberation, "the kiss meant nothing. It wasn't real. So, I felt nothing."

"I see," I mumbled. There were a few beats of silence I felt how tired I truly was—bone deep. "Percy, it's late."

"Let's sleep," Percy answered almost instantly, as though he was thinking the same thing. He stood and started to head for the bedroom, and I followed after him. Rolling my eyes after seeing the way he'd already laid down in my bed, I tied my hair up and grabbed a second blanket before joining him.

"No more fighting at three AM," I ordered. "Seriously."

"Mhm," Percy hummed, pulling me closer. "Yeah, whatever."

"I mean it," I told him soberly.

"No you don't," Percy sighed. He laughed, flicking my ear. "We'll probably fight again tomorrow. At 8 AM, 9 AM, 10 AM, etc. So, get over it. And shut *up*, Chase, I'm tired."

Time had always been a weird concept for me. An hour could pass in what felt like seconds, and seconds could pass in what felt like hours. It could be June, and you'd swear up and down that it was January just yesterday. Time has a way of playing tricks on you—either passing devastatingly slow or outrageously fast. Hardly ever can you get time to slow down to the pace you want; a good medium between the two extremes.

Time is a lot like looking out the window on one side of the car, and seeing trees fly past. However, if you look out the opposite window, the trees pass slowly, and you feel like you aren't moving at all.

Looking out the windows now—seeing nothing but buildings—was a bit disconcerting. I missed the beaches of Florida, or the quaint feeling of Northern Georgia. And now, on the last leg of our tour, we were hitting Salem and Portland of Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and a final show in Los Angeles. Percy's philosophy was to finish where he started, because it really put in perspective how far you've gone. I'm almost positive that he made that bit up in one of his late-night philosophical ponderings.

"Showtime in an hour," Percy informed me, just as the bus rolled to a stop. "Clint just texted me. Apparently this is a free-hour of sorts. Coffee?"

"Always," I replied instantly. He tapped out a response to Clint and pulled me up from the couch, where I was dreamily staring out the window. "Remember how we thought that we weren't going to have much 'us' time?"

"I do," Percy answered, laughing. "I'm pretty sure 'us' time is the only kind of time that we have."

I shook my head as we stepped off the bus. "That's not how it was, initially." Percy took my hand and nodded his thanks to the driver, who leaned his seat back as though he planned on napping. "But now that best friends and best friends in love is more one and the same..." I trailed off with a shrug. "Any time that would have been best friends in love is just more 'us' time."

"Exactly," Percy nodded. "Wouldn't have it any other way, sweetums." He winked at me and unexpectedly twirled me in a circle. "We've never danced together, Chase," Percy said in realization. "Why haven't we?"

“Couldn't bear to be that close to your ugly mug,” I tease, making a face at him. “Now, come on. I'll die if I don't get my chai tea in approximately ten minutes.”

“Punctilious, you are,” Percy said, grinning proudly. “That was a good word,” he stressed, nudging my side. “Pay attention to how smart I am. Think that intellectual guys are sexy.”

I snorted in laughter and shoved him off. “You are the furthest thing from intellectual, you dork.” Percy pouted falsely and laid his arm around my shoulder. “But, that was a good vocabulary word,” I admitted.

Percy grinned winningly, patting himself on the back. “I am a king.”

“King of being a loser.”

“Shut *up*, Chase! You can't be the smart one all the time! Let me have my moment!”

“Maybe I should,” I countered. “This will be your *only* moment.”

“Your faith in me is truly astounding,” Percy deadpanned. “I'm so happy that you support me.” I smiled at him amiably. He scowled at me. “Don't do that. Don't look at me like that.”

“Why, Percy?” I asked innocently. “Falling for my *devilishly* charming smile? My daddy will have to hear about this!” Halfway through my words, I developed a Southern belle accent.

“He won't have to know!” Percy said, catching onto my acting easily. “Run away with me, love.”

“What ever would my parents think? Poor ol' Daddy needs help on the farm,” I answered sullenly, sweet tinge to my words evident.

“I'll buy him a million servants so as long as I can have you, my dear,” Percy responded softly, dropping a kiss on my cheek. He laughed afterwards, and my chuckles melted into laughter as well. “We're positively ridiculous.”

“Why'd we do that?” I asked. “How did that even start?”

“Gotta keep my lovely lady on her toes. I'd hate to lose a beauty like you because you got bored,” Percy replied, grinning. He glanced forward, grabbing my hand and dragging me along behind him. We entered the hole-in-the-wall coffee shop and sat at a table in the corner. Two girls spared us small, hesitant looks before Percy finally waved them over with a grin.

They were preteens, if that—definitely two of our younger fans—but I treated them as if they were any other fan. No need to belittle them for being youthful. Percy retrieved his phone from his pocket and I took a picture of the three of them before they bombarded me for a second one. He promised the two little girls that he'd keep the images forever—by request—and even asked them to tell their mom to look for them on the internet. He had to repeat the word “Twitter” to them three times before they could say it without a lisp. Percy gave them both tight hugs and told them one of his famously horrible jokes which left them giggling all the way back to their mother. Percy smiled after them, and sighed. “I love kids.”

I snorted. “Pedophile,” I sing-songed.

He shot me a glare, shaking his head. “No, I mean that I really *love* kids. They're so innocent and adorable and everything I wasn't at that age. It's refreshing.”

"You want kids then?" I mentioned casually, not sure if this was breaching some sort of silent agreement to *not* talk about the future.

Percy didn't seem to mind at all as he shrugged. "I mean, I love kids, but the thought of raising one of my own is a bit scary," Percy confided. "Babies—those I'm not so good with. But once their seven and up, I'm good to go." He pasted a lopsided smile on his face. "Look at you, Annabeth. You're rubbing off on me. I *never* think about the future."

"And you're rubbing off on me; I think my brain cells are disappearing slowly," I retorted. Percy laughed joyously at my comment, shaking his head. He stared at me for a few seconds, before looking away. "It's weird," I entreated after a few moments. "It's almost over. This whole tour."

Percy leaned his head back, looking out to the darkening sky. "Yeah," he agreed. "But in a way, it seems like it's been forever."

"I feel like it passed in a heartbeat," I disagreed. "I feel like I've only performed three times and it's only been a week."

"That's how my first tour was," Percy sympathized. "I swear, it only felt like a week, but before I knew it, four months had passed and I was back home."

"We should visit your mom," I mentioned, the word 'home' sparking my memory. "We were tense last time we visited." I shot him a pointed look, reminding him that it was, in fact, all his fault.

"And we'll go back to the fireflies," Percy listed. "And our Starbucks."

"I'll give Harry a call," I joked. "I'll make sure he's working the day we visit!"

"Shut up!" Percy said with a sickeningly sweet smile. "That guy is an abominable douche."

"Because he looks at me," I said flatly. "That makes perfect sense."

"He looks at you like you are a mouse and he is an eagle," Percy countered. "And as your protective best friend-slash-boyfriend, I don't appreciate it."

My phone vibrated from its place in my pocket, and I sighed, knowing it was Clint. "Come on, Perce. Time to go."

He nodded, stretching his limbs to their extremities and tossing our empty drinks in the trash can. I met him at the door, and he slipped an arm over my shoulder as we made our way back to the tour bus—where we'd have to wake up our chauffeur and drive another ten minutes to the arena.

Time is an unfathomable concept, I decided, deep in thought just as the lights waned in a fast moment. Just yesterday, I was nodding my head along to Percy J's newest album in my room. Just yesterday, I was running around the playground with my friends. Just yesterday, I was getting the call that said I had talent; and that this was it. Just yesterday, I met Percy Jackson.

But these were all months upon years ago, as much as I couldn't believe it.

And when Percy kissed me quickly—his new ritual before I performed—and shoved me on the stage, I nearly drowned in how surreal my life was. I was on tour with the biggest pop star in the country, and this was my big break. This was my time to be amazed, completely in awe of everything around me.

I stared out with sparkling eyes at the crowd, wishing desperately that I could meet every individual and give my thanks. I took my time as they gave a cacophonous response, reading every poster, smiling at every corner of the arena. With a slightly crazy laugh to myself, I stepped up to my microphone stand, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear. “How are you doing tonight, Salem?”

I closed my eyes and got chills from the emphatic screaming. The opening beats to my first song on the set list started to play, and I lost myself in being Annabeth Chase, The Young and The Famous.

The ride to Portland took right around an hour, so we decided to make the trip tonight, rather than at an absurd hour the next morning. We were scheduled for three interviews in Portland, and one at a city just outside of it, so our day would be pretty packed until concert time. Percy looked absolutely exhausted as he melted into the couch and threw his arm over his face. I empathized, feeling utterly enervated myself.

I made him tea, since we were fresh out of coffee, and leaned up against the couch after handing it to him. “You’re an *angel*,” he told me, squeezing my shoulder in an oddly domestic action. I smiled wearily at him as I sipped my tea.

“That was a very tiring concert,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

“We were quite energized,” Percy assented. “Must have been the Red Bulls.”

“They aren’t lying when they say that you crash afterwards.” Percy gave an indecipherable grunt in response and absently ran his fingers through my hair. I winced at how knotted it was, but Percy either didn’t notice or didn’t care. We sat in a companionable silence for most of the ride to Portland—with the occasional “did you see that...” or “remember when...”—and I’d nearly fallen asleep by the time Clint knocked on the tour bus door and had Joe usher us into the hotel we’d be staying at for the next day.

After our Portland concert, we’d set off for Seattle—essentially our final show of the tour, save the repeat in Los Angeles.

Five months, was a mantra in my head, simply because it hardly felt like I’d been on tour for half of a year. It hardly felt like I’d been *famous* for half a year.

I remember growing up, and watching the reality shows with singers, and thinking *that’ll be me one day*. I never knew that I would skip that whole bit and be thrown right into the epicenter of the tornado of fame. And I certainly didn’t know that Percy would be one of those things I’d get thrown into it with—under false pretenses, of course.

Percy turned to me with sleepy eyes that still managed to be sparkly and charming as he pushed the door to our hotel room open. “I’m really glad that I met you,” he said simply.

Not *I’m glad that you’re my girlfriend* or *I’m glad that we’re best friends*; just *I’m happy we met*.

It was enough to help me fall asleep with a smile.

Bright lights. Blinding stage lights with deafening screams overpowering all of my senses. Adrenaline. Annabeth.

That was the only way I could describe our last concert in Los Angeles. The crowd was louder than it'd been on the whole tour, and every single seat was filled. There weren't a few peppered here and there of people who couldn't make it. It was a full house—a very *loud* full house—that made me jumpy and excited. After the concert, Annabeth and I both were literally buzzing. The rush was incredible.

Then, Annabeth almost cried (her first tour *was* over, after all), so then everyone in crew almost cried, and before long, we were all reduced to a tight group hug with watery eyes. Annabeth gripped the back of my shirt tightly, and I had to take a few deep breaths so that I didn't run to the nearest rooftop and shout how much I loved Annabeth Chase. She still hadn't said it back, but I knew she did. And that was enough.

I kissed her hand after we were seated in the van, which was finally taking us home. She intertwined our fingers and stared out the window in an almost calculating way, but I knew better than to interrupt her thoughts. Instead, I kept my lips on our tangled hands, wondering if it was healthy to love someone so much in a way that was nearly painful. I felt my heart falling out of my chest at the simplest gestures—Annabeth tucking her hair behind her ear, Annabeth smiling in a secretive, soft way, Annabeth handing me the coffee she'd formulated. It was the little things that became the best things and the big things that dwindled into something nominal.

We ended up falling asleep on the couch, falling on the closest, remotely bed-like surface we could find. Annabeth fell asleep almost immediately, in the way that only she could, and I buried one of my hands in her perfectly knotted curly hair.

I was glad that at least one of us could sleep.

Adrenaline *did* take longer to leave my body, in my defense, but that wasn't the only reason I could hardly sleep anymore. Sleeping with one eye open wasn't taken lightly around the places I used to roam. When I lived alone, I wanted to be prepared if someone broke my door down and entered. I lived in fear for a while—but not really *fear*, because I wasn't scared. I refused to be surprised. And sleep evaded me.

Then there was Annabeth. And I suddenly had someone to protect. My sleepless nights were now the result of caring too much; not wanting her to be injured. As demented as my past was, I knew that I could handle it. I didn't know if Annabeth could, and I wasn't willing to take that chance.

I'd always been told that I was *too* selfless. I'd willingly give my life for a friend or someone I loved in a heartbeat. It was both a beautiful and destructive quality.

Annabeth shifted slightly, one of her hands falling on top on mine—where it belonged. “Percy, if you don't stop feeling so tense, I'll never get to sleep either,” she grumbled after a few seconds. I started at the sound of her voice, seeing as I'd thoroughly believed she was asleep, and she opened her eyes. “Sleep,” she repeated, tightening her hold on my hand and my heart all in the same motion.

“Alright,” I answered softly. “Sorry.”

"S fine," Annabeth mumbled. "I know you haven't been sleeping well for a while. Just try, okay?"

I was astounded by her observation skills, and also extremely unnerved. Even the things I thought I could hide easily weren't secrets. I kissed her forehead, and she hummed in response.

I closed my eyes and stopped thinking of all the potential danger, all the hypothetical ways Annabeth could be hurt because of me. And, lulled to sleep by the comfort of Annabeth resting with me, I could finally sleep.

"I love you."

A coffee spoon dropped. More importantly, *my* coffee spoon dropped. I whipped around to face the speaker, and saw Annabeth leaning up against the door frame, without a single conflicting emotion playing across her face. Just a small, warm, fond smile.

I had previously been mid-Michael Buble-song, walking around the kitchen and preparing breakfast. I had on my stupid apron and no shirt and sweatpants from last night's concert.

Annabeth laughed at my shock and I blushed deeply, falling to my knees and scouring for the utensil I'd dropped. After I'd finally found the silverware, Annabeth raised an eyebrow at me. I stared at her stupidly, still holding the spoon and still wearing the dumb apron. "Are you not going to say it back? I know I'm late Jackson, but I hope I'm not—"

I shook my head, stumbling over to her with what must have been a manic grin. "No! I mean, um, yes." I took a deep breath to steady my stuttering and bit the inside of my cheek. I was still holding the damn spoon, I realized. "I love you, too."

"Good," Annabeth answered flippantly, placing her hands on my shoulders as she leaned up to drop a kiss on my lips. "What's for breakfast?"

So, maybe it wasn't one of my most eloquent moments, but I didn't stop smiling all morning.

We had an off day—tomorrow would be jammed pack with interviews focusing on the tour and a meeting with management—to do whatever we would like, as long as it wasn't destructive. After breakfast, two Disney movies and a few minutes spent scrolling through Twitter, we decided on going to our Starbucks. Annabeth had fondly ruffled my hair at the suggestion before skipping down the hall to get ready.

I showered, dressing in a t-shirt I'd received for participating in a charity, and laced up my Converse, meeting Annabeth at the door. She picked a loose string off of my shirt, patted my shoulder twice, and promptly filched the keys from my possession. I pouted. "Babe, I missed my babe."

Annabeth snorted at my confession. "You can drive home."

"S not the same!" I complained. "Driving there is better."

"You won't drive at all if you keep that up, Jackson," Annabeth assured me, helping herself into my Land Rover. She grinned at me. "Besides, I thought guys liked girls who took initiative?"

"They do," I answered. "On occasion. A girl who dominates all the time belittles us."

"Cute," Annabeth commented, pinching my cheek. "Look at that shining vocabulary!"

"I must have gotten it from hanging out with this *pretentious* lady I've been spending too much time with," I deadpanned.

Annabeth grinned. "How *is* your grandmother?"

I groaned, wondering how bad it would hurt if I tucked and rolled out of the car door. "Shut up," I stated simply.

Annabeth shook her head, biting back a smile and turned on the radio. It was one of my songs, and she exaggeratedly changed the station, grumbling and muttering about how much she hated that song. I laughed at her horribly slow, annoyed, adult voice. "I'll always be better at accents."

"I'll always be better than you in every other way," Annabeth said snootily. "You can't out-do me, Jackson."

"I could!" I argued. "I'm a better cook!"

"Says the boy who burned toast this morning," Annabeth replied drily, turning right. "*Burned toast*," she stressed.

"You distracted me," I told her. "Dropped a bomb right on my perfect breakfast."

"I love you," Annabeth said, after a few seconds. My arm slipped from where it was resting against the window and I violently slammed my elbow onto the door. She snorted before laughing loudly.

"Not fair!" I exclaimed. "You can't just win every argument by throwing that out there," I continued, feeling a little breathless. I had a feeling that I'd never get used to her saying that, much like in the way I'd never get used to performing, or being famous at all. She could say it every day for three years, and I'd probably be shocked every time.

"Don't be dramatic, dearest," Annabeth said with copious amounts of humor. "I would have won anyways." She parked in the first spot available and looked at me with amused eyes.

"I hate you," I muttered moodily, not looking away.

"Convincing," Annabeth said, mock-serious. "I believe you." I pushed open my door and met her at the back of the vehicle. She elbowed me and I shoved her back, scowling. "Don't get all grumpy on me now, Jackson," Annabeth teased. "This is our first real coffee-date at *our* Starbucks. You better be good to me."

"Return the favor and I will," I returned, sticking my tongue out. I glanced behind the counter after we entered the coffee shop and waved happily at Harry. He didn't look extremely pleased to see me, but he gave Annabeth a smile that probably would have charmed the pants off of any other girl. Off of any girl who wasn't used to *my* charming smiles.

"Lovely to see you again!" Harry enthused, shoving his hair out of his eyes. "How are you, Annabeth?"

"I'm well," she replied curtly, nodding. Her eyes flickered over the menu, but I knew she already knew her order by heart. She recited her order a few moments later, along with mine, in a practiced way that proved how often we'd been here.

"The usual, then?" Harry asked, cocking his head to the side.

“Yes, please,” Annabeth brusquely answered. He nodded, seemingly paying no attention to her clipped answers and ringing her up at a leisurely pace. I dropped a ten into his palm before Annabeth could even say that her wallet was in the car. She glared at me for all of a second before turning away to hide a smile that I got only a small glimpse off.

I hooked my chin over her shoulder and nudged her cheek until she laughed. I grinned in response, happy with my small success, and accepted the change and receipt from Harry. We moved down the counter, and I waved at a baffled barista working behind the counter. She stuttered when she called out our orders, and we both gave our thanks before settling at our usual table.

“It doesn't feel all that different, for a first *real* coffee-date here,” I mentioned lightly.

“You're always going on about how 'the lines were blurred' and 'we haven't been *just* friends for a while,” Annabeth said, mocking my voice poorly. I made a face and sipped my coffee.

“That's not how I sound,” I accused. “My voice is deeper.”

“Well, I wasn't about to go all Morgan Freeman on you,” Annabeth said, chuckling before she could get the sentence out. I laughed, maneuvering my phone out of my pocket when it vibrated.

“Clint,” I warned, pressing the green button that materialized on my screen. “Hello?”

“Hey,” Clint answered chipperly. “I just emailed you some information about the interviews you guys have for the next few weeks. Did you ever get the folder that I sent you a while ago?”

“The one with all of the stuff?” I asked vaguely.

“Drug deal?” Annabeth questioned. I stuck my tongue out at her.

“Yeah,” Clint answered. “With the tour dates, and the newspaper articles.”

“Do you always keep a scrapbook of things like this?” I asked him. He'd sent me a folder containing scanned versions of all the 'Percabeth' information. Even from the beginning—he'd even kept our older contracts. “I mean, I'm flattered, but—”

“So full of yourself,” Clint muttered. I grinned. “It's called records, Perce. And I sent it to you *and* put it on a flash drive because I refuse to not have a back-up of it. And I'm lucky, too, because I've lost that flash drive and my computer has recently decided to die on me.”

“Always prepared, Clinton,” I praised. “I'm so proud of you.”

“Shut up,” Clint replied pleasantly. “And don't call me that. But forward the file over to me, soon, okay?”

“Will do, sweetcheeks,” I answered, charm dripping off of my voice.

“You,” Clint started, “are horrible. Send me the file.” I laughed as he hung up immediately, scrolling through my list of apps until I found my e-mail.

“What's up?” Annabeth inquired, glancing down at my phone.

“Nothing, really,” I responded, looking up at her with a meaningful look. “He just needs me to send him a file.” Annabeth narrowed her eyes for a second before nodding in realization. I refocused my

attention on my phone, finding the file in my inbox and forwarding it to Clint's e-mail address. "Done," I muttered to myself, shooting Clint a text to tell him that I sent it.

"Why did he need it?" Annabeth asked, sipping her tea. I shrugged, setting my phone down and taking a sip of my coffee—too quickly, I burnt my tongue—and let her know that I would tell her later.

"Ow," I complained, gingerly biting my tongue, as if it would help.

"You do this *every time*," Annabeth said, rolling her eyes. "You think that you would learn from your mistakes."

"Guess I'll have to learn from you," I sassed, rolling my eyes dramatically and pushing my hair out of my face.

She snorted in amusement, shaking her head. "Drama queen."

"King," I corrected, poshly, raising my chin. Annabeth laughed at my show, and I gulped my coffee that I could hardly taste. "You done?"

"No," Annabeth answered, scowling. "I'm drinking mine *slowly*, much unlike the idiot across from me. Hot beverages are meant to be finished gradually, not in a single sip."

"Rules are for squares," I dismissed. Annabeth gave me a dry look. "Which means you're a square."

"I don't know whether I should be offended by that, or astounded by your stupidity," Annabeth stated slowly. I scowled at her, and she stood. "I suppose I will finish this later. I'd hate for you to have to stare at me, a plain old *square*, while I finish my tea." Annabeth shot me an innocent smile, but I knew she was making fun of me.

I stood after her, retrieving my cup and tossing it in the trash can. "You're a unique square. An exotic one."

"Now I'm a stripper," Annabeth responded, exasperatedly.

"No!" I amended. "I mean, you aren't just any old square."

"Percy," Annabeth said carefully and slowly, as though she were speaking to a child. "I think that you should quit while you're ahead."

I pouted and snatched the keys from her hand, stumbling over my own two feet while I rushed to the drivers' side. Annabeth shot me a glare followed by a forlorn sigh, continuing to the passenger seat at her same languid pace.

I was a dead pop star.

Soon to be, anyways. Clint had already called me with three death threats—even the boss of my management company had phoned me with a not-so-pleased attitude. And Annabeth—she was lying on the couch, ignoring my existence, and scrolling through Twitter with the deepest scowl I'd ever seen.

This whole thing—the fabricated relationship, the fake-dates, the affection, the people involved—was a carefully bound book. It was written precisely, some of the pages torn out due to my spontaneity. A few rules not followed here, a few careless tweets there, reckless actions everywhere. This book's pages were

falling out one by one, falling apart at the seams. The cover was scuffed and had been seen by everyone, rather than it's untouched condition mere hours ago.

Everyone knew.

And that's why I was going to become a dead pop star.

My house phone started to ring from it's place on the table, the first call I'd gotten in two hours that wasn't from a reporter looking for confirmation. "Hello?" I answered cautiously, already pulling the phone away from my ear slightly, not wanting Clint to make me go deaf from his shouting.

"We're getting the damage control team on this," he said softly, with a resigned sigh. "They can't do much, but they're trying."

"I'm sorry," I blurted. "I'm *so* sorry, Clint."

"I hate to be the one who says it, Percy," Clint muttered, "but 'sorry' really won't help us hold back a pissed off public paired with angry, crying fans and almost rabid reporters." I winced, pressing the phone to my ear. "The people are *not* impressed."

"I know," I mumbled. "I know."

"Why weren't you more careful?" Clint asked, for what had to have been the twentieth time, at least. "How could you *forget* your phone?"

"It slipped my mind," I responded sullenly. "I was just—you know—with Annabeth and—"

"Don't bring me into this," she interjected, her voice harsh and biting.

"I was careless," I said through clenched teeth. "I'm just as pissed at me at everyone else is, okay? I forgot my phone, it's *my* fault, and I get that."

"I'm glad you get it," Clint said. "You'll either have to find some lie that's worthy of explaining all of *this*, and soothe the public, or tell the truth, which..." Clint trailed off and sighed, completely frustrated. "Do whatever you want, Percy. Talk to Annabeth about it."

"She's not speaking to me," I said bitterly, glancing at her. She robotically scrolled through her phone, and I bit my lip at the thought of what they were saying about us. About her.

"Hand her the phone," Clint said. I knew that he was pinching the bridge of his nose. I stood, holding the house phone out to Annabeth, and she reached out to it without sparing me a glance.

"Hello?" Annabeth greeted, sounding much less angry than she was when speaking to me. "Yeah. I don't think that's... I think we would agree on that, if nothing else. No. I don't want to do that." I wished desperately that I could hear both sides of the conversation, rather than Annabeth's replies. "Do I have to? Clint, *seriously*? No! That's not what I said," her voice hitched as she got progressively more upset. "You're a horrible person for even *thinking* that. I would *never*—" She stopped speaking, rolling her eyes. "Yes, yes, sure, fine, *okay*!" Annabeth answered loudly, obviously speaking over Clint. She hung up only a second later, tossing the phone over to me blindly. I caught it on reflex, and she sat up, turning to me.

"You are an idiot," she told me. "And I wish that I could walk out of here and hate you right now, but apparently, we have to talk. So, let's get this over with."

I flinched, pulling my hair slightly in desperation. "I'm sorry," was the only thing that I ended up saying, after two minutes of thought.

"Cool," Annabeth dismissed. "What do you want to do?"

"What do you want to do?" I asked, almost sadly. "I think I've made enough poor decisions lately."

"You could say that again," Annabeth lashed. "What were you thinking, Percy?"

"I wasn't," I seethed, way too tired of hearing that question. "I'm sorry, okay?"

"Sorry doesn't cut it, Percy!" Annabeth shouted. "Percy, do you not realize what you've done?"

"I do! I know, okay? I just can't do anything about it, at the moment! In case you haven't noticed, I'm a bit scared that I'll lose more than my fans right now!" I yelled.

Annabeth froze, glancing me up and down calculatingly. "What do you mean?"

"I'm scared," I admitted slowly, "that I'm about to lose you." I took a deep breath, and my stomach turned over violently. "And that *really*, really can't happen."

"Why not?"

I sighed. "You know why," I muttered.

"More reassuring when said," Annabeth mentioned lightly, still keeping her distance.

I dropped my face bluntly into my palms, leaving my words muffled. "Because I love you and I need you and all that other stupid stuff," I told her, earnestly. I felt my face heat up, and I begged it not to get worse. "Because you kind of mean the world to me, and I would die if this ended."

"Well, you won't be dying," Annabeth assured me. I breathed a sigh of relief. "Yet," she tacked on.

I groaned into my hands. "False hope is all you give," I muttered.

"What do you want to do?" Annabeth said, sparking the earlier conversation. "We can either lie again—"

"I really don't want to," I said softly, unable to meet her eyes. "Lying hasn't done all that much good."

"—Or we can tell the truth, which most probably won't believe," Annabeth finished smoothly.

"Why wouldn't they believe it?" I questioned. "We have the contracts to prove that it wasn't real."

"I mean," Annabeth explained, "they won't believe that we're together now. If we're still together when the next interview comes around."

I winced, hating the way my heart dropped in a horrible, gut-wrenching way. With a shaky breath, I shook my head. "We're telling them the truth. No matter what."

"Have you seen some of the things they're saying already? Percy, we've lost their trust. There is no 'winning' in this situation. We either tell the truth, and they assume we're lying, or we lie, and they still think that we're lying." She stood, pacing, and it grated on my already beyond tense nerves. "Percy, we lost."

I shook my head. "Don't say that. We haven't lost it all yet."

"Don't quote The Fray to me," Annabeth snapped. I tried not to breathe a relieved sigh after catching an undertone of fondness. "Even if the fans believe us, which they won't, the public will criticize us. *Forever*."

I bit my bottom lip into my mouth. "We'll tell the truth," I stated firmly. "And we'll have to hope they believe us."

"Welcome Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase to the stage!"

Polite clapping. Not the usual cheers that I'd always received, paired with the occasional shout of how much they adored me. I think I even heard someone shouting their disapproval. I refrained from grabbing Annabeth's hand, knowing that she'd hate me for it later. We were back to walking on thin sheets of glass, me tiptoeing around and being careful not to break whatever fragile thing we had.

"Hey, guys," I said, after I settled onto the couch.

"Hi," Annabeth added.

"This isn't your first time on my show," Tyler Taylor himself announced. "Last time you two sat on this couch, we were talking about your relationship. How in love you were, and how picturesque it was living with the one person you cared about the most. What's happened since then?"

"Some news got out to the public," Annabeth answered swiftly. "It was a mistake."

"Are you saying all accusations are false?" Tyler asked, raising a perfectly groomed eyebrow.

"No," I assured him. The crowd began whispering, and I tried not to grimace. "Some accusations were accurate."

"For example..." he prompted, waving his hands.

"Annabeth and I *were* in a fake relationship." The audience members gasped, and they all spoke at once. A million flashes of cameras went off, and for the first time in a long time, I was uncomfortable in their presence.

"We were under contract," Annabeth continued. "For four months—that was the length of the initial contract. Then we tacked on an extra six months for the tour, but we found out that the second contracts we illegitimate due to the guidelines of the first contract."

"We could have broken up then," I explained. "No contract bound us."

"But that's where the kicker comes in," Annabeth picked up. "Because at the time we found out, Percy and I had just gotten together—officially and completely real."

Tyler Taylor raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Under contract—or what you thought was contract?"

"Right," I affirmed. "Our day at the beach in Alabama was the day I convinced Annabeth that we should be together for real."

Tyler looked disappointedly at Annabeth. "America's sweetheart—why did you lie?"

Annabeth looked away in guilt. "It sounds horrible."

"We want the truth," Tyler proclaimed. "Don't we?" He looked to the crowd, and they all gave positive responses.

"It's a horrible feeling," Annabeth said, looking at a random point on the wall. "Being *so* close to fame that you can almost feel it." I nodded in agreement, closing my eyes tightly and praying that they found this honest. "So, my manager at the time grasped at what seemed like a good idea. Percy's famous, close to my age, and was willing to be in a 'relationship' with me. He typed up a contract after conferring with Percy's management, and then it went from there."

Tyler nodded, but I read in his eyes that he wasn't yet convinced. "And now?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What's with you two now? Is it real, is it fake?"

I opened my mouth to speak, though I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted to scream from the rooftops that it was real, that Annabeth was mine and that I loved her, but she'd been horribly on the fence about our relationship in general. Saying a word could cause that paper thin glass I was standing on to shatter.

A hand touched mine—one so familiar that I knew it immediately. I nearly cried in relief when she intertwined our hands, and I think she knew by the way I let out a shaky breath. "Real."

"I don't get it," the interviewer, Deanna Wilson or something, mused. "What made it real?"

"I kissed her," I coughed. "When we visited my mom's house."

"That was the first *real* kiss between us," Annabeth added. "And there was more from then on out. When the tour started—*that's* when things got a bit intense."

"You mean," Deanna clarified, "that's when you guys started to care for each other for real."

"Not necessarily," I interjected. "I'd cared about her for a long time—*liked* her for a long time. She's a bit stubborn. It was hard to convince her that it would be okay if we had a legitimate relationship."

"But I see it now," Annabeth said, smiling. "I see how it's okay. I just hope that everyone can look past all of our previous lies and see that we're telling the truth."

"And you are?" Deanna quizzed, flicking her bangs out of her face. "Telling the truth, that is?"

I nodded adamantly. "I swear. Every word. I'd do anything to prove it to you guys." I addressed the crowd. "Literally anything. Besides break up with Annabeth."

One girl in the crowd 'aww'ed, receiving glares and indifferent looks. I smiled at her, nodding gratefully. She blushed violent red. "Anything," Deanna repeated. "You seem pretty earnest to me, Percy."

"I am," I reassured her. I put my arm over Annabeth's shoulder. "We both are."

"That's all the time we have for today!" Deanna announced brightly. "It was lovely to have you two; I'm glad we got the real story!"

We both smiled and waved as a camera zoomed in on us. The audience clapped lightly, not really encouragingly but not exactly angry all the same. We were ushered off stage, and I held tightly onto Annabeth's hand. We weren't back to normal by any means, but we tended to cling to each other after these interviews. They were hard to swallow, and half the time left us unnerved and upset that so many didn't believe us.

Once we were out in the cool air, allowing me to take a breath, I hugged her tightly. Everything was falling apart, and I didn't plan on us doing the same. "I love you," I told her, for what had to have been the first time in a while. I'd refrained from saying it due to the delicate situation.

"I know," Annabeth said, burying her face in my shoulder. "I just wish they would believe us."

"Some of them do," I assured her. "I've seen it all over Twitter. One girl linked me to a post on Tumblr that had over two million people who said they believed us."

"But there's still some who don't," Annabeth grumbled. "I don't like to be accused of something that's not true. We aren't lying." She sighed, pulling away from the hug. I saw a guarded look in her eyes, and I noted that we would be having an off day.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, for quite possibly the millionth time.

"I know," was the only reply that I received.

That night, I decided to do a Twitcam. I didn't know how many people would watch it, or care, or believe, but I felt like there was something else I needed to do. My words with interviewers weren't enough; those could be just as twisted by management as the whole story in the first place.

I tweeted a quick *'doing a twitcam in 10, tune in if you want the truth x'* and read the replies. Most people were saying that it'd better be good, or that they were really proud of me, but there were some who just called me a deceitful liar. And yeah, that hurt, but I'd probably react in the same way.

Annabeth poked her head through my door as I was putting on a shirt. "What's up?" I asked, smoothing it out absently.

"You're doing a Twitcam?" she questioned, turning the doorknob back and forth.

I nodded. "I figure that they may believe this a bit more? Maybe it's naive, but I have to try something," I responded, sounding a bit desperate.

"I'll be watching," Annabeth replied simply, slipping out the door just as quickly and quietly as she'd appeared.

"Pressure's on," I muttered to myself, setting it up on my laptop. Within a few minutes, I was broadcasting live worldwide to anyone who planned on listening. The viewers number was only at about two-thousand, and I prayed that it would keep going up.

"Hey, guys," I said, without any amount of grace. I smiled, waving a bit awkwardly. "So, I don't usually do these, as I'm sure you know." I watched the replies fall in, most people commenting on what I was saying. "But, I think a lot of you haven't been believing what I've been saying—me or Annabeth—and I wanted to tell you guys the truth. Personally."

I smiled at a tweet that expressed how much they believed me. “And thank you to those who know what I'm saying is true. But to those who think I'm lying...I'm giving you the full story.” I grinned as a tweet from Annabeth appeared on the feed, saying a supportive *good luck x.*

“On September sixth, two-thousand and twelve, Annabeth Chase and I signed a contract.” The date was burned into my memory, along with a million other ones. “We were fake-best friends for about a month, and then we performed a staged kiss at the pier on October twelfth. We faked damage control and tried to stay out of the press for a week,” I explained. “On October twenty-first, we kissed. And it was out of the public eye, in my childhood bedroom at Mom's house. I'm not sure who kissed who, but I know that it just—happened. And from then on out, things weren't really the same.

“We started out just being affectionate for you guys—so that you would believe we were in a relationship. But then the affection started happening at home—accidental kisses on the cheek, hugs, sleeping in the same bed, cuddling—and everything just got really *fucked up*, excuse my French,” I continued. I read some more of the comments, seeing mostly positive ones and breathing a bit easier. “And that night, the night we kissed for real, Annabeth and I both promised not to have anymore 'accidental' kisses. Because complications were unneeded and unwanted. But, I already liked her,” I confessed. “As in, *liked* her, liked her.

“But, true to her wishes, for two whole months, I pretty much stopped showing affection with Annabeth. I don't even think we kissed in public that much. I hardly even *touched* her at the house,” I shared, my eyes flickering away from the screen. “I kind of felt like I was dying, a little.” I laughed without humor, and looked to the ceiling, searching for a date. “On December thirty-first, we signed an extension of contract—which later turned out to be illegible.” I kept my eyes on the comments, smiling when I saw Annabeth's reply saying, *you meant illegitimate, perce.*

“Illegitimate,” I corrected. “They turned out to be illegitimate. The day that we signed those papers was the day that I started being affectionate with Annabeth again. Because—well, we had six more months together, so why not make the best of it? I liked her, at the time, so I figured I should get all that I could, even if it meant nothing to her.” I scowled. “I mean, that sounds horrible and kind of like rape, but let's just say that I was willing to accept whatever affection she was willing to show, whether it was for real, or for you guys.” A lot of people were saying that it was cute, and I grinned. “We are pretty cute, aren't we?

“I told her that she was my real best friend that night, regardless of whatever we'd been before. I'd gotten us matching bracelets,” I said, holding up my arm and tapping the one I was talking about. “I assumed you guys would just think it was some cute Percabeth thing, but really, it was something to stay real no matter what in all the confusion. We were best friends, no matter what happened—contracts ending, fake relationship ending, everything. We were on Tyler Taylor the next day. And I developed this plan to see if Annabeth even liked me at all. I watched if she blushed, or initiated affection, or anything like that. And she did. A lot, I might add,” I said, laughing at Annabeth's tweets detesting my statement.

“Not long after that, Annabeth had a big fight. And I left, going to my mom's house because I'm stupid,” I announced. “Really, really stupid, because I didn't know how to deal with the fact that I cared about Annabeth, and she had trust issues—preventing her from caring about me, or voicing it anyways. And then I went back home, after being told by Mom that I had literally no other choice, and Annabeth told me her story. And I kissed her—*twice*. The first one I said was for sympathy, but really, I just wanted to kiss her. And then a few minutes later, I walked her to her bedroom door and kissed her again. That one really was an accident, seeing as I was half asleep.

“I talked to my manager the next morning, and since he's my closest guy friend, I sort of vented. He learned that I liked Annabeth for real, and he told me that I really shouldn't invest in it. But, I've never

been good at listening. Just ask Annabeth,” I added with a chuckle. “But I did manage two months of Annabeth-abstinence, as awkward as that sounds. I didn’t kiss her once for two months. And once again, I thought I was dying. We were really busy—rehearsing for tour and perfecting songs—so I didn’t have all that much time to think.

“Then the tour happened,” I disclosed. “And the first show was maybe the best and worst day of my life.” I looked down, seeing that I now up to seventy thousand viewers. “Thanks for listening, all seventy thousand of you,” I interjected. “Anyways, the first night of tour was a rush. It was my first joint tour—most had been people opening for me—and it was great to share the excitement with someone. We, however, got a bit too excited,” I carried on with a wry smile. “Right before she went on stage, I kissed her—for the first time in a while. Then after the show, when we were crazy hyped up, I pulled Annabeth into a hallway and we kissed again. And I thought maybe my heart was going to fall out of my chest or something,” I admitted, blushing at the memory. “And Annabeth kept warning me that Clint was going to kill us, but she didn’t really stop kissing me, necessarily.” I grinned cheekily at the screen. “Did you, babe?” Annabeth’s tweet appeared: *‘guilty as charged. x’*

“We slept in the same bed that night,” I confessed. “And I think it’s the best I’ve ever slept. The next day, we were loaded onto the tour bus. And we had another fight. Shocker, right?” I smiled, shaking my head. “This time, Annabeth kissed me,” I said smugly. “To, and I quote ‘relieve tension and maybe something else.’ She didn’t tell me what that something else was, but I’m guessing you guys have a clue.” I rolled my eyes. “I feel really stupid that I didn’t get it at the time. I guess Annabeth wasn’t lying when she called me clueless. The next day, after the concert, we had a free day. We went to a Starbucks, met a few fans, and I realized that I loved her. It was really random and I nearly died on my way to get fresh air, but I did.

“The tour carried on, and we usually slept in the same bed, despite our lack of actually *doing* anything,” I clarified. “I’m not that stupid. I’d never pull that with Annabeth. She would kill me. Eventually, in Alabama, we had a break week. We were allowed to do anything we want, so I chose the beach. On our way there, Annabeth and I got into a small argument. And I said something along the lines of, ‘let’s kiss, right now, then you tell me that it means nothing.’ So, we kissed, and it was *definitely not* a big ‘nothing.’ Annabeth said that I was kissing her different—and I guess I was, since I loved her. And we made a deal—I got the whole day to prove to her that there wasn’t anything wrong with our relationship. Basically, I got the whole day to make her fall in love with me.

“I’m the farthest thing from discreet, and in the end, she found out that I loved her—right there on the pier. And she admitted that she liked me a lot, but didn’t love me yet. And I thought I would die of relief, because I was so sure that she would never care about me in that way. We went back to the hotel and watched movies. Our manager barged in on us, and we were, well, *cuddling*. So, he says, ‘you guys are together, aren’t you?’ And queue awkward stuttering over what we are and if we’re anything at all.” I chuckled. “And then I got to call the beautiful Annabeth Chase my girlfriend. I’ll bet money she’s blushing right now, too.” I beamed at the screen, seeing all the replies of people gushing about how cute we were. “And one night, Annabeth took the password off of my phone—with my permission. I trusted her, and I didn’t want to hide anything from her. She’d already read all of my messages anyways,” I added with a pointed, sassy look that I’d inherited from spending too much time with Annabeth.

“We had a big fight at three in the morning after seeing this horrible video three girls made about Annabeth. It was basically giving all the reasons why they hated Annabeth Chase—or all the reasons why she was better than them, in my opinion. But we made up soon after since we really can’t stay mad at each other—that’s how it’s always been. Even from the beginning. And tour ended, and I loved her a little bit more, and she finally, *finally* said it back.” I shook my head, laughing. “I was wearing a stupid apron with sweatpants and I was holding a silver spoon—which I dropped—but it was perfect. We went to Starbucks later that day, and Clint, my manager as I’m sure you know, called me. Months ago,

he sent me a file of all the Percabeth business. Every article—even a scanned copy of our contracts. His computer crashed, so he asked me to send him the file again, since he didn't have a copy of it anymore. And I did, no issues. But, I did leave my phone.

"I'm really absent-minded and just *stupid* sometimes, no matter how offended I get when Annabeth tells me so," I declared. "And I left my phone, without a password, with my e-mail outbox open just *begging* for someone to find us out. Someone did. And now it's all so *fucked up* again." I sighed, shaking my head. "I know a lot of you didn't believe me—maybe some of you still don't. And that's okay, but I really wish you would see what I'm saying. If you really think I'm this good of a liar—that I fabricated all of this elaborate story—then so be it. But really, out of all the times I've told the truth, this is the one time that I'm begging you all to believe me. And even if you don't, stop sending Annabeth any kind of hate. This isn't her fault at all. It's mine. Any rude messages should be sent my way, please and thank you." I bit my lip, then smiled brightly. "Thanks for listening, guys."

I disconnected the Livestream, closing the lid to my computer. I was about to venture out of my bedroom to find Annabeth, but she opened my door and fell onto my bed. "Thanks," she managed.

"No problem," I replied easily, shrugging. "I needed to fix all of that."

"I think it was a great idea," Annabeth shared, grabbing my hand. I hauled her up so that she was sitting next to me. "And I hope they believe you."

"Was it believable?"

"Of course it was," Annabeth responded instantly. "You were all smiley and cute when you talked about us, blushing, and then all disconcerted and upset when you mentioned the bad times. It looked real."

"It *was* real," I affirmed.

"All we can do is wait, you know," Annabeth spoke into the heavy silence. "Wait until Clint calls with good or bad news."

My new phone, sitting unassumingly on my bedside table, started blaring some song that was Clint's favorite. I stared at it blankly, then looked at Annabeth. She met my gaze, then reached out and picked it up herself.

"Hello?"

"Hello?" I said cautiously, not sparing Percy a glance. Of all the times Percy had acted stupid, this one topped the list. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temple, hoping that Clint wouldn't shout; I already had a headache.

"Yeah, hi," Clint brusquely answered. "Speakerphone, please."

I sighed, following directions and unceremoniously dropping the phone on the bed. "You're good to go."

"Percy?" Clint asked. Percy hummed in response. "Are you crazy?"

Percy rolled his eyes in a careless manner. "They're bound to believe me being me rather than me in an interview." He looked to my eyes, checking to see if I agreed, and I pointedly looked away before shrugging. "I thought it would help some."

"We won't know for a while," Clint murmured. I had a sixth sense that he was pulling his hair out currently; absolutely frustrated with the spontaneous pop star he got the job of managing. "Keep an eye on the Twitter feed, if you'd like. If not, hang back. I'm calling George for some more damage control."

"This isn't damage!" Percy argued. "It's going to help, I swear." He looked at me pleadingly, gesturing to the phone and silently asking me to put in a good word. I shook my head, and he rubbed his eyes.

"Don't look so exhausted; this is kind of your fault," I muttered. Percy shot me a glare, curtly saying his farewell to Clint and ending the call. There was a sharp lull in the conversation—if you could even call it that.

"I know it's my fault, Annabeth," Percy said flatly into the heavy silence. "But honestly, a little support would be nice."

"I'm not going to lie and tell you what you did is okay," I snapped, on reflex. Percy winced, staring out his window, and I felt a tiny pin-prick of guilt. Squeezing my eyes shut tightly, I stood up. Percy's eyes stayed fastened to the night sky, and I leaned forward, pressing a kiss to his temple for a few seconds. "I don't forgive you, but I know you're sorry. And I see that you're trying to help. Just give it time, okay?"

Percy nodded mutely at my soft-spoken words and I accepted it as my queue to exit. It wasn't the best feeling—virtually ignoring Percy and hardly making contact with him—but he deserved it. Percy had always been absent-minded, but this was different. Percy's already had several years of fame; the perfect kind—where there's not many complications and everyone either likes you, or doesn't (but most do). I haven't even gotten to that point yet, and I was already getting bad press. Actually, it wasn't just bad press; this was horrible, unforgivable press. The fans I had preceding this clump of drama probably hated me for what I'd done.

Percy taking the fall was sweet, but it didn't stop the bitter, scathing things I heard about myself. I sat on the couch in the living room, feeling sorry for myself for all of about three seconds before rolling my eyes and walking to the kitchen.

Matters could be worse, as bad as they were right now, and I guessed that press was press—whether it had good or bad connotation. My name was floating around as celebrity gossip, which was better than

my name not being spread around at all. With a sense of dread, I brewed a pot of coffee, knowing that this was the moment I swallowed my pride. Being short with Percy wasn't helping, regardless of how much I felt like he deserved my clipped answers. Percy was probably getting just as many upset fans tweeting him as I was; he didn't really need a pissed off girlfriend to go with it.

I retrieved two coffee cups out of the cabinet, biting my lip as I distributed the coffee evenly. *Even*, I thought curiously. Was there such a thing as being completely even? Completely fair?

No, I decided with a bitter twist to my lips. Nothing's fair, no matter how much it should be. Sometimes, you have to give something important up before you can reach the end result. I'd have to sacrifice my pride, no matter how my skin burned with regret even before I pushed open the door to Percy's room.

Apologizing gets easier after you fall in love were the words that swam around in my head, taken from Sally Jackson herself, and I wondered if saying sorry would ever come easily to me.

I sat on the edge of Percy's bed, setting his coffee on his nightstand. I was as out of my element as a moon appearing during the daytime. Apologizing, no matter who it was to, was never an easy feat. He stared out the window with a clenched jaw, having hardly moved since the last time I was in his room. I cleared my throat once without response, and in the end I punched his knee.

"Ow!" Percy exclaimed with a scowl. "Why?"

"I've been sitting here for ten minutes," I informed him. "I made you coffee."

Percy looked over at the cup on the stand, and he slowly picked it up. "This isn't poisoned, right?"

"If it was, I would have chosen that cup," I muttered.

Percy laughed loudly, the laugh that said he hadn't been expecting to laugh at all. He looked slightly startled at himself for a moment before grinning sloppily at me. "You always know how to make me feel better."

"And you always know how to make me want to throw up," I shot back. "Your niceness is sickening."

Percy smiled indulgently at me. I shifted my eyes away. "So, what's up?"

"I...brought you coffee," I stated obviously. Percy gave me a dry look. "As a, you know, thing. To be nice again."

"Wait," Percy drawled. "Is this—pause for dramatic effect, everyone—an apology?"

"Or something like that," I grumbled. "It's more like a we're-both-really-stupid-sometimes-but-I-guess-I-have-to-forgive-you-eventually-so-yeah," I corrected with a shrug. Percy smiled, biting his lip. "Don't look so smug."

"I'll try," Percy told me with a wink. "It's nice to have you back, Chase."

"Temporarily," I warned. "Won't be long before you do some other impeccably disgraceful act of ignorance."

Percy rolled his eyes. "You use big words on purpose."

"Before," I repeated. "Means, prior to. In front of. Ahead of—"

"I know what 'before' means, Chase."

It was early the next morning (the previous night had been spent staring at the phone and wondering when the chastisement would begin), Percy's phone rang again. Thankfully, we were already wide-awake, preparing breakfast in the kitchen. We both stared at it with wide eyes, Percy reaching out before retracting his hand. "I'm really scared," he admitted, his words slurring in his haste to say them.

"I'm sure everything's fine," I mitigated, though I didn't believe the words myself. The call dropped, since we'd taken too long deliberating, and my phone started ringing in my hoodie pocket. "Jesus," I muttered, yanking it out and pressing answer. "What?"

"Go to the television right now; turn on the news," The call ended as soon as Clint spoke the words, and I blinked at my phone.

"What's wrong? No service?" Percy questioned, leaning forward and attempting to look over my shoulder.

I shook my head. "No, come on," I enjoined, rushing into the living room. I turned on the television, fidgeting with my own hands as it started up. I groaned when I didn't see the remote in sight. "Percy," I addressed, snapping my fingers. "Remote?"

"I don't know," he answered nonchalantly.

I pursed my lips. "Well, then help me find it! Clint sounded urgent."

"He's never encouraged me to watch TV before," Percy grumbled, lifting up a couch cushion. I bent down and searched under the coffee table, even going as far to lift up the rug. It was left on the Nickelodeon channel, and Spongebob's laugh was grating on my nerves.

Just as I decided to behead Percy for losing the remote and leaving it on the unthinkable station, he exclaimed, "Found it!"

I snapped my head towards him, and he hurried in from the kitchen. I scowled at him, snatching it out of his hand. "Where was it?" I questioned, not really caring as I scrolled to the news channel.

"In the fake fruit basket."

I paused in my actions, turning and giving him a disbelieving look. "Don't look at me!"

"That shouldn't be hard," I muttered, finally clicking on the correct channel and falling onto the couch behind me. Percy settled on the other one, leaning forward with anticipation.

.. And here we are with some celebrity gossip! The Percy J and Annabeth C were in a fake relationship! The public hasn't taken too nicely to it, according to recent tweets, but there are some fans who believe the story told on Jackson's Livestream late last night. Let's have a look at recent fan videos..."

A pixelated version of a teenage girl appeared on the screen. "I believe Percy Jackson because you could see it in his eyes. He loves her, for real."

The camera turned on another girl, who nodded in agreement. "There's no way he made that up! That would have taken some intense planning! He even had dates memorized. You can just tell."

It switched to another video clip, this one of what looked to be about seven girls. “We believe Percy J!” they shouted. “He doesn't have a reason to lie,” one of the girls spoke out above the rest. “His eyes were all sparkly and he was smiling!”

“Correct me if I'm wrong,” another girl started, “but Percy's never been a good actor—no offence Percy, I love you!—and there's no way he could have pulled that off.”

That video waned out, and a male face appeared on the screen. “Hey there, everyone. I'm Grover. And I'm Percy's best friend, save Annabeth. I've known him since we were twelve,” Grover explained, holding up a childhood picture. I smiled over at Percy's shocked and grinning face. “And I'm pretty sure that I know better than anyone when the boy's in love.” Percy laughed, and I thought his eyes looked suspiciously shiny.

“Yo, what's up, best friend of Annabeth Chase, here,” another voice said. I looked from Percy back to the screen, and couldn't restrain the smile that built up as I saw Thalia's pitch black hair. “Well, I'm not really sure why I'm saying this, since I personally think it's pretty clear, but Annabeth loves him. I'm not stupid. And if you don't believe him, that makes you stupid. I hardly know the guy, but honestly. Do you see the way he looks at her?” Thalia laughed, shaking her head at the camera. “There's no way he can't love her.”

The screen flickered once more to a shocked looking face that I instantly recognized as Sally. “You're asking me if I think my son loves Annabeth?” Sally waved her hand flippantly. “Of course he does. I'm his mother.”

Percy coughed something that sounded halfway like a laugh and maybe somewhat of a sob, and I found my eyes welling up. I moved from my couch to his, not protesting when he put an iron-like grip on my knee. “Oh my god,” he whispered. I nodded in agreement.

A final face appeared on the screen. “Hello,” Clint addressed formally. “I'm the manager of both Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase. I can personally testify that his story is true. He loves her,” Clint said, chuckling and smiling. “And she loves him.” I smiled, feeling an all-new affection for Clint; he was the best manager either of us could ask for.

The pixelated videos faded off of the screen, flickering back to the anchors. The woman smiled with watery eyes, nodding. “And there you have it, Los Angelenos. Stay tuned for an update on the storm just near...”

Percy let out a breath, fumbling for his cell phone and dialing Clint with restless hands. There was a pause in which I stared with bated breath and Percy gripped my knee even tighter. “Yeah, saw it,” he managed. He laughed, smiling brightly. “Yeah. Thanks, man. We will. Thank you so much. I owe you.” Percy bit his lip and shook his head, trying and failing to stop a smile. “Yeah, I do. Promise. Bye, Clint.”

“What?” I asked, before he even properly hung up the phone.

“He says to check Twitter,” Percy said wryly. We'd both opted for staying off Twitter the previous day—either out of fear for reactions or a reluctance to read any despising messages. Percy finally loosed his hold on my knee, instead patting my upper arm and then my stomach until he found my hand. He intertwined our fingers while simultaneously refreshing Twitter on his phone.

“There's a trend,” he proclaimed happily. “We Believe Percy.”

“Well, that's a good sign,” I commented. I leaned over his shoulder, reading some of the tweets. I made a face. “Not all of these are so positive.”

“There's more positive ones than there were in previous days, though,” Percy optimized. “Typically, people go with the crowd. The more people who say they accept the truth, the more people will agree. And then before long it'll fade into the background and everyone will forget about it.”

“That process could take years,” I told him honestly. He frowned at me. “Just giving you some real-talk.”

“Thanks for putting things in this dreary perspective,” Percy grumbled, tapping out a thank you tweet.

“You're welcome, dearest,” I answered, ruffling his hair and returning to the kitchen, where our breakfast had gone cold. I stared at the half-cooked egg, half-brewed coffee, and open bacon package. “Percy,” I called, “let's just order a pizza.”

Two days later, we were allowed back out.

Three days later, Percy got a hate letter in the mail and stared at it for two hours.

A week after that, we had our first live performance since the reveal at a radio station.

And a day after that, I broke up with Percy.

“I'm so tired of this,” I stressed, scrolling through my news feed. I pulled my sweater sleeve further over my hand. Although there were the fans defending Percy and I, the hateful ones were prominent. They seared into my mind worse than any sweet, heartfelt comment could. People calling me a slut for using Percy; a desperate, selfish, unforgivable bitch. It was getting old.

“Of what, babe?” Percy asked, sliding into the seat next to me at the table. He filched my phone right from my grasp and clenched his jaw as he read. “Don't listen to them,” he stated, finally.

I chuckled darkly, my nails biting into my palms. “Easier said than done.” Percy took hold of my clenched fist, massaging my tense hand until I finally opened my palm.

“When I first started out,” Percy began, “I got a lot of rude comments sent my way.”

I snatched my hand back. “Christ, Percy,” I seethed. “Not everything is about you.”

“I know that,” Percy replied, affronted. “Look, I'm just trying to help—”

“The same way you always are,” I muttered, venom lacing my voice. “You always say that you're trying to help. Is that what you thought you were doing when you left your phone in the Starbucks? Hm? And look where that got us.”

Percy sighed, running a hand through his hair and keeping his eyes steady on the cabinet across from him. “It was an accident.”

“It was also your fault,” I snapped. “And yet, I'm the one getting all of these harsh messages, while everyone sends you love.”

"I still get mean messages," Percy disagreed. "I just ignore them."

"Right, my bad. I forgot that you were good at running away from confrontation," I spat.

"What in the world are you talking about?" Percy questioned, as though I were an illiterate child.

My anger flared to an all new level. "I'm talking about all the times you've ran away because we had a fight. All the times you try to pretend that you're a saint and play peacemaker! It gets really annoying, Percy. *You* get really annoying."

"Look who's talking!" Percy yelled. "Don't even pull that, Annabeth! You're the one who pushed me away for months because of 'trust issues.' Please." Percy scoffed. "You're such a hypocrite."

"How?" I asked, my voice escalating. "Explain to me how *I'm* the hypocrite. I would love an explanation from *the* almighty Percy Jackson."

Percy's fist hit the table. Dishes clattered. "Don't you *dare* talk about me like I'm vain," he said, dangerously calm. I strengthened my aura of nonchalance. "You're the hypocrite because you're constantly saying that everyone runs away—or leaves—and never even stop to think about the fact that you're doing the same exact thing yourself. That's always how it is with you! You're always right, and everyone else is wrong. I hate to ruin your little shell of perfection, but you aren't always right, Annabeth." Percy evenly met my gaze with steely green eyes. "Get over yourself."

My fury took a turn for the worse. "Says the most masochistic, obnoxious guy I have ever met!"

"How am I masochistic?" Percy shouted, standing. His chair fell back, but he didn't seem to notice. "I've risked everything for you. I risked my fame just so that I could help your fucking pathetic career."

I gave him a glare full of utter resentment. "I hate you," I whispered.

"The feeling," Percy ground out, "is mutual." He smirked rudely. "Are we done here? Seems like this whole fight just told us things we already knew."

"We are done," I snapped. "For now," a shallow breath, "and forever." I turned on my heel, my vision nearly whiting out at the edges from my rage. I walked purposefully down the hall and started packing a bag. Percy followed after me, leaning in my doorway. I ignored him as I shoved random articles of clothing and other necessities into my Duffel bag.

"Look who's running away now," he jeered.

"It's not running away if there's nothing that you're leaving behind," I nearly growled. "So kindly leave me the *fuck* alone while I make the best decision of my life."

I waited until I heard him walk away to continue throwing things into my bag. With a quick visit to the bathroom—gathering my toothbrush and toothpaste—I tossed my bag over my shoulder. Pushing my phone neatly into my back pocket, I snatched my wallet off the table near the door. I considered stealing the Land Rover, but that meant I'd have to see him again for sure. And be surrounded by his things, and his oceanic smell, and that was the last thing I wanted. I stepped out into the cool night air, slamming the door behind me with a vengeance.

Walking swiftly, my feet punishing the sidewalk with each brutal, furious step, I called Thalia.

"How can I be of assistance?" she answered sarcastically.

“Where are you?” I asked sharply.

“Rosie's,” Thalia replied. “In town. Why, what's up?”

“I need a place to stay,” I told her softly. My steps stopped being so full of anger, and now withered down to an exhausted stroll.

“Oh,” Thalia responded. “Oh. Right. Where are you, then?”

I glanced around, looking for a familiar landmark. I scowled at the street name. “Jackson Avenue,” I announced bitterly. “There's a gas station up ahead.”

“I'd go there,” Thalia advised. Put on a hat or something—no need to have some late night creeper kidnapping a pop star.”

“They could still take me, pop star or not,” I pointed out, rustling through my bag and sighing in relief when I clutched a snapback. “I'm in my Yankee's hat.”

“I'll be there in ten,” Thalia promised, dropping the call. I scowled at my phone, knowing that Rosie's was much further away. Then again, was Rosie's even open at this hour? I checked the time, noting that it was past ten. Rosie's was most definitely closed.

I pulled the cap that I'd had ever since I could remember on, tucking my hair underneath. I entered the gas station, watching the clerk's eyes linger on me. I felt a spark of anger—hating Percy for making me resort to this and hating the man for his relentless staring. I let my eyes wander over the variety of chilled drinks, my eyes curiously slipping over the liquor section. I'd never touched a drop of alcohol in my life; this was the first time I had ever gotten the feeling that I wanted to be drunk. And not lazy, happy drunk. I mean, ridiculously wasted to the point that I could remember my own name, much less Percy's.

Shaking my head at the temptation, I opted for cold, bottled water. I pressed it to my forehead, not really expecting it to help and not really caring when it didn't. Aimlessly walking around the far corner of the shop, I found that I was glad that all the late night visitors were older—heading straight for a six pack of beer or approaching the counter for cigarettes. I could hardly imagine how shady I looked right now—hat pulled far over my eyes, hair tucked beneath it, all black Duffel bag—but no one paid me any attention. I was out of the cashier's line of view as I scanned the racks of gum for what had to be the millionth time.

Finally, the classic store chime sounded and I saw a flash of black hair. I huffed a small breath of relief, and started toward the door. As I turned the corner, I saw a very different black-haired friend.

Percy, with a tense jaw, walked straight to the liquor section I'd been staring longingly at. He deliberated for all of a second before grabbing several things, piling them into his arms. I swung back around the corner as he set them on the counter with malice. The guy behind the counter obviously recognized him, looking over Percy's shoulder at me. I shook my head pleadingly, begging him not to give my presence away.

Percy was underage, but the man didn't even ask for ID before ringing him up. He tossed a bill on the counter, gathering his surplus alcohol and broodily making his way out the door. I started breathing normally once he was gone, nearly sinking to the floor and passing out from the effort of the fight, the hiding, my temper, and life in general.

The man behind the counter gave me a curious look, and I paid for my water with a conflicted mind.

Percy had told me that he was three years clean—without any alcohol—and yet there he was, buying enough to kill a person. I bit the inside of my cheek, instantly wiping away the stab of guilt for making him resort to drinking.

I nodded gratefully at the man, giving him a ten dollar bill despite the small price of the water. Venturing outside, I took a seat on the picnic table, and waited for Thalia to show up.

True to her word, it had been exactly ten minutes when she pulled up. The car was unfamiliar, yet fitting for her, and I waved tiredly, shouldering my bag as I stood up. “Hey,” Thalia entreated.

“Hi,” I answered, giving her a hug. “How have you been?”

“Good,” Thalia said warily. “So, what—”

“Whose car is that?” I interjected.

“Oh,” Thalia shrugged, tying her messy hair up. “Just this guy.”

“Okay,” I said carefully.

“Look,” she sighed. “I’m busy tonight.”

“It’s past ten,” I deadpanned.

“Most things I do are at weird hours,” Thalia responded with a shrug. “My hotel room is just down the street, and you’re welcome to stay with me. It’s a double bedder anyways.”

“Were you really at Rosie’s?” I asked, dropping my bag into the backseat and settling into the passenger side.

“Mhm,” Thalia hummed.

“Aren’t they closed?”

“Yep.”

I looked at Thalia with a furrowed brow, deciding that I was too drained to understand her. The car ride was silent, and I was glad that Thalia respected my refusal to talk about it.

The hotel wasn’t five star, but it wasn’t a shack either. Thalia handed me a spare key, and I thanked her before lifting my bag and entering the lobby. Her room was on the third floor, and I decided on taking the stairs. I needed less time to think, and walking up steep stairs would consume my focus, if I allowed it to.

I took the stairs slowly, one at a time, focusing on the ache on my shoulder from my heavy bag and the way my feet were already protesting the walk. The pain grounded me; kept me from thinking impossible things, such as *you can go back*.

When I realized that I had reached the third floor, I bit my lip at the lack of a distraction. Gripping the key card tightly, I shuffled down the hall to room 309.

As soon as I was safely inside, I let my face crumple the way it’d been begging to for the whole night. I slouched down against the door, hitting my head gently. The cool metal helped my headache, but did nothing to soothe my conscience.

With or without Percy, he still hijacked my every thought, tagging along with every fleeting memory or word. I took a deep breath, or tried anyways, and forced myself into believing that I didn't feel like crying. The stinging behind my eyes was from the piercing headache I had, and was in no way related to him.

I let my head fall back against the door, allowing myself to wallow in self-pity for a few painful seconds. Swallowing any regret along with the tears threatening to fall, I dropped my bag by the bed closest to the window.

Hot shower, my mind suggested. I accepted gladly—taking a shower that was hot as the waters of Mordor. The shower calmed me down several notches, and I'd never know if I ended up crying, since there were so many streams of water washing over my skin.

After what could have been ten minutes—or an hour, who knows?—I wrapped myself in a towel and sat on the edge of my temporary bed. I dug through my clothes, finding something suitable to sleep in, resentfully tossing an offending shirt of Percy's in the corner. I changed and burrowed myself underneath the blankets, wishing I could just go back to Annabeth Chase, the nobody.

I laughed then, a deprecating, self-despising laugh. I'd lived my whole life betting on fame; going great lengths to finally obtain it. And yet, here I was, wishing I didn't have it.

I was selfish. So selfish.

Rolling over in my bed and ignoring the buzzing of my phone—it was more likely than not Thalia checking up on me anyways—I fell asleep.

Waking up was...different.

There were no strong arms holding me close to a solid, homely chest. I wasn't enveloped in a blanket of affectionate, loving warmth. I wasn't breathing in the smell of the ocean. I wasn't sleeping with Percy.

That in itself almost made my cry again, and I bit my cheek as I dried up any pathetic tears. It's been barely twelve hours, and I was already close to a breakdown. Some part of me said that it was probably normal; after all, Percy and I hardly left each other's sides for close to a year, and I was just attached.

Not to Percy. But the way that he made me feel safe, and loved, and all the other ways he used to make me feel.

For the first time in a while, I considered pulling the blankets over my head and going right back to dreamland, but the insistent vibration of my phone was irritating enough to motivate me to wake up.

I clawed the nightstand for it, answering the call with bleary eyes. "Yeah?" I yawned.

"A call would have been nice!"

I yanked the phone away from my ear until Clint's frantic yelling waned. "Morning," I grumbled, sitting up in bed and pulling the covers around me.

"Yeah, hi," Clint greeted with a sigh. "I heard there was a misunderstanding?"

"If by that you mean 'vicious break-up,' then yes," I replied, laughing without a single bit of humor.

I heard Clint let out a distressed breath. "Are you safe?"

"Yeah," I assured him. "Staying at a hotel."

"He's okay, too. If you were wondering."

"Wasn't," I replied, ignoring the small weight lift off my shoulders. It wasn't relief. Just the sleep-haze wearing off.

"Alright," Clint said, seemingly resigned. "And...you're serious, right?"

"About the break-up?" I inquired.

"Just thought I should check," Clint affirmed softly.

I let my teeth stab at my own lips, leaning against the headboard. "Yeah," I said finally. "I am."

"I figured," Clint muttered. "Call me later, yeah? Think things through; make any arrangements you need to. Keep me updated. I'm still your manager and your friend, you know."

I nodded in vain. "Thanks. I will."

"Later, Annabeth," Clint said, cutting off the call. I dropped my phone on the bed, digging my palms into my eyes. My phone sat unassumingly with unread messages, and I finally gathered my wits and read them.

Seven from Clint. One from Thalia.

And fifteen from Percy.

"Jesus Christ," I mumbled, refraining from viewing his first. Clint's were all orders to call him back, and Thalia's was a simple check in. I answered her, letting her know that I'd made it here alive, and decided to rip off the bandage and read Percy's.

Aaaannnniiiiiee

Uoui shold anwer me

I mmiissss yoi

Soyrryyyy

R yoyiiui mad at me?

Please donut hate mee babeee

I raised an eyebrow as the other nine messages continued in a similar fashion. He was, without a doubt, extremely hungover at the moment. I had the cruel thought of calling him just so that his ringtone would hurt his sensitive ears, but I decided not to, just in case he actually answered. I didn't think I was ready for that.

I ordered room service, deciding that I desperately needed a hot beverage and a healthy breakfast. I'd give Thalia the money I would owe her later.

My breakfast ended up being not so healthy—blueberry pancakes doused in artificial maple syrup with enough butter to clog all of my arteries—and I scowled the whole time I ate them. I'd ordered his favorite breakfast.

Just as I put the dishes on the dresser, Thalia unlocked the door and slipped inside. Her face was flushed, and I raised an eyebrow. “Were you running?”

“Absolutely,” she replied breezily, falling on her bed. “Morning.”

“Morning,” I replied, not really believing Thalia, but not wanting to press her to talk about something she didn't want to. She hadn't pressured me, after all. “How was your night?”

“Fun,” Thalia shared vaguely. “Yours?”

“Percy drunk texted me,” I mentioned, laughing a bit. They were amusing, regardless of my resentment towards him.

“Can I read?” Thalia asked pointlessly, already pouncing on my bed and unlocking my phone. She was quiet for a few seconds, and then she cackled. “These are gorgeous,” she muttered, screenshotting them. “Percy'll love this after you guys get over whatever stupid argument you're currently having.”

I coughed, lying next to her. “We broke up, actually.”

“Yeah, right,” Thalia snorted, not sensing my austerity. “That'll last.”

“No,” I said forcefully, “we're through. As in, forever.”

Thalia sighed. “I'll bite. Who ended it?”

“Me,” I informed her.

She raised an eyebrow, handing my phone back. “Really now?”

“Really,” I ground out.

Thalia nodded, finally seeing my seriousness. “And where are you living?”

“Undetermined,” I declared. “Probably an apartment.”

“Of course,” Thalia agreed. “No chance of making up?”

“Not a single one, I—”

My phone started chirping indignantly, alerting me of a call. I didn't have the number, so I answered with caution. “Hello?”

“Good; you answered,” the familiar voice said. “I'm currently at Percy's—”

“Who's this?” I inquired, curtly.

“Grover—don't hang up!” he begged frantically. “This is important.”

“Better be,” I muttered. Thalia stared on with curiosity, and I generously put the call on speakerphone.

“Well, last night around one in the morning, I got a call from a very hysterical Percy. I wasn't able to make it over at the time, but I'm here now. He's in the shower—”

“What of it?” I snapped. “Why did you call me?”

“Annabeth,” Grover addressed, “he's not okay.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, forcing my voice to sound impassive as I responded, “So?”

“So, I've never seen him like this,” Grover admitted. “Ever. And I've seen him break-down, drink himself into oblivion and be an asshole. This is different.”

I steeled myself. “Cool.”

“Annabeth, shut down the act,” Grover enjoined. “I know you care, so stop acting like you don't.”

“How do you know that?” I snapped. I was so beyond done with people thinking that they knew me when they didn't. Not at all.

“Because I have eyes,” Grover said obviously. “And I know you love him—”

“Loved,” I corrected, cursing the turning of my stomach.

“Bullshit,” Grover called out. “All I'm saying is that you guys should work this out.”

“Nothing to work out,” I deadpanned. “We aren't together anymore.”

“But you guys have something that's really fucking—excuse my French—difficult to find, so both of you need to get over yourselves and be together.”

The call ended right after, and I stared blankly at the screen.

“I agree with him,” Thalia admitted. I shot her a dirty look, and she raised her hands up as a white flag. “This fight won't last. No use in dragging it out.”

“We're over,” I repeated. “Okay? Over as in never going back to being a couple again.”

Thalia sighed, shaking her head. “Whatever, Annabeth.” She walked into the bathroom, and I heard the shower start a few moments later. I frowned at the closed door, then at my phone, then at the tempting shirt in the corner.

Without a second thought, I expelled my phone to the same corner, not caring about the thud, and pulled the comforter over my head to hide from the world.

I crossed off the date on my calendar, sliding my phone onto the counter. One more day that I'd made it through without a) a breakdown, b) going back, and c) seeing Percy at all.

I was doing exceptionally better than I was three months ago. I refused any invitations to ceremonies I knew Percy would attend, ignored all calls from Grover, and slyly avoided the questions about him during interviews. By some ridiculous amount of luck, I'd survived three months.

Our break-up wasn't as publicized as our relationship, but it was confirmed. 'Percabeth' was over and done with. I'd been bombarded with questions at first—millions of tweets and people begging for interviews. I'd read a thousand articles with artificial answers as to why we were no longer together. Not one of them had the truth.

It was past midnight when I finally fell into bed, after a refreshing bath. My apartment, despite the measly two and a half months I'd lived there, looked fabulously lived in. Books were in nearly every corner of the one bedroom home, blankets strewn over every chair. Food filled the cabinets, and there was a distinct lack of empty take-out boxes in the fridge.

There weren't any clothes lying all around the apartment; no excess amounts of Disney movies. Every time that I noticed a void, it stung. And after the bits of guilt and regret finally simmered and diminished, I found myself healing. It wasn't perfect by any means, but it was better that I'd been in the past.

I was born for living this way—alone, in a tidy home kept clean by myself. I'd get used to the noticeable absence of Percy's scent in the sheets and his warmth lulling me to sleep. I'd slept alone pre-Percy, and I should have no problem sleeping post-Percy.

As much as I forced that into my mind, sleep evaded me the majority of the time. Two hours here, an hour there, maybe a nap if I'm lucky. But I was fine. Really.

Still, I only got a measly four hours of sleep on the night before the Grammys.

I was nominated for Best New Artist, much to my surprise. Even being a nominee was enough to leave me in utter shock for a full week. The awards ceremony was tonight, and Percy would be there. He was nominated for Artist of the Year.

It would be my first time seeing him in person since the break-up. I'd pleaded with Clint for a half-hour until he relented and sent someone to get my things for me. Clint promised that he was present, and that he watched Percy hesitate for a full minute before removing my favorite hoodie from the boxes. I tried not to think about what his expression had to have looked like at the time.

At the sound of my phone ringing, I sprung out of bed and answered it on my way to the kitchen. "What's up?" I greeted.

"Hello," Clint replied. "How are you?"

Tired, I thought. "Great," I told him.

"Good, good," he muttered absently. "Sherry's on her way over. Prepare to try on a million dresses."

I laughed. "Will do, Clinton."

"I can't believe he got you saying that, too," Clint grumbled. My smile faltered as I went about the motions of making coffee. "He's alright. Not great, really, but he's started moving around the apartment rather than lying on the couch." Clint tried for a lighthearted tone, and I commended him for that. He still updated me on Percy's well-being, although I never asked. It was nice to know how he was doing, I suppose.

"Cool," I brushed off, my voice sounding breezy and careless—the opposite of my current emotions.

Clint sighed heavily. "See you tonight."

“Bye,” I mumbled, ending the call. I dropped my head into my hands as the coffee brewed, staring at my phone as though it were the problem.

It was moments after I'd formulated my beverage that the doorbell rang, and I hurried over to get the door for Sherry.

It wasn't Sherry.

There was a middle-aged man in a blue uniform, smiling brightly at me and holding a vase full of forget-me-nots, red tulips mixed in. I stared at the flowers blankly, and he handed them over. “Thanks,” I told him cautiously, shifting the large vase.

“It's a delivery,” he promised me, good-naturedly. “Not from me, of course.”

I chuckled, nodding. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” he dismissed, turning on his heel and disappearing down the hall. I kicked the door shut and set the vase on the counter, searching through the sea of blue and red for a card.

When I finally grasped it, disentangling the thin sheet of cardstock, I was confused.

I'm sorry.

It was typed, rather than handwritten, but I knew who they were from. Pathetically, I pressed my face to the flowers, hoping to catch a bit of Percy's scent, but only smelling the light, peaceful aroma of flowers. I scowled, examining them once more. I briefly considered throwing them away, but I found the idea too biting and harsh.

Instead, I put them in front of the window, running my fingers over the delicate petals. I hated how hard he made this.

The doorbell rang again, and I rushed to it, knowing that it would be Sherry and welcoming the needed distraction.

I scowled as the Clint told me to straighten my bowtie for probably the thirtieth time. Pointedly, I adjusted it to perfection, giving him a look. He nodded in approval, and the car rolled to a stop.

I stepped out of the sleek, lengthy, black limo, plastering a smile on my face and waving. Clint followed me as I answered a few questions, letting the press take all the pictures they needed.

It was fine. Not great, but fine. Until some completely *mental* reporter asked, “Where's Annabeth?”

I glared in the direction the yelled inquiry had come from, shaking my head and abruptly moving down the red carpet. I surpassed other starlets who fluttered their fingers in my direction. I nodded to acknowledge them, and paired with my charming smile, I looked convincing.

“Wait, Percy!”

I turned, wondering if it was a celebrity calling after me, but I zeroed in on the voice and saw a younger woman leaning over the ropes. I sighed, deciding I'd had more than my fair share of bad press, and pointedly ignoring *another* reporter wouldn't leave Clint feeling too jubilant. As I approached, she shouted, “Do you still love her?” A microphone was thrust toward my face and I stared at it.

After a moment's deliberation, I nodded slowly. *I'm not exactly pleased with her at the moment.* “Yeah,” I answered. “Of course.”

A million flashes went off and more questions were called out. I smiled curtly, turning on my heel and hurrying to enter the building, not wanting any more questions. Clint filed in soon after me, squeezing my shoulder in reassurance, and we rounded a corner.

I stopped briefly, trying to choose between appearing impassioned or exacerbated. I decided on the first.

Annabeth Chase stood not far down the hall, gesturing and carrying on a conversation with one of the many stars attending tonight. Clint looked worriedly at me, and I paused for one transient second before continuing down the hall, my eyes locked on the floor.

“.. I know! The same thing happened to me when...” I winced when her voice stopped; I'd missed it so much, yet I never wanted to hear it again. “I'm sorry, if you'll excuse me.”

I kept walking, hoping that she would stop Clint and ask him something or tell him a story. The last thing I expected was a hand on my upper arm. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to just *feel* for a second. It wasn't skin on skin contact, but the warmth of her hand burned straight through my suit. She was close to me, closer than she'd been in three months. I felt uncomfortable and unsure. “I just wanted to—”

I glanced around, seeing more stars making their way down the hall. Feeling an odd sense of nostalgia, I took hold of her hand and pulled her into the closet door. I clawed the wall until I found a light switch, flicking it on. It appeared that we were in an AV closet of sorts—full of speakers and wires. It left us to stand close together and I silently commended and abhorred myself for that gift.

“A closet, Percy?” Annabeth asked. I gave her a dry look, communicating that there wasn't exactly a million doors to choose from. “I got the flowers.”

“Cool,” I dismissed, nodding.

Annabeth sighed. “They were pretty,” she commented. I took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied instantly. “I meant it.”

“I know you did.”

“Great,” I acknowledged. “Is that all you had to say? I’m starting to think I made us look shady for no reason.” She looked at me skeptically, and I kept my bored expression.

“Why are you acting like this?” Annabeth asked finally.

I laughed, bitterness rolling off of me in waves as I leaned against the wall furthest away from her.

“Well, I don’t know, I *did* get walked out on the one person who promised she’d never leave.” I pointed my gaze toward a spot on the wall. “That’s enough to mess anyone up.”

“This is both of our faults,” Annabeth said softly. “We both were yelling.”

I shook my head, laughing disbelievingly and a bit sadly. “It really *that* hard to admit that you did something wrong? That you weren’t perfect for once? You won’t always have a clean slate, Annabeth.” She looked shocked at my words, and shook her head. I nodded with exaggeration. “You’re in the wrong. You’ve been pointedly avoiding me for *three* months. Don’t think it went unnoticed.”

“It was for the best,” she replied softly.

“The best for who?” I asked sharply. “It certainly didn’t do me any good.”

“We don’t work,” Annabeth fought back. “We’ve never worked. We’re *fighting* right now!”

“What are we fighting over?” I questioned softly. “Oh, right. Just something that’s *your* doing. I left my phone. It was an accident. I didn’t deserve all of this, and you know it.”

Annabeth stared at me with an affronted and confused expression on her face. I clenched my jaw. “I...I know it was an accident.”

“Then why am I *still* getting shit from you about it?” I quietly yelled. “I’ve been sitting here, apologizing and feeling sorry for *three* months while you sat by yourself, no doubt blaming me.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Annabeth,” I seethed, hating the way her voice sounded strained. “I hate to fight right now because I don’t want to ruin the night for you, but *honestly*. We both know you were.” I sighed, pushing my hair out of my face; I needed a haircut. “Look, I forgive you. I forgave you a while ago. But I need you to...see that it’s not always everyone else’s fault. People—all the people around you—are constantly helping. I got you publicity; Clint took you under his wing. So many people have *lied* for you.” I met her eyes carefully. “I don’t hate you, Annabeth,” I told her softly. “But sometimes, you make it really difficult to love you.”

I saw a tear glisten on her cheek, but she quickly rid of it. Despite the twist in my gut for making her cry, I knew it was a good sign. Annabeth never cried unless it was inevitable, and that meant that I was getting through. I was somehow reaching her through the thick skull and wall of pride.

Silence fell heavy and lengthy, in which I stared at the wall and waited for Annabeth's response. She stared at me, blatantly, without saying a word. With a resigned sigh, I took a step forward and hesitantly dropped a hand on her shoulder. "Call me when the Annabeth I like is back," I commanded softly. It sounded like something out of a movie—in fact, I was almost sure that I'd heard it in a movie—but by the way her expression twisted slightly in anguish, I knew it was the best thing I could have said.

Without a second thought, I exited the closet, which had *very* limited space, and adjusted my jacket. I smiled a bit awkwardly at a man walking by who raised an eyebrow at my sudden appearance from a closet—by *myself* no less. I found an escort and they immediately led me to my seat, pausing and waiting patiently if I stopped to talk or in the event that someone called my name.

If there was anything I hated about being a celebrity, it was the fact that everyone expected you to be one-hundred percent okay, one-hundred percent of the time. No one really liked a sad celebrity, because apparently we didn't have anything to be sad about. Most people liked us, or envied us, and we had more money than we needed. Celebrities are "on top of the world" and almost held up on a pedestal like some super-human race. I'm not saying that I don't enjoy being famous, because I love it. It just upset me how some people could be happier living in shacks with hardly even enough money to buy one meal, and they could still be happier than a celebrity. It didn't seem very fair, towards them. I didn't really deserve to be upset.

As I finally approached my seat, I decided to optimize my mind set. I *was* sitting at the Grammy's, as a *Grammy nominee*; I couldn't complain, really. The Annabeth issue and all that went with it could be procrastinated until I was confined in my apartment, and there was no one to judge me besides myself.

I greeted the pop group next to me, who looked to be only about a year or two younger than me. They were bright-faced and excited, taking me back to the beginning of my fame. I made a sly comment to them, they laughed, and I chose to have a good night.

When they announced Artist of the Year, I was nearly shaking. I wanted this award—in my mind, the most prestigious music award available—and it would be mind-blowingly amazing to receive it.

Then, "Put your hands together for 2012's Artist of the Year, *the* Percy Jackson!"

I stared.

And then I gaped.

And then someone shoved me.

I stood up in a rush as everyone continued clapping, some people standing, and gave a customary acceptance speech through my haze of excitement and bewilderment. I was glad that Clint had taken the time to go over it with me several times, despite the fact that we didn't have a clue if I'd even win, since my mind was a jumble of incoherent words. I managed, grinning like a fool, and pointing straight Clint when I walked off the stage. He shouted an encouragement, and I thought that I couldn't really ask for a better best friend-slash-manager.

The awards were a long ceremony, full of clapping and cheering clamorously and all the while keeping a close eye on my award, safely by my feet. I enjoyed seeing everyone's excitement and the general buzzing of the crowd. I joined the crowd in a standing ovation when Annabeth was announced as 2012's Breakout Artist of the Year, and I leaned forward along with everyone else when she started her speech.

"Uh, hi," she said, a bit shaken. All of the more experienced stars chuckled at the newest artist joining the pool of 'big stars.' "Thank you," Annabeth managed finally, gathering her wits. With a bright smile, she continued. "I'm glad that despite all of the issues a few months ago, I've still been chosen for this award." She laughed a little, looking overwhelmed. "This is the first time that I haven't known what to say," Annabeth confessed, raising one hand to her cheek. "But I do want to give a special thank you to someone who's helped me out a lot." As far as acceptance speeches went, Annabeth's was pretty normal. The awe, the gratitude, the few people that you call out and embarrass with your *special* thanks and—"So, thank you, Percy Jackson."

My breath hitched as my head snapped up to her place behind the narrow podium. A low murmur rose in the crowd ("they aren't together anymore, though!" "just *scandalous!*"), and my cheeks heated—halfway between annoyance and bashfulness. "I—I wouldn't be where I am today without him," she continued, keeping my gaze. "Thank you," Annabeth said earnestly, and I felt like it was for more than what she was claiming it to be for. I nodded almost imperceptibly, feeling more eyes on me than there were on Annabeth.

Rather than a bit of affection and embarrassment, I felt anger. It was almost like she was calling me out in public, that way I couldn't be upset with her without looking like a pretentious asshole. I clenched my jaw as the multitude cheered for her speech, and as everyone stood in a second standing ovation, I gathered my award and backtracked through the aisle, excusing myself from the rest of the ceremony.

I entered the empty lobby, no one noting my disappearance, and found a valet parker to help me get a car. He graciously called one for me, telling them not to waste time. I told a small fib, saying that I wasn't feeling well, when he asked why I might be exiting before due time. After he was alerted about the arrival of my car, he personally led me out and opened the door for me. I gave my gratitude, and he nodded stonily.

People walked me to my seat, people opened my doors for me and shut them behind me, people drove me—it seemed hardly fair. I'd grown used to it by now; I'd been utterly astounded when my fame first began. Even if I didn't really sit and feel horrible for them the whole time anymore, I still tried my hardest to be polite and say 'thank you.'

The ride home was silent, deafeningly so. There was a distinct lack of Clint, and Annabeth, too.

I was a bit, or *a lot* miffed with her at the moment. I knew that it took a lot for her to say that to me in a place so public, full of some of the richest and most famous people on earth, but it was wrong. She should have known better. It's like someone proposing in public, just so that their significant other can't deny them. And sure, I couldn't call Annabeth out, but I didn't mind leaving to escape all of those judging looks. I ruffled my own hair, glancing up to the rearview mirror. "How was your night?" I asked politely, desperate for something to stop the silence.

"It was a slow evening," my driver admitted with a nod. "I see that yours was much better. First Grammy, no?"

"It is," I affirmed, beaming at it. "I was nominated when I was sixteen, but I lost to Adele, naturally. She's amazing."

The driver nodded in agreement, taking a left turn. "This is my first year as a driver for celebrities," he admitted with a laugh, "and I was her chauffeur to a ball around August. I thought I was going to throw up from nerves."

I chuckled at his honesty, shaking my head. "She's sweet, from what I've heard from her. A bit intimidating with all of that talent, though."

"Definitely. She signed a sheet of paper for me," he enthused. "My girlfriend at the time was absolutely *taken* with her. She was so happy when I'd brought that home."

I smiled, glancing down at his hand and seeing a gold band. "Married to her now?"

"Yeah, actually," he shared. I heard the warmth in his voice and I felt happy for the couple. "Just married four months ago. We had been dating for four years."

I whistled in approbation. "Wow."

"Twins on the way, too." I grinned at his excitement. "I can't wait to be a dad."

"They'll be lucky to have you," I told him earnestly. "You seem like a good ol' chap."

"Thank you," the man said, seemingly very touched by the comment. "That means a lot."

I waved him off, as if to say that it wasn't a problem. The conversation lulled, and I was glad that he turned the radio up to a just-hearable hum. Luckily, the Grammy's were held in Los Angeles itself, so the drive wasn't too far. I thanked him and gave a heartfelt 'good luck with the wife and twins' as we rolled to a stop just in front of my apartment. I took the few steps up and unlocked the door with practiced ease, locking the door just behind me.

I untied my bowtie, slid my jacket off and laid it over the back of a chair, placing my Grammy on the kitchen counter with a great amount of care. I shot Clint a text to let him know that I was home and alive, finding the number for take-out saved in my phone. Another night, another order of orange chicken.

It wasn't very long at all before I was lying on the couch, waiting patiently for my food to arrive and staring at the ceiling. For once, I didn't feel like watching television. My thoughts were a coalescence of the words said before and after my attainment of a Grammy and my conversation with Annabeth.

I was beyond grateful for the award. As in, blown away, completely in awe. I'd been told that I was a shoo-in, but what people say and what actually happens is two different things. Universes away, really.

Hearing the doorbell ring, I jumped up off the couch and hurried to the door, grabbing my wallet off the table near the door. I was already pulling out a twenty when I opened the door.

Instead of a delivery guy, clutching a bag full of take out, Clint stood before me. He still had my food, which was a relief, but he looked off. I raised an eyebrow, giving him a puzzled look. He nodded in acknowledgment, pushing past me.

I dropped my wallet.

Annabeth stood on my doorsteps, previously hidden by Clint. I considered shutting the door, but instead, I huffed and flung the door open the rest of the way. I heard her enter after me and I marched straight into the living room where Clint was helping himself to the ordered Chinese food.

"Hello," he greeted properly. "We decided to leave early and visit you."

"Yeah, thanks," I snapped, plucking the box out of his hand curtly and not caring when he simply chose another portion.

"Well," Clint started, "I'm simply here to mediate and keep you two from killing each other. Go on. Talk."

I raised an eyebrow, glancing at Annabeth. "This was your idea," I accused.

She looked spiteful. "Is not. Clint said we needed to talk." I stared blankly at her, expectant. "And I'm guessing you want me to talk first." I gave her a dry look and she sighed. "Point taken."

"Work out what you want to say while I go change," I muttered, setting my food down and starting for the hall. Smirking to myself, I pulled my shirt all the way off before exiting the room, simply because I could. After I was in my room, I nearly laughed to myself at how *different* this feeling was. For once, I wasn't the one apologizing to Annabeth. She was asking for *my* forgiveness. It's safe to say that it went to my head a little.

I put on a shirt that I knew she hated—she'd told me a million times—and pulled on some gym shorts before walking leisurely out to the living room. Annabeth scowled at my shirt, shooting me a dirty look, and I looked at her innocently.

"Please, everyone, help yourself to my Chinese food," I permitted, gesturing to the bag.

"You bought enough for four people," Clint spoke through his mouthful. "It was calling my name."

"Well, back when I lived with this girl," I pointedly said, feeling only slightly bad when Annabeth winced, "I always ordered for four. Three for me; one for her. We had a system. I thought we understood each other."

"We do!" Annabeth argued. Clint shot her a warning look, and she sighed. "We do," Annabeth repeated. "We just have more than our share of *mis*understandings."

"Why?" I questioned suddenly. It had been bothering me ever since I started being shunned. "Why did you ignore me?"

Annabeth stared at a lost fortune cookie resting on the table as though it held all of the answers. "Because," she said. "Because...I just—did."

"Not good enough," I informed her. "Really not good enough."

"I'm sorry," Annabeth said, exasperated.

"I know you are," I stressed. "So stop saying that."

"What do you want to hear?" Annabeth asked, after a small silence. Clint's eyes shifted from me to her, like a metronome.

"Just tell me why you ignored me," I stated simply. I gave her a meaningful look, and she shifted her eyes away. "Stop doing that! You always look away, or run away, or avoid confrontation or *something*!"

"Percy," Clint warned. I scrubbed my hands over my face, my elbows resting on my knees.

"You know I have a lot of pride," Annabeth said as I pulled my hair lightly. "You—I wasn't ready to let you win."

I looked at her stonily. "Jesus *Christ*, Annabeth! It's not always a competition. Dating—being *in love*—is not supposed to be a competition. There is no winning!" She blinked at me. "And why did you pull that? At the Grammy's? Did you think that if you said that in front of everyone that I would have to forgive you or something?"

Annabeth bit her lip and looked at me. “No, I swear! I just wanted you to hear that and I just thought you would believe it if I said what I needed to in front of an audience. I know love's not a competition. It's natural for me to be aggressive, no matter what I do.”

“Why?” I questioned. I looked down at my abandoned food on the coffee table. I was as competitive as the next person, but the fact that she viewed every minor thing as some sort of win-or-lose situation wasn't a good quality.

“I don't know,” Annabeth answered softly. “I don't know, Percy.” Her voice broke on my name, and my heart wrenched with a horrible ache. I squeezed my eyes shut and fell flat on my couch so that I didn't have to look at her. I couldn't focus if I looked at her.

Clint sat quietly, still poking at his food with a plastic fork, and Annabeth sat opposite of him on the second couch in the room. I rested my arm over my face, wishing I could be nonexistent. I didn't want to die—my life was great—I just wanted go disappear for a while.

“That's not good,” I muttered. “You shouldn't think like that.”

“I shouldn't do a lot of things,” Annabeth confessed.

I nodded in agreement. “We all do things we shouldn't. Like putting people on the spot in public.” Annabeth sighed, and I considered what to say, but I came up empty. Everything that needed to be said had been, at least on my part.

“I thought,” Annabeth said, after close to a full minute, “that if I kept my distance, I could forget about you. And you would forget about me. Or something. It sounds stupid now that I'm saying it out loud.” I sighed, leaning up on my elbows and deciding that I wanted to look at her again. “It didn't really work though.”

“Really?” I asked sarcastically.

Annabeth gave me a dirty look. “Trying to give an apology speech here.” I lulled my head the the side, barely restraining from rolling my eyes. “You know how I am.”

“Doesn't mean I have to like it,” I mumbled, fidgeting with the hem of my shirt.

“I'm getting mixed signals here,” Annabeth said, patience wearing thin. “Do you want me to apologize or not? Do you love me, or do you hate me? Honestly, Percy, I can't tell half the time.”

“Don't ever question whether or not I love you,” I enjoined. “That shouldn't even be a question.”

Annabeth looked despairing. “I know.”

“For as much as you know,” I retorted, “you don't make the best decisions.”

Annabeth half-laughed. “I don't, do I?”

“You really don't.”

“Thanks,” Annabeth scoffed. “I got that.”

I smiled slightly, shrugging one shoulder. “Carry on with the heartfelt apology.”

She rolled her eyes, staring at the black screen of the television. "I, Annabeth Chase, am not always right." She pursed her lips, looking disdainful.

I smiled indulgently, my eyes falling back on the hem of my shirt. "Go on."

"But, for the record, I usually am," she declared. I bit my lip to keep from laughing. "And I'll try to cut down on the whole aggressive thing," she continued earnestly. "And thank you for helping me—both of you." She nodded to Clint and he raised his fork as if to say 'no problem.' "Good enough?"

"Did you *mean* it?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Annabeth affirmed simply, meeting my gaze. I could see in the way her lips were pursed that she wasn't all that submissive to her current apology.

"Cool," I replied, falling flat on the couch. A few seconds later, I leaned up again. "But we're not...okay yet."

Annabeth winced, hardly noticeable, nodding slowly. "Okay."

"Alright," Clint said, standing. "Break." He clapped his hands, shuffling over to me and giving me a hug. "See you when I see you."

I rolled my eyes. "Manager meeting tomorrow."

"Right," Clint responded, raising both eyebrows. "Let's postpone that, yeah? We've had a good little meeting tonight. Annabeth," he addressed, "staying here? Going home?"

Annabeth looked uncomfortable with the ultimatum, but in the end, she decided to go home. I couldn't blame her, since all of her things were there.

An awkward moment arose when she hesitated before leaving, and again before hugging me. Then she did, and I could breathe a little easier. Because even if we weren't okay, we would get there. I wanted to be okay with her, as annoyed as I was with her open-door confession.

As much as Annabeth and I fought, I had a hunch that staying away from her wouldn't be easy. We'd walk out, we'd slam doors, we'd yell, but in the end, we always come back. It's a cycle. And endless, destructive cycle of each other's emotions and feelings.

Destructive as it was, I knew it wouldn't be truly ending anytime soon. When Annabeth told me that we were done "forever," it stung, but I didn't believe her. I don't think we'll ever be done, and never for as long as forever. We'd always be together in some way—as strangers, as friends, as lovers.

I felt a bit exhausted due to the night's events, physically and mentally, but my mind refused to settle down. I tried for a hot shower, but my mind continued moving a mile a minute. I tried music, but my thoughts drowned it out.

Another sleepless night.

As much as people viewed insomnia as a disorder, and something that was an inconvenience, I didn't really mind it. It wasn't the best feeling—being so tired, yet you can't sleep—but nighttime was beautiful. The stars shine brightly; the teenagers in love leave their bedrooms vacant and their parents worried. I thought of the night as intense and passionate; much more of a home than the daytime. I believe that the closest bonding occurs past midnight, when the person you're talking to hears you prate endlessly about dreams and your favorite memories and that new song you like and all of your anguish

and your happiness. I think it's after midnight when you really see people for who they are; no longer weighed down by the weight of the day as it's been—because this is a new day. You hear their last thoughts of the day and first thoughts in the morning.

I fondly ran my fingertips over the windowpane, watching the mostly empty streets for a while. I reminisced several months old memories with Annabeth; of our nights laying together and staring at the ceiling and just *being*. She didn't question our relationship or her trust in me, and I didn't think of my past or all the mistakes I've made. We just *were*; Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase.

I realized in that moment, staring at a blinking streetlights, that Annabeth was wrong—and not for the first time. It's not a matter of being done forever, or being in a fight. It was the fact that, no matter what, we would always *be*.

Annabeth didn't contact me for two days. They were both instated as stay home days, and I knew that Annabeth probably had a similar schedule to mine; confirming my thoughts that she could have visited if she wanted to. I wasn't sure if I was apathetic or glad she didn't call.

I was a bit relieved, seeing as fighting didn't seem especially appealing, but disheartened because whether or not we were quarrelling, I still missed her presence in general. I hated myself for it, really, and I knew that I shouldn't have forgiven her as easily as I did. I shouldn't have sat there, hopelessly hoping that she would call for three months. I shouldn't have let the conversation that night go as smoothly as it did.

On the third day, sans-Annabeth, a friend from a radio station was calling me for a chat on live air. I was glad that I didn't have to leave home, since I woke up a measly three minutes before he was set to call. With a muttered cussword, I fell out of bed and lunged for my iPhone. I laid on the floor for a moment, gathering my wits, and then two things happened at once. My doorbell rang, and my cellphone rang.

I groaned out loud, answering the call with a chipper “hello” as though I'd been awake for hours. While bantering with Connor, I hastened to the door, swinging it open while laughing at one of Connor's sayings.

Annabeth Chase, with her stupid gray eyes, was holding two Starbucks cups. I gestured that I was on the phone and allowed her inside. Across the street, I saw a person with a camera clicking the button one last time before jogging away.

With a bit more irritation than necessary, I slammed my door. “What's up?” Connor asked.

“Nothing,” I muttered. “Everything's good. And you?”

“Same old, same old,” Connor sighed. “How's fame? And that shiny new Grammy on your mantel?”

I grinned. “I don't have a mantel. But, it's shining on my kitchen counter, good sir.”

“Who is it?” Annabeth mouthed to me after I sat on the couch. I realized that I'd sat on the same piece of furniture she did and cursed my subconscious.

“Radio interview,” I answered, quietly.

“Who are you whispering to, Percy J?” Connor asked obnoxiously. I rolled my eyes and ran my hands through my hair.

"You radio announcers," I dodged, some truth to my statement, "so obnoxious."

"Of course," Connor replied poshly. I chuckled, shaking my head. Annabeth handed me what I assumed was my coffee and I nodded to her gratefully. Thankfully, Connor didn't press the question, and continued to say, "Thoughts on your Grammy? Did you name your sweetheart?"

"Not yet," I responded, thinking. I considered a bunch of actual names, but they didn't seem to work. Connor brainstormed alongside me. After a large spectrum of names, from Captain Grammy to Petunia, I burst out laughing. "Gramuel," I managed through my laughter. "Because when people are named Samuel, you call them Sammy...Gramuel. Grammy."

Annabeth snorted in laughter next to me, nearly dropping her coffee as chuckles shook her body. "You are an idiot," she informed me quietly.

I fought both urges to smile and scowl at the familiarity, and tuned in to Connor's next question.

The call ended sometime within the following hour, and Annabeth never left, even after she finished her tea. She scrolled through her phone or flipped through the newspaper dropped on my coffee table. I was happy that she stayed, because even if we weren't getting back together right off the bat, Annabeth was my best friend. As soon as I hung up the phone, she locked hers and let it fall onto her stomach.

"What's up?" she asked casually, curiously running her hands over the arm of the couch.

"The ceiling," I informed her, pointing upwards. She shot me a glare. "Oh, nothing really. You?"

"I was planning on dropping in for ten minutes to give you a coffee and say goodmorning with a small conversation, but you were on the phone. And I wasn't going to leave until I talked to you."

"Cute," I muttered. "Determination."

"Cute," Annabeth mocked. "Ungratefulness."

"You should be talking," I snapped reflexively.

Annabeth's eyes flared and she opened her mouth to more likely than not argue back, but then she stopped herself. "Fair enough," she decided in an even voice.

"Someone photographed you on your way in," I recalled. "Or I'm pretty sure they did, anyways."

"Is that a good or a bad thing?" Annabeth asked hesitantly.

I shrugged. "S not really either."

"Oh," she answered. "Okay."

We lapsed into an awkward silence, which hurt a little because we used to never have any. We were so in sync that we could count on one another to just *know* what to say or what you were saying.

We ended up drawing out a "so..." at the same time, and I almost smiled. Because that was the us I loved—saying things in unison.

Annabeth smiled at her palms. "What do we do?" she questioned bluntly.

I tensed, cracking my knuckles simply to have something to do with my hands. “I don't know,” I divulged with a weary sigh. “I don't want to keep acting like strangers, but there's times where I feel like I don't know you at all.”

“What if...” Annabeth hesitated, as though she was internally arguing with herself. She closed her eyes tight and interlaced her fingers. “What if we stopped trying to make this work so we can...be together again?” she continued finally.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Why don't we stop striving for making our dating relationship okay?” Annabeth clarified in a strained voice. “We should just focus on friends.”

I scratched the back of my hand absently, looking up at her. “You think we could make that work?”

“Well,” Annabeth said with an almost bittersweet smile, “best friends worked for us before we actually, you know, loved each other.”

I nodded in understanding. “Right. Uh,” I stared adamantly at a picture frame on top of the vacant bookcase, the one with a picture of my mother and I. “Yeah,” I answered a bit shakily. “Yeah. We can try that.”

The next day, without Clint's permission, Annabeth and I went to our Starbucks. I didn't think about love, not really, and we acted like friends. I still paid for both of our coffees (lover or not, I was still a gentleman), and Annabeth scowled at me. It felt so much easier than the shaky apologies and conversations of “what next?” This was simple. This was something I could handle.

Harry was nowhere to be seen. If I would have seen him, I probably would have beaten him to a *pulp*, the despicable jealous prude.

If Annabeth was unthankful before, she was too thankful now. She gave her gratitude for me buying the coffee several times, saying thank you every time I opened a door for her or said something nice. It felt nice, despite it's superfluous use, because I knew what she appreciated. And really, that's what I'd been asking for since the beginning.

After our coffee outing—in which there had been only *one* heavy silence, I counted—I offered to take Annabeth home. She claimed that she really needed to get some laundry done, and I obliged easily. However, when we arrived there, she invited me in to come and check it out, and I agreed. Friends did that.

Her apartment was on the second floor, meaning that we had a slightly long walk. She was telling me about how beneficial they were, sneaking in a bit of daily exercise, and I focused on not tripping.

Annabeth's apartment was nice. Books were strewn everywhere, laying on the kitchen counter and piled up in corners. She confessed that she hadn't had much time to read, but they made her feel at home.

Her bedroom was light green—“tea green,” Annabeth corrected—and looked much like her room in my house. I made a mental note to convert it back into a contemporary guest room as Annabeth showed me the kitchen. “This is my favorite,” I announced, searching through the cabinets for something to eat. She sighed, yanking the back of my shirt and dragging me over to a cabinet full of

graciously unhealthy food. I made sure to look exaggeratedly relieved. "I was beginning to think that all you had was organic food," I told her in mock terror, choosing a bag of chips and helping myself.

"How do you manage to stay in shape?" Annabeth asked, making a face at my enthusiastic eating.

"Gym," I answered with a shrug. "Sometimes. High metabolism."

"You're going to be unsightly when you age," she declared, shaking her head. "Absolutely horrible."

"At least I was hot while I was young," I jeered, shooting her a look. "Unlike some." I dropped a chip, staring at it forlornly as though I'd dropped my first born child. Annabeth snorted in laughter, and I was glad that we could settle back to normality.

Sure, we were leaving some things unsaid, but we weren't arguing for the moment. And this felt a lot better than listing every single thing that went wrong. She picked up the dropped chip, tossing it into the trash can and throwing me a bottle of water. It hit my shoulder bluntly before I caught it stealthily with my arm. "Thanks," I called after her, as she vacated the kitchen.

I figured she was going to process said laundry, and so I wandered around her apartment a bit aimlessly. I was overstaying my welcome, but I liked seeing Annabeth's pretentious bitch-cave; it contrasted greatly with my bachelor pad *and* man-cave.

Then I settled on the question of whether not I was really a bachelor any more. Annabeth and I weren't dating, but I didn't really want to date anyone in general. I liked living the single life, sort of.

My theory was that as long as I had a few good best friends, I'd be fine. Until I got lonely. But, I supposed that I would deal with that bag of chips when I bought it.

Snorting at the own thoughts in my mind, I replaced the bag of chips in the cabinet and opened three doors incorrectly until I found her in the laundry room. "I should go," I told her.

"Sure thing, Percy," she said sarcastically. "Eat all of my food and leave."

"I'll have you know that I didn't even finish the bag of chips," I apprised her, in a royal voice. She rolled her eyes at me, dropping the lip of the washer.

"Go on, then. Leave, *peasant*," Annabeth said haughtily, staring at me as if I were gum on the bottom of her shoe.

I laughed, ruffling her hair. "Bye, *Princess*," I said witheringly.

She scowled, and I showed myself out with a wave over my shoulder, not noticing the casually posted up guy just outside her door, clicking his camera.

"Percy," Clint warned.

"I swear she was just showing me her apartment, Clinton. I ate some food, she did some laundry, I left. That's it," I summed up.

He looked at me worriedly. "You're okay, right?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, Clinton."

“Stop,” he chastised lightly, propping his feet up on my coffee table. “You guys aren't just jumping right back into it, are you?”

I paused in my tracks. “Why would you think that?”

Clint shrugged. “There's been a few coffee *dates* I didn't know were happening. You almost always text me and say what's up.”

I waved it off. “It was spur of the moment.”

“I hate to beat a dead horse—”

“That's awfully sadistic,” I interjected.

Clint gave me a desert-dry look. “—But I'm just looking out for you.” I huffed, examining my thumb nail. “And I saw how you were when she left. Now you're better again. And I don't want you to get right back to dating just to have her leave again.”

“Thanks,” I managed, after a while. “But we're not dating. So, no worries.”

“Then all the coffee dates?” Clint asked, seemingly mitigated by my reassurance.

“Friend stuff,” I affirmed. “*Just* friend stuff.”

Three days later, Clint told us that we had to do something about the dating rumors. Letting them hang out to dry wasn't turning out to be so successful, so I tweeted her a simple ‘*glad we didn't let all that mess keep us from being friends :),*’ and she replied something to say that she agreed.

The rumors were extinguished, but relentless Percabeth supporters claimed that we were dating, but didn't want it to seem sketchy. I didn't get that theory, because wouldn't it be “sketchy” that we were dating and hiding it?

Regardless of whether people thought we were or weren't Annabeth and I kept striving back to our point of best friends. Reestablishing trust, between the both of us, took time, but it's not like I had to retell her about my past. So, it was a relatively short period of time before we were back to bantering and teasing, but never flirting or kissing. We hugged sometimes, but it was always the quick hugs that you gave close friends; antipathetic to our old passionate and lengthy hugs.

“We're better like this,” I told Annabeth one day while we lounged around, watching movies.

“I've heard that before,” Annabeth muttered.

I hesitated before continuing, double- and triple-checking with myself that this was what I wanted to say. “No,” I clarified after deliberation. “I meant that were better as friends. Better as best friends. As opposed to...” I trailed off, making a gesture that hopefully encompassed all of the falling in love and dating aspect.

Annabeth stared at me for a moment before nodding. “You know, I was thinking the same thing,” she divulged.

“Less arguing,” I listed. “Less tension. Less apologizing. Less pressure.”

“Pressure?” Annabeth questioned. “I agree with everything else, but...do I pressure you?”

I laughed, nudging the back of her head with my foot. “No, I meant pressure from society and the public.”

“Ah,” Annabeth said from her place on the floor in front of me. “I see.”

“So, you agree with me?” I inquired, running my hands over my blanket. “We're better at being friends?”

Annabeth turned around, holding out her pinky. “Just best friends,” she said as my pinky latched onto hers. “For real this time,” Annabeth added with a humored laugh.

“Of course,” I chuckled. “Just best friends.”

Despite the fact that their relationship had been unveiled as a sham, Annabeth still got her fame.

She was currently backed up with interviews—which still mentioned the scandal nearly every time—and you heard her name everywhere you went. Rather than having one song on the radio, Annabeth had three still circulating. The most famous of celebrities were noticing her. Annabeth had quite literally *fallen* off the couch when John Mayer mentioned her in a tweet. Internationally, people were begging her to do concerts. She was idolized and looked up to by teens worldwide. It was everything she'd ever wanted.

Thinking back to where it all began—a cramped, pastel office with Percy Jackson and her manager—Annabeth could almost swear that it was a dream. Everything had changed, from the color of Percy's hair to their relationship status (several times). Annabeth remembered that day like it was yesterday; the smell of strong ink as she carefully scrawled her penmanship, and an aroma that she would later recognize as *Percy*. She had trouble believing that this wasn't just an illusion, and she'd wake up soon to the real world, living in a beatdown apartment with a drunken mother. No one just *hits* a streak of luck like she had; not without consequences.

Annabeth waited, and waited, and waited for the moment that her sales went downhill, or everyone got bored with her.

A year passed.

It never came.

She was two years famous, with a Grammy (fondly named Gramantha by Percy) sitting atop her bookshelf and several other sought after awards. Annabeth was finally in her all time high; meeting fans anywhere and everywhere she went as her follower count on Twitter progressively inched upward. She was close to nine million.

And all the while—through petty rumors and crazy fans and enough fame to share with everyone—Annabeth had Percy.

The friends thing was working. It had been almost eleven months since they'd made that agreement, and they had yet to push limits.

Well, maybe that was a lie. Annabeth accidentally kissed his cheek one day, almost out of muscle memory, and the hugs weren't so brusque anymore. They'd fall asleep on the same couch and Percy still called her 'babe.' She still made him coffee every morning and shared blankets with him when they opted for a day in with excessive amounts of Disney movies. They still ended up playing footsies underneath the table, whether it was intentional or not. Annabeth's reasoning was that they had done all the same things as best friends previously, so why couldn't they now?

It was starting to get warmer outside, March opening the red curtain for summer to put on it's show. The flowers got brighter, along with Annabeth's smile on the front of every magazine. Breathtakingly gorgeous efflorescence began to show itself. The weather was perfect for friendly walks in the park and frappuccinos rather than lattes. Annabeth grew in fame; she learned the ropes so well, Percy knew she was *born* for this. Percy smiled at her success, still having his own, but Annabeth's was more of something to celebrate.

They were at the point of being so comfortable and attached to each other that they could speak openly without judgment. Percy could say that he didn't approve of the cute actor tweeting Annabeth, and Annabeth could tell Percy that the new girl flirting with him shamelessly was no good. They were looking out for each other with the most selfish of intentions.

Days turned into weeks which turned into months. Percy stayed single. Annabeth didn't date a soul.

She'd gone as far as bringing it up one day, cautiously saying, "Why haven't you dated anyone? I mean, after..." Annabeth's voice faded out, but Percy could read the unsaid words in her eyes. He was always reading her eyes, or maybe looking for an excuse to stare at them. They seemed to be brighter these days, tauntingly lively and silver, making it difficult to remember that he *couldn't*.

"Because you have yet to approve of a single person," Percy informed her, grinning. His look softened as she fiddled with a tassel on the pillow in her lap, avoiding his eyes. It wasn't the first time they'd ventured into this realm, but he knew Annabeth wasn't at ease with the topic. In a softer voice, he added, "Besides, I've got you, don't I?"

Annabeth suppressed a smile and the way her heart gave that *unacceptable* flutter. "What's that mean?" she questioned, pushing down her delight and meeting his eyes. They were too much. Ever since Annabeth had met Percy, the only appropriate words she could find to describe him was simply 'too much.'

"It means," Percy divulged after a moment, "that until I find a girl worth dating that we both like, I have you." He smiled. "It's a package deal, really. Cuddles and sleepovers and perfect coffee and a best friend all in one."

Annabeth bit back a smile and tried to ignore the way her hands tingled for a reason she was unwilling to confront.

They were almost inseparable; Annabeth still had her own apartment, but half of her things stayed at Percy's. She had a good portion of his belongings as well, and she took it upon herself to steal every hoodie he figured was lost. They were inseparable, often refusing to be away from each other for extended periods of time. They always went to parties as a duo—never a couple—and people simply learned to send one invitation for the both of them.

Things were different than dating. There were moments when Annabeth was asleep, a heavy yet feather-light weight on his chest, that Percy missed the best friends, but *more* side of them. He still got the rushes of affection, but he'd thoroughly convinced himself that they were platonic. There were moments when Percy woke up, his eyes anomalously luminescent and his hair an absolute *mess*, that Annabeth's hands shook with the effort of not pulling his face to hers. She still felt oddly fond of his cluelessness, and was often charmed by his innocently confused comments.

There was unspoken tension that they both ignored. They acknowledged it separately, and knew that the other had recognized it as well, but they firmly refused to mention it. The times where Percy paused after a long hug, almost kissing Annabeth on reflex, were noticed and forgotten. Sort of.

Tonight, they would both be attending a party for whatever reason (was a reason even needed? Everyone was rich with money to blow, and they may as well blow it with friends), and Annabeth wasn't in an exceptionally party-like mood. Annabeth was hardly ever in a party-like mood, save the nights where she and Percy stayed up too late watching horrible movies and eating too much.

"We've attended three of these in the past two weeks," Annabeth complained. "I am *not* feeling it." Her voice was wearied, and Percy felt like a bad friend for dragging her here. His encouragement had

truly been the only reason she'd gotten ready, but after hearing how much she was dreading the celebration, Percy felt a surge of sympathy.

"We'll just stay for an hour or two and then bail," Percy promised, patting her knee in an oddly domestic, though *definitely* platonic, way. Annabeth sighed, and Percy knew her well enough to take it as an agreement. The ride to the current party they were making an appearance at—who was it for again?—still had a good ten minutes. Annabeth smoothed out her dress, perfecting every small wrinkle visible.

"You know what's weird?" Percy asked after a while. Annabeth redirected her attention to him, and Percy felt somewhat nervous when he continued, "We'll have known each other for two years, come September."

Annabeth looked at Percy, and he wished that they hadn't sat so close. It was always like this, close and yet miles away. "It hardly feels like it," she said softly, her expression something unidentifiable. Percy wished, and not for the first time, that he could read her mind. Annabeth's eyes showed how she was feeling, but they hardly ever shared her true thoughts. "But I feel like it's been decades, all the same."

"Yeah," Percy answered, "me too." Annabeth leaned her head on his shoulder, and he didn't think that he could push her away, even if he wanted to.

And when Annabeth buried her face in his shoulder and simply stated, "I love you," Percy knew that it would have been physically impossible.

It wasn't that they never said the phrase to each other, since they never neglected to let the other know how much they cared and how they needed them, but the moment felt heavy. Percy turned, burying his face in Annabeth's hair and wondered if she'd ever mean it in the romantic way again. Percy wondered if *he* would ever say those three words to her with *that* emotion—the *right* emotion?

They arrived at the party in a silence that only they were accustomed to, greeting everyone around them, but hardly speaking to one another. There were conversing through facial expressions and their eyes, both aspectabund to each other. It was convenient for times like now, when they were stuck at a party for someone they didn't even know. They couldn't outright say, *I'd rather be pulling my eyelashes off*, but Annabeth's eyes suggested the idea easily.

After thirty minutes, Percy realized that he should have listened to Annabeth. The more faces he'd seen with names he couldn't remember, the more overcome by lassitude he was. They'd gone their separate ways, shuffling around the party and mingling to let their presence be known. In the end, they met at their unspoken safe house: the refreshment table.

Annabeth was gingerly poking a strawberry that looked questionable when Percy leaned against the table next to her. She averted her attention to a much less suspicious Percy Jackson.

"So soon?" Percy inquired, smiling at her.

"Well, you're here, too," Annabeth argued. "Ready?"

"Of course," Percy replied. His hand circled around her wrist loosely—never holding hands, not anymore—and they made a beeline for the closest exit.

The grandiose party was so loud and extravagant that no one noticed their sly escape.

Despite the many times they'd followed through with this plan of action, Percy and Annabeth both got a childish rush every time. They hid behind trees and bushes, acting as though they were secret agents rather than celebrities in their late teens. It was raining, and they were both drenched, but laughing to themselves the whole time. Annabeth doubled over when Percy dramatically somersaulted while humming classic spy music, and Percy beamed at her amusement.

"It's raining," Percy announced, pulling on his saturated shirt.

"No, really," Annabeth returned sarcastically, wringing her hair out uselessly. "I would have never noticed."

"Dance with me!" Percy enjoined over the sound of the precipitation.

Annabeth rolled her eyes. "Definitely not."

"If you don't," Percy threatened, "I'll serenade you."

"Sure you wi—"

Percy burst out with the chorus of "I'll Be," dropping down to one knee and holding out a hand. His voice, clear and flawless, coalescing with the rain gave Annabeth chills—and not from her drenched state. Annabeth thought, *too much*. "Annabeth, dance with me right now," he said quickly between the next verse. He continued belting as Annabeth put her hand over his mouth and tried not to smile too big.

"Fine," she relented.

Percy grinned, taking hold of her wrists and guiding them to his shoulders. It wasn't their first time slow dancing within the past few weeks, due to Percy's spontaneity and hopeless romanticism, but it *was* the first time they'd ever danced in the rain. Percy hummed a thousand different tunes as they sprung into his mind and Annabeth said the title every time she recognized them. It wasn't the first time they'd done that either.

"You're a good best friend," Percy told her with a laugh. It was hard to hear him over the rain, but Annabeth had a feeling that she would be able to pick out his voice in a crowd of thousands. "The absolute best. No one else would dance with me in the rain."

Annabeth snorted in laughter, shaking her head and leaning against his cold chest. "Are you unaware of the entire teenage, female—and some male—population?"

"Okay," Percy answered, ending the dance and pulling her into a hug. "Maybe that was a bad example. But you're the only one that *I* would dance in the rain with. Besides Jennifer Lawrence. I love Jennifer Lawrence."

Annabeth smiled, tightening her arms around his neck and shifting up. She hooked her chin over his shoulder, her feet no longer touching the ground, and Percy instinctively held her closer for safety. *For safety*, honestly.

The rain had always given Annabeth an infinite feeling. Much like the space right between dreams and consciousness, anything seemed possible. Water falling down in sheets made the world look different, clouded over yet intensified with every fallen raindrop. Things were blurred, but in a perfect way. In a way that no longer limited actions. Annabeth hated to get philosophical about *rain* of all things, but it

washed away the evanescent feeling life gave you—the feeling that things ended and that you were simply a passing thing. Rain was liberating, in a way.

Maybe that's why she said, "I miss you."

Percy laughed, leaning back a bit and setting Annabeth down. He threw his arms out and leaned his head back in the pouring rain, piling on the dramatics. Shifting his head upright, he gave her his signature lopsided smile. "How can you miss me if I'm right here?"

Annabeth beamed at how *free* Percy looked right now, alive with the feeling of sneaking out of the party and standing in the rain. She stored it away in her carefully filed folder called 'Things For A Sad Day.' "No," she clarified, completely at ease with him. "Sometimes, like now, for example, I miss the way we used to be."

Percy started walking backwards, and Annabeth followed. "As in..." Percy trailed off, looking at her curiously, and Annabeth simply nodded. A smug smirk materialized on his lips. "Annabeth Chase wants to kiss me," he taunted, casually leaning up against a lamp post, his hands behind his head. "I can't blame you. I'll bet I'm irresistible right now." The overjoyed smile on his lips was honestly *too much*. Everything Percy did was *too much*. Percy was the epitome of *too much*.

Annabeth rolled her eyes, keeping her wistful expression from permeating the mask. "Don't get cocky about it, or anything."

"Tell you what, Annabeth," Percy said, adopting a suave tone. "I'll kiss you as you're *so desperately* wishing for me to, if and only if we have a best friend's sleepover."

"We had one last night," Annabeth commented, not allowing herself to focus on the part of the sentence preceding his suggestion.

"We used to have them every night," Percy retorted, shooting Annabeth a pointed look.

"I like my apartment," Annabeth said stubbornly. "It took me so long to settle in! I was unpacking for weeks and attempting to make it look homey with all of the books and blankets. I've already decorated everything just the way I want it and—"

Percy sighed abruptly and loudly over the rain. He crooked a finger and Annabeth stepped forward. "Stop yelling," he teased, tugging on a sopping wet curl.

She scowled at him, as she always did when he pulled on her curls with fascination, and Percy grinned lazily before he kissed the corner of her mouth. He pulled back after merely a second—a boundless, tantalizing second—and looked shocked. "I didn't mean to do that," Percy decided, speaking slowly, and also lying. As much as he wanted to say that he'd misjudged where her cheek was, it wasn't the case at all.

"It's fine," Annabeth dismissed easily. It wasn't the first time, or the last time, they would overstep boundaries. Her mind burned, almost painfully with the memories of every time they'd ever kissed. When it was fabricated, when it was complicated, and when it was almost too intense to handle. *This isn't normal*, Annabeth mentally noted. She didn't think it was possible to feel like someone *knew* you, soul deep and in every way possible; and yet here stood Percy, who'd somehow shattered every belief she'd ever had and proved her wrong. The impossible *was* possible, as long as Percy was with her.

"It's fine," Annabeth reiterated after a few seconds, if only to imbue the words firmly in her mind.

They were standing in the rain, drenched, and *god*, where were they? Percy's arms wrapped around her, and it was home. Percy felt the most conviction he'd ever felt when he said, "I love you."

Annabeth's hands tingled and fisted in his shirt. "Don't."

"This sounds familiar," Percy muttered, glad that the rain was letting up. He rested his chin naturally atop Annabeth's head.

"How can you?" Annabeth asked. "All I've done is mess this up over and over. How can you still love me?"

Percy snorted, tainting the moment. "Beats me. I didn't even like blondes before you."

Annabeth scoffed, punching him for ruining the moment. "You were a blonde yourself!"

"Not naturally," Percy reasoned. "I resented them, I suppose."

"I," Annabeth began, "do not understand you in the slightest."

"Yeah, you do," Percy dismissed. "I vote we call a car with our iPhones, which are probably soaking wet."

"Chinese?" Annabeth question, somewhat glad the heavy moment had passed, yet sad that it hadn't been discussed further.

"Duh," Percy replied, rolling his eyes. "Sleepover?" He pouted childishly, knowing that she wouldn't be able to say no.

"Yes, Percy," she affirmed, exasperated.

He smiled his *stupid* lopsided smile, and Annabeth fished her indeed wet phone out of her pocket.

They'd passed the point of talking about how they felt, and feeling uncomfortable after. If one of them said, "don't look at me like that," the other would glance away. It was an unspoken agreement to help each other's feelings fade.

It wasn't working, really. Maybe if they had agreed to stay distanced for a few months, but not seeing each other *everyday* and being attached at the hip. They were still doing everything they'd done while dating, save the kissing—and they even slipped up on that at times. Both Percy and Annabeth were stuck in the closeness of their relationship, knowing they'd fall apart if they weren't with each other, but falling apart because they weren't *with* each other.

They were back in that destructive cycle; the road that led to decadence.

Clint was skeptic of their relationship, often giving them weary looks when he would enter their apartment to find them tangled on the couch. He had a lurking feeling that their closeness was a problem for them, because it wasn't close enough. Close had never been close enough for them. He'd confronted Percy about it one morning, only to be shrugged off and met with the words, "we're just friends." It wasn't really an answer, but Clint sighed forlornly and gave him the schedule for the day.

Almost all of the fans were pleading for them to get back together—back where they *belonged*—but they always refused. They were both convinced that the other had no interest in a relationship, and that it was really over and done. They were better this way, they were better this way, they were *better this way*.

Subconsciously, they both knew that they weren't done. They'd never be *done*. Something like what they had never ended.

Sleepovers a few times a week turned into one week at Annabeth's, one week at Percy's. They should have been scared, seeing as the thought of being away from each other for more than a few hours was actually *painful*. They were dangerously attached. They patched up the worry of the depth of their bond by finding solace in the fact that it wasn't unusual for best friends to rely on each other.

Percy was just glad that he could sleep again. Annabeth was glad that she wasn't cold throughout the night.

And *maybe*, just a little, they enjoyed the closeness. Maybe.

Their first joint interview in quite a while was with an up-and-coming talk show host; they figured that if it went poorly, it would be easily forgotten since the show was struggling for viewers. Her name was Cassandra Locky, which really wasn't catchy at all, and her hair was a vibrant fuchsia. She had a vibe of *I asked Daddy if I could have a show and he told me that he'd do anything for his angel*. Percy wasn't really complaining. Since she was new to the game, Cassandra was asking the same questions that every other interviewer had. Things like this were easy.

Percy and Annabeth's answers, long or truncated as they were, always had Cassandra's thoughts tagged on after it. Annabeth leaned her head on Percy's shoulder as Cassandra was talking—virtually to herself—and said that it was more of Cassandra interviewing herself under her breath.

Percy replied with his easy going, breathy chuckle, and Annabeth closed her eyes, memorizing the sound for a day when she needed a gorgeous memory. But, then again, everything Percy did was flawless in his perfectly imperfect way. It was carefully filed away in the suppressed file called 'Things I Love About Percy.' Annabeth's filing system was very efficient in that way.

"Are you two getting back together or what?"

Annabeth straightened up immediately from her previous position of leaning on Percy and raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

"I mean, you guys are *all over* each other!" Cassandra said loudly, drawing attention to herself rather than her guests.

"We're best friends," Annabeth argued. "I'm allowed to lean on my best friend's shoulder." Her words held more bite than she'd meant for them to, and the crowd gave an appropriate response. Percy discretely pressed his shoe against hers; a silent warning and reassurance.

"Who's to say that you guys aren't back together already?" Cassandra asked boldly. Annabeth wondered how long it had taken her to apply the caked make-up.

Percy laughed lightly, shaking his head. The tension evaporated instantly, in the way that only Percy could mitigate any argument, besides theirs. "Trust me, everyone would know if we were."

"What makes you say that, Percy?" Cassandra nearly purred, blinking her eyelashes too many times. Percy wondered if she was seizing.

"Because..." Percy stopped, looking over to Annabeth for help, but she seemed just as interested in his answer as everyone else. He grasped for a lie, but ended up saying, "I'd be bragging about it."

The crowd let out a synchronized “aww” and Percy almost winced. *That* wasn't what he should have said. He cursed the lack of a filter in his head, preventing him from saying the truth. It was an inconvenience, at best. Ever since the beginning, he'd always been the one that *felt* more and wanted them to *be* more. And here he was, *again*, more or less admitting that he still harbored feelings for her.

Annabeth wondered how she got so lucky to be stuck with this (wonderful, stupidly amazing) idiot. It wasn't the first time he'd slipped up like this, accidentally saying that he still *cared* about Annabeth, though not in so many words. She'd heard it once or twice on his radio interviews (early in the morning; she'd call Clint and find out what station so she could listen in) and she'd smiled into her cup of tea both times.

“Annabeth?” Cassandra addressed. “Your thoughts?”

“Of course we'd tell everyone,” Annabeth answered, without any permission from her mind. “He may be an ignoramus, but he wasn't a *bad* boyfriend.”

Percy shoved her with a fake glare and Annabeth smiled, innocently. She read a question in his eyes, the silent one asking if that was true, and Annabeth nodded, imperceptibly, unless you were Percy. His hair fell into his eyes when he cast his gaze downward, and all Annabeth could think was *no fair* and *too much*.

“So, why aren't you guys dating, again?” Cassandra interrogated, she leaned forward in anticipation, along with probably every other dedicated fan in the world.

“We're better this way,” Percy and Annabeth replied in unison. They shared a small smile before looking back to Cassandra. “Dating put a strain on our relationship. We're better as friends,” Annabeth continued. Percy nodded in agreement.

'Friends' was a very loose term. As much as they tried to convince themselves otherwise, most friends didn't sleep in the same bed, or on the same couch, so interwoven that it was a feat to guess whose limbs were whose. Most best friends didn't feel the agonizing need to be together, even if they weren't as together as they wished. Most best friends didn't “accidentally” kiss each other swiftly on the cheek before walking away, or leave domestic notes with scribbled “I love you”s and “be back soon”s.

Annabeth thought that they were still a bit in between dating and friends. They held the attachment of a couple but labeled it as best friends. But, it was working, for now, so she couldn't complain.

Annabeth never really considered what she would do when it *stopped* working.

Because, suddenly, the hugs and warm smiles weren't enough. Percy was *too much*, as always, with his constantly disheveled, yet endearing hair, and his too green, but blue, orphic eyes. Percy was too caring, yet casual—sometimes making her feel as though he lusted after a true relationship just as much as she did, and sometimes forcing her to believe that he could care less. It was disconcerting.

Percy only felt mild amounts of chagrin when Annabeth caught him staring, but he liked to think that they'd passed the point of embarrassment around each other. Sometimes, people could fall into your life so easily, and just *fit*, that you didn't have to worry about saying something wrong. They'd understand anyways. Annabeth and Percy were different, nearly disparate, and Percy hated to be *that* guy, but opposites did attract.

It was almost like the way the moon pulled on the tides; two completely separate forces, worlds away, but connected in that way. Sometimes, they felt closer than usual, and sometimes, they retracted from each other. No matter what happened, they would always have some sort of pull on each other.

Enough was never enough anymore; best friends was never enough. They had longing, somewhat despairing glances caught on camera to prove that. They had images of lingering touches falling onto nearly every blog out there, and so many people wishing for them to be together, it wouldn't be a surprise if everyone wished for it at 11:11 every night.

But when Percy realized he'd started wishing along with them, he figured it was time they confront the fact that he was experiencing alarming amounts of saudade.

Percy, the quaint charmer he was, carefully formulated a cup of coffee when he woke up before Annabeth. That in itself was a rare occurrence, but he assumed that it was simply the stars aligning for his elucidation of being standoffish recently. Annabeth was sleeping, gripping the sheets as though she'd noticed his absence subconsciously. That was almost enough for him to abandon the issue and the coffee, slip right back into bed, and let her pull on his shirt rather than the sheets.

Percy had never really admitted it, but he liked when Annabeth did that. He liked when she would anchor herself in his shirt or his hair, because he felt *needed*. And Percy really loved that feeling. He'd spent the majority of his life needing other people—people to care for him, people to look out for him, people to teach him—and knowing that he was finally the person someone *needed*. . .It was all he'd ever wanted, really.

Forgetting the allure of returning to bed, he set Annabeth's coffee on the nightstand, shaking her shoulder slightly. Her breathing cadence changed, and Percy knew she'd wake up soon. Rather than relentlessly shoving her until she snapped at him, he sat on the edge of his bed, twiddling his thumbs and applying his easy-going aura, despite the situation.

Not two minutes later, as anticipated, Annabeth sat up slowly and leaned against the headboard. She looked at Percy with the most amount of distress she could muster through her sleep-haze. "Why are you up before me? Your insomnia's not back is it?"

Percy shook his head mutely, worried that he'd say something stupid, such as "you're adorable in the mornings" or "you look like a kitten."

"Okay," Annabeth mumbled. She pushed her hair out of her face, tying it up more carefully (it'd become annoyingly messy while sleeping). "What's up?"

"Uh, coffee, here," Percy answered tactlessly.

Annabeth gave him an obvious look, accepting the coffee and staring him down. "You only act like this when you need to talk to me about something, but you're afraid to." Percy inwardly smiled, because she knew him so well, through and through. "Commence speaking."

Percy chuckled, stretching his back (he'd neglected to do so previously, and if it's because he knows that Annabeth blushes every time he does, he'll never tell). "Well, we need to talk."

"Oh, not those four words," Annabeth teased. He felt only a slight amount of pride at the small rose tint to her cheeks.

"On the bright side, I'm not breaking up with you," Percy joked.

"Great," Annabeth bantered drily. "I would have been heartbroken."

Percy grinned, thinking *I really hope that's true*. "I think we need to talk about *this*." He gestured vaguely, and Annabeth scowled. "I mean, the huge issue that we aren't talking about."

“Why do you always skirt around important things?” Annabeth questioned rhetorically. “What do you mean?”

Percy sighed, shaking out his hair and staring adamantly at his hands. “It's happening again.” He yanked courage from somewhere, and met her eyes. “Like, *it* it.”

“Jesus *Christ*, Percy, if you don't stop saying nonsensical things—”

“Annabeth,” Percy interjected, effectively putting an end to her words. He gave her a look, and he felt like dying when realization bloomed on her face.

“Oh,” she said softly, pursing her lips. “I see.”

“I didn't know how to say that,” Percy confessed slowly. “Saying 'I like you again' would have sounded stupid.”

Annabeth laughed, and Percy took that as a good sign. “To be honest, Percy, a lot of what you say sounds stupid.” It was a jibe with no real resentment, and Percy smiled down at the bracelet he was fidgeting with.

“The friends thing isn't working,” Percy said, into the silence that could have been a minute or an hour.

“I know,” was Annabeth's only reply.

They lapsed back into silence, with only a small bout of tension. Percy wondered what Annabeth was thinking, and Annabeth wondered how long Percy had been thinking this. She'd obviously thought it as well, but now that the confrontation was just before her, Annabeth couldn't think of any *right* words to say.

“What next?” Percy asked, hating that they were back to this. With the amount of times he'd said it, Percy figured he might as well get a stupid t-shirt emblazoned with the words and dramatically rip his shirt off every time it came to the point.

Annabeth scowled out the window, for once not knowing. Just the thought of time apart caused her stomach to swoop in dread. “We keep trying,” she suggested.

Percy sighed, rubbing his face and scratching his jaw absently. “We've been trying to make this work for almost a year.”

“It is working,” Annabeth assured him. “We just have to give it more time.”

“Annabeth,” Percy said lightly, “this is working about as well as me trying to read a book.”

“I'm guessing that means 'not at all,’” Annabeth muttered, tracing the lip of her coffee cup.

Percy rested a hand on her knee, and she looked up at him. *Too much.* “Exactly. So, we need to try something else or come up with some other plan.”

“Date other people,” Annabeth suggested, not liking the way her stomach twisted.

“Date other people,” Percy repeated, as though it were a foreign language. Annabeth nodded. “You do realize that 'dating other people' means physically *going* on a date with another person?”

Swallowing her apprehension, Annabeth said, “Yes.” Percy raised an eyebrow. “It's worth a try, no?”

No, it's not, Percy thought. "Fine," he said aloud.

"Fine," Annabeth affirmed. She looked back out the window, thinking of the admittedly gorgeous girl who was expressing a lot of interest in Percy. "I cast my vote as Rachel, for you."

"Rachel," Percy said again, suppressing a wince. She was only famous because Daddy was rich. "Alright. For you, I choose..." Percy pondered, trying to think of someone who wouldn't out-do him. He felt conflicted about this new arrangement. "What about that new guy? At the last party we went to, with the band?"

"Will," Annabeth deadpanned. "Will Solace."

"Him," Percy decided. Will wasn't unattractive, but he was blonde. Percy had learned that Annabeth didn't really care for blondes; she preferred darker hair much more. "Date him."

"One date?" Annabeth questioned. "Two?"

"One," Percy reasoned. "And if it goes well, two. And if that goes well, three." Annabeth nodded.

They planned it carefully. Percy and Annabeth would invite Will to some fancy restaurant that had a spite for even numbers of people in a party. He'd claimed that it was some odd superstition, which it wasn't, but it made their arrangement sound good. The restaurant had no such distaste for even numbers. He'd invited Will along with a, "Hey, man, you were cool. We were wondering if you'd want to chill with us? Don't worry about being the third wheel, I think that'll be me."

Will had been confused, but moments later caught the drift and agreed to go to lunch with them the next day. Lunch was good—less commitment and promise than dinner—and Percy was satisfied. He had to drag Annabeth out of bed, complaining of a headache, but she finally relented and readied herself.

They called a car, and Percy clambered in after Annabeth, not liking the way that this plan was going. The plan was going exactly as, well, *planned*, but Percy didn't really like the plan to begin with. He hoped that Will was just annoying enough to grate on Annabeth's nerves.

Once they arrived at the restaurant, climbing out of the car and meeting Will inside, Percy excused himself from the lunch with a woebegone sigh. He had a "surprise manager meeting" that he "absolutely could not miss" because it was "life or death." Annabeth had given him a sad look, and Percy wondered if it was genuine or for the sake of Will.

Thankfully, Will nodded in reassurance that it was fine, telling him with earnest eyes that he'd make sure Annabeth stayed safe. Percy breathed a little easier, since Will seemed like a good guy, and he screamed honesty.

He waved and rushed out of the door, hopping back in the car he'd paid to wait and went back home.

Staring at the ceiling had never been one of Percy's favorite pastimes, but it was left as his only choice. Everything on television made him scowl, because *Annabeth liked this* or *Annabeth despised this*. He hated reading. Twitter was dead.

Scrolling through his contacts and wondering if he should text Annabeth as a check up, Percy hesitated over a number he didn't recognize. The contact was saved as simply 'RED' with a cringe-worthy winking smiley afterwards, but Percy clicked on the name anyways. If Annabeth was keeping up her end of the deal, he might as well.

With a wince and a feeling of regret, Percy tapped out, *hey rach! wanna get a late lunch?* and pressed 'send.'

Not thirty minutes later, he was meeting Rachel at The Golden State cafe for a lunch just around one. She wasn't bad, not really, just maybe a bit ditzy. Rachel liked to talk about herself, and she loved to talk about her passion: art. She wanted to go down in history as one of the big artists of the 21st Century, and Percy encouraged her. It wasn't a *bad* dream to have.

Her hair was red, and her eyes were a light green. She *was* pretty, but she *wasn't* Annabeth. He learned that it wasn't Rachel flirting with him specifically, but it was her nature. When the waiter arrived to take their order, she batted her eyelashes in a dazzling, almost accidental way. The waiter was charmed. Rachel seemed content to talk about interests with Percy, and he noticed a few looks that expressed interest, but he didn't pursue them. Rachel wasn't a horrible person, so far, and you could never have too many friends.

They left each other with a wave and an agreement to meet up for coffee sometime. Percy knew that wouldn't happen; coffee was his and Annabeth's thing. Pictures of his date with Rachel Elizabeth Dare infiltrated the web and many mourned the loss of Percabeth. Percy didn't like the way so many were saying '*it's really over guys*' with sad faces. It wasn't over. They were just trying new things.

Annabeth's verdict was presented to him when he arrived home to find Annabeth curled up on the couch with a book she'd left at his apartment. She was clad in one of Percy's hoodies, the sleeves hanging off her hands. Annabeth looked up, shook her head simply, and refocused on the book. Percy tried not to smile.

Percy's hair was windblown from walking some of the way home, then calling a car, and Annabeth thought *too much*. Because Percy's hair *messy* was enough, but sticking up in a million directions with just slightly windburned cheeks, it wasn't fair. He fell onto the couch next to her, leaning his head back.

"Me too," Percy muttered, agreeing with her answer. "What next?"

"I don't know," Annabeth declared, shutting her book. She met his eyes earnestly, and Percy saw vulnerability. He ached to comfort her, opening his arms and not protesting when she fell on his chest, eliciting a grunt. "That was a bad plan."

Percy sighed, already twirling a curl around his finger. "I know."

"We aren't trying that again."

Percy smiled at how distasteful she sounded. "I hear you loud and clear."

They laid in silence, Percy feeding his fascination with Annabeth's hair and Annabeth picking at Percy's shirt. "Maybe we're trying too hard," Annabeth considered. Her date with Will had been forced and a bit awkward, but she asked him about his band and he talked for almost the whole lunch.

"Or trying for the wrong things," Percy muttered. Annabeth sat up, one elbow digging into his sternum, and Percy readjusted her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Remember how you said that we needed to stop trying to make our *relationship* work, and try for friends?" Annabeth nodded. Percy bit the inside of his cheek and cursed himself even as he continued on with his suggestion. "Maybe it's the opposite now."

Annabeth's eyes flickered, the color of cement rather than the shining polished silver they'd been earlier. He could tell that she was masking it, so he flicked her nose. She scowled, her eyes returning to normal as her concentration was lost, and Percy wondered how one person was able to communicate emotions through their eyes so well. "Maybe," Annabeth agreed, not unkindly, but not kindly.

He sighed, leaning up on his elbows and letting Annabeth stay a deadweight on his chest. "Annabeth," Percy said simply, "we've tried everything else."

"But you said it yourself. We're better this way," she mumbled into his shirt.

"We're better *together*," Percy corrected. "In whatever way we choose to be."

"Stop making sense," Annabeth muttered sullenly. Percy grinned and leaning into her hair. "I don't like when you make sense. The world isn't spinning correctly on it's axis."

"Well," Percy slyly mentioned. "That could be because, oh, I don't know, we aren't kissing or something." He blushed straight afterward, once again cursing that *damned* filter—or lack thereof—in his mind. "Uh, sorry," he said after a moment.

"Why?" Annabeth asked simply, tapping Percy's shoulder twice and an innuendo to lay flat. She crossed her arms and leaned on his chest, doing that stupid thing Percy had done so long ago, and tracing 'I love you' into his shirt.

"What I said..." Percy trailed off, wondering why he was sorry. "I mean, it can't be *helping*, surely." *Like the way that you're laying on me and running your fingers across my chest.*

"Depends on what we want the end result to be," Annabeth said simply.

The doorbell rang before he could carry on that conversation, and the door swung open with Clint's arms full of clothes. "Sherry just got in a new shipment. Annabeth, yours are already at your apartment."

"Why'd you ring the doorbell if you were just going to open it anyways?" Annabeth asked, albeit a tad peeved that he'd interrupted.

"It was unlocked," Clint responded easily, dropping the clothes on the second couch. He appraised them, shaking his head lightly and leaning back. "So, what are we talking about?"

"Annabeth was telling me about her date with Will," Percy informed him, giving Annabeth a meaningful look. "Lunch date."

"I see," Clint nodded. "And you guys are...okay?"

Percy nodded. "Yeah, I went on a date with Rachel."

Clint's eyes widened. "You guys are dating other people?"

"No," Annabeth spoke, her face still hidden in Percy's chest. Clint admired the way he automatically brought a hand up to soothingly rub her back, and thought—and not for the first time—that they were oddly like an old married couple. "The dates were bad."

Because they weren't with each other, Clint thought, analyzing the way Percy's face contorted at Annabeth's state. Percy whispered something in her ear, and Annabeth laughed, smiling brightly. Percy's demeanor brightened along with hers. He smiled slightly at them, hesitating before saying, "I support

you two.” He got two weird looks from two pop stars. “I mean, in whatever decision you make. As in, dating other people, or *I don't know*, getting back together again. Just thought I'd throw that out there.”

“Thanks, Papa Bear,” Percy cooed, making Annabeth laugh again. He smiled at Annabeth's mirth for a moment before saying, “We'll let you know.”

Clint nodded, watching as Percy gave Annabeth an odd look, then shook his head. He felt a bit uncomfortable with the whole 'silent conversation between soulmates' thing, so he called a goodbye and an order to put the clothes away before leaving.

“We've given it nearly a year,” Annabeth said, the moment Clint was out the door. “I agree with you; maybe time's not the issue.”

“Two days,” Percy granted suddenly. “We'll try for two more days, and then after that, whether you like it or not, I think there's only one more option.”

Annabeth just barely restrained from glancing down at his lips, which were *too much*. “Okay.”

“Cool,” Percy agreed, shifting slightly. Annabeth did the same, fitting with him as easily as links of a chain. “I'm tired.”

“Me too,” Annabeth admitted, already gripping his shirt in that way she always did when she was sleepy. “Let's sleep.”

“I've made you lazy, Chase,” Percy muttered with a chuckle. She pinched him as if to say, *don't remind me*. “Love you,” he added after a few seconds, hoping she knew that he meant it.

“Love you, too,” she replied, in that easy way that she always did. Percy had no trouble falling asleep.

It was two days later, and not a single thing had changed. Neither had even attempted to schedule another date, too caught up in each other or prior engagements to consider it. Percy wondered what it meant; what would happen now. Annabeth wondered how to communicate her thoughts.

In the end, she didn't have to. Percy simply said, “Starbucks?” with his *stupid* smile and his *stupid* hair and his *stupid* face, and, *well*. Annabeth thought that it was *too much*. And it was far from the first, and probably the last, time.

They drove to Starbucks in silence, mulling over thoughts and trying to gather them. They both wondered who was going to speak first. Both were too stubborn. Percy tapped restlessly on the steering wheel, and Annabeth listed architectural facts to herself to waste time.

When they finally arrived, Annabeth was uncharacteristically nervous, and she wasn't sure it was because she was about to make a stupid decision. Percy's scowl had evaded his face, alerting Annabeth that he'd made his decision. It was all her. And it was pressure.

Regardless, when Percy jogged around the front of his Land Rover to finish opening her already halfway there car-door, Annabeth took a chance and his hand, all in the same motion.

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