

Stucco Hearts

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Stucco Hearts

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Summary

Percy Jackson and Annabeth Chase are soul mates. They know this because the small Timers on their inner wrists tell them that they are meant to be together-- and not because they've chosen each other. In theory, it will be easy for Annabeth to keep up the wall that surrounds her heart and stop herself from falling for Percy. In execution? Well, that's a completely different story.

- Translation into Español available: [Stucco Hearts](#) by [WerewolfMcWerewolf](#)

Wise Men Say Only Fools Rush In

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Annabeth Chase wakes up a whole minute before her alarm goes off and stares at the cracked ceiling of her bedroom as she lies buried in the scratchy sheets of her single bed. The closed window to her right dispels the noise of the street below: cars and buses rumbling up and down tired streets, voices shouting back and forth, angry and worn out. Like the world they live in.

She counts down the seconds for her alarm to go off, three sharp beeps and then the hum of the radio; a bleaty pop song she doesn't know the name of. Annabeth's sigh falls silently into the room and she sits up, dragging the covers away and flinching at the cold air. Manhattan in November reveals the city at its bleakest nature and the cold seems to seep into Annabeth's very bones.

The bed groans as she stands up and stretches her hands to the ceiling, fingers intertwined as her spine cracks. In the same movement, she bends over, keeping her legs straight as she presses her palms to the wooden floorboards. Her body is stiff from the cold and she feels much older than her twenty two years. Sometimes she cannot believe she is already twenty two years old. Her childhood is a distant memory; she barely remembers the innocence she once looked at the world with. Annabeth has spent most of her twenty two years of life angry at the world, at her parents and her government and her damn bad luck. At this point, she doesn't know how to feel any other way.

The floorboards creak as she walks the short distance from her bed to the tiny bathroom and strips off her layers of clothes, stepping into the small shower. The water barely reaches lukewarm and Annabeth makes her shower quick, scrubbing her long blonde curls with cheap shampoo and shaving her underarms with a disposable razor which nicks at her skin. If the air was cold before, it positively stings her wet skin as she furiously rubs her body dry with a thin towel, the material of which is just as cheap and scratchy as her bedsheets.

Life hasn't always been this way for her. Her parent's house - that is, her father's and her stepmother's - is big and beautiful and out of the city, far away from the cluttered sprawl of Manhattan. Her sheets had been freshly washed by a maid once a week and the shower pressure had been - well, more than the trickle she puts up with now. But she will never go back there. As soon as she graduated high school, Annabeth had scrounged up six years of part time work wages and moved into the city. Her father is required by law to pay for her school tuition if he is able to - and he certainly is - but she still has to pay for her apartment, heating, water, food, travel and so on. She gets by now on the wages she receives working four days a week at a law firm; the same one that her best friend Piper is doing an internship with as part of her training to become an attorney. It's dull work, but she prefers it to waiting on tables and forcing polite smiles to jackass customers.

Working four full days a week means that Annabeth has to complete her college course over five years instead of the standard three. Today is a college day, meaning a morning of lectures

followed by a measly lunch from the cafeteria before she heads North into the city to take part in one of the protests she's been helping organise for the past month. Annabeth has been protesting since she could first understand the concept of injustice - which was of the age of seven. And there is plenty of injustice for her to complain about now.

A hundred and fifty years ago, mankind discovered the countdown. An internal clock inside every living human which counted down the years, months, days, hours, minutes, seconds until a person will meet their soulmate - the one person with whom they would spend the rest of their lives. And the brilliant scientists and technicians figured out a way to make this clock a displayable one, so that everybody could know exactly when they would meet their soulmate. At birth, every baby was implanted with the timer on the inside of their left wrist, and from that moment on, their digits would be ticking down.

As she drags a sweater over her head, Annabeth glances at her own wrist. 3:19:5:42:45. She has three and a half months left and then those numbers will be replaced with a name; the name of her supposed soul mate.

Annabeth tells herself that the timers themselves are not evil. After all, she doesn't want to spend her whole life alone. She would hardly call herself a romantic, but she does believe in love- she has witnessed it enough times. And if it wasn't for the laws, perhaps she would eagerly watch the numbers on the inside of her wrist countdown.

But, upon this great discovery, the government had seized their chance to restore order to their beloved country of delinquents. This had been their chance to enforce family values and improve the deteriorating society. For National Law now states that, just two weeks after two people's timers run out, they must get married. They are then monitored by weekly meetings with a councillor, and when that councillor decides the newlyweds are ready to begin a family, the couple are given a court order to become pregnant or adopt a child within two months.

It's barbaric, and she hates it. She despises a system where her fundamental human rights have been squashed beneath the great foot of a government claiming that this is all for the greater good. Well what's the point of a greater good when people no longer hold the right to their own bodies? Annabeth has considered fleeing the country, but there is little better to escape to and the increasing immigration laws make it nearly impossible to leave or enter the country without smuggling yourself in the back of a truck. There are, of course, the *untimed*. Those who have cut out their timers and run before they are found. But Annabeth cannot run, she does not want to run. She wants to live; she wants to finish her studies and become a professional architect and make her mark on the Manhattan skyline.

As she steps out onto the street, dragging the door to her building closed after her, Annabeth tucks her thick scarf down the front of her coat and miserably watches her breath fog out in front of her. She only has to walk a few blocks to college and picks up an overpriced coffee at the shop on campus before arriving outside her lecture theatre fifteen minutes before it's due to begin. She leans against the wall and pulls out her cellphone, texting Thalia.

All set for this afternoon?

It takes her a few minutes to reply, but when she does it makes Annabeth laugh. ***You woke me up. Ass.*** Annabeth tucks her phone back in her pocket and joins the slow slog of people walking into the lecture theatre. Thalia works night shifts at a bar and often sleeps until around midday to compensate for the lack of sleep she gets at night.

Annabeth had met Thalia while she was still in middle school. And though Thalia is three years her senior, they have always gotten on well, falling into fast agreement on their disagreements with the law. Thalia is not restrained by the obligations that holds Annabeth in line and acts far more liberally because of that. Annabeth watches her sometimes, scratching at the skin around her timer, and wonders if she might just cut the thing out and disappear from her life. It terrifies her that she might lose Thalia so easily; she has always been such a constant in her life.

Annabeth sits down at the end of a row near the back and pulls out her notebook, checking her phone again before the lecturer calls the attention of the class. Thalia has replied again, ***Yeah, we're all set. Quit nagging me and go to class, you nerd.*** Annabeth smirks and puts her phone away again, drawing her attention to the lecturer.

She loves college, it reminds her of what she really wants to be. That her education and her career choice is still hers alone, and no one can take that from her. The fact that she has to work so hard to get it only makes her appreciate it all the more. There are kids in her class a couple of years younger than she is, who will fast track their way through the course and get their dream jobs before she even has her degree. But Annabeth reminds herself what she would have to tolerate if she accepted more assistance from her father, and ignores the flicker of resentment.

Three classes fly past and soon enough Annabeth is catching the subway uptown to meet Thalia and the rest of their group of protesters outside Dionysus Corporation. The sight of hand painted placards outside the towering building is a welcome one and Annabeth hitches her messenger bag higher on her shoulder as she pushes through the crowd, searching for a head of spiky black hair. She finds it at the very front of the crowd, holding the largest placard and shouting the loudest out of everyone.

‘Hey!’ Annabeth calls over her friend’s hoarse yells.

Thalia turns and grins at her. ‘Hey, nerd! Thought you were gonna miss the party.’

‘Class ran long,’ she says as way of an apology and takes a white placard from Thalia which reads IT’S TIME TO END TIMER LAWS in bright red letters.

‘No sign of Piper,’ Thalia notes.

Annabeth shakes her head as she lifts the sign above her head. ‘She texted me this morning. Leela’s sick so she had to stay home with her.’

Thalia nods and makes no further comment. It’s somewhat of a difficult topic between them; Piper’s marriage and her daughter. She had met Jason when they were both fifteen and they

had married on his eighteenth birthday - as soon as they were legally adults. Piper was pregnant within the month. Although Piper argues against the laws as much as Annabeth does, she does not deny that she loves her family. She loves Jason and their daughter and would sooner throw herself in front of a bus than give them up. It's a contradiction of sorts. But Annabeth knows Piper would have liked her family to be hers and Jason's choice, not a result of law.

Annabeth hopes she will not be forced into the same position. Instinctively, she checks her wrist. The timer still reads three and a half months. She hopes that will give her enough time to make a change. Thalia is more cynical than she, and although she spends the majority of her time campaigning about the timer laws, Annabeth knows she holds very little hope that they will change. But Thalia has years left. Those three and a half months are Annabeth's ever shortening lifeline.

After an hour, both of Annabeth's arms are aching and her throat is hoarse from chanting alongside her comrades. Her poor night's sleep and early morning are waning on her. She lowers her placard and turns to Thalia.

'Coffee run,' she shouts over the noise. 'Orders?'

'Black for me,' Thalia replies. 'Don't be long, they'll all be coming out soon.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

Annabeth is about to turn away and thread back through the crowd but Thalia's expression stops her. Her sharp blue eyes have gone wide and her lips are parted in surprise. Annabeth spins around, searching for what has shocked her friend, but she finds nothing in the crowd of protesters. When she turns back, Thalia's eyes are still trained on her.

'What? Thalia-'

'Your wrist,' Thalia murmurs, pointing.

Annabeth freezes, for she had brushed her fingers through her knotted hair just moments before, diverting Thalia's attention to that patch of skin which bore her numbers. Three and a half months... No. When Annabeth finds the digits, her heart sinks. 2m25s.

'How is that possible?' Her own voice was shrill in her ears. 'Is it defected?'

'It would flash with an error sign if it were defected. Annabeth-'

'No.' she started backing away from Thalia, as if she were the cause of this.

'-this happens sometimes,' Thalia implores, looking as desperate as Annabeth feels, 'you know that. Things change, timers change.'

'But it can't! I have three and a half mon-'

'You don't any more! Run,' Thalia says. 'Maybe you can change it again.'

Annabeth barely believes it any more than her friend does, but she turns away from her and begins elbowing through the crowd. She needs to get free of these people, of all people. She needs to hide. Yes, if she can hide then she will change it again. She will get her three months back. The chants pick up around her and for a moment, Annabeth thinks they are directed at her, but then she realises that the office workers must be leaving the building. This spurs her on, sending panic fleeing through her veins as she pushes and shoves her way through the thickening crowd.

Eventually, she bursts out of the group and finds herself in front of a road of busy traffic. Glancing at her wrist, she sees that she has a minute and twelve seconds. One minute, twelve seconds - nine, eight, seven, six - to find a hiding place. Impossible. Nonetheless, she searches for isolation.

She begins to cross to the other side of the crowd, eyes searching for an alley way to duck into, when someone catches hold of her bag.

Fifty one seconds.

‘Hey!’ She spins around.

The guys holding her bag is tall and scowling. ‘Running away? Had a change of heart?’

Annabeth has no idea who he is but he was not her soulmate. Just an angry protester thinking she is betraying the cause. She tugs her bag free and stumbles. Swearing at him over her shoulder as she pushes past more people. The jerk has cost her valuable time.

Twenty two seconds.

No. She has to keep moving away from these people. But the crowd will not dissipate, it seems to grow and writhe around her, leaving her trapped within their midst of people - any of whom could be her damned soulmate.

Twelve seconds. Eleven. Ten. Nine.

No! Annabeth shoves past a woman, receiving an elbow to her cheek for her trouble. She clutches her face, swearing again and feels tears sting her eyes - from pain, desperation? She no longer knows. *Just get me out of here!* She begs of no one.

Five seconds. Four. Three. Two.

One.

Annabeth is frozen in place. She stares at her wrist, feeling the absence of people around her and the pain of her hammering heart against her sternum. The numbers she has held on to for so long are disappearing. Gone. Letters are flicking into place.

P E R C Y J A C K S O N

Annabeth rubs her thumb over the letters and then scrubs at them with her palm, but they are stuck there, under her skin, impenetrable. Drawing in a breath, she raises her eyes to see

Percy Jackson, her soulmate.

He is wearing a suit, with his sleeve drawn back and a hand clutching his left wrist. He is a little taller than her, slim, with black hair and the same parted lips as Thalia. But what catches Annabeth's attention are his eyes; an impossible green she has never seen before, and staring right at her.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter is shorter than what you can expect future ones to be. the purpose here was to introduce the story and the concept of the timers and the laws surrounding them, i hope i made it clear enough for you all without boring you to death.

the title comes from a song by Ingrid Michaelson called I Can't Help Falling In Love With You

Percy's chapter will be up next sunday, see you then!

NOTE: All Annabeth chapters are written by anabeth

Now I've got you in my space, I won't let go of you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

His first thought about his soulmate is that she's kinda hot.

She has this curly blond hair that makes Percy think about fairytale princesses, and it's long and he wonders if the curls at the end would spring if he tugged on them. She has eyes that seem to move even when they're not actually moving. The colors shift and swirl as her pupils move up and down, taking in Percy's outfit. A small crease appears between her eyebrows when she sees the suit that Percy is wearing, and he immediately straightens up, awkward in her scrutiny.

As his soulmate stares at him, Percy fidgets uncomfortably, wondering what he usually does with his hands. Does he let them hang, normally? Does he cross his arms? Instead of grasping at a solution that does not seem like it's about to come to him, Percy decides to stare at his timer.

ANNABETH CHASE.

Annabeth Chase is beautiful. Too beautiful for him, probably, but she's going to have to reconcile herself to that if they're going to grow old together. Which they are. Because they're soulmates.

Shit.

This is fucking insane. He had been going to get coffee. That's it. He had wanted to go grab some coffee for himself and Frank, and he had been about to go to his favorite coffeeshop when he'd realized that there was construction going on. So, instead of braving the loud noises, he had turned to go to the coffeeshop to the left of his office, not the right.

And now he has a soulmate.

Percy had always thought that the first time he met his soulmate, she would smile shyly at him and stare at him and they would click immediately. Maybe shake hands, and feel some sort of *spark* as their fingers touched for the first time.

Meeting Annabeth isn't going quite like that. She's alternating between glaring at him and glaring at her timer. She doesn't seem very pleased with either of them. Percy actually feels bad for his soulmate's timer, because she's known the timer for longer than she's known Percy and he's not taking her anger very personally.

Well. Not too personally.

Annabeth still hasn't said anything, so Percy decides that it's up to him. She does seem a bit shocked, after all.

"So," he says, trying to keep his voice conversational even though his hands are shaking and his knees feel weak. "Did I hit my head, or did three months go by unusually fast?"

Annabeth narrows her eyes and cocks her head to the side slowly. She looks a bit dangerous. Percy has never been into dangerous girls-- he always pictured himself ending up with someone who likes snuggling. What if Annabeth doesn't like snuggling? Wait, what if Percy doesn't like snuggling either? He's never had someone to snuggle with, to be fair. What's the point of emotionally investing in someone who isn't your soulmate?

"I mean, had I known I was going to meet you today, I would have worn a nicer blazer," Percy jokes, trying again. Annabeth's face doesn't change.

Okay, he'd at least wanted a soulmate who would laugh at his jokes. He can't even have that? No, maybe he's just approaching it from the wrong direction. Maybe he needs to try puns. Maybe Annabeth Chase is a pun girl.

"Well, even though it's a bit early, I guess it's about *time* we met."

Nailed it.

No wait. No, no, no. That's a terrible pun. That's the worst pun he's ever made. Is there a delete button for bad puns? Shit, she's going to think that he makes bad puns like this all of the time. He usually makes bad puns of way better quality. His mom laughs at most of them, so they have to be good, right?

"What did you do?"

When she speaks, her voice is slightly hoarse. It's quiet, but Percy can pick it up. He's been waiting to hear her voice for twenty-two years.

"What are you talking about?" he asks, tugging his sleeve over his timer. He doesn't want to stare at her name anymore. He wants to stare at *her*. He wants to take in the stormy eyes and the princess hair and every single mannerism of the girl that he is going to be married to in... in two... weeks.

Shit. Two weeks. He's going to be married in two weeks. That's really soon, isn't it? He still hasn't asked his mom about making a blue cake for the wedding. He'd thought that he had more time.

"What did you do?" Annabeth repeats, voice slightly louder. She's unfrozen, and now she's left her timer alone and is focusing all of her negative energy on her husband-to-be. Percy swallows. "To make our timers change."

Percy is confused.

"How do you know it's my fault? It could have been your fault!"

Why does it have to be anybody's fault? Yeah, they'd had three months, but the sooner they fall in love, the better. The sooner they meet, the sooner they get married, and then the sooner they begin a life together that will inevitably end in dancing unicorns and colorful butterflies and screaming babies.

He wonders how many kids Annabeth wants. Then he thinks that now really, really isn't the time to ask that. Her face is starting to turn red with anger as she glares at him, getting a bit closer.

"I didn't do anything," Annabeth protests. "I was just protesting, and then my timer changed and I--"

"Protesting?" questions Percy. "Um, protesting what?"

Annabeth's eyes go to the ground, staring at her own shoes while Percy searches the crowd of people behind her, trying to see what their signs are saying. When his eyes zero in on one of the angry statements, he feels his mouth go dry.

Timers. She's protesting timers.

For the first time, Annabeth Chase has the decency to look ashamed.

"You're standing outside of my office building, protesting... me," he says blankly. "Because you don't want to have to marry me."

Annabeth worries her lip between her teeth, her eyes flitting up to meet his. He doesn't think that they're as pretty anymore. As a matter of fact, they kind of seem harsh, even though she's looking at him with sympathy at the moment.

"Not you *personally*," she says, slightly pleadingly. "I'm sure you're... um... fine."

Fine. *Fine*? He's her soulmate and she's saying that he's 'fine' even though she has only known him for five minutes. He could be more than fine! He could be great! They could be great, and she's already just calling him *fine*. Doesn't she have more faith in him than that? He's her *soulmate*. He's been looking forward to meeting her since he was a teenager, and now that he's actually face to face with her, he wishes that turning around and running away wouldn't be counter productive to fixing their already tumultuous relationship.

"Well," Percy says, unable to keep the bitterness out of his own voice. "I'm sure you're slightly above average as well."

Annabeth's eyes widen.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that, I just..."

"Don't want to marry me?"

She winces.

"Don't want to *have* to marry you. There's a difference."

"Not really," Percy says flatly.

"Look, it would be different if we got to get to know each other and maybe fall in love."

"Maybe?"

"But, um-" she glances down at her wrist, "But Percy, don't you think it's ridiculous that we're supposed to decide that we want to be together in two weeks?"

“What is there to decide?” he asks, trying much too hard to keep emotion out of his voice. He feels like something precious and perfect has been stolen from him. “We’re soulmates.”

“But wouldn’t you rather decide for yourself if we’re supposed to be together? Percy, what even is a soulmate? Does the word ‘soulmate’ connote a relationship between two people that is functional and practical, or does it just mean that we’re going to have romantic feelings for each other? Because not every relationship that is romantic turns into a relationship that can function in a marriage, right? Shouldn’t it be our right to decide whether or not we’re going to get married?”

He gapes at her, trying to ignore the way his throat is closing and his eyes are starting to sting. Annabeth closes her eyes, squeezing them tight, refusing to look at Percy. He feels guilty almost instantly. He feels *bad* that he’s not good enough to make her believe that they’re supposed to be together. Maybe, with someone else, Annabeth would have lain her eyes on that man and just believed. But that hadn’t happened with Percy.

Weren’t they supposed to be soulmates?

“Look,” Percy says, trying to speak over the chanting of the protesters. “Let’s go get some coffee or something. Figure this out.”

“Um, actually, I have to get back to my-”

“No!” He cuts her off. “We need to do this now. We just need to... talk. Calm down. Get reconciled with the fact that we are meeting each other and we are meeting each other now. Because-” His voice takes on an edgy note, one that he rarely hears in it. Percy gets pissed off about once a year. Usually, he can let anything roll off his back. But not this. Not his fucking soulmate. “Because whether you like it or not, we’re mandated by the government to get married in two weeks, and I am not getting married to you without knowing your coffee order. Okay?”

She stares at him, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

“Okay. Okay, then.”

“Good,” Percy nods firmly. Annabeth waits. “Oh, right. Coffee.”

He turns around and marches down the street, not checking behind himself to see if she’s following. No matter what, Annabeth Chase is going to have to show up at the courthouse in fourteen days to marry Percy Jackson. And that would be a lot more awkward if Annabeth were to ditch him in this moment and run back to her group of protesters.

She’s smart. She’s probably figured that out already.

When they get into Percy’s second favorite coffee shop, it’s basically empty. Percy orders his drink, a black coffee with two sugars and an extra shot of caffeine to get him through the day. Annabeth orders a cappuccino with two pumps of cinnamon, being sure to articulate how hot she wants the coffee to be. Percy pays for both of them, even when she tries to tug money out of her pocket. Percy just glares at her, and Annabeth puts her money away.

“You’re oddly specific with your coffee order,” Percy notes, sitting down at a table. Annabeth sits across from him, staring at her fingers where they are wrapped around the warm cup.

“I know what I want,” she says, shrugging. “There’s no point in being unhappy when we have the unique ability to articulate exactly what we are looking for.”

Percy considers this.

“So, if I were to tell you that I’m looking for a person to grow old with and have a family with and live happily ever after with, you would tell me that I’ve done the right thing because I have ‘articulated exactly what I’m looking for’?”

“That’s different,” Annabeth says, looking up at him. “I mean, coffee is simple. You just make it, and it’s there. You’re asking for a whole life. And that’s difficult, and long, and messy.”

“You’re making it messier,” Percy points out. “Today didn’t have to feel this shitty, Annabeth.”

Her lips quirk up slightly as she frowns.

“Yeah. I guess you’re kind of right about that.”

Percy drops the angry demeanor long enough to look delighted.

“Really? Awesome! I’m never right!”

To his surprise, Annabeth laughs. Loudly. Genuinely.

“Well, I’m glad you’re already used to that. I’m always right.”

“So in two weeks, I get to commit to a lifetime of eternally being wrong?”

“Exactly,” she smiles. “Good luck to you.”

“Ah, thanks,” replies Percy. “So what else do you like besides protesting our marriage?”

Annabeth rolls her eyes. She doesn’t say anything for a moment, and Percy is sure that she’s not going to answer. He can practically see Annabeth withdrawing into herself, blocking him out. But then she looks up at him, and something flickers in her eyes. Her body sags, and she shakes her head to clear it.

“I like architecture,” she says quietly. “I’m in school, studying to be one - an architect. I really enjoy it.”

“Cool,” Percy says, because he doesn’t know much about architecture, but he likes the fact that Annabeth knows about it.

“What do you do?”

“I do a useless, boring job that I hate.”

She raises her eyebrows.

“Really? Why?”

Percy looks down at his hands.

“I was in school, and then my mom... well... we weren’t very well off in the first place and then we just... she couldn’t...” he looks up. “We couldn’t survive on what we had. So I dropped out, got a temporary job, got promoted a bunch of times because I’m a delightfully kind and charismatic person-” he widens his eyes pointedly at Annabeth “-and now I’m still there.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, sounding genuinely sympathetic. “I would hate to wake up every day and loathe what I’m doing.”

“Nah.” Percy quickly brushes it off. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. I have some friends in the office that make work tolerable. And I get to wear a *tie* every day, which was, of course, my boyhood dream.”

“Really?”

“No. Not even one little bit.”

Annabeth chuckles.

“Okay. So what was your boyhood dream, Percy Jackson?”

He puts on his most serious face.

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

She crosses her heart, only slightly sarcastically.

“I was going to be a cowboy.”

“A... a what?”

“You know, those guys in the films that they showed us in history class to try to educate us on the United States because the history textbooks are so goddamn boring. I wanted to have an accent and wear the hat and ride a horse all the time. But then I found out that cowboys aren’t really a thing anymore, and I can’t just pretend to have an accent, and nobody uses real horses anymore anyways.”

Annabeth blinks.

“That’s kind of an impractical dream.”

“Oh, and you always wanted to grow up and and be an architect?” Percy snorts.

“Actually, yes,” Annabeth says.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Never, like, a slightly less realistic job description?”

“Architecture is a very competitive career choice!”

“Yeah, but did you really dream of it as a little kid?”

She looks out the window, her eyes focusing on the gray world that lies outside of their coffeeshop. As Annabeth stares at the buildings of New York City, Percy stares at his future.

“I just think that the world needs a bit more beauty these days. Everything is colorless and functional. Why can’t things be functional and extraordinary?”

Percy lets a smile tug at his lips.

“I like the way you think.”

Annabeth looks away from the window and back at him, slightly bitter as she shakes her head.

“You have to. You’re my soulmate. That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

“You’re *supposed* to fall in love at first sight. You’re *supposed* to be nice to your soulmate. I’d say we’re oh-for-two on those guys, so why are you assuming that anything about soulmates is *supposed* to?”

Her hands tighten into fists on the table as she looks at Percy, the intense look in her eyes pouring into him. Shit. Had that crossed the line?

“I have to go,” Annabeth says abruptly, standing up. “Um. Thanks for the coffee. I’ll see you around.”

They’re going to be getting letters in the mail very soon, telling them exactly when they have to be at the courthouse to get married.

“Wait!” Percy calls, lurching out of his seat so that he can lunge at her and grab her wrist. “Look, I’m not going to stop you from walking away from me, but can I at least have your number? I think it’s dumb to waste these two weeks. We’re going to be married at the end of them. Wouldn’t you rather know the dude that you’re living in a house with?”

Annabeth dithers. Then she grabs the cell-phone that he is offering to her and types her number into it as quickly as possible.

“There,” she says, saving the contact.

“I’m going to text you!” Percy calls after her as Annabeth’s hand grips the doorknob and she pulls the door open.

“I might answer,” Annabeth responds, and Percy can tell that she’s trying to quell a smile.

It takes him three days to finish the whole book.

It’s pretty long, in his defense. Percy usually comes home from work and falls right asleep, so staying up every night to read a book is difficult on more levels than he would care to admit.

It feels like college all over again, except Percy wasn't in college for a very long time, and at that time, his job wasn't as demanding as it is now.

Also, Percy has never really read about the subject before. He keeps having to reread passages to fully understand what they're trying to communicate. Sometimes, he takes a break to look up words or make another pot of coffee. Sometimes, he calls Leo and asks questions, because Leo is an engineer and knows tons of shit like this. Leo can explain stuff.

But mostly, Percy takes so long to finish the book because it makes him feel like he's doing *something*. Not necessarily something that's going to be helpful in the long run, but something that is bringing him closer to Annabeth. Maybe she'll like him better if he is more knowledgeable about the subject. It's worth a shot, right?

He had thought it was worth of shot when he stopped by the library three days ago and taken out a book about architecture. He'd picked this one because it has pictures in it, but they don't really help. They're mostly blueprints, and Percy would rather be looking at really pretty houses than drawings of the angles and technicalities of those really pretty houses.

By the time Percy has finished the book, he feels like he's given her enough time. He takes out his phone and finds that Annabeth is the first contact in it. He adds her contact to his speed dial, replacing his mom as number one. Then, he types her name into a text.

Percy: Hey. It's me.

Annabeth: By me, I hope you mean you.

Percy: Yeah, how did you know?

Annabeth: Hi, Percy.

Percy: Did you have to check your wrist to remember my name?

Annabeth: Surprisingly, no. I guess when you've spent three days seeing one name every time you habitually check your timer, it sticks in your head.

Percy: So...

Annabeth: Something you'd like to ask?

Percy: Yeah. What's your favorite type of arch? Do you prefer a bowstring arch on bridges, or are you more into the classic deck arch bridge?

Yep. This is definitely going to work.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you so much for all of the amazing reviews on the last chapter. We absolutely loved hearing your thoughts on the story, the world, and the future of the fic. We hope you enjoyed this chapter! If you have any questions about the world or the fic (non-spoilery, of course!) please feel free to ask either of us on tumblr. This chapter title is from a Kodakline song.

Note: All Percy chapters are written by rongasm.

You're a Dungeon, But You're Made of Glass

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Annabeth stares at her phone, confusion tugging her eyebrows together as her fingers hover over the screen. But she cannot think of a reply right away. Percy is no architecture fanatic; he probably doesn't know the difference between an arch and a vaulted ceiling. But here he is, asking her opinion on bridge construction. He must have researched it, and Percy doesn't come across as the researcher type either, so she is shocked. He has done this for her? To make a good impression? To make conversation? *To show that he cares?* A smaller voice asks.

Annabeth pushes it down and picks up her phone again, typing a quick reply - a short spiel about the structural benefits of a bowstring arch contenting with her personal preference for the aesthetic aspect of deck arch bridges. He probably won't have a clue what she's on about, but at least it's something. They're talking.

Annabeth tells herself this is good. She shouldn't ignore him, she can't ignore him - this. The stubborn red letters on her timer confirm that every time she glances at her wrist. They are a brand of her future, marking her as taken. That much she resents. Her lack of choice in the matter; she has met him now and she must marry him and live with him and have babies with him and grow old with him. Just like that.

Her phone pings again but this time it is not Percy - he must be searching for a good reply to come back with - but Piper. ***THE DAY IS NEARLY DONE. Meet me in the foyer upon release?*** Annabeth smiles and replies with a quick confirmation before returning to her work. It's a Thursday, which means she and Piper don't get off work until half past eight. And because it's November, the sky outside the small windows has been dark for hours as Annabeth shuts her computer off and shrugs on her jacket, throwing her phone into her bag even as it pings with what is probably Percy's overdue reply.

Piper is waiting for her in the foyer, leaning against a wide stone pillar and biting her nails like she has done since she was eight years old. Despite the childish habit, she looks entirely professional in a pencil skirt and fitted jacket over a dark purple blouse; her hair is pulled back into a bun but has little braids threaded all the way around her head. The real Piper poking through. When she approaches, Annabeth smacks her friend's hand.

'Gross habit. Cut it out.'

'Yes, mom.' Piper grins and pushes away from the pillar and they walk towards the doors together. 'You're coming for dinner tonight.'

It isn't a question and they both know it. But Annabeth tries to get out of it anyway. 'I need to study,' she says, tugging her coat collar up against the harsh cold wind.

Piper gives her a look. 'You also need to eat. You can't live off jelly beans and tinned spaghetti.'

'I can try.'

'Come on. Jason's making fajitas; extra hot. And Leela's dying to see her godmother.'

It's the latter comment which crumbles Annabeth's resolve. As much as she despises the fact that her best friend's family is a forced one, she absolutely adores Piper and Jason's daughter, Leela, to whom she is godmother. Leela is the most adorable three year old on the planet; she has her mother's native american skin and her dark hair, and her father's piercing blue eyes and thin, pink lips.

Piper and Jason's apartment is on the upper east side of Manhattan with an inch of central park viewable through the tall windows in their living room. It's a sizeable apartment, comfortable, homely - unlike their first one together. Far nicer than the one Annabeth lives in. But that's one of the perks of finding your soulmate; sure, you lose a few civil liberties, but you have a partner for life and a nice place to live! What is there to complain about?

Piper unlocks the door in one swift movement and calls out before she is fully through it, shrugging out of her coat. Barely a second later, Leela comes waddling down the hall from the kitchen.

'Mama!' she cooes, chubby arms outstretched.

Piper scoops her up easily and smothers her face with kisses. 'Hi, baby girl! How was your day?'

'Good! I made pasta giants and pushed Timmy into the sand pit!'

'Well that wasn't very nice,' Piper chides.

Leela frowns indignantly. 'But he pushed me first! And - and he called me dirty cause my skin's all dark!'

Piper's face hardens and Annabeth sees her jaw clench infinitesimally. It takes her a moment to speak again. 'Well you still shouldn't have pushed him. That was very naughty of you.'

Leela pouts but doesn't rebuke. Her gaze falls to Annabeth and her face lights up again. 'Annabee!' she calls delightedly. Annabeth puts her bag on the floor and holds her arms out for Piper to pass the toddler over.

'How's my beautiful girl?' Annabeth asks, catching Piper's eye briefly as she slips away - towards the kitchen to find Jason.

Annabeth sets Leela down and they walk hand in hand down the hall towards the living room. On the way, they pass the kitchen where Annabeth catches a glimpse of Piper and Jason with their arms around one another, not kissing but talking quietly with their faces close together. Annabeth settles on the couch with Leela and listens to the toddler's dramatic tales of kindergarten, easing her fingers through the little girl's hair.

In the past, when Annabeth has considered the fact that her own children will one day be brought about under the command of a court order, she has never thought she would be able to love them. How could she look at them without being reminded how they were forced into her life? How can laws and court orders make for any happy family? But then she looks at Leela; at how much her parents love her, at how happy their little unit is - stressed, and often struggling to juggle their lives, but happy. And she is reminded of how much she loves the little girl herself, and the image of a little girl with blonde hair and grey eyes fills her mind before she can stop it. She's not entirely averse to having a family. She just wants it to be *hers* and not a construct of the government to save their failing society. Looking down at her chattering goddaughter now, Annabeth imagines her own child again, except this time the little girl has black tangled hair and sea green eyes. Percy's baby. *Their* baby.

Well, she definitely isn't ready for that yet.

A little while later, Jason walks in with a tired smile. 'Hey, Annabeth.'

Annabeth looks up from Leela, who is beginning to drool against her arm as her eyes flutter closed. She smiles, noticing Jason's rumpled collar and the dark circles under his eyes as he stoops down and scoops Leela into his arms.

'Time for bed, I think.'

'Night, Leela,' Annabeth says softly, smiling as she rests her head against her father's shoulder and starts sucking on her thumb.

Piper appears and kisses her daughter on the forehead as Jason carries her by. She herself is carrying Annabeth's bag.

'It was pinging,' she says as she drops it onto the couch.

Annabeth dives inside for her phone and sees three messages from Percy. She sighs and drops the phone back into her bag, setting it on the floor. Piper is scrutinising her from the other end of the couch.

'You're gonna have to stop ignoring the guy at some point.'

'I'm not ignoring him.'

Piper looks pointedly from the bag to Annabeth's face and raises her eyebrows.

'I'm not!' Annabeth insists. 'I just- Jesus, Piper, I need some time.' She leans her head against the back of the couch and closes her eyes. 'Three days ago I lost three months of my life.'

Piper is silent for a moment, and then her voice is gentle. 'You haven't lost anything, Annabeth.'

'Except for my independence.'

Piper sighs, but says no more on the topic. She knows better than to argue with Annabeth about this; they have come too close to damaging their friendship beyond repair with these arguments before. Instead, Piper makes a comment about work, which effectively leads them into a ranting conversation which flows easily into dinner with Jason and a bottle of wine drunk between the three of them.

Later, when Annabeth is far fuller and far happier than she has felt for days, she refuses Jason's and Piper's offers to stay the night and insists that she will be fine; she'll get a taxi, she won't get mugged, and she'll text when she gets home safe - she promises. She steps onto the street with no intention and no money to call a cab and pulls out her phone. There are two more messages from Percy to add to the three she has already ignored. She unlocks her phone, eyes trained on the screen as she starts walking down the street. The first message supports an argument for deck arches, but in the next messages he contradicts himself. And then for some reason he starts talking about support beams and Annabeth figures the pages of his book he is speiling all of this from have gotten stuck together.

Her fingers hover over the digital keyboard as she thinks of a reply, but then she changes her mind and calls him instead. It's a knee-jerk decision and as the dial tone rings on Annabeth feels a wave of regret tinged with a new feeling... nerves? But before she can change her mind, the phone stops ringing and Percy's thick voice comes through the speaker.

'Hello?' He sounds like he's just woken up and Annabeth realises with a wince that it's gone midnight. 'Hello?' Percy says again when she makes no immediate reply.

'Oh. Hi.' She says eventually. 'It's Annabeth, sorry I didn't realise how late it was. I'll let you go back to sleep.'

'No, no. It's fine.' She hears the faint sound of springs and pictures him sitting up in bed. And then puts a quick stop to that train of thought. 'What's up?'

'I... um. Sorry I didn't reply to your texts, I was having dinner with a friend.'

'That's okay.' His voice sounds a little weird but she can't figure out why. 'You home now?'

'Not yet.'

There's a pause. And then, 'You're walking home? Now?'

'Uh, yeah?'

'It's past midnight.'

She sighs impatiently. 'And I'm a poor defenceless girl who can't leave the house on my own?'

'Not at this time of night! Why don't you get a cab?'

She scoffs. 'Like I can afford a cab.'

Percy's voice is tight and his breath is heavy. She pictures him pacing his bedroom. 'Where are you?' he asks.

Annabeth looks up at the nearest street sign. 'Eighty second street on park avenue.'

Percy's breath expels through the speaker. 'Wait there.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm two blocks away. I'll walk you home.'

'I don't need an escort!' But he has already hung up. 'Ass,' she mutters, stuffing her phone into her pocket and leaning against the nearest building.

Less than five minutes later, Percy is jogging down the street towards her with a goofy smile on his face. He wears scruffy jeans and a blue jacket over a flannel shirt; a stark contrast to how she'd seen him three days ago. She can't decide whether she likes it or not; likes the way his shoulders bounce as he jogs and his hair is even wilder and messier than it had been the last time she saw him. And then she remembers that she doesn't care.

'Hey,' he says, slightly breathless. His cheeks are pink and he doesn't look at all cute.

His grin softens her demeanour, a little. She pushes off the wall as he catches up to her, his breath spilling out in a white cloud.

'I'm perfectly capable of walking home by myself.'

She swears he is smiling, though she stubbornly keeps her gaze on the sidewalk. 'I know that,' he says. 'I just wanted to... you know, keep you company. Besides, I'm a high-end escort and I never disappoint my clients.'

A burst of laughter escapes her lips before she can stop it and when she glances at his face, it seems the damage is already done: he's grinning like a maniac. Annabeth recomposes herself and frowns at the pavement.

'I'm just getting the subway anyway.'

'Awesome. I love the subway.'

She gives him a disbelieving look and he ducks his head, but makes no effort to take his words back.

He actually turns out to be pleasant company. He gives her this running commentary of strangers on the train, sitting perfectly close to her and leaning down to whisper in her ear. Maybe he doesn't realise he's doing it, but Annabeth is hyper aware. She spends most of her time shying away from contact like this, especially from men. She'll hug Jason, but she's known him since they were in middle school. And she's had very non-platonic contact with men - or more specifically, one man - in the past, but Percy is very different. He's warm and

his shoulder is firm against hers but his touch doesn't feel threatening; he's hesitant. It's refreshing.

Once they are off the subway and into the dark night again, Percy keeps his distance from her. He walks along next to her with his hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket. When they reach her apartment she stops firmly outside the front door and faces him.

'So, now you know where I live. I guess there's no escaping.'

She expects a smart comeback, but Percy ducks his chin and winces just a little and Annabeth wants to kick herself. Just try being nice, just this once.

'Anyway, thank you. It was really sweet of you to walk me home.'

Percy smiles at this. Nervous, like a teenager on a first date. And then a thought strikes Annabeth; maybe this is his first date. Not everyone is like her; many people don't see the point of dating and sleeping with people who aren't their soulmates. What if he thinks she feels that way too? What if he thinks she is a virgin? Will he consider her having slept with someone else to be cheating?

'So,' Percy interrupts her internal meltdown, 'I should get going. Work in the morning.'

'Right.' She shifts her weight nervously. 'I would offer you a nightcap or something but I have, like, a bag of Cheetos and some Fruit Loops in my whole kitchen, so.'

He laughs. 'That's okay. And I'm glad your friend feeds you. My mom still does the same for me.'

'You hate cooking too?'

'Nah, I'm actually pretty good at that part. It's buying the food that I hate.'

'Well, *that* part I can do. I guess we balance each other out.'

'You do the shopping, I'll do the cooking.'

'It's a deal.'

And without quite realising it, she has set up a routine for the rest of their lives together. She avoids his imploring green eyes and pulls her keys out of her bag.

'Anyway. Good night.'

'Yeah, g'night.'

She looks up at him and impulsively leans forward, up on her toes, to kiss his cheek. 'Thank you. Let me know when you get home.'

Percy is looking slightly dazed, but he nods as she turns away from him to unlock the door and slip inside.

Two weeks slip by surprisingly fast when you're dreading what's at the end of it. Annabeth tries her hardest to put the wedding out of her mind, but her efforts are futile, especially with Percy texting her every day. She is finding it easier to talk to him now; he's nice to talk to – friendly, funny, even. But as soon as she remembers that he is going to be her husband, her walls fly back up and she shuts him down, shuts him out. As if she can make him go away by just not thinking about him.

The day the letter arrives in her mailbox downstairs, Annabeth stares at it for five minutes. The words print themselves into her mind. **Congratulations!! On behalf of the New York state council, we are happy to announce that your marriage to Percy Jackson will be taking place on Saturday the 24th of November at 13.00. Please arrive at the courthouse at least half an hour before the ceremony is due to begin. You will be designated a court room upon arrival. Please dress appropriately in formal wear.** There is more information about their new apartment; a place in Greenwich Village which will be ready for them to move into on the day of their ceremony.

As small and crappy as her apartment is, Annabeth doesn't want to leave it. She doesn't want to leave her cranky single bed and the small, leaky refrigerator or the one person bathroom which is more of a wet room. Because all of these things are for her to live alone. Soon she will have a double bed and a large fridge and a bathroom for two. And she will have to share; share her space and her food and her life. She cannot keep herself from Percy forever.

But then again, maybe she can. Why should she open up to him? Because of some letters on her wrist? It's not like she really believes in them; believes that they make Percy Jackson her soulmate. He's just a guy. Some random guy she's known for less than two weeks and now she's expected to promise a life with him and live with him and give herself to him. All because of the timers.

Annabeth throws herself onto her tiny bed and glares at the blue dress hanging on the outside of her wardrobe. She had taken formal wear to be one of the outfits she wore to work, but Piper had insisted that she wear a dress. Piper is not adamant about many things when it comes to Annabeth, but when Annabeth had complained that she doesn't own a dress which isn't a work dress and there is no way in hell she is going to go out and spend her very little money on one, Piper had played dress up with her wardrobe. The dress is a grey-blue colour, sleeveless and just above knee-length. The material is soft against her skin and nowhere near warm enough for November, so she will be wearing tights and a grey cardigan with it. She refuses point-blank to wear heels and Piper settled for her black ankle boots.

The whole outfit is carefully hung up, waiting for her, staring at her as she glares back. On her bedside table, her phone vibrates and the ringtone starts. Annabeth picks it up and looks at the screen. ***Percy Jackson calling...*** She stares at the screen, considering ignoring him. But the ringtone is really annoying and things will be awkward enough tomorrow without her rejecting his call as well. She swipes her thumb across the bottom of the screen and holds the phone to her ear.

‘Hello.’

‘Hey.’ In that one syllable, she notices how nervous his voice is. ‘How are you?’

Annabeth settles back on her pillow and tries to think of Percy as just Percy, not the man she will be marrying in the morning. She tugs her sleeve down and pins it to her palm with her fingers.

‘I’m okay.’

‘What did you eat for dinner?’

She sighs. Percy seems to have taken it as a personal mission to make sure she eats properly. ‘Wasn’t hungry.’

‘You haven’t eaten anything?’

‘I’m not going to wither away.’

‘What do you have in your cupboards right now?’

Annabeth sighs heavily and stands up, crossing the tiny apartment to the corner kitchen, her bare feet slapping against the cheap lino, and starts pulling open cupboard doors. The phone is jammed between her shoulder and her ear as she rummages around finding... well, not much.

She gives Percy a running commentary. ‘A couple of bowls - oh, I forgot I had this mug... Okay that bread is out of date and... *oh!* Lucky Charms.’

Percy’s laugh sounds slightly strained, but he adds no further comment as she walks back to the bed and flops down on it. The phone is still tucked against her ear as she sticks her hand into the box and grabs a handful of cereal.

‘So how was work today?’ she asks him.

Percy groans. ‘I think I have the single most boring job on the planet. You know what I spent the entire day doing? Go on - guess.’

‘I’m not going to guess.’

‘You suck. Anyway, I spent the entire day typing up handwritten complaints. I’ve been lying with a towel over my eyes since I got home, my head hurts so bad. I’ll probably be wearing glasses this time next year.’

‘You’d suit glasses.’

‘Thanks.’ He scoffs, not realising that she wasn’t teasing him.

‘Percy?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Why do you do that job if you hate it so much?’

There’s a pause, and then he sighs. ‘I’m sorry. I’ll quit complaining about it, must be pretty annoying to hear me whine about it all the time.’

He’s misinterpreted the meaning of her words again, but she does not correct him. From what she’s discovered about Percy, he should be in a job where he interacts with others; possibly outside, definitely not stuck at an office desk. He’s so restless that she wonders how he sits still long enough to type up one sentence, never mind a whole hoard of complaints.

‘It’s okay,’ she says instead. ‘I love hearing people complain. It’s what I live for.’

‘I’m sure it is, Annabeth Chase.’

It feels strange to hear him say her full name. Tomorrow, she will not become Annabeth Jackson; she refuses to change her name. And, as of yet, the law does not require her to. But she will not be single, independent Annabeth Chase. She will be married. And okay, she doesn’t hate the guy, but she can’t help but resent him for what he is taking from her. Her crappy single apartment and her easy single life.

‘Annabeth, you still there?’

‘Yeah,’ she says, grabbing another handful of Lucky Charms, ‘I’m right here.’

Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe it’s Sunday already, they keep coming round so quickly.

I hope you’re enjoying the interactions between P/A, they have been so much fun to write and develop. Rachel has started affectionately referring to my chapters as Grumpybeth chapters, which I suppose is pretty spot on. But I hope you all understand why Annabeth is behaving the way she is, and that you understand her reluctance towards Percy. All of you pining for romantic percabeth action - hang in there, your needs will be sated but this is a bit of a slow burner; you’ve got to let them develop.

anyway, don’t forget to leave a comment, or hop over to tumblr and message either of us - anabeth (me) and rongsasm (rach) - with any questions you have about the AU or just fill our inboxes up, we love it.

p.s. the title is from a song called The Muse by Darren Criss

until next week xx

An Empty Bed Hands You Forget-Me-Nots

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Percy gets to the courthouse exactly five minutes early.

It's not because he's usually a very time conscious person, or because he'd already been at the coffee shop down the street and had just happened to meander into the courthouse with an uncharacteristic amount of time to spare. It's because Percy is infamous for being late to everything, and he isn't about to start his marriage with an angry wife and a shirt that is sweaty from running to get there.

Not that he knows Annabeth really well, but Percy suspects that she likes being on time for things. He has a very strong feeling that Annabeth Chase would not appreciate him showing up for their wedding five minutes late, which is what would inevitably have happened, had Percy left it to chance. He's got the New York Public Transit system totally down pat, but this isn't a day to wait until the last minute.

This is the first day of their life together.

His fingers get kind of tingly at the knowledge that this is the beginning of a life with someone. For the most part, his days have been mundane and lonely. He comes home to an empty apartment, goes to sleep, wakes up, and goes to the same office building every day. Sometimes he hangs out with his friends, and they're totally awesome, but he's been living this half-life, just waiting and waiting for Annabeth to arrive, and now that she's here, everything's going to be so much better.

The only problem is that Annabeth doesn't feel the same way about it.

It's different for her. When she looks at him, she doesn't see a future, and hope, and happiness. She sees a man that she is being forced to marry. And it isn't Percy's fault that they're soul mates, or that the government is forcing them to get married after only knowing each other for two weeks, or that they will, inevitably, be asked to have children before they are ready because that's what always happens. But he does feel responsible for not being who she wants him to be, and not being able to follow the rules that Annabeth wants to follow.

The least he can do is arrive at their wedding five minutes early.

Unsurprisingly, Annabeth walks briskly into the hallway only a few minutes after Percy has gotten there. He feels a tug at his lips when he sees that she's put on a dress for the occasion—it's simple, and it's not a wedding dress, like they wear in those films that were made before Timers existed. But Annabeth has put on a dress for him, and something about that makes Percy's heart soar with excitement.

"Hey," he says as she approaches. Part of him wants to grasp her hand and entwine their fingers, showing Annabeth how perfectly they fit together. His mom used to tell him stories of holding hands with his dad, before... well. Before. She would always tell Percy that she knew they were soul mates even without the timer telling them that they were. "You look really beautiful."

Annabeth pulls a face, but that just makes Percy smile more brightly. She seems dauntingly put together and untouchably flawless, but sometimes she does things that are cute and imperfect and human and that's when Percy likes her most.

"You look handsome," she comments, not sounding like she really means it. Percy pretends to preen anyways, straightening his tie and lifting his chin like he's a snobby model.

"I always do."

Annabeth laughs before she can catch herself. She's been doing that quite a bit, actually. Sometimes they'll talk and he knows that she finds something funny but just won't let herself laugh. Every day, Percy gets even more obsessed with making her laugh. He likes the cute noise that she makes and the way her eyes seem to turn a lighter color when she's happy.

"Are you ready for this?" Percy questions, then immediately regrets it. Of course she's not. Who the fuck is ready to marry somebody that she's only known for two weeks?

“Are you?” asks Annabeth drily, and when Percy just shrugs nonchalantly, she does the same in an exaggerated motion.

What’s he supposed to say anyways? The truth is that he is ready for this. Yeah, he hadn’t expected it to come to fruition so quickly, but they would have been doing this same thing in three months anyways, and he doesn’t have a personal problem with any of this. He wants to marry Annabeth. He wants to make her fall in love with him. He wants to begin.

“I guess we should go in. Our appointment starts... now.”

Annabeth steels herself, then nods. She turns towards the unfriendly brown door, takes two steps closer, and freezes. Percy pauses too, just watching her as she cocks her head, staring at the door which must be so foreboding to her.

“Did you know that people used to call this... what we are... fiancées?” Annabeth says suddenly.

“What?”

“People that were getting married... they would say ‘this is my fiancée.’ Nowadays, if it comes up, people just say ‘This is my soul mate’ for the two weeks until they’ve gotten married. It’s more clinical that way, I think. Because soul mate isn’t a choice. It doesn’t imply that you’ve chosen this person, or even that you know him.” She turns to look at Percy, eyes dark. “People used to be engaged for nine months, or longer, on average. Because that was how long it took to plan the wedding.”

Percy feels like his insides have just... frozen.

“You’ve done a lot of research on this.”

“I have,” says Annabeth simply. “Not because I care about weddings all that much,” she adds hastily. “But because... I’m curious. I want to know what it used to be like when everybody

had this freedom that was never offered to us.”

Just when he opens his mouth to reassure her, Annabeth shakes her head, as if clearing it of all of the facts that are cluttered inside of it, and walks up to the door. With a simple turn of the knob, they are in the office.

“You’re late,” says the clerk, not looking up from her computer.

“How do you know we’re late?” Percy asks indignantly.

She looks up.

“You’re the marriage appointment, aren’t you?” They both nod. “You’re late.”

“In here, please,” comes a more patient voice, and Percy looks to his left to see a man standing at the door to another room. “I have the papers all ready for you.”

Annabeth squares her shoulders and marches inside, her head held high. Percy follows after her, stomach suddenly a molten pit of anxiety. What if he forgets how to sign his name? Before heading into the room, Percy practices his signature in the air.

“Percy?”

His wife-to-be has stuck her head out of the office and is giving him an odd look.

“Yeah, sorry,” he says, and hurries into the room.

The feeling of anxiety doesn’t go away.

It's dark inside of the room; the shades are drawn as though they are in mourning. Maybe, Percy thinks drily, most people who come into this room do feel like they're in mourning. Maybe he's the unusual one, and everybody else in the world is just as upset about getting married as Annabeth is. And what about Hazel, and Frank? When they walk into this room on their respective wedding days, will they feel like it's an end, just like Annabeth does? Will they be thinking about each other when they sign their lives over to their soul mates?

"Ms. Chase, please sign here."

"Oh, I'm not changing my name," Annabeth says shortly, looking at this particular document like it's something dirty. "I'm keeping it, thank you very much."

Percy looks up in surprise, but when he sees Annabeth scrutinizing his expression, he just shrugs and nods.

"I get it," he says, trying to push the disappointment and anger to anyplace but the surface. "It's fine. Really."

The man pushes this document away and drags out another one. The marriage one.

"You both need to sign in the places where you see an X. Do you have your own rings, or would you like to use the standard ones that we have here?"

"Standard, please," Annabeth says, but Percy cuts her off.

"Actually... if it's okay... I have my mom and dad's rings." Annabeth's eyes widen slightly. It's his turn to look guilty. "My mom doesn't need hers anymore, and my dad... well... we still have it. And they're pretty nice—they aren't the original rings, they're anniversary gifts—so I was thinking that we could use them."

“Okay,” agrees Annabeth, but she looks a little blown-away.

Percy writes his name on the contract just as Annabeth writes her name down. He makes sure that he doesn't bump into her as he signs. When they've both straightened up, the only thing left to do is put the rings on each other. Annabeth slides Percy's on first. She doesn't say anything at all, much less comment on how it's already been sized to Percy. But how would she even know that? She's never going to meet his dad; never going to realize that the man had abnormally large hands and an abnormally large personality.

Percy hesitates as he goes to slip on Annabeth's wedding ring.

“In the films,” he says quickly, just as he's about to put the gold band on her finger. “They used to say stuff to each other before they put on the rings, right?”

“Right,” Annabeth says, startled. “They were called vows.”

“Vows,” Percy echoes. “Okay. Vows.”

Annabeth waits patiently, smoothing a blanket of blankness over her expression. He hates that he can't see what she's feeling. It makes him more nervous.

“Annabeth,” says Percy, “I know that this isn't what you want. I know that you probably dragged your feet to this courthouse, and that you're going to leave feeling like you've lost a piece of yourself. I think that it sucks that you're being forced into marrying somebody that you don't love but... but I vow that I'm going to be the best husband you can ask for. If I know anything, I know that your soul mate is not a person that you should take for granted, so I vow to be your soul mate in every sense of the word. I wish that we had been able to do the whole ‘fiancée’ thing like you wanted to do, but we haven't, and so I vow to spend our life together making up for it. Making you not regret it—not regret me.”

Flushing red and feeling furious at himself for saying the first thing that popped into his head, Percy avoids Annabeth's gaze. But when he looks down at the ground, his eye catches her movements. Annabeth is pushing his mother's wedding band further onto her finger, pressing it hard against her hand.

“Anything you would like to add?” inquires their officiator knowingly.

Percy looks up as Annabeth reaches forward and awkwardly touches his elbow in a way that she probably intends to be comforting.

“I vow to... to let you. Do that. I vow to let you try.”

His answering beam is probably too bright for the moment, but Percy Jackson doesn't believe in a half-assed smile.

They're both kind of tired when the wedding is over, but they manage to get dinner at the bistro across the street from the courthouse. They eat silently, both a little shell-shocked from their marriage ceremony. The fact that they weren't married last night and they are married today is something that Percy is having difficulty comprehending.

His sandwich tastes kind of shitty. He wishes that he had thought to order something with a bit more pizzazz to it-- it's weird that his wedding dinner is a sandwich. Maybe he should have cooked for Annabeth? That would have been really nice of him, right? And husbandly. Definitely husbandly.

Neither of them talk until they're on their way to the apartment that they will share together. Annabeth has been slowly decorating it over the past week, and Percy has been bringing stuff over as well. They've never run into each other-- purposefully, Percy thinks-- and both of them still have access to their old apartments. He's gonna go over there and move more stuff tomorrow. He was kind of thinking of sleeping there one last night, but there's a part of him that wants to spend his wedding night with his new wife. He won't leave until she asks him to.

Annabeth is the one that unlocks the door. Percy wants to carry her over the threshold, but she just goes inside ahead of him. She's been thinking all throughout dinner, and now that the sun is setting on their brand new apartment, Annabeth's mind doesn't seem to have stopped whirring.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Percy says finally. He’s kind of forgotten how his voice sounds because they haven’t spoken in a while. It’s weird to hear himself speak now.

“Just... thinking...” Annabeth answers absently. Percy chuckles, and that’s what pulls her out of her head. “Oh. Sorry. You’ve probably figured that out already.”

Percy nods. They’re just standing in the darkening entrance hall to their apartment, neither venturing further into the space.

“Okay,” Annabeth says, sounding nervous. “Look, I know what usually happens on wedding nights and I’m fully aware of your... expectations, but-”

Percy reddens.

“No!” he says, cutting her off quickly. “I’m not expecting anything from you. I’m gonna, you know, sleep on the floor and stuff.”

“Really?” Annabeth questions dubiously.

As if to prove his point, he backs away from her and puts his hands up.

“Really really.”

She tilts her head to the side and looks him up and down, trying to get a proper reading on him. This is not the first time she has done this. As usual, Percy stands perfectly still. He wonders if she knows that he knows what she’s doing. He doesn’t excel at human interaction, but he definitely isn’t shit at it either. He can read her.

“I have to tell you something,” Annabeth whispers.

Okay, maybe he can't read her.

"You do?"

She nods slowly.

"Should I sit down?"

Annabeth shrugs one shoulder. "Maybe?"

Feeling anxiety creep into his stomach, Percy walks over to the family room and sits down on the couch that his mom had offered up. Annabeth takes an armchair and they both stare at each other, waiting.

"I don't know how to do this."

"Do it really, really quickly," Percy suggests. "And offer me blue food afterwards."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just something my mom used to do when she had to tell me bad news."

Annabeth smiles slightly.

"You're going to have to tell me about that later."

"I will," Percy agrees. "But right now, you need to talk because I'm going minorly insane."

She hesitates briefly before closing her eyes and launching into it.

“Percy, I don’t know what your past is like, or what you think about mine, but... I need to tell you something. And, just so you know, this has no bearing on what’s not going to be happening tonight. I just want to get it out there before we get any deeper into... this. Whatever it is.”

“Marriage?” Percy suggests drily.

Annabeth blinks.

“Was that a very dry attempt at a joke?”

Percy shrugs.

“It can’t be all puns all the time.”

“I’m not a virgin.”

Annabeth looks horrified as soon as she blurts it out, bringing up her hands to cover her mouth. Immediately, her eyes dart over to Percy’s eyes, locking on them. He feels like he’s drowning as he stares at her. He doesn’t know what to say. Annabeth, it seems, takes this to mean that she should keep talking.

“I know that most people wait to have sex until they meet their soulmate, but I... I just didn’t want to. I didn’t see the point of missing out on life experiences, so I started this friends-with-benefits thing with my friend Luke, and I just... went ahead with it. I didn’t think that I would regret it, and I don’t regret it, because, well, I don’t regret very many of my decisions. I think them through. And I think that I did think this through, but maybe not as far ahead in my life as I could have. And I’m sorry if it hurts you, but that’s the only thing that I really regret about the whole thing. And-”

“Did you love him?” Percy asks, interrupting her.

The question takes a few moments to fully settle in Annabeth’s mind. He watches her face contorting as she tries to figure out the answer. For the first time, Annabeth looks guilty.

“I thought I did. But then his timer ran out and he left me without a second glance and never spoke to me again and I realized that... what we had... it wasn’t love.” Percy returns to silence. Annabeth squares her jaw and takes on a professional tone. “I’m sure that this isn’t the type of behavior that you had expected from your soulmate, but this is a piece of who I am and-”

“I’m not mad.” She stops talking. “If... if that’s what you think.”

“You’re not,” Annabeth reiterates slowly.

“No,” Percy says. “I guess I’m a little... well, you know how it is when you’re growing up. You think that you’re gonna be having all these firsts and experiences with the person that your timer is ticking down to. I’m not mad at you for not waiting for me or anything. I just feel kind of stupid. ’Cause I waited, and now I’m gonna look like this total dumbass if we ever... I mean... if... you know.”

“You’re not,” Annabeth says. “I mean, it’s not a big deal. It’s just a thing that people do when they’re bored.”

Percy raises his eyebrows.

“All these years and I only now find out that it’s ‘just a thing that people do when they’re bored?’ Damn. I feel like it’s been way oversold.”

“It probably has,” Annabeth agrees.

“Hey,” Percy says, voice gaining strength. “You know that you can tell me anything you want about your past, right? I mean, I’m not going to judge you on past decisions or the person that you used to be. We’re here now, and whatever happened in the past is stuck there forever. So... yeah.”

She thinks about this very carefully.

“Once,” she says, smiling slightly mischievously. “I tried to rip my timer off.” For the record, this hurts Percy way more than the fact that she had sex with somebody else. “But I think I might be glad that I didn’t.”

“You might?”

“I might.”

“Shake on it?”

Annabeth sticks her hand out and Percy shakes it with a firm pump and a decisive nod of his head.

“Might is good enough for me.”

The first week of marriage goes by without much incident. Percy and Annabeth settle into a rhythm that is comfortable and simple. They wake up at the same time. Annabeth showers in the morning, Percy at night. He cooks breakfast in the morning while Annabeth throws cold

pizza into tupperware for them to have at lunch. Then they order more pizza for dinner. Neither of them are used to cooking meals or going food shopping. It's easy to stick with what they know.

Talking about the past comes a bit more freely now, especially to Annabeth. Percy can tell that his response has lifted a weight off of her shoulders, and she's a bit easier around him. They talk over dinner, and a little bit in the morning, and sometimes she puts a blanket over him if he falls asleep before she goes off to bed. He tries to wait for her, but he sleeps on the couch anyways, and once he hits it, he's usually out pretty fast.

There's just one thing that bugs Percy about their days: this marriage seems to lack any and all forms of true intimacy. They're polite to each other. They never brush their teeth together. They don't talk as they fall asleep, something that Percy has been looking forward to doing since he was a little kid, old enough to say goodbye to his imaginary friends and old enough to realize that the next time somebody would sleep in his room, it would be his wife. Also, they don't have inside jokes or common interests yet, and sometimes Percy wonders if they're ever going to have them. He wishes that they had a television show that the two of them watched together from start to finish; it would give them something to talk about and something to bond over. But he doesn't know Annabeth well enough to pick a show that she would like, and she's too busy with essays and readings to sit down and begin an emotional television experience.

Out of all the times that they could have gotten married, Annabeth's senior year of college is probably the worst one. She's thinking about grad schools, and she has a thesis to write, and she has so much to do in all of her courses. It's the most inconvenient time to begin a relationship with someone. Perhaps if they had gotten to know each other better before they were married, Percy could feel like they were in it together. He could support her; read things to her; quiz her before she goes in for exams. But Annabeth does school the way she does everything else: efficiently, and all by herself.

At least, that's what Percy thinks until her friends shows up at the apartment for dinner one night.

He opens the door to see two smiling people, both of them holding covered dishes. The man is tall and has sandy blond hair, while the woman-- his wife, Percy presumes-- has a dark complexion and long hair tied back in a braid. There's a little girl hanging onto her leg, and she beams up at Percy with a smile that is missing teeth.

“You must be Percy Jackson!” the woman says, kissing him on the cheek before brushing past him and into the apartment. “I’m Piper Grace. It’s lovely to finally meet you.”

As Percy shakes the hand of the man, who introduces himself as Jason Grace, he tries to remember Annabeth mentioning having dinner guests over. He can’t.

“We have lasagna,” Piper announces, inviting herself into the kitchen and preheating the oven.

“Nice place you got here,” Jason tells Percy as their child bounds over to the couch and flops onto it.

“Thanks,” Percy says. “I did... not pick it out.”

Jason laughs.

“You’re preaching to the choir. We got married at eighteen, so I think that they felt like they could just assign us to any old apartment and we wouldn’t complain.”

“Eighteen?”

“We met in middle school.”

“Wow,” says Percy. “That’s a long time to know someone before you get married.”

“It was an amazing experience,” Jason admits. “I was so excited to marry her. But, on the other hand... tiny apartment.”

“Our first place was tiny,” Piper agrees, coming back from the kitchen. “Our second one was nicer. And we’re going to put in a request for a new place when baby number two comes along.”

“Oh, you’re pregnant?” Percy says. “Congratulations.”

“Nope, not pregnant,” Jason says, kissing Piper on the head. Percy feels a pang in his stomach as he observes the easy way that Piper leans into her husband. “Just hoping to be really soon.”

“We’re both finishing up school with Annabeth, so hopefully that will correlate well with me needing to take time off for maternity leave.”

“Oh,” replies Percy, feeling slightly out of his league because he doesn’t know how to handle this.

The doorknob turns, and then Annabeth is in the apartment, carrying a bag of groceries and looking exhausted. She doesn’t say anything as she locks and bolts the door, but when Piper clears her throat, Annabeth turns around with a surprised shriek.

“Piper,” she breathes, holding a hand over her heart. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“You didn’t introduce me to your husband,” Piper reminds her, sounding extremely wounded. In spite of this, Annabeth rolls her eyes. “We’re best friends. Remember? Remember that little tidbit?”

Annabeth shoves the bag of groceries at Jason, who takes them wordlessly. Then she turns to Piper, places her hands purposefully on her hips, and glares.

“You cannot just come into my apartment without asking!”

“I didn’t!” protests Piper. “I asked. Percy let me in. Didn’t you, good sir?”

Percy opens his mouth to answer, but then Annabeth calls out “Leela!” just as the little girl is jumping into her arms and that’s the end of that conversation. He takes the bag of groceries from Jason and heads into the kitchen with them, wondering why Annabeth doesn’t want him to meet her friends. He’s held Hazel and Frank back out of respect for Annabeth’s awkwardness about the whole “marriage” situation, but the way Annabeth reacted... it was like she was ashamed of him or something... shit.

“Percy?” He turns around to see Annabeth looking at him tentatively. “Are you okay?”

Percy nods slowly.

“Yeah. Fine. Why?”

“You’re concentrating really hard on the outside of that bag of groceries and it doesn’t even have any writing on it.”

Percy glances at the bag.

“I... I thought the writing might be invisible.”

“Percy.”

“It’s nothing!” he says, cutting her off. “Really. Seriously.”

Annabeth sighs.

“Okay. You don’t have to tell me,” she says as she picks up a bottle of wine and brings it into the family room. “But I’m sorry that Piper and Jason just showed up like this... I’m sorry if it’s bothering you that they’re here.”

“It’s not!” Percy says quickly. “I’m really happy that I’m meeting them.” Are you? he adds silently.

When he follows Annabeth back into the living room, he vows not to pay too much attention to the way she interacts with Leela. They’re definitely not ready to think about kids yet. They’re still so awkward around each other. And even though he loves talking to her, and loves being around her, he doesn’t know if she would say the same about him. Considering the fact that they have been married for a whole week, they have made very little progress towards actually knowing each other. At least that’s the way Percy sees it.

He holds back from asking Jason and Piper questions about Annabeth all evening, just enjoying the ease with which she interacts with them. He hasn’t ever seen her quite so settled, and as more conversation and wine flows through Annabeth, Percy notices that she gets closer to him on the couch, mirroring Piper and Jason’s close positioning.

Percy is almost regretful when his phone buzzes with a call and he has to leave the room to take it. He excuses himself, then fishes it out of his pocket, not bothering to check the caller ID before he answers.

“Hello?”

“Perseus Jackson, where have you been for the past week?”

Warmth fills his heart.

“Hey, mom.”

“Sweetheart, I had at least expected a measly picture of your wife by now. If not from you, then from Hazel.”

“Why Hazel?”

“Because that girl is a sweetheart and she would never leave her mother hanging once she met her soulmate.”

Percy tries not to think about how awful it’s going to be when Hazel finally meets her soulmate. They all try not to think about it, really.

“Sorry,” he says. “It’s just been kind of... crazy.”

It hasn’t been crazy. It’s been nothing, mostly.

“I’m sure it has,” Sally concedes. “But, really, Percy. At least a phone call with her would be nice.”

“How about this...” Percy holds the phone up to his face and clicks the video icon. When his mother appears on the screen, he smiles brightly at her. She, however, simply frowns.

“Are you alright, sweetheart? You look exhausted.”

“I’ve never gone this long without blue food,” he jokes, trying to distract her. And without sleeping in an actual bed. “Now do you want to meet Annabeth or not?”

She straightens in her seat.

“I do.”

“Okay,” Percy says. “Great, then. Be right back.”

He leaves the phone on the kitchen table as he goes into the family room.

“Are you okay?” Annabeth asks for the second time that night.

“I actually need you in the kitchen,” he says. “Excuse us, please,” Percy adds to Piper and Jason.

“What’s going on?” Annabeth inquires as Percy hands her his phone.

“Hi!” says his mom’s voice. “It’s so nice to finally see you!”

“Annabeth, meet my mom.” Annabeth, for her part, looks stunned. “Mom. This is my soulmate. Discuss.”

He pats Annabeth briefly on the shoulder before heading back into the living room, an anxious knot in his stomach. Percy is hoping that Jason and Piper will distract him, but they’re already packing up their things to go.

“It’s Leela’s bedtime,” Jason explains, gesturing to the sleeping girl.

“But thank you for a lovely night,” Piper says sweetly, heading to the door. “And, Percy?”

“Yeah?”

He straightens up, knowing that what she says is going to be important.

“You’re going to make her happy. Just give it a bit more time. She’s almost ready.”

“She’s just scared,” Jason says. “It’s always been hard for her to just dive into trusting someone.”

“Even if that someone does happen to be her soulmate.”

Percy nods numbly, shaking Jason’s hand. When the door has closed behind them, he sits on his and Annabeth’s couch and tries to reconcile all of the pieces that are scattered across his mind. Their relationship is shattered glass right now, but Percy doesn’t know how many pieces it has broken into yet.

He doesn’t realize how long he’s been thinking until Annabeth sits down on the couch next to him. He does not look at her, but he doesn’t think that she’s looking at him either. Still, she’s close enough that their arms are brushing and that... that implies intimacy.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She pauses. “So, your mom is nice.”

“She’s the best.”

“We’re going to visit her on Saturday.”

Percy looks up.

“We?”

“We.”

“Annabeth. That’s awesome.”

She smiles.

“I thought you’d be happy.”

“I am.”

“And... Percy?”

“Yeah?”

“Jason really liked you.”

“I liked him too. He’s a pretty cool guy.”

“No, but...” Annabeth cuts herself off, searching for the right words. “You don’t understand. Jason never likes anybody that I date. He hated Luke. And I sometimes trust his instinct over mine, because he’s known me forever and he’s mistrustful of most guys that come near me. But you? He liked you. A lot. So I was thinking...”

“That’s a change,” Percy teases, unable to keep the joking at bay because of how nervous he is. This feels big. This feels like something.

“Shut up, you,” she laughs. Then she turns serious again. “I... I was thinking that, maybe, you could sleep next to me tonight. In the bed.”

Percy turns to look at her for the first time since she’s sat down.

“Wait, what?”

“Just sleep!” Annabeth says. “We’re not ready for other stuff that people do in beds, despite our marital status.”

“You know, you’re awfully cagey with the word ‘sex’ for someone who has had sex.”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up not one minute ago?” Percy salutes her and then gestures for her to continue. “I just think that I don’t need a double bed to myself, and your back is probably killing you from being on the couch for a week, and there’s no harm in sleeping next to each other when we’re going to be spending the rest of our lives together. So... what do you say?”

“I would love to sleep next to you,” he says honestly. “Um, now?”

Annabeth stifles a smile.

“Now is good.”

That night, they brush their teeth together for the first time.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Who’s ready for some married Percabeth? I am. I am ready for married Percabeth.

Thank you so much for all of the amazing reviews and comments! We read every single one of them and usually message each other about how wonderful they are. Also, thank you a million times for the messages that you’ve been dropping in our ask boxes! I check Hannah’s Stucco Hearts tag constantly so that I can look at all of your fascinating opinions about the universe we’ve created. Your questions and ideas have served to make Stucco Hearts even more 3D than it already was, so thank you so much!

The title for this chapter comes from Charlene Kay.

You took my soul and wiped it clean

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sharing a bed with Percy Jackson is a strange sort of experience. The first night they climb into bed together, they are both a little tipsy from the wine and she is so tired that she barely comprehends the weight of another body on the other side of the bed before passing out. Percy's face is buried deep in the pillow when she wakes the next morning and she slips out of bed and towards the bathroom without waking him.

The following night is a little more awkward. They get ready for bed in silence, chancing nervous glances at one another and trying not to blush like pre-pubescent teens. Annabeth is acutely aware of his presence, his slow breathing, the rustle of sheets as he fidgets. It takes her a long time to fall asleep that night.

She gets used to sharing a bed with Percy with relative and concerning ease. And with this routine of brushing their teeth together, alternating showers, climbing into bed, and waking up in the morning - both groaning at what the day ahead will bring each of them - comes more routine to their days. After inviting Sally to dinner and realizing they have no food to make said dinner with, they make their first grocery shop together, and Annabeth gets to witness Percy's culinary skills first hand. They cut the pizza habit there and then and set aside Thursday evenings after Percy's work and before Annabeth's last lecture of the day to buy food for the week. Percy is a disaster to shop with. His monotonous work seems to cork up all of his extra energy, leaving him absolutely useless in his free time because he is so easily distracted. He ends up bounding around the store like a little kid hopped up on candy. Annabeth drags him along anyway. She won't admit it to anyone, but his presence makes a grocery shop far more entertaining.

While he cooks for them, she brings her work into the kitchen so as to keep him company. This leads to him enquiring about her work. And even though his eyes glaze over when she gets into the technicalities of architecture, she can tell he makes an effort to understand and asks her all sorts of questions. It actually helps - she has always learned best by going through things methodically, and teaching Percy basic architecture requires a great deal of simplifying and using practical examples. She demonstrates the joints of the San Francisco bridge by creating a little model out of lollipop sticks and string. It still sits on the mantel piece.

Annabeth unwittingly makes room for Percy in her life. A month passes, two months, three, and Annabeth forgets her life before this. She forgets her prison cell of an apartment and her single bed and her empty fridge. The weight of her mother-in-law's ring on her finger is barely noticeable any more, the weight of another person in her bed is a comfort. And the sight of Percy Jackson, her *husband*, in the mornings - with his black hair sticking every which way, his fists rubbing at sleepy eyes, his shirt rumpled, skin lined with sheet creases - is one that makes her heart beat a little bit faster. This sight brings intimacy into their

relationship, a type of intimacy she has never had before. Her time with Luke had always been rushed; never spending the night or lingering for breakfast or a shower in the mornings.

Their arms brush together as they watch TV from the couch; his hand feathers over the small of her back as he holds a door open for her; she feels his hard chest against her back as they squeeze past one another in the small bathroom. And she finds that she doesn't hate these instances, she doesn't resent Percy for his closeness. At night, she is almost overcome with the horrifying urge to reach out for him, to press her body against his and *share* the bed, rather than simply sleep in it together.

Her relationship with Percy is slow; a snail's pace, really. It gives her time to adjust.

And it is monitored by their unfortunate marriage counsellor, Grover Underwood. He sits in his leather chair with a small notepad and pen in his hands and watches Percy and Annabeth sit on opposite ends of the couch. He's eternally patient with them and quells several smiles and groans of frustration at Annabeth's stunted answers and Percy's snarky remarks. And Annabeth finds that she actually likes Grover, until she remembers that he will be the one to initiate the court order for them to start a family; which makes her crawl into herself even more.

'So, how has your week been?' he asks, peering up from his notepad.

Annabeth crosses her arms over her chest and stares at the shelves of books behind Grover. 'Alright, I guess.'

Percy glances at her and shrugs. 'We went grocery shopping yesterday.'

Grover smiles. 'That's wonderful. You're spending quality time together.'

Annabeth snorts. 'I don't know if Percy picking up every piece of fruit and telling a bad pun really counts as quality marriage time, but okay.'

Percy points a finger at her indignantly. 'Hey! You laughed at my *fineapple* pun.'

She rolls her eyes but she's smiling. 'You were stuffing a pineapple down the front of your jeans.'

'Oh, and *that's* the more mature thing to laugh at?'

But she couldn't help it; the noise he had made when he had to pull it out without the member of staff stood behind him noticing was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. And she finds herself genuinely laughing with him on the couch in their marriage counselor's office until she remembers that their marriage counsellor is sitting right there watching them and smiling and writing in his stupid little notepad. It has her sitting up and crossing her arms over her chest.

The look of hurt on Percy's face when she withdraws again is almost enough to make her reverse her actions. But as much as she likes him, as much good he brings out of her - more

and more everyday - she's not ready for Grover to see that. She's not ready to be pushed forward in their relationship. If it's going to develop, she wants it to find it's own way.

'You're happy, aren't you?' Thalia's voice is a sharp contrast to the warm March air.

Annabeth avoids her friend's stare as they walk down the street together. It's 6am and Thalia hasn't slept yet - which is really showing, Annabeth notes irately. Annabeth had left Percy asleep in their bed, picking up an apple from the fruit bowl in the kitchen before leaving the apartment without having showered. She wants to abuse her free membership to the gym on campus before her 10am lecture.

'I'm living with it. You want me to be perpetually angry like you are?'

'You're giving in,' Thalia accuses. 'Like Piper did, like...'

She doesn't need to finish her sentence. 'So this is still about them? You can't throw all your pent up anger for them on me. Why don't you try for some reconciliation instead of being bitter all the goddamn time? It might do you some good.'

They have stopped walking now and Thalia is staring at her like she is a stranger. 'You're giving in to the system. You're a part of the problem now.'

Annabeth sighs tiredly, rubbing her face. 'Some day your timer will run out too, Thalia.'

She shakes her head. 'I thought you were stronger, better than this. Turns out you're just like the rest of them.'

'Thalia.'

But she has already turned away, stalking down the street and leaving Annabeth alone with a bitter taste in her mouth.

She isn't aware of the rest of her walk to the gym, and blinks slowly at the man at the desk who asks for her student card, before pulling it out of her pocket. Thalia's words go around in her head like a carousel. As she works out, Annabeth thinks up far better responses than the ones she had given and wishes bitterly that she could do the conversation over - not to reconcile, but to hurt Thalia as much as she had hurt her.

The truth is that her words sting deep because of the truth in them. Annabeth has given into the system. She is one of those thousands of people happily allowing the laws of government to decide their future; who they will marry and where they will live and when they will have a family. Her free will of choice has evaporated and if she allows herself to become any more complacent with Percy then things will only get worse. Grover will undoubtedly notice the change in their relationship and before Annabeth knows it, she will be presented with a court order to get pregnant. She has never been averse to having children - especially after Leela

was born - but to bring a child into the world under a court order seems so brutal, so unloving. She can't imagine joyously reading the positive sign on a pregnancy test when one of the first people she has to tell will be their councillor to inform the court that they have not broken the law.

These thoughts stay with her after she has showered and left the gym; they solidify her argument to distance herself from Percy again during her classes - where she finds herself unable to concentrate; and they follow her to Leela's day care, where she will be picking her goddaughter up and taking her home.

The toddler is as excitable as ever when she sees Annabeth waiting for her at the gates. She reaches her chubby arms out and giggles when Annabeth kisses her cheeks. Her hand is tiny and warm in Annabeth's as they walk down the street towards Piper and Jason's apartment and her voice is a continuous rattle of stories which sound far too dramatic for kindergarten. But her happy voice helps Annabeth relax some.

Piper and Jason's apartment is a familiar comfort. Leela throws off her shoes and drops her bag by the door until Annabeth tells her to take them to her room and she only grumbles slightly before doing as she's told. Annabeth smiles to herself and tucks her keys - with a spare one to the apartment - into the pocket of her jeans before heading into the kitchen. Jason has left a list of instructions, as he always does when Annabeth picks Leela up from daycare. She has been doing it for years now, but Jason leaves a list anyway. She supposes she would do the same if it were her child being looked after.

There are an extra few jobs tacked onto the bottom of the paper in Piper's handwriting along with a promise of dinner if she completes them. Feeling slightly mollicoddled, Annabeth sets to work, setting Leela up at the kitchen table with a coloring book as she starts the laundry. She tries not to groan out loud when she remembers the pile waiting for her at home and makes her way through the list; cooking up a simple dinner for Leela along the way and getting her ready for bed. She allows the toddler to sit up with her on the couch while she works on an assignment to wait for Piper and Jason to get home from work.

Leela is snoring against her arm, rendering it useless for typing, when the couple get home. Annabeth smiles up at them and nudges Leela awake, who grunts softly and coos at her mother when she picks her up.

'It's late,' Annabeth notes when Jason slumps on the couch next to her.

He nods sleepily, rubbing his face. 'Sorry, we should have rang ahead, but we've both had crazy days.'

'Don't sweat it. That's what I'm here for.' She closes her laptop and stretches her arms above her head. 'You mentioned food.'

Jason smiles and, without opening his eyes, points to the floor where he's put his briefcase down. Annabeth's smile mirrors his when she sees the brown paper bag with patches of grease on the bottom - a tell tale sign of take-out food.

'I'll dish up,' she offers, standing up.

Jason grunts a thanks and Annabeth wonders if he will stay awake long enough for her to transfer the food from its plastic containers to plates. Piper appears in the kitchen a few minutes later and pulls three wine glasses from the cupboard. Annabeth raises an eyebrow at her.

‘It’s a Friday,’ Piper argues, causing Annabeth to laugh softly. ‘Have you let Percy know you’ll be home late.’

The smile falls from Annabeth’s face and she looks away, focusing harder than is strictly necessary on pouring sweet and sour chicken onto the plate.

‘He’s not my mother.’

‘No.’ Piper’s voice has transformed into the stern voice she saves for when Leela is misbehaving. ‘He’s your husband. And he’s probably worried, and he deserves better than you treating him like he’s nothing.’

Annabeth whirls around. ‘I’m not treating him like he’s nothing.’

‘Maybe not,’ she concedes, ‘but I know you’re still holding back from him.’

‘I never said I would give him anything. I married him because I had to.’ But even as she says it, Annabeth knows it’s not quite true; she had promised Percy that she would let him try and make her happy. And although she has allowed so much between them, her walls are still firmly up. But she shakes her head. ‘I don’t owe him anything.’

‘Annabeth,’ she says softly, ‘have you thought about how this is affecting him at all? He’s a good person.’

‘He deserves better, I know.’

‘Oh I don’t know, I think you two would be good for each other if...’

‘If I give up.’

Piper sighs. ‘What are you giving up, really?’

A hundred answers rattle through her head. But this time, she gives no answer.

‘Annabeth, I don’t like the laws any more than you do. And I have had my moments of feeling resentful. But it’s the timers that brought me Jason. And Leela too, and for that I am grateful.’

Annabeth looks at her friend with something close to wonder in her heart. ‘When did you become so wise?’

Piper grins. ‘Motherhood does that to you.’ She releases her and picks up the food. ‘Come on, let’s eat. Before Jason is completely unconscious.’

Once they are sitting in the living room, eating chinese take-out with as much dignity as they can muster, Piper gets Annabeth talking again - about Percy.

‘He does this funny stretching thing when he’s tired - he sounds like a cat, it’s kind of adorable.’ Piper’s grin is incorrigible but Annabeth ignores it and stares at her food as she talks - for now she can’t seem to stop. ‘I’ve never seen anyone brush their teeth with so much vigour, I’m surprised he doesn’t draw blood. And I don’t think he realises that I can hear him when he sings in the shower - he’s *completely* tone deaf and always sings the same three songs.’

‘Is one of them *How do you like your eggs in the morning?*’ Jason interrupts.

Annabeth looks up at him, frowning. ‘Yes. Why?’

His smile mirrors Piper’s. ‘’Cause you’re always humming it under your breath.’

Her cheeks burn and she is almost overcome with the urge to throw a dumpling at him. ‘Shut up,’ she mutters. ‘It’s catchy.’

Ten minutes later, after she has endured more than her fair share of teasing and her friends are looking far too smug for their own good, Annabeth excuses herself. Jason walks her downstairs and hails a cab, handing money to the cab driver before she can even try to protest and hugging her goodnight.

The drive home offers Annabeth a chance to collect her thoughts. She hadn’t mentioned her argument with Thalia to avoid upsetting Piper and Jason but her words still hold heavy meaning. Annabeth cannot ignore her morals screaming out against this life she has been given, but equally she cannot ignore Piper’s words. It’s true that she does not hate Percy, in fact she... well she likes him. A lot, actually. He’s too good for her really, too kind, too innocent to be branded by her hatred of this world they live in.

The cab driver has to call her attention after they’ve stopped and she lets out an apology as she drags herself out of the taxi, pulling her backpack and laptop bag with her. They weigh heavily on her shoulders as she stands on the sidewalk and stares up at her building. By all reason she should be exhausted, but electricity is thrumming through her veins. Her mind goes ahead of her, inside the building, up the cranky elevator, through her apartment door. Percy is waiting up there for her somewhere. It takes her a while to realise that the uncomfortable feeling in her stomach is nerves, not irritation. She’s *nervous*. The feeling is foreign to her; she has not felt nervous about a guy since she was in middle school and she kissed Mark Kennington behind the bike shed.

The knowledge that Percy Jackson makes her nervous makes Annabeth want to turn on her heel and run. But her feet move forward instead, following her mind inside the building, up the cranky elevator and through the apartment door. And then there he is.

He’s standing with his back to her - and doesn’t turn when she enters - still wearing his work clothes. The shirt is rumpled and the sleeves are rolled up messily to his elbows. And he’s... folding laundry.

He's standing there doing the laundry she'd been dreading to do all evening, and he's eaten dinner alone because she didn't call to let him know she'd be late, and she suddenly feels absolutely awful. And she's so momentarily overcome with ridiculous emotion that she almost bounds over to him and kisses him there and then.

She doesn't.

'What are you doing?' she says instead.

He pauses in his actions. 'What does it look like I'm doing?'

'Well I-- I thought you'd be asleep by now.'

'Evidently not.'

He's so sharp that Annabeth recoils from his words. She's glad he cannot see her, she doesn't want to give him that satisfaction.

'What's your problem?'

Percy finally abandons the laundry and turns to face her. He looks exhausted. Dark circles ring his eyes, his mouth is pulled down and enunciated by his furrowed eyebrows. This is a Percy she has not seen before. Gone is the joyous, bounding wonder who makes her grocery shops a highlight of her week; he has been replaced by this angry man.

'You could have called,' he says harshly.

The Thalia in her fires up in true form. 'Why? I have to let you know where I am at all times? I don't remember agreeing to those terms and conditions during our wedding.'

He scoffs. 'Our wedding. You mean the worst day of your life.'

'I--' She is at a loss for words. 'I never said that.'

Something about his demeanor softens and she can tell how desperately out of character it is for him to be cruel to anyone.

'You never had to,' he admits, sounding more deflated, but there is still a hardness to his voice. 'You're not the best actress, Annabeth.'

Something about hearing him say her name jolts her back to frustration. 'Would you prefer if I pretend to be happily married? To become part of the system like every other idiot who sits and watches their timer countdown and can't wait to be forced into getting married and having babies?'

He reels back at her words. 'Like me, you mean?'

Piper's voice rages inside her head now, a devil to Thalia's angel. Or perhaps their roles are reversed; perhaps Piper is the angel. Annabeth doesn't know anymore. *You're taking this out on Percy*, Piper tells her, *none of this is his fault*.

If he wasn't here, you wouldn't be in this mess, Thalia argues back.

Annabeth wants to scream at the voices in her head to stop, to shut up and let her think. Because for some unfathomable reason her attention is being drawn sharply to the open collar of Percy's shirt and the flex of his muscles as he clenches his fists at his sides.

'I'm sorry,' he says. And this time the anger in his voice is utterly gone, obliterated by exhaustion and remorse that she does not deserve. And for the life of her, she cannot understand why he is apologising with such sincerity. Why this man is so impossibly good to her when all she does is throw it back in his face.

And so, instead of thinking, instead of listening to the voices raging inside her head, Annabeth lets her feet pull her forward, across the length of the room, until she can tip up onto her toes and press her mouth against his with an almost painful force. Because he confuses the hell out of her and his chest is firm against hers and his mouth is soft despite her brutality and he is so irrevocably good that she cannot stand on the other side of the room from him any longer.

'Annabeth-' he murmurs against her lips. 'I don't...'

She teeths at his bottom lip, effectively ceasing any further conversation and Percy groans into her mouth, wrapping his arms around her as her fingers delve into his wonderfully messy hair. The heady warmth of him surrounds her and yet she wants more still.

'Percy.' She kisses the side of his mouth, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and tugging. 'Pick me up.'

She feels his body tense as he hesitates, but then his hands slip down her back, over the curves of her body until he stoops against her to grip the back of her thighs. He lifts her in one impressively swift movement and she wraps her legs around him, squeezing and causing him to stumble back against the table with the laundry scattered across its surface.

'Sorry,' she mutters, but she isn't. Because this feeling is incredible. And despite her previous experience, this feels different; it's new and exciting and completely, utterly, wonderful. She does her best to grind her hips against his without causing him to lose his grip on her and relishes the surprised grunt he elicits.

'Trying to kill me,' he mutters as her mouth attaches to his jaw and she begins to suck a decent bruise into his skin.

'Bedroom,' she mutters in response. 'Now.'

He obliges, almost tripping over his own feet as she continues her relentless attack of his jaw and neck. And when he drops her most unceremoniously onto the bed - *their* bed - she barely allows a space to form between them and drags him down on top of her, keeping her arms and legs hooked around him.

And as the length of his body presses into hers she can feel him trembling. Annabeth cups his face in her hands and holds him above her. His green eyes are dark and frantic as they search

her face, his lips are red and parted and ready to be kissed again. She strokes his cheekbones with her thumbs and listens to their thrumming heartbeats each aching to meet the other.

And, after a lingering moment where she sees a smile etch at his mouth, Annabeth pulls him down to her again.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you don't mind the time jump, we have a lot of time to cover in not very many chapters so it was needed

this chapter was a LOT of fun to write. i really love screwing with Annabeth's emotions and having Thalia and Piper pulling on her opposing morals is great fun. and Percy is finally getting some action - poor baby, we made him suffer long enough. but these two have still got a long way to go in their relationship yet.

Rach and i LOVE reading your opinions on this story in the reviews you leave and the messages we both get on tumblr so keep them coming!!

the chapter title is from All I Want by Kodakline

until next week :)

Silence, you heart beats slowly over me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Annabeth is everywhere.

On a mental plane, Percy knows that she is good at this because she has done it before. But, from a more emotional standpoint, he doesn't give a shit. After all, it's not *Luke* that she's kissing right now. It's not *Luke* that just got to second base. It's not *Luke* that already has three hickeys—and, as a person who has never had a hickey before, Percy thinks that Luke is seriously missing out.

The idea of Annabeth marking him with her lips and tongue and teeth makes Percy's stomach flip in a way that causes him to press closer and closer to her. He kisses her at an even more furious pace, working hard to pour all of the frustration and anger that he has felt at her into their kiss. When she finally moans into his mouth, Percy takes it as his cue.

He flips her over so that Annabeth is shoved against the pillows at the head of their bed, breathing heavily and staring up at him with puffy lips and slightly narrowed eyes. But turnabout is fair play, and it's his turn to mark her. Percy isn't really sure what to do—this territory, while *fucking awesome*, is brand new to him—so he surveys his canvas carefully. His eyes travel over the pale skin that is revealed, some new now that she's not wearing a shirt. He looks at the delicate skin on her neck and the soft skin on the parts of her breasts that spill over her bra cups and the smooth skin on her stomach and he thinks of all the places that he wants to kiss and bite and *touch*, touch in general, because he has spent this entire time stopping himself from touching her, and now she's literally offering herself up to him to do whatever he wants with.

She trusts him enough to do that, and this makes Percy beam as Annabeth puts his hands on the clasp behind her bra.

Getting it undone is his first fumble, but she just rolls her eyes and kisses him and pushes his fingers aside so that she can remove the clasp herself. Percy's heart pounds, thumping violently against his chest, and he can feel it everywhere: in his head, in his fingertips, in his neck. He keeps his eyes on hers even when her chest is bared to him. Annabeth's lips tilt

upwards in a questioning manner, but Percy just shrugs before leaning forward to kiss her again.

He doesn't want to talk right now. He knows that words are going to ruin this *feeling* that's pulsing through his entire body, the love that is fucking throbbing through him. And he's never experienced it as powerfully as he is experiencing now. He wonders if Annabeth can feel his heart hammering from where their bare chests are crushed together, but he doesn't even care because after all of the holding back he *wants* her to know that she makes his heart pound like it's about to beat itself out of his chest and fly into the open air.

Percy has heard enough about sex to know that there's a million things he wants to do to Annabeth, but when he's finished kissing her all over her upper body and she's finished with being still, he allows her to take over again. She's got him lying against the pillows, and he can hear his breath as it is released from his body over and over and over again and all he can do is stare up at Annabeth and the crease between her eyebrows and the way she's moving up and down and sucking her bottom lip between her teeth and the flush on her cheeks and the short, rhythmic spurts that her breaths are coming out in *and, and, and*.

Percy doesn't think he's ever been as observant as he is in this moment, even though the moment is over too soon.

Annabeth is curled cozily into Percy, and her breath is puffing out against the skin on his neck as her chest moves up and down. For his part, Percy feels more than a little bit shell-shocked, as though the bed has moved them from their small, empty life together into an entirely new, alternate universe.

He doesn't say anything for several minutes as he waits for Annabeth to talk.

"You're good at kissing," is her first offer of conversation, and Percy nearly chokes on his own spit as he struggles, a bit too eagerly, to reply.

"I am?"

Annabeth places her chin on her closed fist, scrunching her eyes slightly so that she can carefully scrutinize Percy. He tries to blink innocently at her, which causes her to laugh and relax her position, rolling over onto her belly.

“Did you not know that?”

Percy shrugs innocently.

“I guess... well... I’ve kissed girls before. But... never exactly like that.”

“You mean you’ve never had sex before,” Annabeth clarifies confidently.

“No,” Percy says, shaking his head adamantly. “I mean, I haven’t had sex before. But I’ve also never kissed a girl like... like *that*. You know what I mean? It didn’t *feel* like that before. Never.”

Annabeth slowly runs her tongue along her bottom lip as she thinks. Percy remembers tracing it with his own tongue earlier in the night and his body immediately begins to react.

“I think I do know what you mean,” she murmurs, face turning slightly red. “Kissing you... it’s not something I want to do *just* because I’m bored.”

He knows that there’s more to what she’s saying from the way she’s avoiding his eyes, but he also thinks that he can piece it together without embarrassing her further.

“So you might want to do it if you’re... say... lying in bed and talking to your husband?”

She’s kissing him before he’s able to finish the sentence, slow and deep, and he can hear the little gasps in her breaths as he rolls on top of her and allows himself to get lost in what they’re doing. Annabeth’s kiss burns into his veins like wine settling in his stomach, but even the absolute fire cannot stop him from feeling content and peaceful in finally being with her.

This time, he makes sure to go slow; concentrating carefully on the things that make Annabeth whimper. He keeps his eyes on Annabeth's closed lids and allows a slow, lazily feeling to drift through him as he puts all of his weight into their entwined hands above Annabeth's head. She's quieter than last time, but there's something in her expression that makes possession creep up from Percy's stomach all the way through his arms and to his mouth.

"Is this *just something to do when you're bored?*"

He says it sardonically, with a protective armor around his voice. But when Annabeth makes a high pitched noise and shakes her head frantically, hair thrashing against the pillow, the ball of anger slinks away. It leaves something much simpler, a feeling which causes him to lean down and kiss away some of the sweat that has gathered at her hairline.

And the look on Annabeth's face when he figures out exactly where to touch her is enough to make Percy realize that he genuinely, truly does not care who Annabeth had staved off the boredom with in the past. The only thing that matters right now is her noises and *her* expressions and *her* body and *her*.

A close second—they.

Percy sinks into the bed, arm slung haphazardly over his forehead as he tries to calm his pounding heart, wondering exactly how much of it is actually from physical exertion. Annabeth reaches over him, grabbing the box of tissues from the nightstand. She pauses suddenly, seeming to contemplate something as she stares at him, bringing a hesitant thumb across his cheek. And then she kisses him on the forehead, letting her lips linger for a few moments before she places her head on the muscle of his shoulder.

It can't be comfortable, but that doesn't seem to stop Annabeth from falling asleep almost right away, her soft breasts pushed right up against him, some of her hair loose across his pillow.

Percy wonders if the falling asleep part could be the most intimate aspect of sex.

Maybe it's weird that they don't talk about it, but Percy doesn't really know. He's not sure if there's any sort of proper procedure for falling in love with your soul mate. Most people are rather quiet about their personal lives, but not in the way that they used to be. When you're attempting to fall in love with someone that you've already agreed to dedicate your life to, it's easiest not to talk about how painfully awkward your life is. Nobody needs to know when you start falling in love, or having sex, or truly feeling like your relationship is a real one.

Before the timers, people had been protective of the intimacy that came from their relationships— at least that's what Annabeth says. She researches it a lot, and sometimes Percy can get her to talk about her findings if she's relaxed enough. In the beginning, it was all about her being comfortable around him, but that's not the issue anymore. They've seen each other naked enough times to be comfortable around each other 100-percent of the time, but even that doesn't mean that Annabeth wants to talk to Percy about every single detail of their life together.

When he closes his eyes at her kiss, he sees a future instead of seeing fireworks. And even though he hasn't *told* Annabeth that, he's afraid that she knows. Every time Percy tries to ask Annabeth how she feels about him, or where they stand in their relationship, she distracts him by taking off her shirt. And, honestly, Percy is pretty sure that he's never going to get sick of staring at Annabeth's boobs. They're freaking awesome. Even though he logically knows that she's distracting him, there's a large, predominant part of him that doesn't even care because Annabeth is half-naked and half-naked usually leads to whole-naked and he loves what happens when they're whole-naked.

After a few weeks of playing her games, Percy decides that he needs to talk about it. And when he needs to talk, there's only two people that he goes to.

Frank and Hazel may not be the best people to go to for relationship advice, but they are both strong, solid listeners, and over the years, Percy has learned that this is the best you could ask for.

They aren't allowed to live together, but Hazel spends a lot of her time at Frank's anyways. When Percy shows up one afternoon holding a six-pack of beers, she is the one that lets him in, eyes slightly confused.

“What's the matter?” she asks, looking pointedly at the alcohol. “It's too early for beer this cheap.”

“You always think that it's too early for beer,” comes Frank's voice from further in the apartment, and Percy glances around Hazel to see his friend grinning lopsidedly from inside his apartment. “What's up, man?”

“I have stuff to work through,” Percy says dramatically, and Hazel tries to stifle a laugh as she pulls the door open wider and gestures to the couch.

“Step into my office,” she suggests. “I might be able to help.”

“Thanks.” Percy drops a quick kiss on her cheek and then hops onto the couch, bouncing lightly before he settles himself into a comfortable lying down position on the well-worn upholstery. Frank and Hazel go into the kitchen together as he grabs the bottle opener and Hazel grabs a soda for herself, never much of a drinker.

“So what's going on with you?” she asks, heading back into the family room, where she sits on the armchair that used to live in her apartment before she and Frank started dating. Frank squeezes her shoulder as he walks past her to take another chair, letting his hand linger comfortingly. When Hazel looks up at him to smile sweetly, the two share a moment.

This is why it was always so hard to hang out with them when Percy was single.

But now it's different. Now he has a soul mate and both of them has timers that are ticking down to strangers. Now is the time that Percy gets to begin discovering what the rest of his life is going to feel like while his two best friends desperately hold on to whatever time they have left together.

It fucking sucks because Percy knows that Hazel and Frank are one of the best couples ever. And when he really allows himself to pull away from the situation and think clearly about it, it doesn't make any sense to him that Hazel and Frank wouldn't be allowed to be together. They may work well together, but they're not legally allowed to live together. They're not really allowed to be in love, either, but it's not like the government can stop you from seeing someone.

It's not like they care enough to protect people's hearts.

(Geez, he's starting to sound like Annabeth.)

"Hey, married guy," Frank says, throwing Percy a beer. "Talk."

Percy talks. He talks through one and a half bottles of beer, and by the time he's done, he doesn't know if he wants to laugh or cry. Luckily for him, Hazel seems to be experiencing a similar emotion.

"So, what you're saying is..." Hazel slows down, giving herself a moment to consider. "You're saying that you and Annabeth are having sex, and she is using the sex to avoid discussing her emotions?"

Percy takes an angst filled swig of beer.

"Right in one," he confirms.

"So, Annabeth is inciting a lot of sex?"

Percy frowns.

"Um, yeah?"

“And... and Annabeth is using the sex to distract you?” Frank questions, taking over effortlessly.

“Mhm.”

“She’s utilizing it to get what she wants?” he clarifies.

“I guess.”

Frank nods slowly, picking at the label on his bottle of beer. It’s always weird to see a beer in Frank’s hand. He still looks like a kid, even when he’s holding alcoholic beverages and has been in a relationship for two and a half years.

“And Annabeth is enjoying the sex?”

Percy wrinkles his nose. “God I hope so.”

“So... why can’t you use sex to get what *you* want?”

Frank seems genuinely confused, as though he assumes that the thought has already occurred to Percy and doesn’t understand where Percy has spotted the error that would make it an unusable plan. While Hazel lets out a gasp and glares at Frank, Percy shoots up on the couch, his eyes widening.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Hazel nods approvingly at him, a small smile ghosting over her lips.

Frank stutters. "I... uh... I'm sorry?"

"No, dude!" Percy exclaims. "That's fucking brilliant. You realize that it's brilliant, right?"

Frank looks shocked while Hazel's smile falls.

"Brilliant?" he asks, looking slightly awed with himself.

"Brilliant?" demands Hazel, looking horrified.

"Sure!" Percy enthuses. "I mean, Annabeth uses sex to distract me, right? So I can use it to... focus her!"

"Is she particularly focused during sex? Do people get focused when they're having sex?"

"No, Percy!" Hazel says, cutting in and ignoring her boyfriend. "This is a terrible idea. You can't take advantage of a physical relationship like that, especially when it's so tentative. You need to use honesty and conversation in order to learn to trust each other even more and build a solid foundation for a relationship.

Percy ignores this.

"Dude, we totally got this," he says, reaching over to meet Frank in the middle and high five him. Frank still looks a little confused, but he high fives Percy nonetheless.

"Great," he says.

“Why do I even try?” Hazel sighs, glancing up at the heavens and most likely praying for strength.

Tricking Annabeth at her own game seems like an easy idea at first, but over the next few days, Percy realizes that it’s going to take a little more planning than he had initially thought. After all, it’s one thing to ask Annabeth questions about the standing of their relationship or ask her about her past. It’s a whole other thing to ask her about the future, and Percy knows that if he’s going to get what he truly wants to hear from her, he’s got to reach a bit further.

Annabeth is seated on her desk when Percy gets home from work. She likes to settle herself onto the top when she’s reading-- says that it’s good for her posture. When Percy walks in with a box of pizza and his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows in the way that always makes Annabeth jump him, she looks up and gives him a small smile. She’s wearing one of the dresses that she wears to work everyday. She’s peeled off her tights and taken off the jacket that goes with it, even though it’s the middle of the winter. Percy thinks that she looks adorable. He kisses her on the top of her head in a way that is just slightly too intimate even in the wake of the steady, loving friendship-on-fire that they have built. Then he braces his hands on the desk on either side of her hips and positions his face so that it’s right in front of Annabeth’s. Her eyes are drifting shut to accept his kiss when he says it:

“How many kids do you want?”

Annabeth’s eyes pop open again.

“Um... what?”

“How many kids do you think we should have together?”

After the first one, it’s technically their choice, but that’s not why he’s asking. As Annabeth grabs the hem of her skirt, Percy gives himself a second to smirk to himself before he covers her hand with his own.

“Are you trying to distract me from my question by taking your dress off?”

Annabeth bites her lower lip.

“You noticed.”

“Please. I’m no virgin, Annabeth Chase.”

She slaps him on the arm, hard. It would probably hurt more if she weren’t laughing, or if she didn’t lean forward to cover his lips with hers after he had released an indignant “ow!” He lets her get swept up in the kiss, knowing that she’s fully invested when her posture slips and her fingers start tugging at his hair.

That’s when he gets onto his knees.

“What are you doing?” Annabeth questions, looking, to her credit, only slightly terrified.

“I’ve decided that we’re going to play a game,” Percy says, slowly and clearly. “A game involving *mouths*.”

“Percy?”

Annabeth Chase at a loss for words is kind of a beautiful thing. He kisses the inside of her thigh and she shivers immediately, unconsciously licking her lower lip.

“I’m going to say nothing and you are going to tell me what I want to hear. Sound good?”

“Wait!” she says urgently. Percy looks up, his hand on the waistband of her underwear. “No one’s ever... I mean... I’ve never...”

His expression softens as he settles back on his heels and looks up at her imploringly. “Is this okay, Annabeth?”

She squeezes her eyes shut, taking a few beats too long to answer him.

“Yes?”

“Is that a question?”

She steels herself.

“Yes,” Annabeth says more firmly. “Yes.”

“Are you sure?” Annabeth just nods. Percy watches carefully as she begins to nod faster, and then she’s biting the corner of her thumbnail as she wordlessly lifts her hips, offering him permission to remove her clothing. “Okay then.”

He feels a sudden onslaught of nerves as he faces the actual reality of doing this for Annabeth. What if he sucks at it? What if she doesn’t like it? His hands are shaking as Annabeth’s voice pulls his gaze back up to her face.

“So what do you want to *talk* about?” she questions breathily.

He’s been practicing this part.

“I want you to tell me where we stand, Annabeth.” As he talks, he ghosts his mouth over her flesh, gaining confidence at the way goosebumps trail in his wake. He murmurs the words into her thighs, all lips and tongue as he moves higher and closer to where he wants to be. “I need you to tell me how you feel about me and how you feel about us and I want you to stop bullshitting me so we can figure out what’s going on. That is all I want. Seriously. Not even hard.”

“I don’t feel very comfortable talking about-- oh *shit*.” The first graze takes her by surprise, and Percy glances up at the expression on her face before deciding that it’s a good kind of surprise. He returns to what he’s doing, ignoring the small whimpers that Annabeth is trying hard to keep in. “I don’t... I...”

He stops, leaving his hand in place but creating a gap between his mouth and where she wants his mouth to be.

“Where do we stand, Annabeth?”

As he speaks, he brushes his thumbs in circles across the skin on her upper thighs, teasing her.

“I just think--”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be thinking,” Percy says decisively, getting close again.

“*Percy.*”

He’s not looking at her face, but he imagines that she’s totally bamboozled by his astounding display of confidence.

Huh. Bamboozled. That’s a nice word. He should definitely say bamboozled more often. Why isn’t it a more commonly used word? Maybe people just don’t like three syllabic words. It seems like it would be fun to say though. Percy would try saying it out loud, but he’s slightly occupied. He traces the letters with his tongue instead. *Bamboozled*.

There’s silence for a few moments. Which isn’t okay; he’s following his end of the deal, after all.

“Feelings, Annabeth,” he reminds her, still not looking up.

“*Okay, okay,*” she moans into the air. “Um, okay. Words.”

“Words are good.”

“You didn’t have to stop that time!” she says shrilly. “I’m trying, Perseus Jackson!”

He rolls his eyes and can’t stop grinning when she tightens her thighs around him. As a reward, he gives her a few moments to compose herself.

“I know that we’re m-married,” Annabeth says, carefully and steadily. “I- I know that we’re soul mates. I understand that on a level that’s more than-- oh my *God*-- intellectual.”

“You shouldn’t be able to say ‘intellectual’ right now. I’m obviously not trying hard enough.”

“You’re not exactly failing either,” Annabeth notes breathlessly. When Percy finally looks up, he sees a woman with her head thrown back, her lips parted, and her elbows braced casually against the top of her desk.

“So you understand that we’re soul mates,” Percy prods before returning to the task at hand.

“Right. I get that. And I’m very glad that I was forced into this situation with you, but I... *I don’t think I’m in love with you yet.* Shit. And even though I may be falling for you, that doesn’t mean that I’m ready to sacrifice all of my opinions about timers or immediately fall into a perfect, oh, god, perfect relationship with you. I... I just need more... more *time!* ...okay? Are you satisfied, Percy Jackson?”

He smirks. Cocks an eyebrow in a way that’s almost disgustingly arrogant.

“Are you?”

“Close,” she says emphatically. He lifts the right side of his mouth as Annabeth winds her hands into his hair and directs him.

When he finally gets off of his knees, his jaw hurts like hell and he’s pretty sure Annabeth’s thighs are stronger than his. But all he does is neatly wipe the corner of his mouth and shrug.

“There now. That wasn’t so hard, was it, Ms. Chase?”

He kisses her on the lips once before hopping onto the desk next to her and grabbing a slice of pizza.

He tries to ignore the thudding of his heart as Annabeth stares at him. He can feel his burning cheeks and knows that he’s bright red, but there’s a little smile lingering on his lips as he eats. As he reaches for another slice, Annabeth grabs him by the collar and pulls him towards her, fitting her lips carefully to his. Percy responds enthusiastically, dropping the pizza back into the box and winding his fingers into her hair.

When he finally pulls breathlessly away from her, Annabeth slips her hand from his hair to the back of his neck and pulls him close, so that their foreheads are pressed together. Her eyes finally flick up to meet his, and he finds himself getting swept up by the current of the searching, inquisitive look.

“You, Percy Jackson,” Annabeth says, shaking her head slightly against his. “You are something else.”

“Something good?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow.

Annabeth closes her eyes, nudging his nose slightly in the process of going back to kissing him. She pauses before she allows their lips to touch.

“I’ll tell you when I can catch my breath.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So... that happened.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter and thank you so, so much for all of the comments and reviews we’ve been getting. I’m going to try to reply to some of the reviews we get tonight, so let me know what you think and feel free to ask any questions that you might have. See you next week.

You can lay with me so it doesn't hurt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Annabeth stares at her reflection in the mirror. Her cheeks retain a slight flush which isn't completely unrelated to the wonderfully languid morning sex she and Percy had just twenty minutes ago, and her hair is still damp from her quick shower. She has to leave for work in five minutes or she will be late, and yet she stands, and stares. The sunny spring they've had makes itself known in her hair, which is threaded with lighter golden strands; and on her skin, where a light tan had replaced the paleness winter had imprinted on her. It is partially revealed by her short sleeved blouse and knee-length skirt. All of this is familiar to Annabeth. She knows her own reflection.

And yet.

And yet everything about the face which stares back is unfamiliar; it's like her tone has shifted slightly. She looks down at her left hand - at the wedding band which rests on her third finger (Percy's mother's wedding ring) - and lets a sigh fall loose. Marriage is not what Annabeth Chase had expected it to be. In the beginning, she had wished her soulmate was a jerk - at least then it would be easy to hate him on principle. But Percy Jackson is an impossible person to hate - for her at least. He has a deep, honest kindness in him which shifts her very soul. And the way he reveres her still makes her breath stutter; not only in the simple blush that taints his cheeks when she holds his hand, or the way his mouth worships her skin, causing her back to arch and her toes to curl against the mattress of their bed. But in the way she catches him looking at her sometimes; like he can't believe his luck.

Their bed has become a very different place to her; a place which holds their secrets. Sex to Annabeth hadn't been exactly what she had told Percy all of those months ago - something to pass the time - but it certainly wasn't this either. The way Percy has sex with her brings a whole new meaning to the act; his lack of experience before her is made up ten fold by the desperate appreciation he seems to have of her. It has her gasping his name in a litany and returning every favour he grants her with just as much vigour.

Annabeth turns her wrist over and runs her thumb over her timer. His name is imprinted on her wrist and she finds herself grateful of it, of him.

'You're gonna be late,' his voice interrupts her thoughts and Annabeth looks up to find Percy doing up his tie in the mirror behind her.

She smiles at the sight of them standing together and turns to him, replacing his hands with hers as she finishes his tie and then uses it to draw him close.

'Well, whose fault is that?'

He grins as his hands settle on her hips, thumbs teasing at the waistline of her skirt. 'Didn't hear you complaining earlier.' His voice is teasing. 'I'm getting a Starbucks before work, are

you gonna cum again?’

‘Oh GOD. That was terrible.’

He’s laughing.

‘No really,’ she insists. ‘That has to be your worst pun, yet.’

He tugs at her hips and presses a kiss to the corner of her mouth. ‘You love my puns.’

I love you. She thinks, and then backtracks on that thought. Does she? She’s never been in love before, she doesn’t know how it’s supposed to feel. As Percy releases her and picks up his bag to leave, she follows him silently, letting him hold the door open for her and take her hand and buy her coffee and kiss her when they part ways. And she thinks about what he means to her. She certainly doesn’t hate him, and the sex they are having certainly isn’t empty fucking. She’s shared more of herself with him than she has with anyone. And not just physically.

It gives her a strange sort of comfort when she thinks about how much he knows her, and how much she knows him. She still finds herself digging out his secrets and his personality like sifting for gold. Except every piece of him she finds is gold, there’s not a bit of dirt in him. He loves his mother more than anything, his greatest fear is that she would suffer for him as she did when he was a child. His work is monotonous but he makes an unfathomable effort to make it sound enjoyable so as not to make anyone pity him. His friends mean everything to him and he can’t stand the idea of anyone sacrificing something for him. He always gives everything of himself to others; he doesn’t know how to hold himself back as she does.

And he loves her.

He’s never said it. But she knows.

How can she know that he loves her but not if she loves him?

Annabeth shakes her head of it, she’s late when she sits down at her desk and her colleague reminds her of it. Now that spring break from college has arrived, Annabeth is working five days a week. Which means that for the first time in three years, she has weekends off.

Weekends are a lost luxury from her childhood and adolescence. She spends them with her friends; crooning over Piper’s growing belly, marvelling at Frank and Hazel’s relationship, clinking a glass of wine with Sally Jackson as she tells her old stories about her son. And of course there’s Percy himself. Who makes her breakfast in his boxers while she sits on the side and watches, who walks with her in the park, and goes furniture shopping with her. And who wakes up sleepy and eager for cuddles in the morning.

The weekend is about to descend upon them again and they find themselves in their own apartment surrounded by people. Annabeth isn’t entirely sure how hers and Percy’s friends became friends with each other, but here they all are; wrapped up in a particularly loud game of Monopoly. And okay, she knows she is the source of the noise and it’s just a board game

and she shouldn't be taking it quite so seriously, but Annabeth is a competitive girl and she can't help it if she gets a little over zealous sometimes.

She knows the game is over when Jason goes bankrupt, leaving only she, Percy and Frank in the game. She easily has the most money and the most properties and is clearly the winner, but it's only when Hazel yawns hugely and leans against Frank's shoulder that Annabeth concedes the game to be over.

'Ugh, thank god,' Percy groans, throwing his cards down. 'I'm beat.'

Annabeth raises her eyebrows. 'You'd better be awake tomorrow.'

Percy lets free another groan and throws his arms over his face. She definitely doesn't stare at the way his t-shirt rides up and reveals a strip of skin above the hem of his jeans.

'What's tomorrow?' Piper asks.

Annabeth drags her eyes away from Percy's belly - I mean really - and starts collecting the monopoly cards off the table. 'Lunch with my parents.'

'Oh.'

Annabeth wishes Piper and Jason could be more subtle about their balking and look-exchanging when Percy is right there.

'What do you mean 'oh'?' he says, his voice raising a tenor.

'Nothing,' Piper says hastily, trying to cover her mistake.

'No. That wasn't nothing.' He points at them both accusingly. 'You were doing the married knowing looking thing. You know something I don't.'

'Well, let's put it this way, buddy,' Leo offers when neither Jason nor Piper give any explanation. 'There's probably a reason you've been married for six months and have yet to meet the in-laws.'

Annabeth wants to strangle him. She settles for a fierce glare and is mildly satisfied when Leo flinches just a little.

Piper clears her throat. 'It' going to be fine, Percy. Frederick and Elise are lovely.'

Her words are not untrue, but Annabeth still squirms uncomfortably. She's only going through with this upon Grover's request. Grover, their marriage counsellor, who still doesn't know that Percy and Annabeth are sleeping together, encourages them into a lot of "married couple activities" in the effort of making them connect as soulmates. Percy has gone along with Annabeth's facade of being unprogressive in their marriage so as to put off the inevitable court order for them to start a family together. But it's becoming more and more difficult for both of them to pretend.

'Well, we should get home,' Jason says. 'I'll get Leela.'

The three year old had passed out on Percy and Annabeth's bed a few hours ago and is still snoring contently against Jason's shoulder when he carries her out. Annabeth presses a kiss to her forehead and then one to Jason's cheek before they leave and then Piper is hugging her and whispering in her ear - It'll be fine - and pulling on her coat. Frank blushes when Annabeth kisses his cheek, Leo grins, and Hazel gives her a warm smile. And then the door is closed and she and Percy are alone in their apartment again.

Annabeth puts the last of the glasses and dishes in the dishwasher and returns to the living room where Percy is clearing up the remnants of the Monopoly game. She walks past him, dropping her hand to his shoulder briefly.

'I'm gonna have a shower before bed, okay.'

'Yeah, sure.'

The hot water slowly unwinds her aching muscles from a week of sitting hunch-backed at a desk, but Annabeth's mind is left troubled with the worries of tomorrow. She has barely spoken to her parents since she moved out four years ago. What if tomorrow ends in a screaming match and she ends up cut off from them completely? What if her brothers don't remember her as their older sister?

When she realises that the hot water will do nothing to wash her anxiety away, she steps out of the shower. She rubs her hair with a towel and braids it into two plaits, and then pulls a large towel around her body. Annabeth wipes a circle in the steamed up mirror as she brushes her teeth and watches as her reflection slowly fades from view.

In the bedroom, Percy is already in his pyjamas, propped up on pillows, on top of the covers.

'Everything okay?' she asks of his frowning face.

'Hm?' He looks up at her slowly as she crosses to the bed.

'You're worried about tomorrow,' she guesses.

Percy stares at her a moment before nodding. 'So are you.'

She considers him. 'For different reasons I think.'

He crawls over and reaches for her, tugging her against his body and onto the mattress. Her towel slips a little, but she makes no move to recover it as Percy rolls them over so that her head is against the pillows. He kisses her softly and she can feel the tension in his shoulders. She reaches up to cradle his cheeks between her palms and holds him above her.

'What's the matter?'

Percy avoids her gaze, staring at her left ear and playing with the end of her braid. 'Nothing. Just nervous, I guess.'

She grabs his chin and directs his gaze to hers. 'That's not it. Tell me, please?'

He half-heartedly glares at her like, play fair, and sighs. 'You don't want me to meet your parents.'

'No,' she says and immediately regrets it as he winces. Annabeth sighs. 'Not because of you. It's... my step-mother, and my dad and just that whole house. I haven't been back since I left for college and I'm not sure I'm ready to.'

Percy rolls off of her and she shifts so that they are lying side by side, noses inches apart. He holds onto her waist through the towel.

'Why did you want to leave so bad?' he asks. 'You've never really told me.'

Annabeth hesitates. It's a difficult question to answer and she wants him to understand because she can tell that he wants to understand.

'My mom - my birth mom - she was only with my father for a little while, long enough to have me. And she... her timer's blank. It always has been.'

Percy frowns. 'I didn't know that was possible.'

She shrugs. 'Some people never meet their soulmates. They aren't meant to or... Anyway, my parents aren't soulmates, and when my father did meet his soulmate, I was the extra piece. A constant reminder for my step-mother of our imperfect family.'

Percy brushes a strand of hair behind her ear. 'I didn't know it was like that, I'm sorry.'

She shakes her head on the pillow. 'It was never that bad - they were never blatantly cruel to me, and I never helped myself with always asking about my birth mom and saying I'd rather go live with her.'

'Why didn't you?'

She smiles sadly. 'My mom was never the loving-mother type. She has a kind of all over the place life, never settled. I haven't seen her myself for years now; she wrote me a letter after I got into college but since then... nothing.'

'That sucks.'

'Yeah.'

'So,' Percy hedges after a moment, 'tomorrow...'

She sighs. 'Tomorrow will be okay.'

'You're not ashamed of me?'

She stares at him, taken aback. 'No. God no, Percy. I know I haven't been the easiest to be with, but I'm still adjusting and I...' She falters, struggling to explain herself to him and kisses his mouth firmly, tries to press her feelings towards him into that kiss. Tries to make him understand. 'I'm not ashamed of you. I'm proud that you're my soulmate.'

Percy smiles, but it's still a little sad.

She falls asleep curled against him, still wrapped in her towel, and hoping she can fix his smile.

He keeps fiddling with his cuffs.

She told him to dress smart-casual so he dithered in front of the wardrobe for five minutes until she ordered him to sit down on the bed and let her pick something for him. Dark blue jeans and a grey button down. He's been messing with the sleeves ever since he put the damn thing on - rolled up, or down, Annabeth?

I don't care, Percy. Except she sort of does, because something about rolled up shirtsleeves on Percy Jackson does something wicked to her libido, and that probably isn't the best circumstance for a lunch with her parents. But now that they are standing outside the front door to her old house having rung the doorbell, she really needs him to stop fidgeting. Annabeth smooths down the front of her skirt and takes his hand.

'Relax,' she says, partly to herself. 'It's going to be fine.'

He glances at her briefly before the door swings open and there stands her step-mother in a high-necked floral print dress with her hair pulled back into a tight bun.

'Annabeth.' She smiles, and it looks genuine. 'And this must be Percy.'

'Yes, ma'am. Nice to meet you.'

'And you, dear. Why don't you come in. Lunch is nearly ready.'

She leads the way and Percy gives Annabeth's hand a squeeze as they follow her, closing the door behind them.

'Boys!' Mrs Chase calls as she walks ahead of them. 'Our guests are here, will you come downstairs please.'

It's neither her father or her two step-brothers that she is greeted with first, but a rather large, black bulldog. Annabeth releases Percy's hand and drops to her knees to greet the overexcited dog.

'Ceebee! Hey girl.' She laughs as the dog whines and stuffs her nose against Annabeth's cheek.

'She missed you,' a deeper voice sounds above her and Annabeth looks up to see her father standing there with his hands in his pockets.

She desperately wishes she hadn't been on her knees when he first sees her and hastens to scramble up, accepting Percy's hand and holding onto it like a lifeline.

'Hi, dad.'

He offers a smile. 'It's good to see you. You look well.'

'Thank you. And you.' He still looks like his mind is still upstairs in his den, working on some new brilliant idea. His clothes are a little haphazard, like he doesn't have the time to straighten them. His whole appearance is so incredibly familiar that Annabeth is overwhelmed for a moment with the idea of home.

'Well,' Elise says cheerfully. 'Let's go and eat shall we?'

The dinner table is already set up and waiting for them when they walk into the dining room. It's clear Annabeth's half-brothers have laid the table by the unevenness of everything. But she does notice that the best crockery is out - the stuff they reserve for Thanksgiving and when the grandparents come round to visit. Annabeth doesn't know how to feel about that; if anything, it distances her from the place, from her home. She still isn't sure if that's a good thing or not.

When her brothers walk in, Annabeth does a double take. In the past four years, they have both shot up and are now have an inch on her. She's strangely thrilled when she finds that she can still tell them apart - Bobby has a mole below his right ear and a slightly longer nose, while Matthew's is shorter and just a little bit wider - and shocked further when they both give her a hug. She can't really comprehend that they are seventeen now. For some reason, her mind had put them on freeze after she left. Whenever she had thought about coming back, she'd always imagined them still fourteen years old - short and awkward and her baby brothers. Not the two young men who stand before her now.

She hates herself a little bit for missing their adolescence. She could have teased them about their first dates and helped them get ready for prom and been their annoying older sister who loved them affectionately. Instead, she disappeared without a backward glance.

'So this is your husband?' Bobby asks rhetorically, looking to Percy.

Percy, to his credit, doesn't miss a beat. He holds out his hand and smiles brilliantly. 'That's me, Percy Jackson. Nice to meet you.'

'Bobby Chase.'

Matthew elbows him out of the way to shake Percy's hand and Annabeth shoots him a glare which he ignores as he takes Percy's hand and pompously introduces himself. 'Now, you'll take care of our baby sister, won't you?'

Annabeth smacks his arm then. 'I'm older than you, you dolt.'

He grins. 'It's good to have you back, sister.'

Lunch is an uneventful affair. Bobby, Matthew, and Frederick interrogate Percy and Elise asks Annabeth about her college course and how married life is going and are they going to have a ceremony with guests? Annabeth doesn't answer that question, she's not ready to contemplate that question. A proper ceremony would mean having friends and family hear them announce vows to one another and promise their lives together. And right now, when she's just coming to terms with the idea of spending the rest of her life with Percy, she's not sure public announcements of love and devotion are right around the corner.

'We don't have anything planned,' Percy saves her. 'Maybe in the future.'

Elise seems to take this as a cue to stop further questions about their marriage - she has always known Annabeth's stance on the timer laws, and she seems to gather now that those opinions have not changed. Unfortunately, she chooses a rather more tenuous topic.

'So, how is Thalia? It's been so long since we've heard anything from her.'

Annabeth feels herself stiffen all over. Since their argument, Thalia has barely spoken to her. In the few, short conversations they've had, she has registered that Annabeth is having sex with Percy and not resenting him with every ounce of her being like Thalia would have expected of her, and she has taken this as a termination of their unity on the protest against timer laws. It's been weeks now since Thalia has returned her phone calls and texts and Annabeth doesn't hold any hope for the future.

Elise notices the second frosty reception of her questioning and clears her throat. 'Dessert,' she announces. 'Boys, help me clear the table.'

They both let out a half-hearted whine worthy of their fourteen year old selves until their mother shoots them each a glare which shuts them both up. Percy's foot knocks against hers under the table and she looks over at him. You okay? his expression asks, and she nods.

'So, Annabeth,' her father says apparently oblivious to their silent conversation, 'you finish college this year?'

She swallows the thickness in her throat and nods. 'Yeah.'

'Any plans for afterwards?' the question is innocent enough, but his voice holds a more strenuous tenor to it.

'I had an internship with an architecture firm in the city last summer and they've agreed to have me back this year.'

'Is it paid?'

Her jaw clenches involuntarily. 'No. But if the summer goes well they've said they would like to offer me a job at the end of it.'

'And you work part time at a law firm now, yes?'

Annabeth assumes he has gained this information from the council because she certainly hasn't told him. 'Yes, but I'm resigning when the internship starts because that will be full

time.'

'Right. If you need any financial support-'

'I don't,' she says too sharply.

A tense moment passes and then Percy clears his throat. 'Sir, I work full time and have enough income to support Annabeth. Besides, we both have savings. All due respect sir, but we can manage by ourselves.'

It sent an odd thrill through her when he said that.

Her father gives Percy a once over and then nods, apparently satisfied. It irks Annabeth some that she could not defend her own actions to her father, but as the rest of her family re-enter the room, she lets the matter rest. No use dragging up old arguments when they are all getting along so well.

Percy seems to think the same thing when they leave forty minutes later.

'I think that went well,' he says, swinging their linked hands between them as they walk back to their rental car.

Annabeth throws him a look as he opens the door for her and he just sticks his tongue out at her. He is driving because she never got a licence; a fact which greatly amused him when she had first told him. He rolls up his sleeves and throws her a completely unsubtle smirk before starting the engine.

'Jerk,' she mutters.

As he pulls out of the drive and onto the road, Annabeth tugs her hair free and massages her scalp a little, groaning as her curls tumble loose down her back. She kicks her shoes off and sticks her feet up on the dash, grinning as Percy tsks at her. Percy turns the radio on and she rolls down the window, letting the music and the breeze wash over her. They have the rest of the weekend ahead of them to themselves, and as she glances over at Percy with his rolled up sleeves, she can't wait to get started.

Percy's back slams against the apartment door and he lets loose a grunt of pain.

'Sorry,' she mutters into his mouth.

Her hands roam over his chest, frantically unbuttoning his shirt and digging her hands underneath, over his hot skin to push the material off his shoulders. Percy lets her do this, but only lets go of her momentarily to remove the shirt and then his hands are on her again. Tugging at her shirt, fumbling with the clasp of her bra, unzipping her skirt. She steps free of

the garment as it falls around her ankles and walks them back towards the couch, turning around to push him down first.

He sits up and stares at her as she stands above him and then ever so slowly climbs into his lap, planting her knees firmly on either side of his hips. Really, the only reason she has waited this long to jump him is because the car was a rental. She settles over him, feeling his hard on through his jeans and grinding her hips into his with a grin. Percy groans her name and reaches for her, winding his hands into her hair as he kisses her. She sucks on his bottom lip and feels the room sway as one of his hands slides down her back and grips her behind, dragging her hips into his again.

Keeping her mouth on his, she reaches between them to undo the button, fly of his jeans and struggles to push his pants down. Laughter falls between them as he lifts his hips to wiggle himself free and when he is, she wraps a hand around him. Percy's laughter falls into a sigh and both of his hands hold her head, fingers tressed into her curls and tugging slightly. His eyes are closed but hers are wide open, watching as his bottom lip drags between his teeth and his forehead puckers.

Without further warning, she lifts her hips and shifts her panties aside before sliding onto him in one swift movement. Percy's eyes fly open as she settles onto him and rests her forehead against his, keeping perfectly still for the moment. One of her hands wraps around his neck, fingers delving into the hair at the nape of his neck, and the other is still pressed between them.

They begin to move languidly, with slow, deep movements that leave them gasping into each other's open mouths as their hands tug on hair and push and pull at each other to get the right friction between their bodies. And it's right then, as his teeth tug on her lip and his fingers leave marks on her flesh, as the slow burning builds in her belly and leaves her panting, that Annabeth Chase realises she's in love with him.

She doesn't say it just yet - possibly because she can't say anything right now - she just holds onto him as tightly as she can as they move together. Percy comes a little after she does, moaning hoarsely right in her ear and she loves hearing that noise so much more than any loud cries of ecstasy.

It's afterwards, when their breathing is finding a normal rate and they are still pressed up against one another on the couch, that she tells him. With her forehead pressed against his and her thumbs stroking his flushed cheeks.

'Percy. I love you.'

He blinks at her. 'You...'

'I love you,' she says again, louder, clearer. Because she wants him to hear it, after all this time, he deserves to hear it over and over again. 'I love you, Percy Jackson.'

His shaking hands reach for her face, like he's afraid she might disappear or run away or shatter like glass. His thumbs run over her dry lips, tugging them, and he looks up at her with

marvelled wonder. She waits for him, because he has waited for her for so long, as he comprehends her words.

And then a smile splits his face in half and leaves her blinded from its beauty.

‘I love you, too.’

Chapter End Notes

okay so this has been my favourite chapter to write so far. perhaps for obvious reasons

let me know what you thought of Annabeth’s family - i know i surprised rachel with that one

the chapter title is from Stay With Me by Sam Smith

until next week loves xo

I wanna come close, I wanna come closer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sometimes Percy thinks that Hazel has completely desensitized herself to the fact that Frank isn't her soul mate. She talks about the future like he is in it. She makes decisions about her life after discussing them with Frank. She smiles and laughs and, Percy notices, never looks at her timer. The fact that they have a forever-type relationship that's only going to last a few more years has always broken Percy's heart.

But it's kind of different now. He knows what it's like to have a soul mate. He knows what it's like for another person to be your other half. And even though Hazel and Frank love each other, they must not have what Percy and Annabeth have, otherwise they would be soulmates. It doesn't really make sense to him because their relationship seems to be perfect, and Percy can't imagine Hazel with the man that she will meet in a few years. But he can imagine her happiness. He can imagine what it would be like for her to have another piece of herself added because of a person who is the right person.

As they all sit around the table, plates heaped with food that has been cooked right in front of them, they are suddenly distracted by the sound of two different timers going off. Hazel looks up with a shocked, excited expression as her half-brother stares gapingly at his new soul mate. When he doesn't move, Hazel nudges him gently, calling him to attention. Nico glances over at her and she offers him an encouraging smile, her eyes soft as they communicate wordlessly.

"Go," says Hazel. "You can do it."

Nodding silently, Nico turns back to the man. He is getting closer, his head tilted slightly at the side.

The man has blue eyes and blond hair and a face that seems to have smile lines permanently etched into it. Percy can see his smile, *despite* the fact that he is not smiling. He is staring at Nico, though, with a look on his face that tells Percy that they're going to be okay.

As he starts to stand up, his hand slides towards the hot grill at the middle of the hibachi table. Heroically, Jason pitches forward and knocks Nico's hand out of the way before his soul mate's first impression of him is a burned hand. As Nico rises without incident, Jason looks around proudly, waiting to be praised for his heroics, but everyone is too busy staring at Nico and his soul mate to pay any attention to Jason. Dejected, he slumps back in his seat and moodily pops a piece of chicken into his mouth.

"I'm Will," the strange man offers first, stretching a hand out towards Nico, who grasps it tightly, eyes still on his soul mate.

"Nico," he says hoarsely, not able to stop staring at his future husband.

This is what soul mates are supposed to look like when they meet each other. This is what is supposed to happen.

When Hazel's lower lip begins to wobble, even Percy knows that her tears aren't tears of happiness. Annabeth grabs her sleeve and drags her to the bathroom, with Piper following behind them. The rest of them remain at the table, wondering why Nico had to go and ruin Hibachi night.

Seriously. They've been planning this for weeks.

"I guess you guys should go talk," suggests Jason. Both men are staring at each other with looks of awe on their faces. At Jason's words, they both slowly nod their heads, giving each other shy smiles. Percy thinks that this is a miracle in itself—nobody ever sees Nico smile. It's like sighting Bigfoot. He and Annabeth have a tally going, actually. When they get to twenty-smiles, they're going to buy a bigger television.

"That was dramatic," Frank comments, the innocence of his voice hiding his bitterness. He has a decade left on his timer. He has several year of loneliness to look forward to while everybody begins their lives.

"It usually is," says Leo, shoving a piece of chicken into his mouth. He seems unaffected by the moment, and once again, Percy wonders how much time is left on Leo's wrist. His friend always keeps the timer covered with duct tape, so that nobody can sneak a peek at the numbers ticking away on it. Not that society would ever encourage people to show off their numbers. Usually, though, close friends have conversations about it, ones that are weighty and difficult. Percy doesn't think that Leo has ever been known to do anything that is weighty and difficult.

"It wasn't dramatic when Piper and I met," Jason says calmly. "I mean, not a whole bunch of kids were meeting their soulmates on the third day of seventh grade, but I think we made a pretty good example for everybody else."

Percy and Leo exchange a look. Jason is afflicted with an unfortunate case of 'solid-relationship-smugness.' As he leans over Leela to give her some broccoli, Percy notices Annabeth and Hazel making their way back to the table by themselves, Hazel looking rather worse for wear.

"Hey," Percy murmurs, kissing Annabeth's temple when she slides gracefully into the seat next to him. She looks beautiful tonight, although he could be biased. Possibly. *Maybe*.

"Hi," she says back, finding his hand almost immediately. They stare at each other, silly grins on both of their faces. When Percy finally finds the wherewithal to turn away, he sees Frank and Leo exchanging a look that is oddly familiar to the one that Percy had just shared with Leo.

Okay. So he and Annabeth might be suffering from 'new-relationship-cheesiness.' It's still better than 'solid-relationship-smugness.'

“Oh, Jason!” Hazel says suddenly, remembering something. “Piper has requested that you meet her in the ladies’ room.”

None of them miss the way Jason’s face turns bright red as he hastily folds his napkin and runs a tender hand across Leela’s hair before sprinting to the back of the restaurant.

“I thought Piper was finished with the puking part of pregnancy?” Percy says, confused.

“Oh, she is,” Annabeth says, casually stabbing a piece of shrimp with her chopsticks and offering it to Percy. “She’s onto the horny part of pregnancy.”

He chokes on his shrimp.

“Is she?” Percy says. “Um, that’s interesting. I did not know that this was a thing that happens to women when they are pregnant.”

Annabeth raises her eyebrows.

“You really didn’t interact with any women before we were married, did you?”

“I’m friends with Hazel!” Percy protests. “I talked to women. They’re lovely. Women are super great. But what’s the point of flirting when she’s not your soul mate?”

“He’s one of those people who always gets flirted with and becomes hilariously uncomfortable when he realizes that flirting is what’s happening,” divulges Hazel, smiling a slightly watery smile.

Frank brushes his thumb across the tiny tear track on her cheek, smiling sweetly at her. Percy wonders if they go through this every single time someone close to them gets matched. He wonders if Hazel had cried when his timer went off.

“Not to mention the fact that our office is almost exclusively composed of males,” Franks adds.

“That’s true,” Annabeth concedes. She’s visited Percy at work a few times, and that’s all it takes for anyone to notice the lack of diversity in the gender department, Percy knows.

No, wait, not the gender department. There isn’t, like, a department for gender. There’s just not lots of variety in the department of gender. Oh, fuck it.

“So, Piper and Jason have a meeting at the OBGYN early tomorrow morning.”

“That’s nice,” says Percy absently, wondering if he can move all of his mushrooms onto Annabeth’s plate without her noticing.

“It’s at, like, 7 AM, before Jason goes into work. And they don’t have anywhere to put Leela. So I said that we would bring her home with us tonight and they could come pick her up when they were done.” She lowers her voice. “They obviously need some alone-time anyways. Is that okay?”

Part of him wishes that Annabeth had asked before, because it kind of seems like a big decision to make without him. But when he meets her eyes, he realizes that asking wasn't the point of this. He sees, from the earnest look of her gaze, that this is a gesture. She's doing this for him-- she's opening the floor up for discussion. She wants to talk about... kids? Maybe? Either that, or this is a passive aggressive way of getting Percy to realize that he's been doing something really important without asking Annabeth first. He wonders if this is about forcing her to eat blue cake for their six month anniversary a few weeks ago.

"Is this about the blue cake?" Percy asks-- very sensitively, he thinks-- but Annabeth's eyebrows shoot up as the corner of her mouth twitches.

"Is everything about blue cake in your mind?" she questions, and when Percy opens his mouth to answer, Annabeth stops him with a kiss. "That was rhetorical, Percy. I know that everything is about blue cake. I will always be second to blue cake."

"I love blue cake a lot," Percy admits. "But I'm pretty sure I love you more."

Leo begins dramatically gagging on his water, causing Annabeth and Percy to turn towards him. He's got his eyes open wide, his hands on his throat, and a look of disgust on his face. As Frank slaps him halfheartedly on the back, he glances over at the Jackson-Chase family.

"I'm sure he doesn't mean that personally," Franks says kindly.

Leo stops his theatrics for just long enough to say, "Oh, it's personal," before adding a strange wiggle of his upper body to the performance.

(OOO)

Leela cries when she says goodbye to her parents, but Percy isn't worried. He knows that she's comfortable with Annabeth. Sure enough, she stops crying soon after Annabeth lifts her into her arms and begins carrying her towards a taxi. They're splurging for a cab because it's far safer for a little girl, and Percy isn't going to risk the subway or a walk with a tiny human falling asleep in the lap of his wife.

The cab ride lulls Leela to sleep, and Percy just stares at the absent way Annabeth is stroking the hair of the small girl, her gray eyes focused on the New York City skyline as illuminated by an almost-full moon.

"So," Annabeth says, trying to bring conversation into their strangely silent cab. "The man at the Hibachi place was wonderful tonight."

Glee fills Percy as he rubs his hands together, preparing himself. This is what he's been waiting for all evening.

"Really? I thought his performance was kind of choppy."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I kind of wanted to grill him about his technique."

“Oh no.”

“Although the speed at which he chopped onions brought a tear to my eye!”

“You’re a dork, Percy Jackson.”

“I guess I must be, because I really *flipped* for his tricks.”

“Put Leela in our bed; you’re on the couch tonight.”

“No, no, don’t get upset! I’m just saying that maybe having a stove in the middle of your dinner table isn’t such a *hot* commodity.”

“You’re a hot commodity!” Annabeth says in retaliation, finally breaking.

Percy lets a smirk grace his expression as he slowly eases an arm around his wife.

“Oh,” he says. “I know. You’ve told me.”

She shakes her head lovingly at him, looking like she very much wishes that she could kiss him right now. Percy feels warm from tenderness and alcohol and the nature of ease, something that they’ve only recently gotten and something that is so endlessly important to him. As he stares at her, and the way she cuddles the sleeping Leela, something occurs to him.

“Do you remember why you told me that you love architecture so much?” Percy asks her. He’s surprised that he can form a coherent sentence. The sight of Annabeth with Leela is doing crazy things to his palms-- they’re sweaty, and he has to swallow back all of these things that he wants to say to her about having a family with her and getting a golden retriever and eventually moving out of the city and living in a house surrounded by nature where they can raise their kids on love and puns.

“I said that I wanted to add something to the world that is both functional and extraordinary,” responds Annabeth, quoting herself.

Percy nods.

“Yeah,” he says. “And you also said that you don’t think that soul mates necessarily mean that the relationship is going to be functional. But look at what we did.” He’s trying hard to smile. “We got the dream.”

Annabeth looks down at the child in her arms.

“My beliefs didn’t change, you know,” she says, smoothing some hair away from Leela’s eyes. She’s avoiding Percy’s gaze, but he doesn’t care. No matter what she feels about soul mates and marriage, it doesn’t seem relevant anymore. It doesn’t *apply* to them. They are in a place that is beyond soul mates and beyond timers and beyond the government. “I’m in love with you. But I’m not in love with you *because* you’re my soul mate. I’m in love with you because of all of the ridiculous things that make you who you are.”

“And, of course, my charm and good looks,” Percy tacks on, grinning at her. She rolls her eyes. With love, obviously.

“You’re supposed to say it back,” Annabeth hints, whispering exaggeratedly.

Percy’s eyes widen.

“Oh, did I not say it?” At this, Annabeth shakes her head. Percy smacks himself on the forehead. “God, I can’t believe I didn’t say it.” He turns to her, grabbing her hand from where it lies on Leela’s shoulder. “Annabeth Chase.” He clears his throat very carefully. “Annabeth Chase. You, too, have charms and good looks. You’re welcome.” She opens her mouth to respond indignantly, but Percy cuts her off with a kiss. “And I love you all the more for how long you resisted mine,” he adds quietly, pulling back.

She bites her bottom lip, head tilting to the side as she stares at him carefully.

“Do you think it means more because I tortured you for so long?”

They’ve never talked about how difficult the first segment of marriage was. How hard it was, before Annabeth let him in, because... yes. Percy had expected things. Percy had expected to be treated a certain way, and had expected to feel a certain way, and to have his soul mate feel those things back. And then, there he was, falling in love with a girl who might not love him back-- not ever. Some days, he wonders if he would have put up with it, had he not known that she was his soul mate. He thinks about Jason and Piper and wonders if they would have gotten so close as children without their names on each other’s wrists. Then he thinks about Hazel and Frank and thinks about the way they let themselves get close despite the numbers on their timers.

It’s possible that he was always meant to fall in love with Annabeth. But it’s also possible that he wouldn’t have loved her as resiliently had he not so strongly believed that timers are the end-all-be-all of love.

“You didn’t torture me,” Percy says, because he doesn’t know how to express all of these thoughts in any form of simple sentence. Annabeth is staring at him intently and he wants to tell her that he doesn’t blame her for the sadness that had draped over him more than six months ago, but he does. He does blame her.

He also forgives her.

“I know that I did.”

They both know that she wouldn’t change her actions, even though she does feel sorry about them. There’s a wide difference, and Percy is okay with that. He truly is.

“Why are we talking about this now?” he asks, suddenly feeling tired. “This is... over.”

“Because,” Annabeth says slowly, “I want to get this part of our life cleared up before we move onto the next part of our life.”

“The next part?” echoes Percy, frowning. Annabeth nods her head emphatically, the gesture highlighted by the moving city landscape that is behind them. They’ll be home in less than a minute.

“Grover can’t hold off the order to have kids for much longer,” Annabeth says quietly. “We have to get ourselves straightened out before we bring somebody else into this.”

When the car stops, Annabeth hands Leela off to Percy so that she can grab her purse and pay the cab driver. Before he even realizes what’s happening, they’re halfway up the stairs and he’s got a child wrapped around him like a feather boa. He realizes this belatedly, then is quickly struck by how comfortable he is to have Leela in his arms. He’s never had siblings, or nieces and nephews. He’s never around kids.

But this one seems to like him. And Percy really, really loves his mom, but he doesn’t want to raise his kid as an only child. He hated being an only child. The thing is, he has no idea how Annabeth feels about this. He just knows that she’s staring at him and Leela with this lingering smile on her lips, melancholy and sweet.

Annabeth has taught him so much over the course of their marriage, but Percy thinks that he might have taught her some stuff as well, and he thinks that’s fucking awesome.

“You’re good with her,” Annabeth informs him as she fits the key in the lock to their apartment. Percy locks the door behind them as Annabeth flicks on some of the dimmer lights and goes off in search of the pillow and blanket that he used to use when he slept on the couch.

“That’s only because she’s asleep.”

“No,” Annabeth argues, shaking her head as Percy settles Leela onto their couch. She barely stirs. One good thing about this kid-- she can sleep through just about anything once her bedtime hits. Percy thinks that it’s a pretty admirable trait. He could have used it last month when Annabeth got a cold and couldn’t stop snoring. “Earlier tonight, you were explaining how to use chopsticks to her and she was riveted. You understand how to talk to her.”

After pulling the blanket up and tucking it under Leela’s chin, Percy slips his hand into Annabeth’s and tugs her towards their bedroom. The bed is still neatly made from the morning, blankets pulled neatly up. Percy just has to search the floor on his side of the bed for a few moments before he finds his pajama bottoms. Shucking off his jeans, he pulls on the red plaid and replaces his button down with a t-shirt. By the time he’s crawled into bed, Annabeth is already brushing her hair out, sitting cross legged on her side of the bed.

Tentatively, he raises his hand to the brush and tugs it out of her grasp before brushing it into her hair. Annabeth closes her eyes and sighs slightly as he threads his fingers into her curls, making sure that he doesn’t tug too hard as he brushes. This is relatively new-- they’re always adding new things, it seems. The more comfortable they are around each other, the more boundaries they’re willing to push. And Percy has started to look forward to going to bed and marathoning the show that they’re watching together while he brushes out Annabeth’s hair. It always gets tangled in the wind, and she likes to braid it back so that it doesn’t stick up everywhere when she wakes up in the morning.

Tonight, he doesn't feel like turning on the television and making predictions about the insane ways that the show is going to take plot points. He just wants to brush her hair and talk to her and acknowledge the fact that she brought this child home for a reason. Annabeth never does anything without a reason.

"You think that Grover is going to force us to have a kid soon," he states, because it seems easy to start with what he knows. "And you don't want that kid."

She reaches behind herself to touch his knee briefly, reassuring him.

"I don't want to be told when I have to have a child with the man that I love. I want to decide with him. I want it to be a choice. I want to be ready."

The voice that she is using is steady and calm, and it makes Percy feel calm too. He nods slowly, moving back so that Annabeth can begin braiding her hair. She turns around to face him as she does so, eyes darting all over his face as she tries to scrutinize his expression.

"Just like you wanted us to get married when we were ready," he says carefully.

"Exactly," Annabeth replies, voice still gentle. "Percy, before you, I never even thought about a world in which I would welcome a child. I never thought that it would be something that I wanted. But now that I see you with Leela and I see Piper being pregnant and I see... just, the way you look at me. The way you're looking at me right now. It makes me think that I could want something that I've never wanted before. And that terrifies me. Do you understand?"

He nods. Slowly.

"I want more than one kid, Annabeth," he says quietly. On a whim, he leans forward and captures Annabeth's hand in his, then starts playing with her fingers. "I know that only one is mandatory, but I want two or three... I don't want my kid to grow up as an only child. If something happens to... to... well. Me and my mom, we only really had... you know, each other, and if... I just mean... I think that kids should have lots of people around them. Adults. Other kids. I don't want any of us to ever feel lonely again. You, or me, or our hypothetical child that is apparently soon going to be not hypothetical. I just... I hate being lonely."

He sees Annabeth swallow hard. As he stares at her, she looks down at their entwined hands, brushing her thumb over the ring that was Percy's father's. Percy knows that he doesn't talk about his dad. He knows that it's the only piece that he doesn't share with Annabeth. But she has everything else. Does she really need this? He doesn't talk about it. He just doesn't. When he was younger, he used to lurch into conversations about his dad regardless of the darkness that always stole over him when he spoke of it. Not anymore. Now, Percy actively avoids the anger that comes with thinking about it. He tries to avoid anger *period*. That place has never felt safe for him.

"This is about him," says Annabeth, encircling her thumb and index finger around the band that is on Percy's ring finger. "Your father. Your real father, I mean."

Percy half smiles at the idea of Paul being his actual dad. Maybe life would have been better if Sally Jackson's timer had gone off on Paul Blofis. Sure, she wouldn't have ended up with

Percy as her son, but everything would be... easier. For her.

"It's about me wanting kids, Annabeth."

She looks up at him sharply.

"You were not talking about kids. You were referring to your father." His face hardens as she says it, perhaps one of the only times he's ever truly blocked her out. "You don't have to bottle it up, Percy."

"No," he refutes. "I do have to, okay? Bad things happen when I think about it."

"Because you're angry," Annabeth guesses.

"Yeah, because I'm angry! Because he fucking *kicked it* and then left my mom with nothing and she deserved better than a soul mate who died when her kid was six."

"Was it his fault that he died?" Annabeth presses.

"Does it matter?" Percy asks tiredly.

"I just mean... are you angry at him, or at the world?"

He shrugs.

"Neither. Both. One or the other."

"But your dad was your mom's soul mate," Annabeth reiterates. "She had a soul mate. She wasn't alone, or timerless. She had him; she had you."

"You don't get it," he mutters. "How do I make you get this?" While he thinks, she waits patiently, perfectly still except for the thumb that she is circling across his palm. "Annabeth, the reason that I am so hopeful about timers is because... well, the only thing that makes it *remotely* tolerable that society frowns upon my mom's relationship with Paul is the knowledge that soul mates are each other's perfect matches. The only thing that makes it seem even a little bit okay that she only had a few years with my dad is the knowledge that they were literally manufactured to be together. Because, otherwise, how the hell is any of this worth it?"

"*This* is worth it," Annabeth says urgently, lifting their entwined hands. "Whatever they're forcing us into, whatever they do to us, we stay with it because we have each other. Piper and Jason, and Hazel and Frank, and your mom and Paul... those relationships are what make all the shit worth it. Stuff happens, Percy, and the world that they're making us live in is harsh and it's really, really ugly. But without it, I never would have gotten you. And I *love* you."

He winces.

"You don't know how selfish I am. You don't know how bad it gets when I... when I..."

"I know how selfish *I* am," she reminds him. "I know how angry I can be, and I know that everybody has a dark side. But you have always been irrevocably hopeful, even when the girl that you were marrying acted like she wanted nothing to do with you and pretended that she didn't like your puns. Humans are wretched, sometimes, and you can be too... but that doesn't change the good in you. Okay?" He doesn't respond. Annabeth winds her hand into his hair and uses it to lightly tug his head up. She softens her voice when she sees the lost look in his eyes. "Okay?"

"Okay," he whispers. She sighs heavily, guiding him forward so that his head is resting in her lap. Slowly, he moves into a lying position. Annabeth reaches over and turns off the light. For a few moments, they lie in silence.

"If you want more than one kid," Annabeth says suddenly, "I think that might be okay."

When he responds, his voice is muffled.

"If you want to work to outlaw timers, I think that might be okay."

"Yeah?"

"Mhm."

Wiggling up slightly, Percy rests his head on Annabeth's chest. She lies back against the pillows as she continues to run her fingers through his hair, and Percy just focuses on her breathing, the familiar and rhythmic thumping of her heart.

"For the record," she murmurs, "I don't think that it's the only reason you believe in timers."

"You don't?"

Annabeth presses her lips against the crown of Percy's head, brushing back the hair there.

"I don't. I think you believe that love is real-- maybe more than anybody I've ever known. I think that you know that your mom is happy because of love. Because of you and your dad and Paul. She's okay, Percy. She's happy. You see that, and you want to love someone the way she loves so deeply. That's why you hope so much. That's why you never stopped believing in me when our timers went off. And that's why we are where we are right now."

He's just about to fall asleep when it occurs to him that he needs to thank her. For loving him. For trusting him. For letting him talk to her and encouraging him to let go. He struggles to remain awake, slurring his words as he says these things, voice still muffled by the way he's leaning against her.

He moves with her as she breathes in deeply.

"No," she says, sounding slightly unsteady. Her fingers still where they are stroking his hair, and she winds some strands around her fingers, channeling her intensity into the touch.

"Don't thank me. Now it's *my* turn to save *you*."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I am currently updating this chapter in period costume from America in the early 1900s. Theatre problems, huh? Anyways, I hope you enjoy this chapter and I want to give a shout out to Percyyoulittleshit for waiting patiently for Percy to become angry at something. And thank you a million times for all of your amazing reviews. I cannot believe we got to 200! That's absolutely insane. Between all of your reviews and your thoughtful questions, we continue to be blown away by your view of our universe.

~writergirl8

the chapter title is from Animal Life by Shearwater)

I can only be what I've been

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Picking the brains of architects with years of experience is always easier to do when you've perfected their coffee orders. Annabeth discovered this in her first week at the firm and has been abusing it ever since.

Mr Dawson, an older gentleman with curly red hair and a kind smile, sips on his coconut flavoured latte and divulges his deepest secrets as Annabeth hastily notes down every word he says on her little blue notepad. He's the most willing to talk; all she has to do is comment on one of his sketches or ask his opinion on a certain design, and he's off.

He sits back in his desk chair, causing it to creak beneath him, and smiles. 'You've just finished college, yes?'

She looks up at him from her notes. 'Yes,' she nods, 'I know I was very fortunate to get this internship.'

'You're dedicated,' he notes, 'it shows. I'll personally be recommending you for a job at the end of this summer.' When Annabeth blinks at him, he leans forward conspiratorially and grins. 'But that's off the record.'

Annabeth nods. 'I... thank you.'

He smiles at her. 'You've got talent, Annabeth, and a good work ethic. This company would benefit from your employment.'

She isn't sure what to say, so she nods again. 'Thank you.'

He waves a dismissive hand. 'When do you get your examination results?'

She draws in a deep breath. 'Today, actually.'

He nods. 'My son gets his as well. He's an engineer major at NYU. Are you nervous?'

'Terrified. I mean, I'm confident that I've done well, but it's still nerve-wracking, you know? I mean, these results will decide the rest of my career.'

A year ago, she would have said life. They will decide the rest of her life. And, in some ways they still will. But she knows that while her career is one part of her life and it is hers, it is not the only thing. She has many things in her life to be grateful for; her circle of friends, her family, the city she calls her home, and Percy. Percy, who waited so long for her to figure everything out, who loves her, who is ready to start a family with her. Who is going to have a family with her... whether she is ready for it or not.

'Well, good luck,' Dawson says.

‘Thank you.’

(OOO)

‘Just keep your head down, okay?’

‘Percy, I’ll be the only female in the entire office, I’m not exactly going to blend in.’

He scowls at the elevator button and punches it again, tapping his foot impatiently on the tiled floor of the reception area. She has visited his workplace before, but he seems more on edge now; the previous times, he’d dragged her around in full view of everyone. *‘Hey guys, have you met my wife?’* But now it’s like he doesn’t even want her there.

The elevator pings and the doors slide open, revealing an empty metal box. They step in together and Percy pushes the button for the fifth floor.

‘Is everything okay?’ she asks. ‘I can access my results on my phone.’

‘What?’ He blinks at her. ‘No, we have great internet here, you may as well abuse it.’

‘I just... I get the feeling you don’t want me here.’

He frowns at her. ‘Of course I do.’

‘Then what’s the problem?’

He sighs. ‘Nothing, I just... One of my colleagues - you remember Marty?’

She nods. ‘Brown hair, glasses?’

‘That’s the one. He fucked up on an order he made this morning and now I have to deal with it.’

‘Why do you have to deal with it?’

He drags his hands down his face. ‘Because he’s fucking useless and I’m the most experienced person in the office so...’

The doors ping open before she can reply and Percy’s hand brushes her lower back to usher her on to the office floor. It is overflowing with too small cubicles and odd bursts of laughter and conversation amongst the clatter of keyboards. Percy walks them to the end of the room, in between cubicles from which people greet them both; they both wave in acknowledgement, but do not stop to chat.

When they get to Percy’s cubicle, he sits down on his swivel chair and Annabeth gets comfortable in his lap. He turns them both around to his computer and rests his chin on her shoulder. Annabeth looks around the small space. It’s far too cluttered for an office; she knows she’d never be able to work properly with so many things to distract her. She smiles at the framed photo of herself and Percy with their arms around one another in Central Park and

picks it up to put in front of the photo of her on her own. She can feel Percy's grin against her cheek.

He bounces his knee, jostling her. 'You nervous?'

'No. Maybe. A little.'

The computer has loaded and she types in the web address for her college blackboard. Percy's arms encircle her waist and squeeze. 'You'll do amazing.'

'Mm.'

The wait is torture and Annabeth tries to focus on Percy instead of the screen; on his warmth and his fiddling with her shirt and his breath next to her ear. He's a good distraction, but when the page loads and Annabeth clicks on the link to download her results and taps her foot on the floor. The page comes up in a new tab and she scrolls down.

Percy's woop nearly deafens her.

She winces. 'Jeez, Percy.'

'I'm married to a genius!'

'A deaf genius.'

'Sorry.' He kisses her cheek. 'You're amazing.'

'Well...'

'You're kidding me. Annabeth, there's not one mark below ninety there. There's no possible way you can be disappointed.'

'I'm not,' she insists. 'I'm just... checking.'

He laughs in her ear. 'We're going out for lunch to celebrate.'

She leans forward, chewing her thumbnail as she analyses the page containing her results. She's passed, she will graduate college with top marks. It takes her a moment to comprehend this and join in with Percy's glee, attracting the attention of most of the office. Five minutes later, they are bounding out the front of the building hand-in-hand, discussing where they will go for food.

They decide on a Thai place on the corner and sit with their bowls of noodles at a small bar up against the window, looking out at the busy street.

'So do you think you'll get a permanent place with Goldmarr's?' Percy asks as he stabs a piece of pork with his chopsticks.

'Well they have to offer me a position first.'

'They will.'

She rolls her eyes and quells a smile. 'We'll see. But if they do, I'm sure I'll accept. What do you think?'

Percy blinks at her and swallows his food. 'You're asking me?'

'You are my husband; the man I'll be with for the rest of my life and the father of my future children. I'd like to hear your opinion on this.'

'Okay.' He smiles into his food like he's been given the greatest gift in the world. And then he screws his face up as he thinks about the question she has presented him with. 'I think what would hold you back from choosing to stay at Goldmarr's is the idea that it would be the easy option.'

She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out, so she closes it again, biting her lip.

Percy nods like she's just given him everything she needs to know. 'But you'd be wrong. You've worked your ass off for this degree and for this internship. If they offered you a place it would be because you deserve it.'

She mulls this over as she scoops more salt and pepper chicken into her mouth. Percy is right - she isn't sure when he managed to get a handle on her so well - she's worried that staying at the company she's interned with for two summers would be settling. Annabeth Chase likes a challenge, and starting in a new workplace would certainly be a challenge. But then again, would it be a complete waste of resources and archived knowledge of the company she's been shadowing for collective four months now to not stay there?

'You don't have to decide now,' Percy points out, and scoops some noodles into his mouth. 'You won't hear back from the places you've applied to until the end of August, right?'

'Mm.'

He shrugs. 'So relax while you can. You'll probably feel different at the end of summer.'

'Okay.'

He smiles and she returns to her chicken, picking up a piece between her chopsticks expertly as Percy continues to fumble with his.

Annabeth walks him back to his office and smiles at his goofy grin after he has kissed her for the hundredth time since finding out her results. Then he lopez back into his office, looking considerably more happy than when she had met him before lunch. As she walks back towards Goldmarr's, Annabeth pulls out her phone and searches for the relatively new addition to her phonebook.

He picks up on the fifth ring. 'Hello, Chase residence.'

'Hey-- it's Annabeth.' She nearly says *hey, dad* but it feels too casual. She is not quite ready for casual yet.

‘Oh. Hello, Annabeth. How are you.’

‘I’m good thank you. Really good actually.’ She hitches up her bag on her shoulder and stops in the street, leaning up against the nearest storefront and watching the cars and people trundle past. ‘I got my exam results.’

‘You did? How- how did you do?’ he asks hesitantly.

‘I passed everything...Straight As.’

‘That’s--’ It takes him a moment to speak again. ‘Annabeth, I’m so proud of you. Congratulations, Bumblebee.’

She is at a loss for words. He hasn’t called her Bumblebee since she was in middle school. ‘Thanks... dad.’ It still doesn’t settle quite right in her mouth, but she doesn’t feel horrible for saying it.

‘You should come over for dinner this weekend. If you don’t have plans already?’

‘No, I think I’m wide open.’

She could hear the smile in his voice. ‘That’s wonderful. Maybe we’ll go out some place nice - just you and me?’

‘That-- that sounds great.’

‘Okay, honey. Let me know if you’re definitely free and I’ll book something later this evening. Congratulations again, I’ll speak to you later.’

‘Okay. Bye.’

After she hangs up, she stands with her back pressed against the window of the store and her phone clutched in her hands, pressed to her chest. A year ago, she never thought she would have such a conversation with her father. Sure, it’s still fairly awkward between them, and they definitely have some issues still to talk out, but it feels good to start bridging the gap she had created three years ago.

‘So I told my dad about my results.’

Percy’s voice is muffled as he sticks half of his body into their small pantry. ‘Oh yeah? What did he say?’

‘He was really happy for me. He wants to go out for dinner this weekend - just the two of us.’

‘That’s great!’ He says, reappearing with a bag of sweet potatoes in hand.

Annabeth shifts her weight as she leans against the counter. 'Yeah. I just hope it won't be too awkward. I mean, I don't remember the last time I was alone with him.'

Percy dumps the potatoes on the surface next to her. 'Want me to come with? I hear I can be pretty charming.'

She rolls her eyes and lightly slaps his arm, pushing away from the counter to dig a potato peeler from the draw. 'No, it'll be fine. Thanks though.'

'Welcome.' He flicks a smile at her before nodding to the potatoes. 'Now get to work, slacker.'

She raises an eyebrow along with her potato peeler. 'I'm holding a dangerous weapon, Jackson.'

He just grins at her.

After they've eaten and watched TV and fallen half asleep on the couch, they drag themselves off to bed. It's the middle of summer and their AC is temperamental so they've been sleeping on top of the covers in minimal clothing. Percy sprawls across the bed in his boxers as Annabeth changes into a camisole and sleep shorts. She climbs onto the bed and leans over to kiss him before flopping back onto her side of the bed. It's far too hot to snuggle, even though she wants to.

'G'night,' she mumbles.

Percy grunts but makes no further response. Seconds later, he is snoring.

It seems like only minutes after she has closed her eyes that Annabeth is awoken by a shrill ringing. She groans, and flops a hand in the direction of her bedside table, grasping the solid line of her cell. The screen is too bright for her to make out so she just answers the call before it can wake Percy up.

'Hello?' Her voice is cracked as she speaks, sitting up in the bed and leaning against the headboard.

'Hello, is this Annabeth Chase?' comes the crisp reply. It sounds professional. It sets Annabeth's nerves on edge.

'Yes, speaking,' she replies, hearing the change in her own voice.

'Good evening, Annabeth. My name is Cheryl, I'm calling from Bellevue hospital--'

That has Annabeth sitting ramrod straight. 'What?'

'It is my understanding that you are the primary In case of Emergency Contact number for Miss Thalia Grace?'

Annabeth isn't sure she's breathing. 'What?' she says again because she can't seem to say anything else.

'Do you know a Thalia Emily Grace? Age 27. Five foot, five; slim build; short black hair; several piercings in her ears, lip and nose; a tattoo of lightning on her left shoulder blade--'

'Yes,' Annabeth says when she finds her voice, probably a little too harshly. 'What happened to her?'

'I'm calling because we weren't able to find contact numbers for any relatives--'

'What happened to her?'

That's when Percy wakes up. In the infinite seconds that it takes for Cheryl to respond, he is sitting up next to her and rubbing his face as he switches the lamp next to the bed on. His face is tired, his eyes filled with the frantic energy she feels.

'Miss Grace has had an accident with her timer.'

She doesn't elaborate and Annabeth wants to throw her cellphone across the room. She stands up instead, starts pacing, and holds onto the damn thing like a lifeline. 'An accident?'

She meets Percy's eyes and his brow tightens.

Cheryl's voice is strained when she speaks again. 'She's in recovery now, but she lost a great deal of blood... She's relatively stable, but I'm sure--'

'I'm coming in.'

'Alright, Mrs Chase. It's Bellevue hospital, on 462 and first.'

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. And Mrs Chase, if you could get in touch with the next of kin, we'd be most grateful.'

'Okay.'

She hangs up the phone and stares at the screen as it goes blank. She's shaking when Percy's hands close around her shoulders.

'Annabeth,' he says, voice hard with worry. 'What happened?'

She looks up at his face. 'Thalia. She's in the hospital.'

'Which one?'

'Bellevue.'

He nods and draws away from her. 'Get dressed,' he says, picking up his own phone and dialing a number.

‘Who’re you calling?’

‘A taxi.’

She nods, feeling dazed still as she drags on a pair of jeans and a sweater over her pyjamas. Percy’s voice is a background noise to her panic as images of Thalia lying in a hospital bed fill her mind. *An accident with her timer.* What does that even mean? Has it defected and affected her in some way?

Has she tried to tear it off?

The idea make Annabeth’s blood run cold. She thought back to her’s and Thalia’s last conversation, the one where her oldest friend had claimed Annabeth’s betrayal because she had gone and fallen for her soulmate. And left her, even though she had promised so long ago, over and over, that she would never do so.

‘Annabeth?’ Percy’s hand on her elbow. ‘Cab’s on its way.’

She nods and picks up her phone as he leads her from the room and holds the front door open to her. They are waiting for the elevator when she tells him,

‘There’s someone else we need to call.’

Percy looks at her. ‘Who?’

‘Jason.’

His eyebrows pull together. ‘Why?’

Annabeth meets his eyes as the elevator doors slide open. ‘Because Thalia is his sister.’

Percy is still confused half an hour later when they pull up outside Bellevue and hand cash over to the cab driver. They tumble out of the cab and towards the artificial light of the front entrance.

‘I just don’t understand how this piece of information was just left out for the -what?- seven months that I’ve known Jason.’

‘They don’t get on.’

Percy scoffs. ‘Yeah, I figured.’ She can’t tell if he’s actually pissed at having this knowledge kept from him, but she finds herself with more present concerns as they approach the help desk. The woman sitting there looks up as they approach, and smiles.

‘Good evening.’ It’s three in the morning. ‘What can I help you with?’

‘Thalia Grace. She was admitted earlier...’

The receptionist looks down at her computer, and bites her lip. ‘Ah, yes.’ Her expression clears. ‘She’s in the recovery ward on the fifth floor. I’m afraid you won’t be able to see her yet, but there’s a waiting area up there.’

Annabeth is already gone. ‘Thank you,’ she says over her shoulder.

As they walk into an empty elevator, Annabeth's phone buzzes in her pocket. She digs it out and answers immediately when she reads the caller ID.

‘Piper,’ she breathes, ‘where are you?’

‘Park avenue. Do you know anything yet?’ Her friend’s usual calm sounds shattered and Annabeth doesn’t quite know how to process that. Piper has always been her calm entity to rely upon.

‘No. We’re on our way up to see her. Hopefully someone will be up there to talk to us.’

‘Okay.’

The elevator doors open and Percy and Annabeth pile out, necks craning as they search for their next navigation point.

‘Piper, is Leela with you?’

Percy meets her eyes and points to his own chest. Annabeth nods as Piper confirms that yes, her daughter is currently strapped into the back seat of the taxi next to her.

‘Okay, Percy will watch her.’

‘Okay.’ A breath close to relief. ‘Thank you.’ A few beats of silence pass on the other end of the phone as Percy speaks to a nurse in purple scrubs. And then, ‘Annabeth?’

‘Yeah?’

Piper’s voice is much quieter, and much more afraid. ‘You don’t think she actually did it, do you?’

Annabeth looks down at her husband’s wrist, where his jacket hides the timer with her name on it. ‘I don’t know,’ she says, because she doesn’t want to think about what Piper is asking - what they will soon find out.

‘We’re here,’ Piper says.

‘Fifth floor.’

‘See you soon.’

As she hangs up, Percy directs her down the hall with a hand brushing her lower back. A doctor is stepping out of the room as they approach, she looks up at them with tired eyes.

‘You’re here to see Thalia Grace?’

Annabeth nods.

‘Next of kin?’

‘On their way.’

‘So you are...?’

‘A... friend.’ The word feels heavy on her tongue.

Just then, in their usual saving grace, Piper and Jason herd themselves down the hallway with their daughter in tow. Percy’s knuckles brush Annabeth’s as he dutifully goes to distract Leela; she goes with him willingly, grasping his larger hand in her little one as they walk down the corridor towards a waiting area.

‘Annabeth,’ Piper says in a huff of relief: as if her presence can make it all okay. Annabeth wishes it were that simple. She looks at Jason, who looks like death. She has seen him in states of exhaustion before, but this is something else; and as he meets her eyes, she feels the joint burden of his pain. They both know they have failed Thalia, and now it was time for them all to face the consequences.

The doctor looks between them all. ‘I take it one of you is the next of kin?’

‘Yeah,’ Jason says, voice thick with disuse. ‘She’s my sister.’

The doctor nods. ‘Perhaps we should speak alone.’

Jason is shaking his head. ‘Piper is my wife. And Annabeth has known my sister since we were in fourth grade. I’d like for them to stay.’

‘Alright.’ She shifts the clipboard in her arms and moves away from the door to Thalia’s room. The blinds are drawn, so they can’t see in anyway. ‘Mr Grace, your sister attempted to remove her timer.’

Annabeth can’t even gasp. She isn’t sure that what she is feeling is shock. She does notice Piper shift closer to Jason and take his hand; he is steel faced, blue eyes fixed on the doctor as she speaks.

‘It appears that she used some sort of knife to pry underneath the device - but I doubt she knew how deeply the timers are attached and therefore how much damage would result from her attempting to remove it.’

Annabeth blinks. What does *that* mean? *Deeply attached*.

Her own attempt - if it could be called that - when she was in middle school, had gotten as far as making the smallest dent in the black seal surrounding her timer with a butter knife. Her step-mother screamed when she saw her, and dragged her off to the emergency room. Annabeth hadn’t even scratched her own skin, but she received therapy for the next six

months and still has that mark on her timer to this day. Her right hand closes over her timer and she tries not to think about the promise she once made.

‘We’re waiting for the bloodwork to come back, but we are under the impression that she was under the influence tonight.’

‘She’d been drinking?’ Jason’s voice sounds hollow.

‘Alongside other substances, we think.’

‘You think?’ Annabeth asks skeptically. ‘How can you know anything without the blood work? I thought she was unconscious when she was brought in.’

‘She was. But, ah, when she was admitted, she had writing on her arm - telling us what substances she’d taken. We asked the paramedics if they had done it, but they said they had found her that way.’

‘Found her?’ Jason repeats.

The doctor takes a breath. ‘Yes. It appears that someone called 911 on her behalf but did not wait for the ambulance to arrive.’

‘Where?’ he asks. ‘Where did they leave her?’

‘Union square.’

Jason is shaking.

They left her in the street, bleeding to death. Whoever they are, whoever had gotten her into such a state and left her, Annabeth wants to strangle them - wrap her hands around their throat and squeeze until there is nothing left. But then she tries to remember the last time she tried to contact Thalia - really try and find her - and she feels guilt creep up into her chest and squeeze its hand around her heart.

‘Can we see her?’ she asks, voice cracked.

The doctor looks between the three of them and slowly nods. ‘She’s asleep. But you can see her.’

She could be Snow White waiting for her prince. Her ebony hair is unspiked, skin white as snow. Only her lips spoil the image - they are as bloodless as the white hospital gown she wears under starched sheets. Her left wrist, lying on top of the sheets, is heavily bandaged. Good, Annabeth thinks. She doesn’t want to see the extent of that damage just yet.

‘Thalia,’ Jason murmurs, drawing close to the bed and touching her cheek. He’s the younger sibling, but he’s always acted like the older one. Annabeth looks at him across Thalia’s dormant body, at his tired face, and wonders what happened to their childhood. They grew up

too fast and the timers were partly to blame for that, but not wholly. Annabeth leans down to kiss Thalia's forehead, and meets Jason's eyes fleetingly before slipping out of the room.

Once in the hall, she gulps in a deep breath like she'd been smothered. The room had been too close, too full of what she didn't want to see, what a small part of her had dreaded would happen for so long. She stares at the wall for a few seconds as her heart settles in her chest. When her feet start moving, she finds herself going in search of Percy. He is the person she wants to talk to right now, despite his naivety of the situation.

She finds him playing with Leela amongst an array of plastic bricks in the small waiting area. He looks up as Annabeth walks in and encourages Leela to carry on playing by herself. They sit next to one another on the plastic seats and she immediately reaches for his left hand. She pulls his sleeve back and runs her thumb over the surface of his timer. Her name is still there, in block capitals, claiming him as hers. She'd never thought she would find herself quite so attached to that idea.

'Annabeth?' Percy asks, his voice low and concerned. 'What the hell is going on?'

She has to tell him. He deserves to know. Even though this is something she had hoped to keep firmly in her past, it has already been dragged up. And he has shared everything of himself with her.

'I knew Jason before I knew Piper,' she says, looking up at him. His brows are furrowed, his green eyes watching her face. 'In fifth grade, my parents moved me to a new school with the hope that I would settle in better.' Percy smiles at that - he'd been moved from school to school as a young adolescent because of his unfathomable talent of not getting along with other adolescents. 'And that's when I met Jason and Thalia.'

'How old was she?'

'Fifteen. She was in high school, and I worshipped the ground she walked on. The way she went on about how damaging the timer laws are and all of her conspiracy theories. I was hooked... and so was Jason.'

'Wait. Jason was against timers?'

'Hard to believe isn't it?' Annabeth glances at Leela, who is still playing contently by herself. 'I was at Jason's house a lot because home was... well, you know. So the three of us were together a lot. Thalia would preach to us about the timers and we would eat it up. It wasn't until high school that I realised it wasn't timers themselves that I hated, just the laws surrounding them.'

'Anyway, one summer, Thalia got into a huge fight with her dad and she made us promise to never give into the laws. No matter what. We would never let the timers control our lives. We promised.' there is a flicker of hurt on Percy's face and she can't quite look at him. 'We made a promise.'

'What happened?'

Annabeth looks up at his face. 'Three months later Jason met Piper. He kept it from Thalia for as long as he could, but she found out when they got serious. And then Thalia dropped out of school, and they've barely spoken since. I was the main way of communicating, but since we stop talking...'

'Because of me,' Percy finishes.

Annabeth looks into his green eyes, full of a guilt but doesn't belong to him. She shakes her head. 'No, Percy. Because Thalia and I both too stubborn for our own good.' She reaches up and brushes his messy bangs off his forehead. 'You remind me of her, you know? I think you would have gotten along with her. Either that you would have hated each other.'

Percy smiles. 'There's still time.'

She tries to smile back. *I hope*, she doesn't say aloud.

'So what did they argue about?' Percy asks, 'Thalia and her dad?'

This is the topic she had wanted to avoid. It's a little too close to home to both of them. Annabeth sighs. 'Jason and Thalia's dad, he... He wasn't a good person. He never mistreated them, but he just didn't really care about his family. He was erratic, absent a lot of the time. And he cheated on their mom - a lot. I still think Thalia and Jason must have half siblings somewhere.'

Percy's face is screwed up. 'But they were soulmates.'

She looks at him sadly. 'Soulmates don't always work out, Percy. We do, and Piper and Jason do. But what about Frank and Hazel? What about your mom?'

He shakes his head. They've talked about this before and she knows that his singular belief in soulmates being wholly compatible has been shaken by her words, by his best friends' relationship. But his heart still holds onto the belief he grew up with. And his relationship with Annabeth reaffirms that belief. So he struggles.

She doesn't want to push him now. 'It screwed their mom up, anyway. Unlike him, she loved Thalia and Jason. She just... wasn't very good at it.'

'That's a lot of past tense in there.'

She nods. 'They both died in a car accident when Jason was fourteen.'

'Jesus,' Percy whispers, mindful of the toddler nearby. He rakes a hand through his dishevelled hair. 'I had no idea.'

'You should talk to him,' she says quietly, wary of how he will receive her words.

Percy's jaw hardens, he shakes his head a little. 'What's the point of dragging that up again?'

His stubbornness strengthens her resolve. 'Do you really want to feel like this for the rest of your life, Percy? It's not supposed to feel like this. You're not supposed to hate your dad for

dying.' Her words a blunt but she knows they need to be.

Percy's eyes close. 'Annabeth--'

'I just want you to feel better,' she says softly.

After another moment, his eyes open and his jaw has relaxed. 'So, is she going to be alright?'

She's determined he won't brush this off forever, but now that her mind has been drawn back to Thalia, she cannot effectively distract it again.

'I think so.' She shakes her head and rubs at her face. 'She tried to cut her timer off, Percy. I never thought she would actually do it - we talked about it, but I never thought she would.'

'Didn't you try to once?'

She scoffs. 'With a butter knife, when I was twelve. I barely made a scratch, look-' She holds up her arm to him, his fingers are gentle on her wrist as he turns it over to examine the timer. His eyes narrow as they find the scratch, and then soften.

'You can barely see it.'

He almost sounds relieved.

It's then that Leela's patience runs its course. 'Annabee?' She toddles over to them. 'Where's mama?'

Annabeth scoops her up into her lap and strokes her hair. 'Hey, sweetie. You're mom's visiting someone with daddy, she'll be back real soon.'

Percy pokes her belly lightly and grins. 'You're stuck with us.'

Leela giggles and grabs Percy's hand, keeping him captive.

A few minutes later, Piper appears in the doorway and Leela immediately forgets Percy's and Annabeth's existence as she bounds over to her mother.

'She's awake,' Piper says tiredly over Leela's shoulder.

Annabeth scrambles up off the plastic chair. 'How is she?'

'Groggy. The doctor has just seen her and she told us she should make a good recovery. She and Jason are talking now.'

'Thalia and Jason?'

Piper nods. 'Yeah. And we agreed it's about time she meets her niece.' She sets Leela on the floor and takes her hand. 'That's you, Buttercup. You wanna meet your auntie?'

Leela squeals like it's Christmas and skips down the hall with her mother. Annabeth stares after them, unable to move until familiar fingers slide between hers.

‘You okay?’ Percy murmurs.

She takes a deep breath. Grips his hand. ‘I will be.’

‘I’m right here.’

Annabeth smiles at him. ‘I know.’

And her feet are released. They take her forward, with Percy at her side, to see her best friend again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N

ookay some further developments, and more issues to resolve. i’ve actually received a few asks about thalia and jason’s relationship and this is kind of why i hadn’t responded to them. because even though it’s canon so it’s completely not a surprise, i still wanted to ~dramatically reveal~ it

people are also asking about how long grumpybeth is going to remain grumpy and the answer is... always, i guess? at least some part of her anyway. although her attitude towards percy has changed dramatically, her beliefs have only altered a little.

i should also mention (because somehow we’ve neglected to say so yet) that rachel and i have decided to extend this fic to 14 chapters instead of 10!! so we’ll finish around christmas time

the chapter title is from Dogfight the musical (apparently)

We've got to make it last

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It only takes a bit of coaxing for Percy to get Annabeth to agree to walk home with him, as exhausted as she is. Leela's small voice is still chattering away in Thalia's ear when the two of them finally make their way out of the badly lit hallway and down to the darkened streets of New York City. As he tugs Annabeth down a block, he hears her breathe in deeply, inhaling the familiar city air.

As disgusting as it can be, it's home.

"You sure you're okay?" Percy asks, feeling sleepy even as Annabeth regathers her energy from being outside. He yawns through his words, then shuts his mouth quickly, trying not to draw too much attention to his own needs. This is about Annabeth, and helping Annabeth, and sticking by Annabeth. That's what tonight is for.

"I'm... I don't know." She pulls him into a right turn, leading him to a shortcut that goes towards their apartment. "I wish that Thalia and I hadn't... left it. Like that."

"It's not your fault."

"It feels like it's my fault. It feels like I betrayed her."

She stops talking there, but he knows what the implication is. It feels like Annabeth betrayed her by loving Percy as much as she loves him. And even though he doesn't feel bad for making Annabeth love him, he does feel terrible about the fact that gaining him meant losing something important. He wonders who Annabeth would have picked had they not been forced together by the timers. No doubt, she would have chosen Thalia over him, not allowing him to get close enough to worm his way into her life.

But they're never going to know what that world is like. They're not, because the timer laws exist and they are the reason that Percy and Annabeth are together. They are the reason that she's probably resenting him right now as she walks next to him. The thought twists Percy's stomach in a way that makes his entire body ache, and his head.

"It's really hot out here," he says, and when he drops her hand, he hopes that it sounds like it was a proper excuse to disguise the fact that he cannot even look at her, so consumed is he in the guilt wreaking havoc on his mind.

Their apartment still has a few lights on from when they had hurriedly left it, desperate to get to the hospital. Percy's hand instinctively goes for the lightswitch and he ends up shutting it off, darkening their living room. It's strange, because it's a few hours until the sun comes up and they've not gotten any sleep, but he doesn't want to go into their bedroom. He finds himself glancing towards the couch, wanting to continue the feeling of separation he's been

feeling all night, ever since he'd realized that Annabeth had never mentioned the fact that Jason and Thalia are siblings.

It just reminds him of the fact that their entire group is a fabrication; that the joining of his friends with her friends isn't a willful one. And that thought makes Percy feel sick.

"I think I'm going to get some work done," Annabeth says as she toes off her shoes. She hasn't said anything about the light; just goes into the kitchen and flicks on the one over the table. "I need... distraction."

Normally, he would take that as an opportunity to distract her himself, but now is *really* not the time, and he doesn't even have the energy to make a joke out of it.

"Okay," Percy says blandly. "Have a good night, then."

He turns to walk into their bedroom, already shaking his jacket off of his shoulders

"Hey." Annabeth's hands are tugging at the back of his shirt before Percy can register the fact that she's talking to him. He halts, allowing her to slide her arms under his and all the way around his waist, pressing her cheek in the space between his shoulder blades. "Thank you for staying with me tonight. I needed you there."

Perhaps it's the softness of her voice that makes Percy squeeze his eyes painfully shut, or the tender way her thumbs are moving in circles across his abdomen, or the fact that this moment in the quiet of the night feels so one-sided. But mostly, he thinks that it's because she is hugging a man far less selfish than Percy Jackson is.

He's still thinking about it when he kisses her forehead and walks silently into their bedroom, where he curls up, alone, for the first time in such a long time.

(OOO)

Getting up for work the next morning is nearly impossible, especially with only a few hours of sleep under his belt. It helps a little bit that Annabeth kisses him awake, straddling his hips and dropping sweet kisses on his collarbone and up to his scruffy jaw. But the moment he remembers the empty emotions he had felt the night before, Percy burrows back into himself, hiding under the covers.

"I made you breakfast," Annabeth says, voice seductive. "Come on, Percy. Up you get."

"No offense," he says, voice muffled against the covers, "but you're a terrible cook, Annabeth."

His voice is gentle as he says it, but he still worries that it doesn't quite have enough warmth to it. Annabeth, however, laughs.

"Okay, so I didn't make breakfast. I got bagels and lox at 5 AM because I was still awake."

"You know eating fish makes me sad!" Percy says, throwing the covers back so that he can glare at his wife. She chuckles.

"Yes, but I also remember you actually moaning out loud when I lied to you and told you that lox was a special kind of chicken."

"I wanted to believe it so badly," sighs Percy, dramatically throwing his hand over his forehead.

"I know you did, sweetheart," Annabeth says, laughing. "So I figured you could continue to lie to yourself over bagels, cream cheese, and coffee."

He peaks an eye open.

"Did you get the capers?"

Annabeth rolls her eyes.

"I'm offended that you have to ask."

When he watches her above him, laughing with her hands on his chest and her eyes sparkling from the light of the morning sun, Percy manages to forget everything else. He tries to let the feeling carry through even when she has gone back to the kitchen and he is taking a quick shower to get the smell of hospital off of himself. He carries the image of her laughing right into the kitchen with him, forcing himself to kiss her temple and squeeze her hand as he passes her to grab milk from the fridge.

It feels odd, doing all of these things while he has a huge pit in his stomach. When he kisses her goodbye before work, coffee breath and all, he knows that he doesn't put enough heart into it. He knows because he can see it on her face; confusion, and a bit of dread that he has never wanted to instill in her.

He's supposed to be there for her, not hurting her even more. She's not supposed to be affected by his flaws.

Percy walks to work in a fog and moves through his day in a similar manner. He's so absorbed in himself that he doesn't even realize that Frank isn't in the office until his boss walks up to Percy and asks where Frank has been all day.

"He didn't call in?" Percy asks, frowning.

"No," his boss says. "And this type of behavior is unacceptable. I hope it doesn't become a habit."

Aside from the fact that it's just bad form to do such a thing, Percy knows that Frank would never be so thoughtless. He needs his job- he actually doesn't mind working here as much as Percy does. Frank is the kind of person that doesn't want much human interaction; he enjoys being stuck inside of his own head, daydreaming about Hazel while he types away at his computer.

Wait. Hazel.

"I'll take care of it, sir," Percy says, trying to ignore the large sense of dread that has suddenly cloaked him, masking any anxiety he's been feeling about Annabeth all day. This is bigger than that. If Frank is missing work, it means something has happened with Hazel.

Oh god. What if she'd gotten an infection at work? What if she'd been doing rounds at the hospital and had caught something that one of the patients had? What if she gave it to Frank, and he can't come in because he's dying of the black plague? Oh god, not the black plague! That's such a gruesome way to go.

The clock says that it's 1:00, which means Percy can easily go to take his lunch break. He shoots out of his desk chair and clocks out, then rushes to an elevator, which is mercifully empty. Percy practically slams his fingers against the screen of his phone, dialling Frank's number once, twice, three times. He doesn't pick up. Percy calls Hazel next, bouncing worriedly as the elevator moves downwards. Nothing.

Frank's apartment is only a few blocks from work, so Percy decides to check there first. His breathing is getting labored as he considers all of the terrible things that would cause Frank to miss work and neither of them to pick up their phones. Goddamn it, what if they're dead? Can't they at least pick up the phone to tell him that they're *not* dead? It's common courtesy! Then again, it's also common courtesy to call in at work and tell your boss that you're not coming, but it doesn't seem that Frank has done that.

By the time he gets to Frank's apartment, Percy has begun to realize that his exhaustion might be leading him to overreact just a little bit. Still, he can't help how frenzied he feels when he bangs on the dark brown door, his fist curled up as he rams the side of it against Frank's apartment.

"Dude, are you there?" Percy asks, pressing his ear against the door. "Frank. Hello?"

He's just about to give up and go to Hazel's place when he hears something smash against the wall inside of Frank's apartment. Without saying another word, Percy puts his hand on the cold doorknob and twists his wrist. The door swings open with only a creak serving as an argument, and Percy walks in instantly, reactions quickened by his agitation.

Frank is on the floor, his back against the wall, a beer bottle in his hand, several others on the floor. One look at him makes Percy's entire stomach lurch in fear. He's never seen Frank like this; not ever. He is always so happy and content with his life. He's always cheerful and kind. He's never drunk- even when he does have a beer, it's always in social situations and never enough to get him past buzzed. Hazel has seen too many alcohol related incidents at work to like drinking and Frank always does the thing that would make her the most comfortable.

"What the hell," Percy asks flatly, shutting the door behind himself. "Dude. What are you doing? Drinking in the middle of the afternoon?" Frank doesn't say anything. "Where's Hazel?"

If there's something wrong with Frank, Hazel would be the first person to cheer him up. She'd be the first person he would tell and the only person that could make it better. Percy isn't nearly as skilled as she is in this aspect. Sometimes Percy thinks that he could get to that

place with Annabeth, though. That he could read her as well as Hazel and Frank read each other. That they could mirror each other's needs in the same effortless way.

"Hazel's gone," Frank says, voice hoarse.

"Is she sick?" Percy questions, crouching in front of his friend. "Is she at the hospital?"

"No," Frank says. "I dunno."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't know where she is because it isn't my business."

"Of course she is, she's your soul ma-" Percy catches himself too late. He stops himself instantly, but not soon enough. Frank throws one of the empty beer bottles against the wall.

"She's not my soul mate," Frank says bitterly. "That's the fucking problem."

Hearing Frank swear is... insane. Percy wants to force him to take it back; ask him to go back to being the gentle soul that he always is. He's always admired Frank so much for never swearing, never losing it like most people seem to, but now Percy's wondering how much of that is tied to the waist of Hazel.

Hazel. What had she done?

"She... left you?" Percy asks tentatively. Frank takes a swig of beer. It would be funny that he isn't drinking something harder if there weren't so many bottles lying on the floor and smashed against the wall.

"In the dust," Frank confirms with a bitter smile. "Said that she can't pretend anymore. That she can't be bothered to try to make this work when it's going to end in a few years."

"She didn't phrase it like that," says Percy instantly, knowing Hazel better than that. She would never say 'I can't be bothered' to Frank. Not with all that they've been through together.

"Not in so many words," admits Frank, shaking his head. "But that's what it was. She already prefers her soul mate over me, and she hasn't even met him yet." He turns desperately to Percy, his eyes pleading. "What if he's terrible? What if he isn't good to her?"

"What if he is?" Percy asks, sliding against the wall next to Frank. "Do you really want to be around to watch her falling in love with somebody else? She's protecting you, dude."

"I don't want to be protected. I want Hazel." He sounds like a petulant child.

"I know," Percy says, grabbing a beer for himself.

"She's in love with *me*. Not him."

The statement jars Percy. He's right. Hazel is in love with Frank. She's loved him for years, so much so that she was willing to give pieces of herself to him despite knowing that it would

never last. That type of sacrifice... that *is* love. It's like walking into a fire knowing the fact that you're going to get third degree burns. And she did it for Frank. Because she loves him. She wants to spend her life with him. Because she *loves* him.

"Oh my fucking god," Percy says. "You and Hazel... you guys are soul mates. You made each other your soul mates. And now you don't even get to be together. Because of timer laws."

Frank isn't paying any attention to Percy.

"I could have handled it," he says insistently. "I could have handled it even if she had met him while her hand was still in mine. I just wanted as much time with her as I could get. That's all. Why is that too much to ask for?"

They don't deserve as much time as they can get. They deserve all the time in the world to be together, just like Percy wants with Annabeth. What would it have been like if they had been able to fall slowly for each other, like Hazel and Frank had? That particular love story had been so luxurious, Percy recalls. They'd had time for small moments and sweet first kisses and shaking hands and *dating*, actual dating, like in the old movies that Annabeth likes best. Percy thinks about what it would have been like knowing that Annabeth had chosen him, just like Frank chose Hazel and Hazel chose Frank.

Percy thinks about dropping Annabeth off at her doorstep and kissing her goodnight; talking about a possible future; discussing whether or not they wanted to have kids; talking on the phone late at night from separate apartments across the city that never sleeps. He thinks of a scene in one of Annabeth's favorite movies where the man and woman are watching a movie in separate houses, talking on the phone and making jokes about the plot and characters.

Frank and Hazel have done all those things. Percy and Annabeth never have.

As consuming as he loves Annabeth, the two of them don't have the history that Frank and Hazel do. So much is still so uncertain about their relationship, but Frank and Hazel had built their life together into something stable and beautiful. And they can't keep that. They can't have it forever, like they deserve.

"This is fucking ridiculous," Percy mutters to himself. He glares down at the timer on his wrist, at Annabeth's name written there, and wonders what's going to happen to Hazel when she's looking at a name which isn't Frank's.

"I told her I hated her when she left," Frank says emptily, words shaking Percy from his thoughts. "I don't hate her."

"What did she say?" Percy asks, dreading the answer even as the words leave his mouth.

"She said... 'good.' And she was crying."

"Shit," Percy sighs, hitting his head against the wall. He wants to be there for both of them. He can feel the need to comfort Hazel tugging at his right arm, the one closer to the door. He could get up right now and go to her apartment and plead with her to take Frank back; give

her comfort in knowing that Frank already misses Hazel. Maybe if she realizes how broken he is, she'll ask him back.

But there's a part of Percy that is keeping him sitting on the floor, right next to Frank. And that's the part that knows that, even though Hazel loves Frank and Frank loves Hazel, she won't take him back. Not when she's broken up with him to protect the both of them. The sooner Frank and Hazel separate, the sooner it will stop hurting. It may feel like hell right now, but the pain has to lessen up at some point, right? And now that the process has been set in motion, is there really any point in sewing them back together just so the fabric can be ripped apart once more?

It's totally fucked up, but this thought is what keeps Percy on the floor with Frank, trying to swallow his anger down using bitter sips of beer.

(OOO)

At some point, it dawns on Percy that he should get someone to go see Hazel. Annabeth is at work, he knows, so he does what any sensible grown-ass married man would do and calls his mother.

Frank is in the bathroom, and the sun is starting to settle low in the sky, so Percy feels safe enough as he quietly pulls his phone out of his pocket and dials his mom's number. She picks up on the third ring, voice slightly breathless.

"I am covered in dough," she says, sounding very comfortable with this fact. Percy's lips lift, but just barely. "Paul and I are trying to make homemade pizza for dinner. It's a bit more of an undertaking than we thought it would be."

Percy hears laughter in the background that he knows to be Paul's voice. Normally, he would laugh too. Right now, however, he can't. He just can't.

"I need to ask you a favor," he says, wincing when he realizes how dark his voice sounds. His mom must hear it too, because she gets serious almost instantly.

"Oh dear," she says. "Is something wrong, honey?"

"Definitely," he sighs. "Mom, Hazel broke up with Frank."

She's silent for several moments.

"I... I think that's terrible."

"She did it because of the timers, not because she doesn't love him or doesn't want to be with him. But Piper and Annabeth are probably at work, and I'm over here with Frank and I think someone needs to go be with Hazel, and you've always been really close to her, so I was wondering if you could head over there."

"Of course," says his mom, voice brisk. If he closes his eyes against the darkness of the room, he can see her untying her apron and heading over to the sink to wash her hands and arms to rid it of dough. "Am I supposed to be talking her out of her decision?"

"No," Percy says, stomach twingeing. "No, I don't think you should. Just... be there for her."

"I can do that," his mom says. "I love you, Percy. And send Annabeth my love as well."

"I will," Percy promises, knowing how happy that will make his wife.

Wife. As he hangs up the phone, he realizes how badly he wants to go home to Annabeth and burrow in her embrace, allowing her to hide him from the world. He has a headache from drinking and from Frank's heartache, which seems to be permeating through Percy's entire body. He knows that it isn't his own heartache to bear, but he feels it deeply, having spent so much of his life invested in this perfect relationship that is now smashed into the carpet. Percy wants Annabeth so powerfully, so painfully, that by the time Frank wanders back into the living room, Percy has already texted Leo pleadingly, asking him to relieve Percy of his duty.

He needs Annabeth right now; needs her to pull him out of his darkness.

"Leo's on his way," Percy says, standing up to greet him. "He's bringing his book of puns to try to cheer you up. Fair warning."

Normally, Frank's eyes would have crinkled with a smile, but he just winces this time.

"You're sick of me already?" he says, meaning it as a joke but it comes out all wrong, all vulnerable and painful.

"Never, bro," Percy says, punching him on the shoulder affectionately. "It's just that I've been sitting on the floor for so long that my ass is starting to kill me, and I figure Leo's butt is so boney that I know we can get some excellent enjoyment out of his pain over the next few days."

"You want to go home to Annabeth," Frank says plainly. "I get it."

Percy deflates, all humor leaving his voice. He just sounds tired when he says, "Sorry. I just... I need to see her."

"I understand," Frank tells him. There's a knock on the door. "And that's Leo, coming to be my next watchdog."

Ouch.

"Hey," Percy says, opening the door to the apartment. He almost lets out a yelp of shock when he sees a boy standing there with a giant red wig and a clown nose. "Dude. No."

"He needs to laugh!" protests Leo.

"Not the time."

"You said he was sad!"

"This isn't the kind of sad that a clown nose can fix!"

Leo shakes his head, mouth open in mock shock.

"I beg to differ."

"Leo."

"Go home, Percy," he instructs. "Let the pros handle this. You never dated anyone before Annabeth."

"But... you don't date either."

"Shhh. Just let it happen, Percy."

Feeling like he's doing the worst thing in the world, Percy gives Frank an awkward head pat in lieu of goodbye and then grabs his coat. He texts one of his work friends, thanking him for covering for him and asking if everything had gone okay. Percy is halfway home by the time he gets a response, to which he sends several effusive thank yous.

The apartment is well lit, so Annabeth must be home. Percy can see light creeping under the door as he fits his key into the knob and opens up the door. Annabeth isn't in the living room, but the light in the kitchen tells him exactly where she is. He has to stop himself from running to her, but he can't seem to control himself long enough to drop his coat off on the proper chair. He ends up shaking it onto the floor and keeping his shoes on as he strides into the kitchen, steps purposeful.

Annabeth is seated on the counter, wearing one of Percy's shirts from high school and a pair of cotton shorts. Her hair is tumbling down her back and she's looking at her phone, balanced on her knee, as she munches on a slice of pizza. Percy feels all of the weight leave his body when she looks up at him and smiles brilliantly.

"I got pizza!" she says holding up a slice. "I thought we could just stay in and take several naps before going to bed. What do you th-?"

She's cut off by Percy slamming his lips against hers, kissing her hungrily as his hand roughly grips the back of her head. Annabeth drops the slice of pizza in surprise and wraps her arms around his neck, kissing him back hard. He groans into her mouth, feeling warmth spread all the way to his toes and fingertips.

"Oh *god*," he moans against her, not able to help himself. "I love you so fucking much. I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry about?" she asks breathily, chasing his lips when he goes to answer, effectively stopping him from talking as she continues to kiss him. Percy has a feeling that she knows how awful he feels because he is dreading the moment that they have to stop kissing. He wants to kiss her until he's lightheaded; so lightheaded that all the darkness of the world seems silly and stupid as opposed to terrifying.

He only pulls back when there's no other option, leaning his forehead against Annabeth's as he braces his hands on the kitchen counter on either side of his wife.

"You taste like shitty beer," Annabeth pants, which kind of makes Percy laugh despite himself.

"You taste like awesome pizza."

"I got it from your favorite place."

"Not your favorite place?"

"I was in a giving mood. Also, you seemed upset when you left this morning. I wanted to cheer you up."

"I think you're my best friend," Percy says, quirking a smile. Annabeth looks pleasantly surprised. "You're just... the most important. Okay? I need you to know that. You're the most important."

"You're my best friend too," she responds, kissing him more sweetly. "And I love you."

He closes his eyes, nodding against her.

"Okay."

"Good." She pauses. "Do you want to talk about it?"

In truth, he wants to lift her into his arms, carry her over to the couch, and spend a very long time making out with her, just letting her make him feel whole. He wants to go to the innocence of mere kissing, something he's never really had before. He wants to ignore the fact that they could very easily go to their bedroom and have sex and just act like two people that are safe in the knowledge that they're supposed to be together. Two people that have time and are in no hurry to challenge that.

"Hazel broke up with Frank."

Percy pulls back to study her expression and watches as Annabeth's mouth forms a perfect 'O.'

"Why?"

"You know why," he replies, wincing slightly at the harshness of it all.

"She did?" Annabeth breathes. "Damn. That's... awful."

"For both of them," Percy says. "Although I gotta say that I keep having to remind myself that Frank isn't the only one that is hurting."

"Were you with him all day?" Annabeth inquires, massaging her fingers over his shoulders. Percy slumps against her touch, sighing slightly.

"I was."

"I'm sorry you both had to go through that. And how's Hazel?"

"I sent my mom over to her," Percy says, smiling slightly. "She dropped everything and left."

"I would have too."

"Thought you were still at work," Percy mutters, his eyelids drooping slightly as moves in to kiss her again. Annabeth lets him, head moving backwards at the force of his lips on hers. But she moans quickly as he rubs his thumb over her cheek in apology, massaging the back of her head with the other hand.

"Percy," she says, "You really should talk about this."

"Nothin' to talk about," he murmurs against the skin at the juncture between her neck and shoulder. "I just wanna be with you."

"Percy," Annabeth says again. "Come on. How do you feel about this? It's got to be evoking some emotion aside from hornyness."

He pulls back abruptly, frowning as he runs a hand through his hair.

"It's not hornyness," he says carefully. "I just need to feel... close to you. I guess. I need to feel something good because right now I'm really, really mad, Annabeth. I'm angry."

"About what?"

"About... the world. The timer laws."

He doesn't miss the way her breath quickens, but he wishes that he had.

"You're mad about the timer laws?"

"If it weren't for the laws, Hazel and Frank would probably have been married before the two of us even met. And, Annabeth, they're soulmates. I'm sure that they're soulmates. They may not have been specifically manufactured to be with each other, but they became each other's soul mates over the course of their time together. What they have means something... something important. And I'm not okay with the fact that Hazel is going to have to start a family with, and grow old with, someone she might never love."

"Why do you think she wouldn't love him?" Annabeth asks. He knows that she knows the answer. He knows that she's testing him, trying to see where his mind is at. But not even Percy can miss the excitement in Annabeth's eyes; the happiness that she feels at the idea that he's finally starting to get it.

"She might not let herself," Percy theorizes. "Out of guilt, or maybe because she can't let go of Frank. She might never let herself."

Annabeth squeezes her eyes shut.

"That would be terrible."

"Fuck, what if you had fallen in love with Luke? What if you had never fallen for me because you had fallen in love with Luke?"

"I wasn't in love with Luke," Annabeth reminds him, squeezing his shoulder. "I've never felt about anyone the way I feel about you."

"Yeah, but," Percy pulls himself away from her and begins pacing. "What if you had been in love with him, and I would have been married to this woman knowing that she wanted to spend her life with somebody else? I would have literally been forced into a relationship with this woman who would spend her life with me not wanting anything to do with me. Dreaming that our kids were somebody else's kids... that would *suck*. I wouldn't want to be that guy. Whoever Hazel marries isn't going to want to be that guy, soulmates or not. That's not fair!"

Annabeth hops off the counter and grabs him to kiss him, pulling his head down vigorously.

"You're absolutely right," she says when she's finished kissing him. "It's fair to no one. And it has to be changed."

Percy clenches his fists.

"Maybe... maybe it does."

"Timers are okay, but the laws that surround them hurt more than they help. They take away certain unalienable rights that should never be erased from man. Timers should be a choice, just like marriage should be a choice."

"A choice," Percy says, tracing her words. "God. Maybe you're right."

He watches as her eyes trace over his lips again. At first, Percy thinks that it's because she's going to kiss him. Then he realizes that his lower lip is wobbling slightly. Annabeth runs her thumb across it, smoothing it out.

"Shhh," she says comfortingly. "Perce, there are things that we can do. We can fix this if we try hard. For Hazel and Frank."

"For Thalía."

"For your mom and Paul."

"Yeah," he whispers. "For my mom."

Annabeth winds her arms around his neck and presses her body tightly against Percy's. At first, they just stand there, Annabeth's head on Percy's shoulder, Percy's cheek on her hair, his hands on her hips. Then, slowly, they begin to sway back and forth, moving to an inaudible beat. Annabeth looks up at Percy, a smile that is almost shy gracing her lips.

"Shall we dance?" she teases, but instead of laughing with her, Percy slides his hand up to her waist and wraps his hand around her hand. He turns to look at her with a serious expression on his face.

"You're going to have to help me," he says. "I haven't done this since I was in sixth grade."

"And you think I have?"

"You're smarter than me. You remember stuff."

Annabeth shakes her head and nudges his foot with her foot.

"It's just this foot back," she says, concentrating. "And then this one to the side. Yeah, like that."

It takes a bit more coaching, but eventually, they're waltzing around their small, brightly lit kitchen, Percy in his button down and tie from work, Annabeth in cotton shorts and an oversized t-shirt. As they dance, Percy can feel his expression shifting from serious to content. All of the angst from earlier seems like nothing as he holds onto the girl he loves and moves around the kitchen of their home, only occasionally stepping on each other's feet.

"We could do this one day," Annabeth says, biting her lip as she looks up at Percy. She looks vulnerable, and he doesn't know why.

"We're doing it right now," he says, twirling her. Annabeth spins gracefully before coming back to him.

"No," she says, shaking her head quickly. "I mean... in front of people. Wearing nice clothes."

"Like... like a wedding?"

"We're already married," Annabeth reminds him, raising her arm. Percy gets the message and twirls around her index finger.

"Yeah, but, like a wedding."

"Okay," she says, rolling her eyes. "Like a wedding."

He can't help but notice the way her cheeks pink up and her mouth quirks up.

"Hey," Percy says, starting to grin. "You wanna re-marry me."

"Shut up, doofus. I do not."

"Yeah you do," he says, waltzing a bit faster. "You want to re-marry the crap out of me."

"Not at this particular moment."

"Nope. Right here, right now."

"Do not."

"Do too."

"Do *not*!"

"Do freaking too!"

"Do n-" Annabeth begins to say, but Percy dips her suddenly, covering her lips with his before he says, "Do too," and brings her back up.

"Okay," Annabeth says, voice breathy. She licks her lips before saying, "I will consider doing the whole cheesy wedding thing."

"Good."

"But you have to read me my textbooks out loud the next time I do the dishes."

"Sure, sure."

"And you have to make me smiley face chocolate chip pancakes every Sunday for the rest of our lives."

"Just as long as you keep your figure," Percy says with a straight face.

"Percy!"

He starts laughing.

"Don't worry! It's okay if you round up a bit while you're pregnant."

"*Percy!*"

She's laughing too, despite the horrified expression on her face.

"Is it my fault that I want to be married to the hot mom?"

Annabeth narrows her eyes, shaking her head.

"Fine. You can gain sympathy weight while I'm pregnant and then we can work it off together once the baby comes."

Percy makes a face.

"Yuck. Let's never be one of those couples."

"You sure? We could have matching track suits."

"I'm, like, 85% positive."

"85?" yelps Annabeth, stumbling slightly.

Percy shrugs.

"Matching track suits could be cute. We could get *The Jacksons* written on the back and get the baby a matching one."

"Ugh, I changed my mind. I don't want to re-marry you."

"Your loss," Percy says, cha-cha-ing his hips for affect. "You know I won't put out until I get a ring on this finger."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: If you would like to talk to me about Percy and Annabeth, I am rongasm on tumblr. If you want to scream at me about Hazel and Frank, I am not rongasm on tumblr. Not. At all. I don't even know who rongasm is. What kind of URL is rongasm, anyways?

Chapter title from If You Leave by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. If you don't like them, you should check out the Nada Surf cover, which is rad.

Love, Rongasm/Not Rongasm

Your mess is mine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Annabeth has never liked the smell of hospitals. No matter how much disinfectant they use, the place still smells like overworked bodies and infection. She watches the sludge of coffee reminiscent to the consistency of tar fill her styrofoam cup and wonders if all hospitals have to buy crappy coffee machines to keep the urban myth going. Or perhaps it's to get people out of here and go home to their normal lives and their decent caffeinated drinks.

Annabeth sighs at her lot and starts the short walk back to Thalia's room. It's no longer a private room, but a shared one with three other patients; one of whom is sleeping when Annabeth walks in. The other two glance up at her but return to their respective forms of entertainment when they see she isn't a visitor for them.

Thalia's bed is next to the window and she is staring out of it, holding onto her bandaged wrist. She isn't aware of Annabeth's presence until she sits in the hard chair next to the bed and clears her throat.

'How're you feeling?' she asks, setting her coffee down on the table propped halfway over Thalia's knees.

Thalia rolls her eyes. 'Pissed off.'

Well that's standard.

'Stop scratching it,' Annabeth says, nodding at the fingers Thalia is prying under the bandages encasing her left wrist.

They haven't really talked about it, Annabeth knows that they should and they will, but there's whole can of worms to be opened between them when they finally broach that subject. And Annabeth wants to relish the peace between them for as long as she can; it's been a while since she's had Thalia to herself. Whenever she has been to visit there has been Jason and Piper and Leela to contend with, but now they are alone.

There are no buffers left.

'How long will you have them on for?' she asks Thalia, stalling.

Thalia tugs the sleeve of her sweater over the white bandages and tucks the material between her fingers and palm. 'As long as it takes,' she says, and sounds thoroughly miserable about it. 'I think they're gonna discharge me tomorrow though.'

'That's good.'

'I just don't get why I'm still here. It's been a week.'

'You tried to cut your timer off, Thalia,' Annabeth says quietly, but her words are heavy and they harden Thalia's expression as she receives them.

'We're jumping straight into it then, huh?'

Annabeth stares at her. 'Why?' she asks, desperate to know. 'Did it change?'

Thalia is shaking her head, expelling a harsh breath. 'It didn't change, but it's still counting down. And one day it's gonna say someone's name, and then what am I going to do?'

'So you thought cutting it off would fix things?'

'No.... No, I- I don't know what I thought it would do.' She deflates a little. 'I just wanted it to stop.'

Annabeth leans forward and takes Thalia's hand between hers. 'How long do you have left?'

'It's still on eight years.'

Without really realising why, Annabeth breathes a sigh of relief. Perhaps because it gives her time - time to fix things, to keep Thalia from doing something like this again to avoid her fate, to help her heal.

'I didn't think you'd be relieved about that,' she says, her voice harder now. 'Figured you'd be encouraging me into my impending marriage now.'

And just like that, the air between them has shifted. Annabeth's hands slide away from Thalia's into her own lap again. She twists her wedding band around her finger and tries to figure out how she is going to broach this subject; explain how her views of the timers has changed and not changed so significantly.

'Thalia-'

'Look, Annabeth-'

'I'm sorry.'

That brings her up short. 'What?'

Annabeth sighs. 'I'm sorry I gave up on you like I did, that I didn't explain things to you. But I'm still figuring it all out myself.'

'Figuring what out?'

'*Everything*. How I feel about the timers, and the laws. How I feel about Percy...'

Thalia's sharp eyes meet hers. 'How you feel about him?'

'I love him,' Annabeth says easily. 'I know that I love him. And I want him in my life - for the rest of my life.'

Thalia scoffs. 'What, you're gonna start popping out kids now?'

'Maybe.'

Thalia looks like Annabeth has torn the world out from underneath her feet. '*What?*'

And it's not really fair, because Thalia hasn't been here while Annabeth has been figuring all of this out; while her attitudes have been morphing into something less selfish; while she has been falling in love with her husband. She hasn't seen it, so how can she possibly understand it? Especially for Thalia, who has never understood romantic love. Her father destroyed that idea for her when she grew up watching her mother fall to pieces as a result of her soulmate's carelessness. For Thalia, a soulmate is a robber in the night - they take and leave and don't stay to clean up the mess they have left behind - and the timers give them the key.

There was a time when Annabeth's thoughts followed a similar line.

She is not under any pretence that timers are without fault. In fact, recent events have proved to her just how destructive they can be. But she knows that sometimes, just sometimes, they can lead to good. Whether that is by serendipity coincidence or pure luck or actual scientific reasoning, she has no idea. But she knows that the timers brought Percy to her, and he is something she will never give up.

But Annabeth needs to make Thalia understand this.

'Thalia, Percy is... he's my best friend.'

Those words wake something up in Thalia - those words have meaning - they make her sit up and watch Annabeth's face with a frown.

'I've never really had that before. I mean Jason and Piper are my closest friends but they have each other and you... you...'

'Me,' Thalia says, looking like a lost child. 'What am I, Annabeth?'

She thinks about it for a moment. 'You're my sister.'

Thalia raises her eyebrows. 'You mean the family you're stuck with.'

'Yes,' she says bluntly, because she's tired of her friend's moping. 'You're my shitty family who brought me up and forced your beliefs on me and scared me half to death by getting admitted to hospital for nearly killing yourself.'

'That's not fair.'

'No, it isn't. But I guess that's what we're left with isn't it?'

She hadn't meant to get angry, but that's the way it always seems to go between them. 'I'm sorry,' she says, more gently. 'I shouldn't have left you.'

Thalia shakes her head. 'I was the one who left, Annabeth.'

'I meant figuratively.'

Thalia gives her a withering look that makes Annabeth almost wistful for a time when she would receive those looks on a daily basis.

She presses on. 'I should have explained to you - how I was feeling about him, and about the timers and... everything.'

'Tell me now, then.'

Annabeth eyes her. 'I will if you tell me who you were with that night.'

Thalia visibly clams up. 'That doesn't matter.'

'Of course it *matters*. You nearly died, and whoever you were with - whoever wrote that stuff on your arm, they just left you in the street.'

She drops her head into her hands, letting out a groan. 'Why does it matter?'

'*Thalia.*'

'Luke,' she bites his name out. 'I with Luke.'

Annabeth is glad she is sitting down as the breath falls out of her chest. 'Luke? You were with-'

'Yes,' Thalia says and Annabeth can swear her voice sounds pained, 'that Luke. Your Luke.'

'He's not my Luke,' she says quickly.

'Well he's not mine either.'

Something in Thalia's voice makes Annabeth pause. 'You were sleeping with him.' Her face is all the confirmation she needs. 'Oh my god, Thalia. He's *married*.' Her voice hushes to a whisper as she becomes hyper-aware of the three other people in the room.

'Adultery isn't illegal, Annabeth,' Thalia says, sounding impatient.

'People have been charged for less. And that's not even what this is about, Thalia. I know you have questionable morals, but have you even thought about his wife, and - oh god, it's been years - they probably have a child now.'

Thalia is shaking her head. 'They don't, but...'

'But what?'

For the first time, Thalia glances around at the other patients in the room, and she looks abashed. Shameful even. And Annabeth knows.

'She's pregnant, isn't she?'

She expects Thalia to become defensive, but she just droops like a wilting flower, pride crumbling like the leaves that fall in winter.

'He told me last night,' she whispers, so quietly that Annabeth has to shift forward to catch her words. 'He doesn't love her, but the court ordered it so... that's that.' Her blue eyes - so similar to Jason's that Annabeth wants to find his goodness within his sister - study Annabeth imploringly, like she wants her to see the good too. 'He's not coping and he just needed to-'

'Don't you dare defend him.'

'Annabeth.' She sounds tired, 'do we have to do this now?'

She draws in a deep breath along with her strength not to snap at Thalia.

'Are you still going to see him?'

'No,' Thalia says with some earnest. 'It's over now.'

Annabeth nods, trying to calm the shaking of her hands. She can't pinpoint quite why this has rattled her nerves so much. She's not jealous, that's not it, she doesn't love Luke - not even in the way she thought she once had. And she knew Thalia wasn't exactly celibate, and that she didn't limit herself to one person as Annabeth did. But this is a line Annabeth had never thought she would cross.

And she wonders, perhaps, if it has something to do with her.

Thalia lost her closest friend, her brother, both of her parents, because the timers on those people's wrists had told them who they would marry. Her parents had been a lost cause long before Thalia was born, but she chose to segregate herself from Jason and Piper - she made that choice. But Annabeth had barely hung on. And Thalia turned to what comfort she could find, and if that comfort could in some way destroy the thing that had taken her loved ones from her, then why wouldn't she have taken it?

Marriage is not a promise to Thalia, it's a thief.

'Don't disappear again,' Annabeth whispers. 'Don't leave me.'

'You don't need me, Annabeth.'

'Of course I don't *need* you,' Annabeth says impatiently, causing Thalia to look up. 'That doesn't mean I don't want you around.'

'So you're not angry with me?'

'Oh, I'm pissed. But you're not getting away from me that easily.'

Thalia almost smiles. 'So will you tell me then? About your new theories?'

'Will you listen?' Annabeth returns. 'I mean, really listen?'

Thalia rolls her eyes. 'As long as you don't go all gooey when you talk about your husband.'

Annabeth tries not to smile, she really does.

Hazel's apartment is beautiful, Annabeth wonders why she's never been in it before.

'You came straight from the hospital?' Hazel asks as she closes the door behind Annabeth.

Annabeth half turns, hitching her duffel bag up on her shoulder. 'Yeah. Thalia's going to be discharged tomorrow, hopefully.'

'That's great.' Bless her, even though she must be something close to broken inside, Hazel does her best to sound positive. She crosses her arms over her chest and looks so small that Annabeth wants to wrap her in a hug. 'You don't have to stay the night, I'm sure you want to go home to Percy.'

And yes, she really does, because today has been exhausting and what she really wants is to go home to him and tell him everything. But Hazel is her friend, and she wants to be here for her.

Annabeth smiles and digs around in her bag. 'Don't try and get out of our slumber party. I have a full bottle of wine to be drunk and you promised me dinner and chick flicks.'

Hazel's lips quirk just a little and she uncrosses her arms as she walks past Annabeth towards the kitchen. 'So I did,' she says.

Annabeth follows her into the small kitchen and situates herself in one of the wooden chairs at the table pressed up to one wall. The apartment is no bigger than Annabeth's old one, but Hazel has managed to make it homely and warm with odd crockery and quilted throws and framed photographs of her friends and family. It reminds Annabeth of Sally and Paul's place.

'Anything I can do?' she asks, hoping the answer will be no because her legs seem to have given up on moving for the evening. Hazel will have to roll her to the couch.

'No,' Hazel says, 'just tell me about your day.'

It's something Percy would say to her, and possibly something Hazel would say to Frank when she is - was - making dinner for them. There's something so simply intimate about it that breaks Annabeth's heart; because Hazel has lost her person to talk to about her day, to make bad jokes with and make dinner with and forget about whatever crappy thing has happened today.

So for now she will try to fill that gap for Hazel.

'It was good,' she says, standing up - and holding back a groan from the effort - to find two wine glasses and open the bottle of red she has brought with her. 'I took on a new project today.'

'I didn't know you had your own projects.'

Annabeth leans against the worksurface. 'Well, I'm coworking them so it's not my name on the dotted line, but I do most of the leg work.'

Hazel wipes her hands on the apron tied at her waist and accepts the glass from Annabeth with a small nod. 'That's great!'

'Yeah. I mean I'm not getting paid for it, but it's all experience, right?'

'Well, here's to working for free.' Hazel holds up her wine glass with a grin and Annabeth laughs, chinking the rims together.

The note falls away after their laughter and Annabeth tries not to notice how easily the sadness creeps back into Hazel's eyes.

They wind up on the couch after they have eaten, watching *The Princess Bride* in their pyjamas and making their way through a second bottle of wine from Hazel's wine rack. And Annabeth doesn't realise that this perhaps wasn't the best choice of film until Buttercup hurls herself down the hill after Westley and Hazel is sobbing.

Annabeth sets down both of their wine glasses and drags Hazel into a hug, wrapping her arms around her like she can heal her wounds by pressing the torn seams together. Hazel's tears soak her skin and her sobs shake them both and all Annabeth can do is hold onto her and feel her own tears burn tracks down her cheeks.

The first words she hears Hazel say are muffled by Annabeth's shirt.

'He hates me.'

Annabeth thinks to Percy's description of how broken his friend was when he'd gone to see him a few days ago and wonders how true those words might be. But no, they can't be. Frank might be angry at, he might hate everything and everyone, but not Hazel.

There is too much love in his heart for this girl for him to hate her. And he must know, somewhere inside of his broken heart, that she did it to protect him from further harm. He must know how much it took from Hazel for her to end things on her terms and not hang on for as long as she could.

'No, Hazel. No he doesn't hate you.'

'It's the last thing he said to me.'

'He doesn't hate you, Hazel,' she says more firmly. 'He's hurting, but he will heal. Like you will.'

Another sob heaves Hazel's chest. 'I don't *want* to heal. I want to be with him.'

'I know,' Annabeth says, rocking her slightly, 'I know you do.'

'We always knew it would happen. We knew this would have to happen one day.'

But they fell in love anyway. *Why?* Annabeth wants to ask, *why did you let it happen when you knew it would end like this.*

'I tried not to think about it,' Hazel says. 'All that time with him, I knew we wouldn't last - we wouldn't be allowed to - but I just pushed it to the back of my head. Like a deadline you don't want to think about. So you just don't.'

She sits up and looks at Annabeth, all red eyed and lost. 'But I had to - I had to end it before we ran out of time because if we'd left it until my timer ran out then we would both fight it and it would be harder for everyone. I wanted to give us both time to heal.' Annabeth has never known such intensity from Hazel. It's like she needs someone to know why she's done this, even if she can't tell Frank - even though he's the one who really needs to hear these words - someone has to understand. 'It's the best thing I could give him.'

Annabeth pushes her hair back and wipes a tear away. 'You did the right thing,' Annabeth says, even if she's not sure she did.

It isn't fair that Hazel and Frank have had their lives taken away from them, it's *cruel*. The anger Annabeth has felt towards the timer laws for such a long time has been shaped since she has met Percy, but now it morphs into something else again. Because she was always angry on her own behalf; enraged that her own freedom of choice is taken from her and that she is valued nothing more than a body capable of producing a child.

But Hazel's pain is palpable, and the timers are to blame.

Frank and Hazel might not be whatever the scientific definition of soulmates are, but they are meant to be together. They have built a life together, and isn't that what's important? Isn't that the whole point of this demented system - to create couples who will provide stability and love for their children?

Annabeth thinks of Percy's mother, left alone to raise him; and of Thalia and Jason's parents, whom had never belonged together like Frank and Hazel do. And yes, sometimes the timers bring people together who are good together; but they force those people into a too close future. She thinks of how different life would be for Jason and Piper if they had grown together in their own time and not been forced into adulthood so early in their lives. They both love Leela more than anything, but parenthood has taken so much from their young lives.

And she thinks about her relationship with Percy. She is sure they would have found each other in every possible universe, and they would have had time to fall in love. She wouldn't have spent those first months knowing him sharpened with resentment; he would never have known that pain. Annabeth thinks about how he might have asked her out in the beginning, all stuttering and red cheeks; and how he might have asked her to marry him - the way they used to in the old days - bent down on one knee asking her whether she would take him to be her husband.

A choice.

Taken.

Annabeth coaxes Hazel into her bed and lets onto her hold onto her hand as they fall asleep, and she thinks about Frank lying alone in his own bed, and Percy curled up on himself in the bed they usually share. The difference is that Annabeth gets to go back to him tomorrow.

Her last thoughts before she falls asleep is that life is a big game of luck. And god forbid you draw the short straw.

Work drags long the next day and it's dark by the time Annabeth is finally walking home. It feels like an eternity since she was last there and even longer since she saw Percy and it's like a physical ache. After everything she and Thalia talked about, and after holding Hazel as she fell to pieces, she needs Percy; to hear his voice and feel his warmth and be reminded of what they have together. Annabeth unlocks the front door with little grace and bites her tongue to stop herself calling out his name. She hangs up her jacket and slips off her shoes and finds him in the living room, slouched on one end of the couch with his head lolling back against the cushions.

Annabeth puts her bag down and he is woken by the muffled thud. His head jerks up, hand immediately moving to wipe his mouth. Annabeth smiles and climbs into his lap, sitting sideways across his legs with her back against the arm of the couch and she presses a kiss to his open mouth.

Percy's arms wind around her, holding her against his warm body. His kiss is sleepy and earnest and Annabeth wants to wrap herself up in him.

'Hi,' he says when her mouth leaves his.

She sighs and rests her elbow on the couch cushion next to his head, propping her cheek on her fist.

'I missed you,' she says.

He smiles. 'I made dinner. It's in the microwave.'

'I'm not really hungry. But thank you.' She reaches a hand up to brush his bangs off his forehead, 'You didn't have to wait up.'

His thumb starts making circles on her knee. 'I wanted to be up when you got back. I figured you'd have a lot to talk about.'

And she does, she's just not sure where to start.

'How is Hazel?' Percy prompts.

'She's hurting. I mean, she's not throwing beer bottles at the walls, but she's barely holding it together.'

Percy's brow creases as his eyelids close and Annabeth can see the pain there. She wants to soothe it away but this is not something her kisses can heal.

'I hate this,' he says, and the anger from the night he had come home from Frank's has dissipated into exhaustion. 'They both deserve so much better.'

Annabeth drops her hand from her face and runs her fingers through his hair. 'I know they do. And maybe we can change things for them one day, but for now we just need to be here for them.'

He nods, moving her hand with him. 'I know.' He takes in a breath through his nose and looks up at her. 'How was Thalia?'

Annabeth groans.

'That bad, huh?'

She drags a hand down her face. 'I never know if I've made things better or worse after I see that girl.'

'What happened?'

'She's been sleeping with Luke.'

Percy stares at her. 'What? Luke? As in Luke, Luke? That Luke-'

'Yes, that Luke.' She doesn't want him to say *your Luke*, because Luke was never hers. 'And here's the kicker, his wife is pregnant.'

'Holy shit.'

'Yeah.'

He's quiet a moment, and the sounds of the apartment fill the empty space. Ticking clocks and the rumble of the washing machine and the distant noises of the city outside the cracked window in the bathroom.

'Are you okay?' he asks eventually, and Annabeth hears hardness in his voice. He is trying, so hard, to focus his needs on her when they are discussing the somewhat taboo of Luke. Luke, who has been a topic of discussion between them before, but still feels unresolved. Who naggles the little green monster out of Percy everytime.

Annabeth rests her palm against his chest, feeling his heart beat steadily there and rubbing her thumb back and forth. And she nods, watching his face.

Percy avoids her gaze. 'Aren't you pissed off with her? I mean, she slept with your ex, isn't that one of those lines you never cross.'

I wouldn't know, he doesn't say, *because you're my first relationship, my first everything.*

And that's a pretty overwhelming thought to come to terms with. She is his base line for a relationship. But, now that she thinks about it, he is her base line too. They are both their first experiences with the whole actual-committed-in-love relationship thing, and she doesn't think

they're doing too bad for it. But Annabeth still has this past that Percy doesn't, and she accepts that the difference between her relationship with Luke and her relationship with Percy is something she should remind him of.

'A year ago I probably would have said yes,' she says.

That's what makes him look at her.

'I didn't love Luke,' she tells him, not for the first time. 'But I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt when he left, and I harboured those feelings for a long time and Thalia knows that. But I don't think what happened between them had anything to do with me, at least not in that context.'

Percy frowns. 'What do you mean?'

'She didn't sleep with him to spite me.'

Percy is still frowning, but he nods to show his understanding and lifts a hand to her cheek. Annabeth catches it and brings his knuckles to her lips.

'I told Thalia that you're my best friend.'

This effectively removes the frown and replaces it with one of those glorious Percy smiles. 'Yeah?'

She nods, kissing his fingers. 'Yeah.'

Percy's hand breaks free of her grasp and curves to her cheek, drawing her against him. And when he kisses her, Annabeth feels something settle in her chest.

'You're the only person I've loved,' she says against his mouth. 'And I choose you, every time.'

He nods, forehead knocking gently to hers. Annabeth kisses him again, fitting her mouth more firmly against his this time as she feels a need build inside of her which shifts her position against him, fitting her arms around his shoulders and tugging. Percy laughs breathily into her mouth and lifts her off his lap so that she can lie along the length of the couch. She wastes no time in pulling his body to hers and he smiles, planting his hands on either side of her to support his weight. But Annabeth wants to feel him, really feel him. So she snakes her hands under his top and presses them to the warm skin of his back, rolling her hips into his and relishing the low groan which falls loose of his throat. Percy's mouth finds her jaw, and then her neck and he seems happy to go slow so she does too. So much of their relationship has been fast forwarded, it's nice to be able to take things like this slowly and just enjoy each other.

Because she really does love this man. Despite how much she resents the system that forced them together, she loves him. And he really is her best friend, he's the one she wants to go home to and the one she wants to share her secrets with and stay up late with and make out on the couch with and... have a family with.

Okay, big thought.

Don't freak out, Annabeth, baby steps.

Wait, that doesn't help.

Annabeth gasps for breath as Percy's mouth leaves her to attack her neck again and she holds onto him as she processes this thought. She thinks about telling Percy this and how happy he would be, but that would make it too real too fast. So she tugs on his hair and brings his mouth back to hers and kisses him soundly.

Yes, she loves him, and maybe wants a family with him, and definitely wants to keep making out with him; because he makes her feel whole and good and like there is potential for brightness in this black and white world they live in. And if that's what a soulmate is, then maybe her timer got it right.

Chapter End Notes

A/N

oh jeez i didn't think this chapter would ever get finished (in fact, i'm writing this before i have actually finished) but what can i say, rachel's last chapter was a hard act to follow.

well, i don't think i wrenched at your heartstrings quite as much as she did, but i hope i poked a bit of surprise into you with this chapter's developments. feel free to come by my tumblr (ananbeth) with any questions/rants/ theories because i really really love getting everyone's opinions of this world we've made, and i don't think i've done anything to warrant an ananbeth/not ananbeth debacle :)

the chapter title is from the song by Vance Joy - Mess is Mine and it's so beautiful you guys need to go and listen to it

until next week friends xo

Crack the door so I can just fall out

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you so much for reading and reviewing! We hit 300 reviews. That's insane and wonderful. Thank you so much-- we have enjoyed reading every one of them. Also, we talk about them, so if you want to leave us some juicy gossip about your life in a review, feel free.

Casual side note: The chapter title is from A Car, A Torch, a Death by Twenty-One Pilots. I am, as I ever was and ever shall be, Not Rongasm.

Annabeth is actually cooking.

Well. Not cooking, exactly. But she's sitting on the counter of the home in which Percy grew up and is handing his mother different ingredients as she prepares a meal for the four of them, which is, in Percy's book, good enough. He peers into the kitchen from where he sits in the family room, pretending to talk to Paul, and thinks about the way his mother is beaming at Annabeth, and the way Annabeth is telling a story with her hands.

She never acts like this around her own family. She isn't quite as alive around her own family, but when Percy watches her with his mother, he sees a safety that is between the two of them that makes his stomach ache with everything that is good. Annabeth is his soul mate. She was always meant to be a part of his family.

Just like Paul was. And despite the fact that Sally Jackson's timer hadn't gone off on Paul Blofis, Percy is now certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Paul is the man who his mom was supposed to end up with. This is how it's going to be for the rest of their lives. Percy and Annabeth, his mom and his step-dad, and they're going to have holidays together and Sunday dinners and Annabeth and his mom are going to laugh as hard as they're laughing right now.

Watching them together reverberates all the way through Percy, until he can't help but itch to finish his conversation with Paul so that he can join them and find out what they're discussing. As soon as they're done talking about the new addition to the house that Sally and Paul are trying to get approved, Percy excuses himself and heads into the kitchen, where he leans against the counter and places his chin on Annabeth's shoulder. She absently kisses him

on the top of his head as she passes his mom a spoon to stir the soup with, not breaking conversation.

“So, Perce,” says his mom, and Percy raises his eyebrows expectantly, waiting for his mom to finish throwing avocado into the taco soup so that she can finish her question. “How’s work lately?”

“It’s good,” he lies automatically. Annabeth’s brow furrows as she looks down at him, trying to scrutinize his expression. But Percy just gives her a huge, goofy smile and kisses her on the lips. “Seriously,” he says, more to her than his mom. “I’m fine.”

Annabeth doesn’t think he’s fine. She’s been making concerned comments for weeks about how exhausted he is after work, and how much harder he has to work in order to make up for Frank dropping the ball at the office. Percy’s been sleeping more than ever lately, unable to stay awake long enough to make more than a few falsely cheerful exchanges with his wife. He misses her. He feels like he’s only ever awake enough to enjoy her company on the weekends.

When it comes down to it, Annabeth doesn’t think that Percy is happy. And maybe he isn’t happy-- at least not with work. But he is happy when he comes home to her and gets to pepper her face in kisses. He likes clamboring on top of her on the couch and tickling her, making her shriek with laughter that isn’t held back by any form of propriety. He likes kissing her until she’s breathless; likes knowing the ticks of her body.

As many times as he has communicated this to her, Annabeth tells him that it isn’t enough. She says that, if he isn’t happy getting up and putting on a button-down shirt, he should find a job that him excited to dress up or dress down or do whatever it is that will make him thrilled to wake up in the morning.

Percy has never known anything but this job-- these people. He’s been with them since he was a kid. Since he wasn’t able to complete his education, and they took him under their wings and gave him money to support his mother with, before she met Paul. Before this job, they’d never had enough. Now, Percy isn’t going to do that same thing to Annabeth. Whatever he had wanted to do before is utterly insignificant. Annabeth’s comfort is what matters now.

“I keep telling him that he needs to find a job that makes him happy,” Annabeth is saying, exchanging a conspirational look with his mom. “Maybe you can talk some sense into him, Mrs. Jackson.”

It’s weird, because Annabeth is Mrs. Jackson in Percy’s mind, even though her name is still Annabeth Chase. They both introduce her as Annabeth Chase. It’s on all of her paperwork, and her ID at work. She’s been working there since the beginning of this month, and it’s weird to think that, instead of going back to school in September, Annabeth had gone to a job. It feels like the last, final step into adulthood for the both of them.

Percy isn’t going to set that back by quitting his nice, steady job and throwing himself back into university.

“He’s never listened to me,” his mom says, shooting Percy an endearingly exasperated look. “I always wanted him to stay in school.”

Percy shrugs, desperate to get off of the subject.

“It wasn’t the right thing,” he says.

“I know, but-” Annabeth starts.

“It just didn’t happen, Annabeth,” Percy murmurs, hiding her face in her neck. He nuzzles her, and Annabeth sighs, exasperated with his attitude, before she buries a hand in his hair, pulling him closer. “And if this is the way my life was supposed to turn out, who am I to argue with fate?”

“There’s no such thing as fate, dear,” his mother says, tasting her concoction. She gives a satisfied nod, then offers the spoon to Annabeth, who takes it from her with a smile. “There’s just good and bad decisions and the way we look at life. That’s it. That’s all we have.”

“Hey, do you wanna see my room?” Percy asks Annabeth, avoiding what his mother has said. He doesn’t agree with it, to be honest. He’s always believed in fate. He’s always believed in life going the way it is supposed to go-- that’s why there are timers. That’s why they have

soul mates. And even though Percy's ideas about soul mates seem to be changing and shifting every single day, that doesn't mean that he's willing to totally change the way he views the world.

"I've seen your room before," Annabeth says. "You showed it to me the first time we had dinner here."

"Yeah, but I didn't show you all the cool stuff in it," Percy says, wiggling his eyebrows. "Don't you want to want to see all of my collectible comic books?"

"Oh, honey, how little you know about women," Annabeth teases, but Percy just pouts until she hops off of the counter, takes his hand, and tugs him towards the stairs.

His room is dustier than it had been when he'd lived in it, but other than that, it remains almost entirely the same. He's got the same light blue walls and dark blue comforter. The same books in his bookshelf, the ones that he had always hated reading because reading was too hard, too confusing, and it made his head hurt. It still kind of does, but seeing as all he really does every day is read and write, it's not as difficult anymore. He's trained himself to be able to do it without becoming as frustrated as he used to.

Annabeth settles onto the edge of his twin sized bed as he closes the door behind them, and he doesn't miss the expectant look that she gives him as soon as he turns around.

"What?" he asks, leaning against the door. Just in case he needs to make a quick getaway, obviously.

"One day you're going to have to stop avoiding this subject," Annabeth warns him. "I'm just hoping that it's sooner than later, because seeing you like this is really hard for everyone who loves you."

"Seeing me like what?" Percy exclaims, now officially exasperated. He runs a hand through his hair, making it stick up in odd angles, and Annabeth smiles slightly when she sees that. "Annabeth, what the hell? Have I ever shown myself to be anything but happy with you? With what we have?"

“No,” she says, scooting closer to him so that she can take his hands and pull him towards the bed. Percy drags his feet, but allows Annabeth to tug him closer to him. She keeps her hands in his as she looks up at him imploringly. “Percy. Us isn’t the problem. It’s you. It’s the way you’re looking at your life like it’s as good as it’s going to get, when, in reality, it can get so much better.”

“I don’t need anything but yo--”

“I know you think that, and I appreciate that, Perce, I really do. But right now, the fact that I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life isn’t 100-percent because of you. It’s also because I love my job; I love waking up in the morning and doing what I love, and I really, truly want you to have that.”

He tries to pull away, but she pulls on his hands until he’s fallen onto the tiny twin sized bed next to her. It creaks loudly as Annabeth settles back against the pillow, turns around, and wraps Percy’s arms around her body. Their legs and feet are tangled together at the bottom of the bed, and they’re totally squashed due to the lack of space, but he doesn’t miss the way she releases a content little sigh and presses back against him.

“I used to lie in this bed and stare at my timer and think about how badly I wanted to meet you,” Percy says quietly. “I was this little kid who wanted what his mom and dad had, and I resented the numbers so much for how far away you were. I wanted to grow up with you and get married as soon as we could and start living my life with you.”

“You missed me,” Annabeth says, joking, but Percy nods against her and breathes in the familiar scent of her hair.

“I understand now that I was in love with an image of you that wasn’t real, but at the time, I thought that my dreams and fantasies about this version of my soul mate were actually going to happen. And considering the fact that you were actually dreading meeting me while I was daydreaming about you... yeah, I actually feel bad for that little guy.”

“It’s odd how it affects different people,” Annabeth says, squinting. The sun is starting to go down, and it’s getting steadily darker in Percy’s tiny bedroom. “Before the soul mate timers,

you would have been thinking about the girls in your school and in your classes, not about an abstract concept fabricated by society.”

“But because of the timers, they never meant much to me.”

“Well,” Annabeth says, rolling over so that she can look at him. She looks thoughtful. “What about your first kiss? Did she mean anything?”

Percy chuckles, low in his throat, and Annabeth shivers against him.

“Eighth grade,” he recites, closing his eyes as he rests his forehead against hers. “There was this dance that all the eighth graders went to, and a bunch of kids in my school-- like, an unusual amount-- had met their soul mates in seventh grade, when we all went to middle school and there were new people. So most kids had dates, which made other kids want dates, and I invited this girl from my science class.”

“Can I get the name of my competition?” Annabeth asks, laughing when Percy rolls his eyes emphatically and pulls her closer with the hand that is pressed against her back.

“You don’t want to just stick with ‘dirty whore?’” questions Percy, his voice quiet. “I mean we kissed once in eighth grade. It was very serious.”

“So you took her to the dance and kissed her outside?”

“Oh yeah,” Percy says, nodding. “And, of course, I missed, so that was great.”

“You missed?”

“I got her cheek instead of her lips.”

“Bless your heart, Percy Jackson.”

He wrinkles his nose.

“I think you just had a southern accent.”

“I took a theatre elective in high school once.”

“You don’t say?”

“Mhmm. Does it show?”

“Oh, absolutely. My wife is sexy and talented.”

“Unlike that dumb slut you kissed once in middle school,” laughs Annabeth, scrunching up her nose in mock disdain. Percy kisses the tip of it.

“Good thing I didn’t let that one steal my heart.”

“Don’t I know it.” She sighs and snuggles herself further into his chest. “Mmm. I probably shouldn’t call that poor girl a slut. Knowing how irresistible you are, and all that.”

“Oh, of course,” Percy says, nodding seriously. He closes his eyes, breathing with her for a few moments. This is nice. He likes the peace and quiet just as much as he likes the banter. He doesn’t think he’s ever thought that about anyone before.

Annabeth is so many new things compiled into one person. Percy doesn’t think that he’s ever going to stop discovering things about marriage that surprise him or make him smile. And he’s probably never going to stop discovering the annoying parts, too, but he can work with those. He’s getting laid, so the fact that Annabeth organizes his and her shirts by color gradient and level of dress only annoys Percy a bit.

It's endearing, actually. He just hopes that she finds it endearing that he always forgets to change the toilet paper roll and leaves his towels on the floor of their bedroom pretty consistently.

"Tell me another story."

Annabeth's voice is muffled by his shirt, but Percy doesn't mind. She's snuggled as close to him as she possibly can be, and it makes Percy think of the next few months, when it's going to start getting cold again. They're going to be able to cuddle way more now that the New York weather isn't so stiflingly hot. Actually, that might be Percy's new favorite part of winter. Fuck Thanksgiving and Christmas and snow. There's snuggling now. Snuggling kicks the ass of all that other shit.

"Which story?"

"I don't know. One that I haven't heard yet."

"You've heard all my stories."

Annabeth shakes her head against him.

"No. I do not accept that answer. We've been married for less than a year. I have not heard all of your stories."

"I mean, I'm not sure what you want to hear. We could continue on the vein of firsts and talk about... I dunno... the first time I made out with someone."

He's joking, of course, but that doesn't stop Annabeth from pulling back from his chest and offering him a delighted look.

“Oh, yes, tell me that story! Baby’s first breasts!”

Percy is completely aghast.

“Annabeth!”

He has to cover her mouth with his hand because she’s laughing so hard at her own joke, and Percy stares at her in surprise as she shakes silently against him, her eyes shining with mirth. Or maybe tears. Maybe both, actually, but the point is that he’s glad that he’s muffling her laughter because Annabeth only laughs harder, until Percy sees no other option except to press her head against his chest again and join in.

“Okay,” he says finally, shaking his head as Annabeth wipes her eyes on his shirt. “You’re ridiculous and I’m not telling you that story.”

“Oh my god, now I have to hear the story.”

“No way!”

“Was she blond? Brunette? A redhead? Should I be asking if the carpet matched the drapes?”

“Jesus Christ, Annabeth, did my mom get you drunk?”

She smirks up at him, twitching an eyebrow.

“If you think that four tequila shots could get us drunk then, yeah, I’d say she did.”

“Annabeth!”

“Kidding. Gods, can’t a girl get a little punchy?”

“Not when we’re lying on a twin sized bed in the house that I grew up in and it would be wildly inappropriate for me to ravish her right now.”

“Ugh, ravish? What am I, a vegetable?”

“You said that ‘make love’ sounds stupid,” Percy reminds her.

“Because it does.”

“Fine. It would be inappropriate for me to fuck you right now. And I want to.”

Without further comment, Annabeth leans upwards slightly so that she kiss him. She rolls him over so that he’s lying down on his bed, and then she’s on top of him, her hips over his, and she’s got her hands up the front of his shirt and is probably kissing him more enthusiastically than she should be in his mom’s house.

“Annabeth,” Percy hisses when she breaks away to kiss his collarbone. “My mom is literally downstairs right now.”

Annabeth groans, wiggling slightly from her position on top of him, and Percy has to stop himself from laughing at the slight tinge of red on her cheeks.

“You can’t say that you want to fuck me and then just take it away. We haven’t even had dinner yet. It’s going to be hours.”

He grins.

“Your fault. I said ravish first.”

“How long do you think it would take to sneak home and go at it on the living room floor?”

She’s sitting on his stomach, her cheeks and chest flushed, her hands braced just below his shoulders. The best part is that she looks like a kid who has just had her favorite toy taken away, and it gives Percy a surge of power to know that he has this kind of affect on her. That he can make her feel as insatiable as he is.

He lifts her shirt briefly and places a kiss on her stomach, then lets it fall back down. The room is barely lit at this point, and he can only slightly see the contented smile that is on his wife’s face.

“Too long,” he says regretfully. “But I can tell you a story to make up for it.”

Annabeth bounces slightly.

“Yes please. Go back to the makeout story.”

“You don’t want to hear that.”

“Oh? And why not, Mr. Jackson?”

“Because I actually had a thing for that girl.”

Annabeth’s smile only slips slightly.

“You had a thing for her?” she asks, now genuinely curious. She rolls off of his stomach and sits up, crossing her legs neatly underneath herself. Percy follows suit; they sit with their knees pressed against each other and their hands loosely linked between them.

He actually feels bad for saying that, but Annabeth just shakes her head, her eyes soft.

“I know you must have had crushes, Percy,” she says, nudging him with her knee. “Tell me about her. Start with her name.”

“Um, Cassia,” Percy recalls. “Yeah, Cassia.”

“Hair color?”

“Don’t you just want to hear the story?”

“I’m an architect. I need all of the details so that I can form the picture in my head.”

“Visual learners are so demanding.”

“Too bad you’re married to one,” Annabeth says, looking horrified on his behalf. “How will you live with your life choices?”

They both pause, awkward in the fact that Annabeth wasn’t a choice. Percy stares at her, and she stares at him, and for a moment, his timer seems to be heavy on his wrist, pressing uncomfortably into his skin. He suddenly wants to tear at it just like Thalia had done; show Annabeth that he would be with her regardless of it. Despite the fact that they both know it’s true, Percy doesn’t think he’s ever going to want to stop showing Annabeth that she’s not just the name on his wrist. She’s not the girl he’d thought about when he was growing up, waiting to be in love like his parents were. She is tangible and important and flawed in a way that no little boy could ever dream up.

“Brown hair,” Percy says instead of relaying his thoughts to Annabeth. It’s easier if she doesn’t hear things like that. It’s easier if they ignore their rocky start and pretend that they’re two teenagers hiding from his parents in his childhood bedroom and falling in love to the ticking of the old, dusty clock on his cheap bedside table. “And blue eyes.”

“Very classic look,” says Annabeth approvingly. “What was she like?”

He squints, trying to remember.

“I was seventeen, Annabeth, I don’t really--”

“Stop protecting me,” she says, laughing. “I love being jealous. It feels great.”

“Oh, shut up. There’s nothing to be jealous of, you banana.”

“Seriously, though,” Annabeth says, wrapping three of her fingers around Percy’s index finger. “It feels normal. And nice.”

Percy swallows.

“Okay. She was cool. She was kind of shy around me, but when I got her comfortable she was really funny, and I liked the fact that she was the kind of person that was just friends with everyone in high school. No true social group, but everyone knew her and really liked her.”

“Including you,” Annabeth hedges.

“Yeah,” Percy nods. “It was one of those things where we were both at a party and we spent the entire night talking and I ended up kissing her and--”

“Where were you?”

“Outside on a swing,” he says decisively. “And she had a snowflake necklace, which I remember because I played with it when I went to feel her up and panicked and went for her neck.”

Annabeth grabs his pillow and shoves it over her mouth to stifle her laughter.

“Sorry, love,” she gasps after he lets out an annoyed huff. “Didn’t mean to ruin the story.”

“Well, not all of us can be naturally gifted at the art of boob grabbing.”

“That’s true,” Annabeth says, nodding seriously. “Go on.”

“There isn’t much to tell. She kind of placed my hands on her breasts and I gave her a hickey and we stopped because I felt so guilty that I had cheated on you.”

Annabeth’s mouth drops open.

“Percy! You cock-blocked yourself because of me?”

“I think she probably felt guilty too,” he admits. “I dunno; I kept thinking about the fact that the girl who had her tongue in my mouth wasn’t my soul mate. That she was somebody else’s future wife.”

Annabeth pats his bed twice, hitting it hard with her small hand.

“This bed here must have seen a lot of action.”

“Did I just tell you that I--?”

“Not that kind of action, honey.”

He has enough propriety to look guilty, which just makes Annabeth smile wider, and Percy thinks that there’s this odd glow to her that doesn’t have anything to do with how tan her skin is from the warm summer months that they have just spent together. Looking to distract her, Percy glances around his bedroom until he spots something pink poking out from under his bed. He reaches down and swipes at it, letting out a triumphant ‘ha!’ as he sees what it is.

“Okay,” he says, settling it in his lap. “This is Pinky. They are my nonbinary sleeping buddy from childhood.”

The delight on Annabeth’s face is absolutely enough to make the humiliation worth it.

“Seriously?”

She makes a grab for the bunny, and Percy instinctively whips it away from her insistent hands.

“Careful,” he says emphatically. “They’ve been around since I was an infant. My grandma gave them to me when I was born.”

Annabeth holds up her hands in defense.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “I’ll be very gentle.”

“Okay,” Percy says, watching her closely. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. Pinky is important to us. I got it.”

He lowers the bunny into her hands, trying not to feel a guilty pit low in his stomach when he sees how little stuffing poor Pinky's body has.

"So how did Pinky come to be nonbinary?" Annabeth inquires, smoothing back the cotton fabric of the bunny's ears.

"Well, they're pink and have a bow tie. Pinky has been he and she and it and they and we're both okay with that."

"Fair enough," Annabeth says, scratching between the bunny's ears. "So you slept with them as a kid?"

"For an embarrassing amount of years."

"Ooh, really? When did you stop?"

"Oh, would you look at the time!" Percy says, springing up. "I think I just heard my mom calling."

"Nope, I heard nothing," Annabeth sings. "C'mon, o' husband of mine. Give me the dirt. There's no avoiding the truth."

He's opening his mouth to answer with another brilliantly snappy retort when he hears his mom calling both of their names.

"Hah!" Percy says. "Dinner time. Let's go."

"You go ahead," Annabeth says, her eyes still on Pinky. "I want to look around one last time. Try to find the loose floorboard where you hid your cigars and dirty magazines."

He laughs, figuring that she just wants to few moments to collect herself before she goes downstairs to a family dinner.

“Okay, sure. See you in a minute.”

“I love you,” Annabeth says, her voice urgent. “Always, okay?”

Percy frowns despite the happy pang in his stomach.

“Yeah. I love you too.”

He closes the door behind him instinctively.

But by the time Annabeth gets downstairs for dinner, her expression is back to the pleasant happiness that she’s been showing for the whole evening. She teases him, jokes with his mom, and discusses a novel that she hated and Paul loved. Everything is totally normal, right up until his mom and Paul show them to do the door and wish them a good night, thanking them for a wonderful evening.

They get back to their apartment almost at midnight, but even as Percy opens the door and walks in the door, he doesn’t feel like going to bed yet. Today as been good. He doesn’t want it to be over yet.

“I guess I’ll go take a shower,” he says, setting his keys down and scrubbing a hand over his face. Even though he doesn’t want to sleep, it doesn’t mean he isn’t tired.

“Percy,” Annabeth says, and he turns around, staring at her expectantly. Instead of speaking, she meets his eyes and takes a few beats before reaching down and lifting her shirt over her head. As she lets it slither off of her fingers and fall lazily onto the floor, her eyes are still trained on his.

They don't sleep for a while after that.

Percy had never minded working late.

When he first started working at this company, he hadn't had anything else in his life. He'd had his mom, and his friends, but he'd been living a half existence, waiting to finally find Annabeth. He'd never had a steady girlfriend to come home to, or even a pet. He'd known that he was going to be moving as soon as he met his soul mate, so he hadn't felt the need to decorate his apartment or, really, make anything permanent. He'd poured himself into his job and waited on his timer, not needing anything else. And he hadn't felt the need to go home, because there hadn't been anyone there, wanting to ask how his day was.

It's different now. When he's at his desk, there's a picture of Annabeth beaming at him on one sweaty summer day when they'd been walking to the grocery store. And there's another one of her with her nose red with cold, their comforter pulled right up to the bottom of it while Percy sneaks a kiss onto her temple and holds the camera in front of the two of them. He can stare at that picture whenever he's bored with his job; daydream about what it was like to take that picture in the middle of March. Think about how it felt and how he could feel that again if he just went home to his wife instead of working late into the evening.

Despite the fact that Percy knows that he needs to focus, he can't stop thinking about what Annabeth could be doing and what he could be doing if he were with her and how her day was and what they could have had for dinner if he hadn't just grabbed something quickly from the pizza and sub shop across the street.

Yeah, he's never minded working late before, but now it's different. Now he just wants to go home. Be with Annabeth. Except he can't, because Frank is barely functioning during work, and Percy has spent the past couple of months desperately trying to pick up his slack so that their boss won't notice and fire Frank. And it fucking sucks that Percy has something to go home for and Frank is choosing now to be completely incompetent.

Okay, so that's not fair. It's not Frank's fault that he's being incompetent. It's Hazel's. And it's not even Hazel's fault, either. It's the government. Which, ironically, Percy is working late to appease. Oh, and it's also not Frank's fault that Percy has gotten almost no sleep lately. The blame for that rests solely on the shoulders of Annabeth. She's been insatiable these past two weeks, and although he can't understand why, Percy does know that even he wouldn't choose sleep over sex. So he's been working late, going home, getting less than five hours of sleep, and then repeating the process all over again.

He's fucking exhausted.

And, the thing is, he's not happy. Percy is glad to have a wife that loves him and a great mother and a nice apartment and a step-dad who laughs at his puns, but sometimes he'll catch himself thinking that he wants more than this. He doesn't want to spend his life typing up complaints in a cubicle. He wants to do something. Anything at all. Just... something that isn't this.

Annabeth wants that for him. So does his mom. And when he brought it up around Jason once, Jason seemed to think that it was an awesome idea. So what's been holding him back? Why is Percy clinging to this job that was never supposed to be anything more than a temporary position? Why does this matter so much?

The truth is that it doesn't. It doesn't matter. And he'd moved up in this job because he'd been willing to stay here, to work late and put in the extra hours, but now he isn't. Now it isn't worth it anymore. He isn't the same guy and he doesn't have the same life.

Testing himself, Percy pushes back his desk chair. When that doesn't feel wrong, he stands up. When that doesn't feel bad, he walks out his cubicle. After that, he lets his feet carry him all the way to his boss's office, where he raps twice on the doorframe.

"Jackson," the man greets, turning around and giving him an expectant look. "How can I help you?"

"This is my two week's notice," Percy says brusquely. His boss's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Seriously?” he says, running a thumb across his mustache. “Damn. Took you long enough, Jackson.” Percy stares. “Do you want me to fire you so that you can collect unemployment?”

“Uh, that’s okay,” Percy says, slightly unnerved. “I’m just gonna... you know... go home now.”

“Do that.”

It’s earlier than he’s been home in ages, and this is the part that feels odd-- walking home in a city full of people going home from work, rather than those who are just leaving for clubs or bars. Percy finds himself practically ogling different people’s work attire; he’s so unused to it.

The more he walks, however, the freer he becomes. His steps begin to have more bounce, and by the time he’s home, he’s practically springing. He wants to tell Annabeth-- right now. She’s going to be so fucking proud of him, and she’s going to smile elatedly and kiss him and back him against the door and--

“ANNABETH!” Percy shouts, shoving the door open with his shoulder and throwing himself into their apartment. “I’M HOME!” Silence. “ANNABETH, ARE YOU HERE?”

“In the bedroom,” comes her voice, quieter and meeker than Percy had expected. She’s probably just surprised that he’s home. Percy begins undoing his tie and throws it to the floor vigorously, feeling all the more rebellious as he does so.

“God, you should have seen me!” he calls into their bedroom, kicking off his shoes and beginning to head towards her. “It was insane! I walked right into Robards’ office and I just--”

He stops talking when he sees Annabeth sitting at the foot of his bed, staring at an object in her hands. “Hang on,” he says, pausing in the doorway. “Is that Pinky?”

Annabeth looks up, eyes clouded over with something that is keeping Percy out. It’s keeping him out from everything. So he stares at her, bracing himself in the doorway and waiting for her to shake her head, clear it, and let him in. Any time.

Any time now.

“I took them,” Annabeth says quietly, eyes still on the toy. “I’m sorry. I hope that’s okay.”

“Annabeth, it’s fine,” Percy says calmly, satisfied now that he understands what she’s guilty about. “You’re my wife. Anything that is mine is yours, okay?”

He moves closer, making to touch her, but Annabeth puts a hand out, stopping him from coming any closer.

“Don’t,” she says sharply.

Percy just stops. Stares. Tries to understand, but she won’t stop looking at the damn toy.

“Annabeth, what’s wrong? Did I do something to upset you? I’m sorry if I did something wrong; I know that I’ve been working late a lot these past few months, but today I actually just--”

“Percy,” she says, looking up and promptly cutting him off. “Percy, I’m pregnant.”

I woke with her walls around me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~Two months earlier~

A baby is staring at her.

All big blue eyes and chubby cheeks spit dribbling down its chin. And okay, it's cute, but why is the thing so damn intent on staring her out? She would just look away - quite easily distract herself with Percy who is sitting right next to her, his warmth pressing into her - but she's not about to lose a staring match with an infant.

The bus jostles and Annabeth's shoulder bumps Percy's. They are sat together on the back row, right in the corner and will have to fight their way off when they get to their stop. Annabeth is hoping Percy's paying attention to their surroundings because she's pretty occupied by stare baby.

"He likes you," the baby's mother notes, forcing Annabeth's eyes up to her face. She smiles and bounces her baby in her lap. She's young - younger than Annabeth is - and looks exhausted, with dark circles against already dark skin shadowing her eyes. But she looks happy as she watches her baby.

"He's gorgeous," Annabeth says, feeling Percy lean forward against her arm to get a look at the topic of discussion. "What's his name?"

"Armin."

Annabeth smiles and looks back at the baby, he has now reached out to grab her curls which are falling loose over her shoulder. She forces herself not to wince and pull her hair out of the baby's grip. Leela has always been obsessed with her hair, so much that she used to pull it out.

Percy laughs. "Kids love Annabeth," he says fondly, it only makes her squirm a little.

The woman smiles at them both, glancing at Percy's left hand on Annabeth's knee and probably spotting the wedding band there. "Do you have children?"

Not yet.

"No," Percy says.

Her eyebrows rise. "Oh. When did you meet?"

Annabeth looks at her husband. "We're coming up to a year now, right?"

He nods, smiling that wonderful smile. "Will be in November, yeah."

“And no children yet?” the woman says, sounding shocked. “My husband and I were given the order two months after our marriage.”

“Wow.”

Annabeth doesn't know what else to say. She can't imagine being given an order only two months after knowing Percy. It took longer than that to accept him in her life, and even longer to love him and to consider the idea of having his child. She looks at the woman next to her and the child - happy, ignorant of the world it has been born into - giggling in her lap. And Annabeth wonders how this woman had received that news. Had she welcomed it? Were she and her husband eager to begin their family together? Or had it shot dread into the young woman's veins; thrusting such a weight onto her shoulders at such a young age and after only knowing her husband for a few months?

“This is us,” Percy says, jolting Annabeth from her thoughts as he leans over her to press the bell.

They both manage to squirm out of the seats - Annabeth freeing her hair from the baby's chubby fists - and say good bye to the woman.

“Best of luck to you both,” she says and it makes Annabeth hesitate.

“And you,” she replies.

Percy's hand circles her wrist and tugs her down the aisle. They shove their way off the bus, thanking the driver as they go and are deposited on the sidewalk. Annabeth shivers, zipping her jacket up and wishing she'd worn more layers.

“It shouldn't be this cold in September.”

Percy chuckles and wraps an arm around her shoulders and she goes willingly to his side, curling her arm around his waist.

“So,” he says, “where should we start?”

“I want to get Elise a tagine from that homeware store.”

“So...” He spins them around. “This way.”

“This way,” she agrees, and they set off together down the sidewalk.

“You know,” Percy says after a moment, “you have to be the only person I've ever known to start their Christmas shopping this early. I mean, I know you're organised, but this is pushing it.”

Annabeth laughs and pinches his side. “It's better to be planned. I bet you're one of those people who does all of their shopping in a mad rush one week before Christmas.”

She looks up to see his grin. “Guilty.”

Annabeth presses a kiss to his jaw and huddles against his side again.

They didn't do Christmas shopping together last year because Annabeth hadn't let him into her life yet. She had been set on keeping him at further than arms length. As she holds him close now, Annabeth imagines what it will be like with him when winter and Christmas descend upon the city. They will wrap up in their winter coats and sing along to the songs playing in every store and decorate their little apartment with a box of ornaments from Sally's loft which have gone unused for years. She pictures them in Christmas sweaters, but hers is stretched around the midsection to accommodate the growing belly there.

Her heart begins to race in her chest and she panics that Percy might notice and ask her why she's looking so worried and then she would have to tell him because she hates lying to him. But he doesn't. He is blissfully unaware.

Yeah, she hates lying to him, but that's exactly what she's doing.

She had made the executive decision to stop taking her birth control pills last week. And now every time she thinks about it, about the fact that she is keeping such a massive thing from Percy, guilt bristles in her stomach and makes her feel sick with anxiety. And she has to rationalise her decision all over again. She has a checklist, you see. It goes like this:

She wants it to be a surprise.

She knows Percy wants a baby.

He will be happy when she tells him - it will counterbalance how terrified she will be.

He will forgive her, because he always does.

She might not get pregnant for a long time and doesn't want to set him up for disappointment.

She made this decision so that it could still be hers to make and not a government mandated order.

This is how she rationalises it.

But she hates lying to him, hates it.

She feels it again - the bristle of guilt - when they are curled up together on his childhood bed; when she sits on his lap and he presses a kiss to her stomach, her knees go weak because surely he must know. But he doesn't, so she lets the moment pass.

She makes an excuse to stay longer in his room so that she can sit on the bed he slept in as a child and hold the stuffed toy he's had since infancy. She pictures baby Percy sitting where

she is now, a tiny body crossed legged in the middle of the mattress, clutching Pinky his chubby arms. He's all black hair and big staring eyes and gap-toothed grin. Annabeth laughs at the image and wants to pinch his round cheeks.

She realises that this is what their child will look like, and she wants Pinky to be there too. That's why she wipes her cheeks - she hadn't noticed the tears begin to fall - gets up off the bed and sneak the stuffed toy downstairs where they can hide in her purse. That's why she smiles at Percy when she joins them all at the table and imagines what it will be like to bring a baby along to these meals.

She always thought those women were crazy - the ones who said they knew weeks before they could take a test that their egg was already becoming a baby. But it's a fetus at this point, it's a nothing; a little shapeless thing with no fingers and no toes and no nothing.

But it's hers. And oh does she want it, even if it terrifies her, she wants it.

She and Thalia had stolen a pregnancy test when they were younger, before Annabeth had had her first period. Thalia had dared her to take it, and even though she'd been irrationally terrified of the stick, she did it. Because it was Thalia, and she always did what Thalia said - back then, at least. A little pink line tells eleven year old Annabeth that she is not, in fact, pregnant.

Two pink lines are staring at her.

The stick that holds them sits perfectly parallel between two more pregnancy tests. The other two confirm that she is pregnant with dark, block letters, like the ones on her wrist. The difference now is that she made this choice. And now she has to live with it.

Her hands fall to her stomach. It's flat beneath Percy's basketball jersey, which she's been wearing since she got home from work half an hour ago, but in a few months it will begin to grow round and full.

Wearing Percy's clothes was a mistake; now she feels nothing but guilt and nerves. She wants him here, to hold her hand and talk her panic down and take this step with her. But she had shut him out of this decision, because she's an idiot. A ridiculous, stubborn idiot with a husband who loves her and has supported her always.

And she lied to him.

Albeit with good intentions, but she still lied.

Well, not actively. But she kept the truth from him, and that's just as bad.

She needs to calm herself down. She walks into the bedroom, leaving the sticks and their black letters and pink lines behind, and crosses to the wardrobe, where she had hidden Pinky after kidnapping them. Annabeth holds the stuffed toy in her hands and sits on the edge of the bed, staring at the unblinking eyes. She focuses on the loose stitching by their left ear, on the worn fabric of their belly, on the torn seam of their paw. Annabeth takes deep breaths, she calms herself down.

And that's when Percy comes home. His voice sounds so far away that she can't really make out what he's saying but she vaguely recognizes that he's shouting and he sounds happy, excited.

Damn.

Five minutes ago she had wanted nothing more than to have him here with her, but now she's terrified to face him.

And now he's here, all bright faced and happy and oh god oh god oh god...

She confesses to kidnapping Pinky, he doesn't mind, of course he doesn't mind. What's mine is yours. And he smiles again because he thinks that's it. His face when she holds out a hand to stop him touching her - because if she lets him touch her she won't bring herself to confess everything - shatters something inside of her. Annabeth never wants to be the cause of that hurt again.

'I'm pregnant,' she says.

And Percy stares at her.

She can't read anything in his face other than shock. Annabeth wants to stand up and move to him but she is stuck there by his silence.

"Percy?" she asks hesitantly, voice thick with unease. "Please say something."

A frown morphs his face as something unsticks his feet. He takes two steps towards her and drops to his knees. Pinky sits between them in her lap, as silent as the both of them.

"Annabeth I-- I don't know... "

"I'm sorry," she says, still unable to move her hands to touch him like she craves. "Percy, I'm so sorry I didn't--"

His eyes close tight, forehead dropping to her knees. "You don't want to keep it."

"No! Percy, I do!" His head pulls up, eyes searching her face. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

His forehead puckers - and god does he look cute when he does that, it doesn't help her concentration. "How long have you known?"

"No." She shakes her head. "That's not what I mean, I just took a test - three actually - ten minutes ago. But I stopped taking my birth control about a month and a half ago."

"You... what?"

Sitting still becomes unbearable. She stands up, moves around him and starts pacing.

"I'm sorry, it was so stupid to keep it from you but I wanted to surprise you. But now that I'm here, it's so ridiculous that I didn't tell you or ask you I mean - fuck - I made the decision that we're having a baby without even telling you. How screwed up is that?" She thinks of her checklist. His happiness is supposed to counterbalance her terror. He will forgive her. And, and there is something else...

She whirls and points a finger at him. "I didn't think it would happen this fast. You have, like, really eager sperm."

Either Percy doesn't register that she's talking about his sperm, or he doesn't care because he's crossing the room to her. She's not sure when he had stood up, but all of a sudden his arms are around her. After the moment of shock passes, Annabeth extricates her arms from between their stomachs and wraps them around his waist. Pinky dangles from her fingers as she links her hands at the small of his back. Percy's lips touch her neck.

"Percy?"

"Thank you," he murmurs.

"What for?"

"You want to keep it?"

"Yeah. It's our baby."

She can feel his grin as he laughs against her neck. "Annabeth." He squeezes her tighter. "We're having a baby."

She turns her face inwards and presses a kiss to the base of his throat. Yes, the panic is there, bubbling below the surface, but she listens to Percy's heartbeat and lets it calm her down.

They're having a baby. Now that she's told him, the weight and truth of the matter seeps into Annabeth's bones heavily. Her breathing picks up and she has to pull herself out of Percy's embrace, feeling immediately colder for doing so, and try not to let him see how panicked she is feeling. They're having a baby. The words are a mantra that do nothing to calm her racing heart. She looks down at her bare toes, curling into the rug and Percy's shoes as Pinky's ears slide between her fingers.

She tries for practicality to quell her emotions. That usually works. What will they have to do now? What's the procedure?

"We um... we have to tell Grover."

Percy takes Pinky from her and tosses them onto the bed. He grips her shoulders, hard. And when she looks up at him, his expression is hard too. "No. We don't have to tell anyone." His

hands move to her face, gentler now, but his voice holds its intensity. “Annabeth, this is ours. Not a court order or a government law. Ours. Remember that.”

She searches his face - open and earnest - and clutches his wrists. He tethers her to Earth, to right here and now in their apartment with just the two of them and their baby.

Their baby.

A peal of laughter loosens Annabeth’s throat. Percy looks at her, slightly concerned, but she just pulls herself up to him - or him down to her, she’s not sure, doesn’t care - and kisses him soundly. His hands curve to her cheeks, thumbs catching her fresh tears and Annabeth realises that this is what it should feel like. The realisation that they are becoming a family is joyous, all happy tears and shared kisses and huffed laughter.

After she’s pulled away, Annabeth rubs his wrist with her thumb and smiles at him. “You know who we should tell first?” she asks him.

He frowns, tilting his head slightly. “Who?”

“Your mom.”

A smile breaks free and devours his whole face. “She’s gonna be so happy.”

“I hope so, ’cause she’s going to be saving our asses a lot with this. You do realise that neither of us have a clue about raising a child.” Her hand drops to her stomach. “This is an actual human being which is entirely our responsibility to fuck up.”

He grins. “We’re not going to fuck him or her up. Well, maybe a little, but that’s okay. Everyone is a little fucked up.”

“Percy,” she says in a little breathless laughter.

He joins in with her laughter and adds his hands to her stomach on top of hers. He meets her eyes. “This is real. Holy crap, this is real. What do we do now?”

She grips his hands. “Relax, please. We have to make it through the first trimester before we tell anyone I think.”

“Tri-what?”

“Oh god.” She taps his forehead. “We need to get some pregnancy books and do some research.”

He groans, dropping his head to her shoulder. “Why did I have to marry a nerd?”

She slaps his shoulder and he backs away, grinning and holding his hands up so she can’t hit him again. After a moment though, his smile falters into falseness and his hands drop to his sides, tucking into his pocket. She wonders if he’s even aware of that particular tell of his.

“But, yeah, I’ve got to-- I need to go back and do this thing...”

“Percy.”

“I-- fuck.”

“What?”

He sighs, heavy and tired. “I have the worst timing in the world.”

“Okay, I’m going to say this one more time: what?”

Percy scrubs his hands over his face and through his hair, leaving it positively chaotic. He sighs again and stares at her. “I handed in my notice.”

Annabeth feels her eyes bug out of her skull. He handed in his notice. He actually did it; after all of her not so subtle hinting and begging for him to see himself for what he really is, which is better than the job he has, better than settling for boring and mundane and everything that is so opposite to his integral being. He is better than that job, than that life of just letting things happen to him.

And he has done it.

“Percy, that’s amazing!” She launches herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I’m so proud of you!”

His hands on her back are hesitant. “Annabeth, I can’t...”

She pulls back to look at his face. “You can’t what?”

“We’re having a baby, now. I can’t just quit my job and go and... and, well I don’t know what I was going to do-- fuck, I really suck at the whole impulsive thing.”

“No, Percy, this is great!” She holds his face between her palms. “Don’t you dare go back to that job, it’s time to move away from it.”

“But the baby--”

“Is at least eight months away and doesn’t need his or her father working a job that makes him miserable.” She tugs at him until he meets her eyes. “What do you want to do? Forget that I’m pregnant, forget about whatever anybody else needs or wants. Percy what do you want?”

She can see his inner conflict as he tries to be a man far more selfish than he really is. “I... I don’t know. I thought about finishing school, maybe.”

“Then finish school.”

Percy’s eyebrows pull up. “We’re having a baby and you want me to go to college? Did we suddenly win the jackpot?”

“We have savings, and you can work part time like I did. We can read books together like a boring old married couple. Percy, we can make this work.”

Something in his expression shifts and his hands move up to cradle her face softly. Hers drop to his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath her open fingers. “You would do that for me?”

Annabeth smiles at him and wonders if he truly knows how much he means to her. Her thumb rubs a spot over his heart. “There is very little I wouldn’t do for you, Percy Jackson.”

Annabeth is feeling the side effects of pregnancy pretty early on.

Some of them aren’t so bad. Her boobs are bigger than they’ve ever been and Percy seems to appreciate that too, but they are sensitive as hell. And she’s horny. So goddamn horny all the time and pulling herself away from Percy in the mornings is actual physical torture.

A more irritating one is her sudden, aggressive aversion to coffee. She’d planned on cutting it out of her diet anyway, but the wonderful smell of fresh coffee in the morning has been tainted by the being growing inside of her. The morning she discovers this new aversion, when she runs from the kitchen to throw up in the toilet bowl, she sits on the floor afterwards and glares at her belly.

“Really? You had to take coffee from me too? Isn’t the whole making me pee fifty times a day thing enough for you?”

Percy finds her there, raised eyebrows and crossed arms. “Everything okay down there?”

Annabeth sighs, tilting her head back against the tiles. “The baby hates coffee.”

“Oh. Well that sucks.” He joins her on the floor and she lets her head fall to his shoulder as his hand rubs her thigh. “I guess we’re a coffee free house now.”

“Percy, you can’t function without a morning coffee.”

“I’ll buy one on the way to work and chew gum all day to get rid of the smell.”

That pulls a laugh out of her. “I love you.”

He kisses the side of her head. “Just grow our baby good and I’ll forgive you.”

Annabeth slaps his leg lightly. “Ass,” she says, laughing.

He grabs her hand and lifts it to his mouth. “Shush. I’m giving up coffee for you.”

Annabeth lifts her head off his shoulder. “No you’re not!”

“Okay, but I’m reading pregnancy books. That’s a sacrifice.”

She rolls her eyes. He’s not reading pregnancy books, he’s lying on the couch with his head in her lap or on her chest or her belly or some part of her body while she reads the pregnancy books out loud. But sometimes she lies on him, and he always asks her questions and sounds like a giddy kid and that makes up for the fact that he’s usually pressing against her bladder like mini Jackson.

That’s what they’ve taken to calling him or her - mini Jackson. The first time Annabeth said it, Percy stared at her. “They’re gonna be a Jackson?”

“Of course.”

He’d kissed her so hard her lips hurt for hours afterwards, but it was a sweet ache, reminding her of his happiness.

Of course they’re going to be a Jackson, because at some point in the future, Annabeth will be a Jackson too. And they will be the Jackson family, people will call them the Jacksons.

Annabeth isn’t sure when this is going to happen. They’ve got a baby coming and Percy is applying to colleges in the city and life is hurtling at them at full pelt, but she knows she will become a Jackson and remarry this sweet, madly-in-love-with her, crazy fool.

Annabeth shifts against the hard tiles of the bathroom floor and taps Percy's leg. He blinks like he's been lost in some reverie like she has.

"As much as I'd love to sit here all day, we both have work to go to," she reminds him.

He scrambles up and holds out his hands to her. Annabeth rolls her eyes as he hauls her upright.

"Damn, you weren't kidding about baby weight, huh?" he teases with a grin.

Annabeth laughs and slaps his chest. "Watch it."

Percy is still grinning when he catches her hand so she can't hit him again and leans down to kiss her. But Annabeth holds her other hand up to stop him.

"Sick breath," she explains. "Let me brush my teeth."

Percy nods and settles for kissing the tip of her nose before releasing her. "I'll de-coffee the kitchen."

Annabeth squeezes some toothpaste onto her brush. "Thank you."

She glances at the bathroom door long enough to see him turn and wink at her.

"I'm sure you'll think of a way to repay me."

Chapter End Notes

A/N

soooo this was an incredibly fluffy chapter which was fun to write after the angsty stuff. i cannot tell you how long i've been looking forward to writing preggers annabeth. also, hormones + grumpybeth = :D

seriously, i can't wait.

the chapter title is from Work Song by Hozier

For the life of us we can't get back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Percy arrives home to find Annabeth pacing in front of their apartment, her hands wringing together. He frowns at her as he sets down his shopping bags, something feeling off in his stomach as he surveys the tense posture of his wife.

"Um," he says, because that's the first thing he thinks of. "Hi?"

Annabeth startles, her eyes widening as she turns to him.

"Hi," she replies slowly, nostrils flaring slightly. Uh-oh. She's hiding something. Her nostrils only flare when she's this close to being found out. "Um, so, Jason said that you were supposed to be gone for another two hours."

Percy watches as Annabeth fidgets, brushing her hands over her soft, worn blue jeans and adjusting the hem of the flowy red shirt which is designed to float over her belly.

"Honey," says Percy. "What did you do?"

Annabeth hesitates.

"Okay," she says, "before I tell you, I need you to know that I love you."

"Noted."

"And that I'm kind of proud of myself for not doing this before, because being pregnant has made me feel... meddly."

"Oh crap. You didn't."

"Define... didn't."

"Annabeth!" Percy groans. "You didn't!"

"I had to!" she snaps. "Someone had to handle it, and nobody else does, and I am pregnant so nobody can yell at me."

"I'm about to yell at you!" he declares, throwing his hands up. "I told you to stop worrying about them. They're fine. They're getting through it in any way they can."

"But they could get through it better if they just spoke to each other!"

"Annabeth," Percy says impatiently, "we agreed that you would stop making decisions last week after you bought two iguanas and a frog."

"You've been saying that you wanted a pet."

"I said I wanted a dog! Who wants a frog? You can't even pet them. They're all slimy and gross."

"But we could have named him Ribbit."

"We could name our dog Ribbit."

"That wouldn't be a pun," Annabeth spits out, pushing a strand of hair away from her face bitterly, with a bitter expression.

"Neither is having a frog named-- you know what, never mind. I cannot believe you tricked both Hazel and Frank into coming to our apartment at the exact same time and locked them inside!"

She crosses her arms defensively over her chest, confirming Percy's assumption.

"I don't know why you're so upset. You love Hazel and Frank. Don't you want them to be together?"

"Of course I do!" Percy says, running a hand through his hair exasperatedly. When he sees Annabeth open her mouth to protest, he grabs her hand and squeezes it, silencing her momentarily. "But, Annabeth, we can't change the fact that their timers don't match up. We know that they're soul mates, but the government doesn't agree, and doing something like this doesn't help anyone. It just makes it harder for Hazel and Frank."

For a moment, she just stares at their entwined hands, hiding her face from him. When Percy lifts her chin with his forefinger, trying to get her to look at him, he sees her mouth turned down and her lower lip quivering.

Oh shit.

"No!" he says hurriedly, pulling her hand until her body is flush against his. Her shoulders are starting to shake, so Percy runs a hand lightly up and down her back, murmuring comforting things in her ear. "I'm sorry, Annabeth. I know you were trying to help."

Percy is totally aware of the fact that her tears are coming from hormones and her insane decisions are a factor of pregnancy brain. But that doesn't stop him from feeling guilty as he hugs her to his body and tries to soothe her, comforting her from the upset that he has created.

Knowing that he has to be patient with her and actually being patient are two different things, it seems.

"I w-wanted them b-back together by Christmas!" Annabeth sobs. Oh for the love of god. If she's been watching more of those cheesy Christmas films, he's going to turn off the fucking cable. "There's only three m-more weeks and we c-could have gone on a t-triple date on Christmas Eve!"

Percy tries not to laugh.

"Jason and Piper are going to want to be with Leela," he reminds his wife, sliding his hand down to the small of her back and pulling out of their hug. "And we're going to spend the night deciding on a baby name so that we have something to tell mom and Paul on Christmas day."

She starts to smile, and it's watery and vulnerable all at the same time. Percy chuckles at the look on her face; Annabeth loves calling the baby Mini Jackson, but she's been excited to pick a real name too, and so has he. It's going to make this all the more real.

Annabeth stops crying eventually, once Percy's shirt is soaked through and he's starting to nod off to the comforting lull of Annabeth's breathing, despite the fact that they're in the middle of the hallway. He watches as Annabeth swipes at her eyes and frowns, shaking her head as though clearing it.

"I'm being crazy, aren't I?" she asks, voice slightly more normal.

"Yes. Yes you are," says Percy tenderly, wrapping a curly piece of hair around his index finger and unravelling it to watch it spring away. "And you're probably going to be crazy tomorrow, too, so remember this shame and try not to have a repeat."

She shoves him away, pouting, but Percy grabs her at the waist and pulls her back towards him, dropping a kiss on her nose before kissing her lips.

"Okay, yeah, that was my bad. Tactless. Dick move."

"Jerk," Annabeth mumbles into his shoulder. "I'd be mad at you, but I'm emotionally exhausted from all the other feelings."

"And I thanking my lucky stars for that particular fact," Percy says sincerely.

Annabeth scrunches up her nose in thought, already moving on to the next thing.

"Should we go rescue them?" she asks. "Tell them that they don't have to put up with each other anymore?"

"Nah," Percy sighs, sitting down on the ground and settling against the wall facing the door. "Now that you've started this, I think we're both in for the long haul. We should just wait it out. Let them get it all out now that they're in the situation. Besides-- they were going to meet up eventually. I just sort of wish that it had been at fate's hand, not the hand of my meddling wife," he finishes pointedly.

It takes a bit longer for Annabeth to sit down, but she finally gets herself pressed against the wall next to Percy. She rests her head on his shoulder and reaches into the pocket of his jeans to grab his phone.

"Let's watch a movie," she suggests, unlocking it and pulling up one of the streaming apps. "It seems like we're going to be here for a while."

"I'd be surprised if we weren't," Percy tells her absently, his eyes going to the small bump in her stomach. She's got her left hand resting on it lazily, and when Percy places his hand on top of hers, she glances up at him to smile briefly before turning back to the cell phone.

"Want to watch an old movie?" Annabeth asks, scrolling through the films. Percy just stares at his hand on her stomach, thinking of the baby that is growing inside of her. He wonders if

she ever panics like he does. There is a living human being inside of his wife, and it's beautiful and insane simultaneously.

"Whatever you want," mutters Percy, still focusing on her stomach.

Annabeth either doesn't notice or doesn't care. She just rubs her thumb over the top of his hand, humming slightly as she looks through films.

"We were watching this a few months ago and we never finished it."

"What? Why not?"

"I believe we got distracted and ended up having sex on the couch," says Annabeth without blinking.

"Sounds like us," Percy quips.

"Mhm. Exactly."

"And nine months later, Mini Jackson was born!"

She freezes, looking up at him with a horrified expression.

"Oh god. I hope we didn't conceive our child on a couch because we were getting impatient with plot holes and bad lighting."

"Wow, that really does sound like us."

She elbows him hard in the ribs.

“This conversation never happened, Percy.”

“What conversation?”

“Good.”

"So let's finish the movie, then," he suggests, tapping the play button on his phone. Annabeth sets it against her leg so that the back is facing the wall that is in front of them, then double taps the top right screen. Immediately, the film projects onto the wall in large picture.

They fast forward through most of the stuff that they remember and end up halfway through the film, where the romantic subplot is starting to really pick up. Annabeth seems to be riveted by the plot-- she cries at least twice, once when they're happy, once when they're sad-- but Percy focuses more on staying awake. He's been having so many nightmares lately, and he's been waking Annabeth up constantly in the middle of the night, shaking madly in their bed. He's tried to sneak off and sleep on the couch so that he doesn't disturb her, but she finds him most nights and drags him back to bed with her, claiming that she can't sleep without his snoring and she doesn't mind the fact that he keeps waking her up. And Percy, as much as he loves her, can't quite get himself to be selfless enough to leave her alone.

He loves the way she strokes his hair when she finds him and tells him that he's not going to leave them, because he's not, and she reminds him that if he does have to leave them in the same way his dad did, it's not going to be Percy's fault. He always feels a little bit less broken when she reminds him that death isn't an option or an escape. And it wasn't those things for his dad.

Percy isn't surprised when Annabeth starts to cry again near the end of the movie. But he is surprised at what follows. She pauses the screen on the image of the main male character kneeling on the ground, holding out a diamond ring, and turns to Percy.

“I want to marry you,” she says, her voice urgent. “Percy. I want that to be us.”

He shakes his head, confused, but Annabeth stops him by cupping his cheek and directing his vision towards her. Percy stares into her eyes, trying to find something that will tell him that

she's lying; trying to find something to quench the hope before it bursts out of him.

"Wait, what?"

And Annabeth just smiles, her eyebrows drawn together in a worried frown that doesn't match her lips.

"I want... I want the wedding, and the vows that we wrote for each other, and I want to wear a white dress and see you in a tuxedo and have my first dance with you and I want to mean all of it. I want it before this baby comes so that we can spend one day feeling completely normal, like two people who got to fall for each other-- because that's exactly what we did, and that matters to me more than I ever thought that it would. And when this baby comes, I don't want to be Annabeth Chase. I want to be Annabeth Jackson. And I don't want to feel sorry about wanting those things, because I don't want them for society or the government. I want them for me, and for you, and for this baby."

Percy can feel his heart in his throat, throbbing painfully as he tries to swallow it down. It feels like rough sandpaper, but it doesn't even matter because Annabeth wants to marry him, wants to be with him, and he could never have imagined this moment better than sitting in a hallway with her, watching her face linger between nervous and earnest.

"I want to marry you too," he breathes out, and then he just watches as his words wash over her expression, clearing it into a smile so large that he can't help but kiss it.

"So you'll remarry me?" Annabeth asks, pulling back to look at Percy. He chases her lips, but she stops him before he can kiss her again, waiting for the answer that she already knows. Percy rolls his eyes in protest, but Annabeth just raises her eyebrows, waiting on him.

"Any day, every day."

They are interrupted when the door to the apartment bangs open, and Annabeth springs away from Percy when she sees Hazel and Frank standing awkwardly in the doorway. She's off the ground before Percy can even register what is going on. Still on the floor, he quietly

observes Hazel and Frank. Their limbs are locked to their bodies and both of his friends exhibit turned down mouths and stiff posture.

Watching it makes Percy ache. He remembers when they had first started dating, when they had slowly gotten used to being around each other. He remembers watching Frank nervously take Hazel's hand and watching Hazel flush and look away, smiling, and Percy had thought of how badly he wanted what they had. But he doesn't envy them now. He envies the time that they'd had, maybe, and the way that they had learned to be comfortable around each other, but now that Percy and Annabeth have done the same thing, looking at Hazel and Frank just makes his head ache.

For a moment, he tries for empathy. He squeezes his eyes shut and puts himself in their place, thinking of what would have happened if he and Annabeth had met under different circumstances, fallen in love, and been forced to grow apart from each other due to timers that did not match up. He thinks about never hearing Annabeth telling him that she's pregnant with their child and watching helplessly as her timer ticks down to someone else.

The anger that surges up inside of Percy is almost too much to bear. He opens his eyes and finds that his heartbeat has sped up. When he looks at the plain gold ring on Annabeth's finger, he releases a relieved breath, then begins to fiddle with his own wedding ring. There is a certain type of bravery to what Hazel and Frank are doing. Percy understands that now. They are walking away from each other, even though it hurts.

If Percy were to be asked to walk away from Annabeth, he thinks he would hit the roof.

"Thanks for letting us use your apartment," Hazel says pleasantly, looking over at Annabeth. She still looks hopeful, which Percy feels terrible about. He gets off of the floor and tucks himself right next to Annabeth, sliding his left hand into her back pocket to remind her that he's there for her. She reaches for his right hand and he gives it to her, allowing her to squeeze it before letting go.

"And for the cookies," Frank adds.

"We gathered your laundry and did the dishes," Hazel tells them. "It was the least we could do. Oh, and-" she reaches into her purse and tugs out a small knitted hat. "I knitted this for Mini Jackson."

Annabeth's bottom lip is starting to quiver again.

"What happened?" she questions, nudging Hazel's foot with her foot. "Are you guys okay? I realized that this wasn't the best idea, but only in hindsight, and-"

"No," Hazel says firmly, placing a hand on Annabeth's elbow. "Annabeth, we needed to talk to each other. This was good."

"We've decided to be friends," Frank says, and nobody comments on the way his voice breaks on the last word. "We were friends once; we can do it again."

"People change all the time," says Hazel brightly. "Relationships change. We're just going to have to learn how to go back to the people we used to be. And... who knows? Maybe we are soul mates after all, but in a platonic way."

Annabeth's eyes are wide.

"Do you really think you could do that?"

The smile that Hazel offers her is weak as best.

"We think that we have to try," she says simply. Percy decides not to comment about the fact that Hazel still refers to them in plural, a habit that she is yet to break. He watches as she nods quickly at them and starts to head toward the elevator. Frank follows, looking more like a lost puppy than the man that had been Percy's friend and coworker for years.

"Bye," whispers Annabeth, waving at their backs with one finger. She exchanges a helpless glance with Percy before stepping into their apartment. He lingers in the hallway to pick up the shopping bags that are still on the ground.

“Oh!” Hazel says, pausing. Annabeth pokes her head out the door. “By the way, Annabeth, that Christmas movie that you were watching unpaused while we were talking, so I just turned the television off. Hope that was okay.”

When the elevator door has closed, she is still looking at Percy with the guilty face: wide eyes and flaring nostrils.

“Annabeth.”

He starts walking into the apartment. Annabeth walks backwards, away from his wrath.

“Um,” she says, “I was... watching it for a friend.”

She winces when he slams the door shut with his foot.

“You promised!”

“It was one of the ones with memory loss! Those are the best kind!”

“Did you cry?”

“Um...”

“We said no more Christmas movies until you were emotionally stable!”

“But--!”

“You know what this means I have to do, don’t you?”

Her eyes grow wide with alarm as he drops the bags and holds his hands up, grinning at her.

“Oh god. No. Please don’t tickle me.”

“Come here, Annabeth,” he says, quirking a brow dangerously.

His wife continues to back away from him.

“I won’t watch any more Christmas movies! I promise!”

“Don’t run. It will only prolong the anticipation.”

He wiggles his fingers.

“No!” Annabeth shrieks and scurries over to the couch, which she hops onto. “So help me, Jackson, I will name this child Agatha and you will have to live with that decision!”

“You wouldn’t do that to my mother,” he says calmly, twitching a finger at her. “She hates the name Agatha.”

“Percy.”

“Okay, fine,” he says, flattening his palms in surrender. “I suppose there are two options here, wife.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, bouncing slightly on top of their couch cushions to get warmth in the cold air of their apartment.

“I will hear them.”

“I can tickle you,” he says. “It will be long, and vigorous, and you will laugh so hard that you end up yelling for mercy. Or...” Comprehension dawns on Annabeth’s face. She starts to laugh, waiting for him to say the next part of his sentence. “I can make you scream in other ways. Totally your call,” he adds over her laughter.

“You’re an idiot,” Annabeth tells him, stepping off of the couch and into his waiting arms. She kisses him, knotting her fingers into his hair before she pauses and pulls back, licking her bottom lip as she does. “I choose the sex, by the way. Just in case that wasn’t apparent.”

“I got it, honey.”

“Wasn’t sure if it was too subtle, or...?”

“No, it was great.”

She chuckles, taking his wrist and tugging him towards their bedroom.

“I’d ask you if you had fun with Jason, but now doesn’t seem like the best time.”

“See, you still have good instincts! Pregnancy brain hasn’t completely taken over yet.”

“Yet!?”

When she turns around to glare at him, he’s already got his sheepish grin fixed onto his face.

Twenty more seconds of this and there's an 83 percent guarantee that she won't be mad anymore.

(OOO)

"Oh, I think we need this."

Percy ducks to avoid the jar that Annabeth has just thrown towards their shopping cart, letting out a tiny squeak as it narrowly whizzes by his nose. He frowns vigorously when it clanks to the bottom of the cart and dives in after it to see which item was important enough to Annabeth to almost cause his death.

"Nipple cream?" he says, reading off of the label. He looks up, suddenly feeling terrified. "Annabeth... what's going to happen to your nipples?"

She responds by turning around and biting her thumb nail guiltily.

"Sorry, Perce," she says, wincing.

He backs dramatically against the cart, throwing a hand to his forehead.

"But... I like your nipples the way they are now."

"I know, sweetheart."

"Why do they have to change? Why do they need cream?"

"Shhh. It's too late to back out now. We're already having this child."

“I just didn’t realize that satan’s spawn was going to change your nipples! I want out!”

“Percy.”

“MOM!” he yells, and a few seconds later, his mother appears, carrying a onesie that says ‘grandma’s little love-bug’ on it.

“Yes, dear?” she asks, casually adding it to the shopping cart.

“What does nipple cream do?”

His mom exchanges a pained glance with Annabeth.

“Sorry, Perce,” she says, expression sympathetic.

Ten minutes later, he’s still pouting when his plan finally falls into motion.

“Annabeth!” says Piper’s voice, and Percy turns around to see the small family of three walking slowly towards them. Or, waddling, which is the case of Piper. She’s only a few weeks from her due date, and she should be relaxing at home, but when Percy had come to Jason pleading his case, Piper had insisted on helping him out. “Fancy meeting you here!”

“Hi, Pipes!” says Annabeth, reaching out to hug her friend. “How are you feeling?”

“Skinny,” Piper says drily. “Badum bum,” she adds at the look on Annabeth’s face. Annabeth chuckles.

“Hey, Annabeth, I have a great idea!” Percy says, sidling up next to her and offering her what he hopes to be a winning grin. “What if you go around with Piper and Jason and get an idea of what we’re going to need for the baby?”

“What are you going to be doing?”

“I’m going to be getting you some really, really good pickles.”

Annabeth perks up immediately.

“Really?”

“Really really.”

“With chocolate sauce drizzled on them?” Annabeth questions hopefully.

Percy tilts his head to the side, squinting at her.

“Uh... if I say yes, will you be happy?”

“Yes!”

“Yes, then. Let me just ask Jason this one thing before I go.”

“Okay!” says Annabeth, who has brightened visibly at the idea of pickles and now seems to be uninterested in anything but. She moves towards Piper and begins speaking loudly about the pickle that she’d had at the deli the other day. When Percy looks over at Piper, he sees that she’s trying very hard not to laugh.

“Hey, Jason,” Percy says, tugging his friend to the side. “What does nipple cream do?”

Jason smiles sympathetically and pats Percy gruffly on the shoulder.

“Sorry, Perce.”

“Dammit!”

His mom tosses one more item into the cart before the two of them walk out of the store, waving at Annabeth as they go. As soon as they’re out of her line of vision, they head not to the food court, but to the antique store that is on the opposite end of the shopping plaza.

“Do you think they’re actually going to have engagement rings?” his mom questions as they walk. “They’re a little... outdated, dear.”

“I know,” admits Percy. “I know. I just really want to try to give one to Annabeth. I mean, she’s giving birth to my child, and that’s gotta suck.”

He looks over at his mom for confirmation. She nods.

“It does. Go on.”

“Right, so... birth is really crappy, so I figured that the least I could do was find her an engagement ring. She and Thalia used to watch old films and see the way marriage used to work before the timers and I think that’s Annabeth’s idea of romance now-- the idea of the guy getting down on one knee and offering his girlfriend a ring.”

“So you’re going to do it,” his mom reiterates.

“At least I already know what she’s going to say, right?” Percy jokes.

“Unless she hates the ring.” His mom stops walking at the horrified look on Percy’s face.
“Kidding, dear.”

He’s still shaking his head at her when the two of them turn in to the antique store. They wander around aimlessly for a while, trying to find the jewelry section, but when they finally do, Percy has a feeling that they’re not going to be leaving for a while. There’s a lot of rings. Not all of them have diamonds, but there are enough to bring a smile to Percy’s lips. He thinks that he could actually find something for her among this mess of rings.

“Let’s look for ones with gold bands,” he suggests. “And not too big, okay? Because she’s not going to want that.”

His mom smiles slightly.

“Alright then. I’ll start over here.”

He looks up ten minutes later to see her sorting through engagement rings with a look of extreme concentration on her face. The idea of this being as important to his mom as it is to him kind of blows Percy away, but he doesn’t say anything, just turns back to the rings that he’s looking at and sets aside a few of them for later.

Even though it’s a mindless task, Percy can’t help but allow his mind to wander to other things. When he looks back up at his mother, it’s with a question on the tip of his tongue. And even though it takes him several tries to get out, by the time he says it, he’s not sure why he hasn’t asked it before.

“I know you’re with Paul now, mom, but are you... are you okay? With what happened with dad?”

He can tell that she’s startled from the way her hands still on the rings. Percy watches as her fingers rest on the glass case, not fiddling or thumping against the counter. Just holding onto a ring, clutching it between her thumb and forefinger.

“I am,” she says simply. When she speaks next, he can tell how careful she is being with her words. “For years, Percy, I was so afraid that the same thing would happen to me. That I would have to leave you involuntarily, and you wouldn’t have anybody left in your life to care for you. Being your mother-- being the only person you had-- had me scared every single day. But I think that’s what being a parent is. Always being scared that you aren’t good enough to raise your child. Always being scared of what’s going to happen in the world next. And the fear doesn’t ever go away-- not completely. But, Percy... when you brought Annabeth to meet me, I think I breathed for the first time in years.”

“I’m scared too,” he says, feeling a lump in his throat. “I’m scared that I’m not going to be able to stick around for this kid, just like dad couldn’t. I’m scared that this baby is going to be just as angry at me as I was at dad.”

“Was?”

He looks up at her.

“Was,” he echoes. “I have to let this pass me by if I’m going to be a dad, don’t I? For Annabeth, and for the baby, and for me, and for... dad.”

His mom closes her eyes briefly, setting the ring down on the glass. When she opens them, they settle calmly on Percy.

“If you die, it’s not going to be because you didn’t love Annabeth enough,” she says with a quiet intensity that he has never heard in her voice before. “Or because you didn’t love the baby enough. If you die, you die because the universe dictates who lives and who dies and sometimes it throws a temper tantrum. And it’s scary, Percy, because we don’t have control over any of it. But your father didn’t die because he didn’t love you enough, or because he didn’t love me enough. He didn’t leave us on purpose, just like you would never leave this baby on purpose.” She swallows, then holds out her hand. “I think this is your ring,” she says softly.

He pulls his wallet out of his pocket without looking at the ring.

No matter what it looks like, his mom thinks it's perfect, and that matters above anything else.

(OOO)

By the time they arrive back at the baby shop, Percy is lugging a giant jar of pickles and carrying a small ring box in his back pocket. He is surprised by which one feels heavier.

As soon as he sees Annabeth, he wants to get down on one knee and offer the ring to her. But she's talking with Piper, and Jason is trying to get Leela to stop crying about something, and Percy knows that it's not the time. He just kisses the top of Annabeth's head and reminds her that they have an appointment with Grover in twenty minutes and that it's time to say goodbye to everybody.

A few minutes later, they're walking down the street with six shopping bags and the large jar of pickles, which Annabeth is cradling like a baby.

"Why did it take so long to get these?" she asks. "You and your mom took forever."

"She got distracted by an antique store," Percy rattles off without pause. "You know how she gets."

He grins at Annabeth in a way that he hopes isn't suspicious and leans over her to pull the door open. Annabeth walks through, ignoring her husband and choosing, instead, to grab another pickle out of the jar. At the loud moan she emits upon taking the first bite, Percy has a feeling that Grover is going to be able to tell she's pregnant even without taking a look at her stomach, which has seriously popped out since the last time they saw Grover.

When they do stride into Grover's office, Annabeth's belly is conveniently hidden by the jar of pickles. They sit down in the chairs in front of his desk, and Grover is so busy looking for their file that he doesn't notice the giant bags of baby supplies that are all sitting on Percy's arms.

“How are you guys?” he asks distractedly, then releases a loud “Ha!” when he finds their paperwork. “Here we go.” Grover looks up. “Okay,” he says. “Here’s the thing. You guys are friends now, obviously, but your last couple of visits have shown me that you still aren’t completely comfortable around one another. And since it’s been over a year since you met each other, this is the time that we start talking about whether you want a baby or you want an annulment. If you think it’s not possible for you to ever like each other enough to want to procreate together, we have to start looking at more drastic measures.”

Percy looks over at Annabeth as Grover lays two pieces of paper out on the table. She’s staring at him, a sly smile playing at her lips. With one look at her, he knows that this is going to be fun.

“Sounds good,” says Percy, still looking at his wife.

“On the left is an annulment contract. On the right is the order to have a child. And seeing as I like you two so much, I’m going to let you guys pick.”

Annabeth nods slowly, seeming to concentrate. She sets the jar of pickles on the floor and looks around the room.

“Wow, Grover!” she says suddenly. “Is that a fikus?”

He frowns, looking over at the plant.

“Uh, yeah. My wife gave it to me. It’s-” Annabeth stands up, crossing the room to plant. Grover’s eyes immediately zero in on the large bump on her stomach, accentuated by the tight shirt that she is wearing. At first, Grover looks like he doesn’t know what to say. Then he directs his attention toward Percy, who wiggles his eyebrows, grinning. “Uh... guys?”

“Yes?” Annabeth says lightly, turning around from the plant and placing her hands on her hips.

“Whose baby is that?” Grover bleats in alarm.

“Pumpkin,” Percy says to Annabeth. “Whose baby is this?”

“I believe it is yours, sweetums,” she replies, sitting back in her chair and picking up the pregnancy order.

Grover sits back in his chair, looking like he’s been hit by a truck.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “Okaaaaaay.”

“Okay,” agrees Annabeth, grabbing Percy’s hand.

“More than okay,” he tells her.

Grover grabs the stress ball at the corner of his desk, usually meant for couples, and squeezes it tightly.

“Guys, you have a lot of explaining to do.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Two chapters to go! I can’t believe it. This part of the story is definitely payoff for all of the angst at the beginning, so I hope you are enjoying married Percabeth as much as we are. Writing them like this is a gift.

Thank you for all of your amazing reviews, insightful questions, and general interest in the story. ALSO- check out Meg’s (anxiouspineapples) new art for the story! It’s absolutely gorgeous.

This chapter title is from Sad, Beautiful, Tragic by Taylor Swift.

And if we only live once,

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Annabeth is cooking.

It's a rarity found amongst blue moons and flying pigs but here she is, in yoga pants and a loose-fitting shirt, wielding a spatula. She wants someone to take a photo or something and almost contemplates finding her phone to take a selfie to send to Piper but she's so focused on not burning the eggs that she can't take her eyes off the pan. She does, however, begin humming a tune under her breath. One she's heard her husband sing so many times in his terribly tone deaf voice. Well, if he sings when he can't sing, then she can cook when she can't cook.

She slides the spatula under the egg and flips it over, letting out a happy little noise when she manages it before returning to the song.

"How do you like your eggs in the morning?" she hums, "I like mine with a kiss--"

She's greeted then, by two warm arms sliding around her waist and lips pressed to her cheek, his still-damp hair from his shower tickling her face.

"Morning," Percy hums. "You're cooking."

"Yes I am," she says proudly.

He chuckles as he moves away from her. "Your toast is burning."

"What? No! Save it!"

Percy pops the toast up and throws it onto the two plates she's already got out. They're just the right side of burnt. He moves to retrieve the butter from the fridge, passing her as he goes.

"So what brought out the domestic goddess this morning?"

Annabeth flips the egg onto one of the plates and cracks a new one into the pan. "I'm nesting."

Percy starts buttering the toast. "With eggs? How appropriate."

She resists the urge to throw something at him. "Piper says it's my mothering instincts kicking in - she started knitting when she was fifteen weeks along with Leela. Although the research I've done tells me I shouldn't start experiencing this until my third trimester. About my thirty eighth week I should start going crazy with tidying the house up and organising the sock drawer."

"Can't wait for that."

Annabeth flips another egg onto the plate. "Watch it, Jackson."

He picks up the plates and takes them to the table as she switches off the hob off before joining him. He's grinning as she sits across from him.

"What?" she asks.

"I'm gonna get to call you that soon. *Jackson*."

She rolls her eyes at him but she's grinning too. She shakes her head. "Speaking of which, we're meeting with the caterer before lunch and then my scan is at two. And then we need to head into town because we still have no decorations for the house and it's Christmas in eight days."

"That didn't bother you last year."

She looks up at him and Percy looks a little taken aback by his own words. He opens his mouth, looking like he wants to spill an apology but he's just silent. Annabeth bites her lip and bumps her foot against his under the table.

"This year is different."

His eyes search her face. Slowly, he nods. "Yeah, yeah it is."

There is silence between them for a while as they eat. And Annabeth has to say, it's actually pretty good. She focuses on the little movements Percy is making - always a restless, boundless ball of energy - probably without even realising. She focuses on the tapping of his foot on the tile floor and the rapping of his knuckles against the table as he eats, his eyes dart all over and anyone might think he doesn't want to be here but Annabeth knows him. She knows that this restless energy conveys his nervousness for the day ahead, and his excitement.

"Hey," he says after a few minutes of silence, "d'you have my Christmas present yet?"

She looks up to see his grin. "Bought and wrapped and hidden where you'll never find them."

His eyebrows pull up. "*Them*?"

Annabeth grins at him. "Yes," she says, "them."

She's only mildly satisfied to see the excitement tinged with panic on his face.

The brunch with the caterer is made that much less daunting by Sally's presence. She directs them both with the best decisions and kindly reminds Percy that no, the wedding cake can't

be blue. It's traditionally white, and he wants everything to be perfect for Annabeth so he only gets grumpy about it for a little while.

And then they are sitting around the kitchen table in Sally and Paul's apartment with a too long list of people which they need to cut down to no more than twenty five people and a horribly long list of things they need to organise.

Percy drops his head onto the table with a heavy groan. "This is impossible. Did people really use to do this all the time?"

Annabeth runs her fingers through his hair as Sally gets up to make them more tea with a fond smile thrown in her son's direction. "It's such short notice that I expect some people won't be able to make it," Annabeth reasons, "so that makes less people to cater for and a smaller venue."

Sally returns to the table with mugs of herbal tea - something Annabeth is trying in the absence of caffeine - and smiles at her ruefully. "You need to be ruthless, dear."

Percy perks his head up then and looks between them both. "Damn, I'm not leaving you two alone. There'll be no one there to witness my awesome vows."

Sally shakes her head, rolling her eyes at him, and pulls the notepad they are using towards her. "Right," she says in a decisive tone, "definite guests. Go."

"Piper and Jason," Annabeth says. "And Leela's the ringbearer."

"And their other spawn by then," Percy adds.

Annabeth pokes him in the ribs. "You can't call their baby a spawn. How would you like it if someone called our baby a spawn?"

He grins at her. "The spawn of Jackson."

She's about to pinch his waist when Sally clears her throat. "Focus, kids."

They're married with a child on the way but they both sit up in their seats like naughty schoolchildren when Sally berates them with a fond smile and a pointed pencil.

"Who else?"

"My dad, step-mom, Bobby and Matthew," Annabeth says. "And Thalia."

Percy nods. "Hazel and Frank too."

Annabeth finds his hand under the table and squeezes. This wedding acts as such a stark contrast to the hopelessness of Frank and Hazel's relationship; Percy and Annabeth are celebrating the life they are building together while Frank and Hazel are coming to terms with the fact that the life they had begun to build is crumbling to sand between their fingers.

It will be impossibly hard for the both of them, but they will attend and support Percy and Annabeth because that's who they are; selfless, kind, loyal. Traits which make them so compatible as a couple, never mind how much the numbers on their wrists differ.

Percy draws in a scratchy breath and looks at his mother. "You and Paul."

Sally nods as she adds her own name and Paul's to the list and looks to Annabeth. She can almost feel the question before it is asked, tilting on her mother-in-law's tongue, wondering whether it should be voiced aloud.

Annabeth saves her from deciding. "My mom," she says, feeling the Jacksons' stares as her eyes follow the grain of the wooden table beneath her fingers. "I'd like to send her an invite at least."

She looks up to Sally's smile as Percy brings their entwined hands on top of the table. He plays with the wedding band on her finger with a soft smile. Annabeth nudges him.

"What about people from work?"

"Leo, obviously. Uh, I'm not all that close to anyone else. Maybe Jake Mason and his wife 'cause I've known him since I started there and she's real nice too. But everyone else is just an acquaintance."

Annabeth clicks her fingers. "Will and Nico!"

"Shit, yeah. Forgot about them. Sorry," he adds when Sally raises her eyebrows at his language. He looks at Annabeth. "Any college friends?"

"Um... I'd like it if Silena and her husband came."

"Beckendorf," Percy says in recognition. "Yeah, those guys are awesome, they should definitely come."

"And Grover," Annabeth says decisively.

Percy nods. "And Grover," he agrees. He looks at his mother. "With his wife too, how many's that?"

Sally tots it up. "Twenty five, including the wedding party and yourselves."

"Wait," Annabeth says, remembering, "if my mom does come, then my uncle will have to come too. I mean, my actual extended family is ridiculous so they can't all come, but he would have to if she does."

"Okay," Sally says, adding to the list. "That makes twenty six then, in all."

"That's manageable," Annabeth says. "So if we give that number to the caterer as a template and send out the invitations by the end of the week, with a deadline for January third, I think that's reasonable."

Sally nods. "You've decided on the invitations, yes?"

"We're going with the simple ones," Percy says, "they don't need to be fancy. Besides, we can't afford to pay two hundred dollars on invites alone."

Annabeth inwardly cringes at the mention of money. She has been looking to avoid it as much as possible in the duration of the planning, simply trying to enjoy the process. But it is an inevitable fact - planning something like this costs money - and she cannot ignore it forever. It's just so daunting. They want to put every bit of their savings towards the baby and Percy's college course which he will start next August. She wants to have this wedding more than anything, but as reality trickles its way into their plans, Annabeth has doubts as to whether this is the right thing to do. Is she being irrational, wanting this? Is it just pregnancy brain pushing for a wedding when she and Percy are already married?

"Speaking of which," Sally says, causing Annabeth for a moment to panic that she'd been voicing her concerns aloud, "Paul and I had dinner with your parents last night, Annabeth."

"You did?" she and Percy question.

"Mmhmm. We came to the agreement that we'll go fifty, fifty. Everything straight down the middle."

Annabeth blinks at her. Sally smiles back as if what she's just says makes perfect sense; like she's just told them that grass is green and her cookies are blue.

"Wait, what?" Percy asks.

Sally raises her eyebrows. "The wedding. Frederick was all for paying for it in full - something about tradition for the father of the bride to pay - but that's ridiculous. Paul and I insisted, we want to contribute to this too."

"Mom," Percy says in a small voice, "are you saying that you're offering to pay for the wedding?"

Sally looks between the two of them like they've gone mad. "Of course. We're not going to let you two pay for it when you have a baby on the way and Percy, honey, you're starting college next year. You need to save what you can."

Annabeth and Percy both begin to protest, but Sally closes a hand over Percy's on the table, effectively silencing them both.

"Sweetheart, you gave up so much of your childhood to help me. Let me do this for you."

The words tape Annabeth's mouth shut as she watches her husband struggle between gratitude and reluctance ~. He turns his mother's hand over in his and rubs his thumb across her knuckles and Annabeth sees the love between them; a family bond she's never had with her own mother and she almost feels a twinge of jealousy until Sally's eyes find hers. Sally Jackson looks at her like she has given her the world. Annabeth has made her son happy, and that's all Sally has ever wanted.

The thing is, Percy and Sally have given Annabeth the world too.

“This will be cold.”

Despite the warning, Annabeth still flinches as the Sonographer squeezes some gel onto her slightly protruding belly. Percy presses his grin to her knuckles; he sits in the chair next to her bed, knee jumping like a jackhammer.

As the woman in pink scrubs presses the ultrasound wand to Annabeth’s belly, she watches the fuzzy screen and tells them what to expect.

“It’s your first scan, so I should be able to tell you how far along you are accurately and, if we’re lucky, we’ll get a sex. It’s up to you whether you want to know that or not.”

Annabeth looks over at Percy even though they’ve already discussed this. He nods, still smiling into her hand, and she tells the woman that yes, they do want to know.

“Okay. I’ll just wait for this image to clear up and hopefully we should get...”

She trails off and for a moment, Annabeth’s heart sinks as the worst possibility flashes through her mind. And it’s in that moment, that tiny, impossible moment, that she realises just how much she wants this baby; how much she already loves him or her. The prospect of losing her baby before she can even hold it makes her blood run cold in her veins.

But the silence is warmed by a strange thrumming coming from the machine.

“What’s that?” Percy asks. Annabeth is grateful, her voice is trapped somewhere in her throat.

The sonographer smiles at him. “That’s your daughter’s heartbeat.”

“Oh my god.”

“Oh my god.”

“Daughter?”

He looks at Annabeth, squeezing her hand almost too tight and smiling at her like his cheeks might burst. A baby girl, with Percy’s hair and Percy’s eyes and Percy’s smile. Annabeth hopes she gets them all; all of his beauty and wonder and happiness; all of his hope and his love and boundless energy.

“And...”

The Sonographer starts and doesn't finish and it's enough to get Annabeth's heart racing again.

"And?" she asks impatiently. Percy pats her arm.

The woman glances up at them and then back at the screen as she moves the wand across Annabeth's belly again.

"And this... is your son's heartbeat."

It takes a full ten seconds of the new thrumming filling the room before either of them speak.

"We're having twins?" Annabeth asks, voice breathless.

"You're having twins," she confirms.

Twenty minutes later, they are walking out of the clinic, clutching images of their unborn babies.

Babies.

As in plural.

As in more than the one they had been expecting and preparing for.

"It's kind of a relief, you know," Percy was saying though Annabeth couldn't really summon the energy to listen properly. "I thought I wanted a boy but when she said girl I nearly started crying right there. But now we get both! And I'm picturing a boy and a girl with curly blonde hair and holy crap we're gonna have cute kids and Annabeth you're staring, are you okay?"

He's gripping her shoulders tightly by the end of his ramble as she stares somewhere around the vicinity of his throat. She watches his Adam's apple bob and tries to collect her thoughts. Part of her recognises the excitement in Percy's voice and wants to join in with it, but the rest of her is in full panic mode.

She's been preparing herself to look after one other human being; she could share that burden with Percy without losing her sanity. But two, two human beings completely in their care and relying on them literally to survive, is too much.

"We're not going to sleep for five years," she mutters.

Percy expels a relieved breath which makes Annabeth wonder how long she's been silent for. "Annabeth."

"Two babies, at the same time. We're going to have to double up on everything, for the rest of their lives. And I read this article about twins having more self-esteem and identity problems than only children."

"Well, speaking as an only child I can tell you that's probably bullshit."

“Be serious, Percy.”

He frowns. “I am being serious. These are our children, how can I not be serious about this?”

Annabeth finds herself throwing her arms up in frustration. “Well you don’t seem to be grasping the magnitude of the situation. Having a baby is a huge responsibility, but two, two children is... I mean, how the hell are we going to do this? We’re twenty three years old, how can we be expected to look after two children?”

“Annabeth,” he says, his voice softer than before.

She looks up at him. “How are we going to manage this?”

One of his hands goes to her belly as the other curls around the back of her neck, pulling her forward so that their foreheads touch. “The same way we manage everything,” he says gently, “together.”

“Percy--”

“Annabeth, these are our babies. They’re going to be more work than we can probably manage and I’m going to ask my mom to move in with us - like, forever.” This pulls a short laugh out of her, a breath which falls away as white mist between them, and he smiles. “But we will love them so much. Trust me, I’m freaking out - probably more than you are - but I’m holding onto the fact that our kids are going to be awesome because they’re our kids and you, Annabeth, are going to be an amazing mom.”

Annabeth lets him hold her a little longer, leaning into his warmth as the cold December surrounds them. She lets his words settle over her and steady her racing heart.

“Sorry,” she says, feeling a little calmer as his hands hold her.

Percy kisses her nose and draws away. “It’s okay,” he says.

Annabeth pulls his arm over her shoulders as they begin to walk through the parking lot, nestling against his side. “You’re really freaking out too? Because this whole calm exterior thing is pretty deceiving.”

He side-eyes her, grinning. “That’s because I’m internally high fiving myself for creating two spawn at once. I mean, that’s like, bonus points, right?”

Christmas Eve descends upon them with snow and good company. Annabeth opens the door to Piper’s enormous belly and kisses her cheek before she waddles into the apartment; Jason follows with a bottle of wine and a slightly harried look about him. Annabeth remembers this well from when Piper was pregnant with Leela. Near the due date, Jason goes hyperactive,

fretting about every little thing and following Piper around like a mother hen. It's adorable really, only Piper doesn't seem to think so.

Annabeth accepts the bottle of wine from him and steps aside to let him into the apartment.

"You look great," he says.

"Apparently I'm glowing." She tilts her head to the side like a model.

"Positively." He kisses her forehead and looks at her more seriously. "I'm happy for you, Annabeth. You deserve this."

She actually feels her eyes well up before she slaps his arm lightly and shoos him away.

"Don't you know better than to say mushy stuff to pregnant women by now? Go and find your wife."

He grins at her and walks down the hallway towards the sound of Percy's voice. She closes the door and follows a moment later, greeted in her living room by laughter. Annabeth hands the bottle to Percy to store in the fridge and sits down next to Hazel on the couch.

"What's so funny?" she asks, picking up her glass of lemonade.

Across the room, Will wipes his eyes and points a finger at Piper who rolls her eyes and shakes her head at Annabeth. "I'm a Weeble Wobble."

"Excuse me?"

"You know, those toys you had as a kid, shaped like eggs. *Weebles wobble but they don't fall down*," she sings, tilting her body from side to side and bringing on a new round of laughter.

As it falls away, leaving a quiet Christmas song humming from the speakers in the kitchen to fill the space, the doorbell rings again. This time, Percy goes to answer it and Annabeth is grateful because they all know who is waiting on the other side. She shifts closer to Hazel as subtly as she can and catches Nico's eye across the room, he's watching his sister with a slightly pained expression until he looks at Annabeth.

Will moves closer to his husband and places a hand on his wrist. "Annabeth," he says, drawing the room's attention, "the apartment looks great."

She smiles. "Thank you. It took us forever because Percy couldn't decide where he wanted things to go."

"Excuse me, Mrs Jackson," Percy says as he re-enters the room with a sheepish looking Frank on his tail, "but who's the one who made me shift that damn tree around for an hour?"

"That's not my name yet," she retorts, refusing to acknowledge the rest of his sentence.

He grins at her. "I know, I just like saying it."

"You two are disgusting," Leo comments. "Hey Frank."

Frank looks up and smiles tightly. Percy claps him on the shoulder. "I'll get you a beer."

"Oh, not for me. I'll just take a coke or something, thanks."

Percy's eyebrows rise just a little and he nods. "Sure, man. One coke, coming up."

As Percy disappears into the kitchen the group falls back into a conversation and Annabeth rises from her seat, giving Hazel's forearm a quick squeeze before she goes. She passes Frank on the way and reaches up to kiss his cheek.

"It's good to see you," she says.

He nods. "You too. You look great."

"And you." It's not quite the truth and they both know it, but he looks better than the last time she'd seen him.

Annabeth finds Percy in the kitchen, leaning up against the sink with a dazed expression on his face.

"You okay in here?" she asks, jolting him from reverie.

He blinks at her. "Hm? Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

She crosses to him, placing her hands on his hips as she looks up at his face. "You sure about that?"

He draws in a breath and nods, smiling just so. "Frank's never been a big drinker but... I don't know, I just wasn't expecting the no alcohol thing. Especially after... you know."

She nods, tucking her thumbs under his sweater and rubbing them over the skin at the waistband of his jeans. "I know. It's a good thing though, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah it is. It just..." He rakes a hand through his hair. "It just reminds me how much has changed for those two."

"I know, but they're moving forward. And it's going to take time, but I think they can be friends."

Percy looks down at her. "Could you do that? If it were you and me?"

Her chest burns uncomfortably at the idea. She opens her mouth a few times to answer but struggles for the words.

"I just know that I'd try to keep you in my life," she decides on eventually, "in whatever capacity."

"Fuck, that would hurt. Being around you and not with you."

She nods. "It would." She listens to the sound of their friends in the next room and sighs, tapping his hips. "Come on, we're being horrible hosts."

Before she can slip away, Percy leans forward to capture her lips. She can feel a hint of urgency in the hardness of his mouth and she leans into him, trying to soothe his worry. When her mouth leaves his, he offers a small smile which she returns.

"I'll be through in a minute," he says, "the food's nearly ready."

"Okay." She crosses to the fridge for Frank's drink, feeling colder as she leaves him.

With Frank and Jason's help, Percy brings the magnificent array of food to the table just five minutes later.

"Fuck, that smells like food sex," Leo groans in appreciation.

"Hey, there are baby ears at the table," Jason complains, pausing as he passes his wife's seat and clamping his hands over her belly.

"Sweetie, I'm pretty sure you're covering the baby's ass," Piper says.

Jason kisses the top of her head and lets her go, moving to sit between Annabeth and Will.

"Where's the birthed one anyway?" Percy asks as they all start serving themselves.

At this point, Annabeth is just grateful that he didn't call Leela a spawn in front of Jason and Piper. As it is, Jason just rolls his eyes.

"Leela is with her aunt tonight."

It makes Annabeth happy to hear the note of pride in his voice when speaking about his sister. Thalia has been spending a lot of time in the Grace household as of late; she looked after Leela for a week last month when Piper and Jason took a well needed break to one of Piper's father's homes - a babymoon, Annabeth had called it. For whatever reason, be it regret for missing so much of her brother's life, or her immediate liking to Leela, or the fact that she will soon be aunt to another niece, Thalia is stepping up in a big way.

She's still difficult and a pain in the ass to be around a lot of the time, but Annabeth loves that she is around again; loves seeing her with Jason again. It's put new life into him, having his sister back.

It's after they've stuffed themselves with Percy's delicious food and are sitting at the table, waiting to be hungry enough for dessert that the topic of Jason's sister arises again.

"How is Thalia?" Hazel asks, taking a sip of wine. "After the hospital?"

Annabeth notices the hesitation in Hazel's question, how she didn't mention the cause of Thalia's stint in the hospital. And she finds it strange how, as a group, they have never

discussed timers, or even the concept of a soulmate. It's almost a taboo amongst them.

"She's good," Jason answers. "Had her bandages off a few weeks ago."

"Just out of curiosity," Leo says, pointing a fork at the group in general, "how long's she got left on the old ticker?"

Hazel actually clutches a hand to her chest. "Leo, you can't ask that!" she admonishes.

"What? It's a completely innocent question."

Percy joins in. "Nah, bro. I think it's one of those questions you don't ask women; like, how much they weigh and if they're in the red."

Annabeth glares at him. "Don't make me regret carrying your spawns."

He grins at her use of his nickname. "Yes, dear."

Annabeth looks at Leo. "Anyway, you're one to talk." She nods at his duct tape covered wrist. "What does yours say?"

Leo looks taken aback, which is a first. And Annabeth thinks she's overstepped, pushed too far and crackled awkwardness into the situation. But then Leo speaks up.

"I dunno, keep it covered, don't I?" She can tell he's trying to keep his tone light but there is heavy tension behind it.

"Mind if I ask why?" Nico asks. "I've always wondered."

There's a shift in the atmosphere as they all look at Leo.

He sighs. "It won't settle. Never has; since the day it was put in me it's been changing." He puts down his drink and pulls his sleeve back and then slowly drags the duct tape away from his skin. Annabeth can't help but lean forward in her seat to get a look. The numbers flit like the pictures in a slot machine. They settle for twenty seconds at most, and then change again. "I used to think they would settle on one time, you know? I used to check it all the goddamn time. But then I realised I was wasting my life staring at a bunch of numbers that are never gonna give me an answer. So I keep it covered." With that, he covers it again.

"That's..." Jason starts.

"That's shit," Piper finishes. "I'm sorry, Leo."

He shrugs, tucking into his food again.

"Don't you ever get curious?" Frank asks with genuine interest. "That it might have settled and you've missed meeting your soulmate?"

"I have to change the tape every now and then so I look then, but it's not going to. It hasn't in the past twenty one years of my life, so why would it now?"

“So does that mean that you have several possible soulmates, or that the circumstances of you meeting your one soulmate keeps changing?” Will asks.

Leo shrugs, picking up his beer. “Got me.”

“D’you think you can have more than one soulmate?” Percy asks, glancing at Hazel.

“What, like, at one time?” Leo asks, wiggling his eyebrows. “I like the sound of that.”

Piper leans forward, grinning. “Even if it was two guys, one girl?”

They all laugh at Leo’s pulled face and Annabeth pulls herself taller in her chair to make herself heard. “I don’t think that would work anyway, the whole polygamy thing. Not only would it be extremely unlikely for three, or more, people who are supposed to build life together to meet at the same exact moment for their timers to be the same. But I don’t really think it would be something our government would encourage, or even allow to happen. What with their slogan being about the wholesome American family and all.”

She’s amazed at how good it feels to voice these things with her friends, with someone other than fellow protesters or Percy. And she’s amazed further at how her words don’t shut the situation down into awkward silence. They all look interested, Will even leans forward in his seat, narrowly missing dipping his elbow in Cranberry sauce.

“You think the government can influence timers?”

She shrugs. “They’re the ones who put them into us, aren’t they?”

“So you think the government manipulates who our soulmates are?” Frank’s voice is hushed like he’s afraid someone is listening into their conversation.

“I don’t know,” Annabeth says honestly, “possibly. God knows, they control everything else.”

“I think...” Percy starts and Annabeth looks at him in what she hopes is an encouraging way. He smiles back. “I think our timers show who our soul mate could be. Like, Annabeth is my soulmate, but if both of our lives went a different way, maybe we wouldn’t work together like we do.”

Piper was nodding. “It’s all luck. I think the timers lead us to someone who *could* be our soulmate when we’re born, but stuff happens in life and we change. So the person we’re supposed to be with might not be suitable for us when we’ve grown up and become a different person.”

Jason is looking at her like she’s just dropped out of space. “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

She looks over at him earnestly. “We made it work. We were lucky.”

“Lucky,” Frank echoes, and Annabeth doesn’t have to strain to hear the bitterness in his voice.

“It could be more than that,” Annabeth goes on. “What if your timer leads you to someone who makes a significant impact on your life? What if they misinterpreted what it meant when

they first discovered it?"

"And now we're stuck with a broken system," Leo muses.

"That could be why yours changes so much," Nico says, nodding at Leo's wrist.

"Could be."

"Wait, wait." Jason holds his hands up. "This is all sounding pretty conspiracy theory...esque."

Piper raises her eyebrows. "The day we're born, we have a machine attached to our wrists which essentially decide what will happen to us for the rest of our lives. I'd say that merits some conspiracy theories."

"They don't decide everything about our lives," Hazel argues, "just who we'll end up with. There's more to life than that."

On the other side of the table, Frank's eyebrows pull up. "Who you're going to have a family with and when you're going to meet them is a pretty big part of your life."

"But it's not everything..."

Annabeth doesn't hear the rest of Hazel's sentence or Frank's response to it, if there is one, because Leo's voice drowns it out as he argues with Piper. Is it an argument? Or a heated discussion? It feels fairly heated to her. She's just glad Thalia isn't here.

"But what I'm saying is that we don't even *know* what a soulmate is. It's a subjective matter."

Annabeth joins in, feeling a pump of adrenaline through her system. It's been so long since she's been in a debate - she was on her college team and was reprimanded a few times for 'over enthusiasm'.

"He's got a point. Up until the timers came to light, a 'soulmate' didn't have a definitive meaning. The one we have now was sanctioned by the government, but who's to say that's correct?"

"Well what would you define it as?" Jason asks, looking a little flustered at the direction the conversation has taken.

She shrugs.

"Your other half," Percy offers, and Annabeth can't help but share a smile with him. Of course he would say that, he's always believed in soulmates and he believes with all of his heart that Annabeth is his other half in this life. She might not solidly agree with his opinions on the matter, but she does believe he makes her whole.

"Someone who *could* be your other half," Nico says.

“Exactly!” Piper points at him enthusiastically. “This is what I’m saying! Because relationships don’t just happen, you have to work at them. Hell, we all know that. So what if your timer leads you to someone who has the *potential* to be your soulmate but might not necessarily be the person you’re supposed to spend your life with?”

“But that could be more than one person,” Jason argues, looking like the little boy who used to argue with his sister, the scar on his lip twitches as he frowns at his wife. “Maybe the timers lead you to the person who you will make it work with. So you bypass those other people who could possibly have been the one but, for some reason, it wouldn’t have worked out with?”

Piper tilts her head to the side. “Possibly,” she says, but she glances at Hazel and Frank, whose discussion has dropped, and it’s then that the atmosphere shifts.

Jason’s cheeks burn, he looks like he wants to blurt out an apology and bury his head in the sand all at once.

“I mean, it’s just a theory,” he mumbles.

Piper gasps. Jason is up before Annabeth can even turn her head to look at her friend.

“Piper? What’s wrong?”

She’s staring, wide-eyed, at Annabeth as Jason hurries around the table to reach her. “My water just broke. Oh my god, my water just broke all over your chair,” she says, looking horrified.

Annabeth chokes a laugh, rising from her chair along with the others. “Piper, you’re going into labour, I don’t give two shits about our upholstery.”

There is a flurry of action as they all rise from the table and fluster around Piper who is presently more concerned with the mess she has left on the chair. Annabeth reassures her that it’s fine and ushers her into the living room as the others find something to occupy themselves. Half of them wind up clearing the table as the others sit in the living room with Piper and postpone calling a taxi.

“We’re supposed to wait an hour,” Piper says, sounding extraordinarily calm for a woman in labour. “My contractions should be five minutes apart.”

“Pipes,” Jason says, holding her hand as he sits next to her on the loveseat and rubs small circles on her lower back, “second pregnancies go faster, remember? And who knows how long it will take us to get there, and we don’t even have your overnight bag--”

Piper places a hand on his knee. “We’ll call Thalia and ask her to bring my bag. And I know it’ll be faster but my first contraction was, like twenty minutes ago.”

He checks his watch. “Twenty three minutes ago.”

“Oh my *god*.”

“Piper, maybe if I call a taxi, everyone would be a little calmer.” Annabeth is referring to Jason, but he doesn’t need to hear that out loud.

Piper groans as another contraction sweeps in and she clutches Jason’s hand. They are a practiced team at this; he tells her to breathe and rubs her back and she puffs her way through another contraction, squeezing his hand so tight it looks like she might break a finger. Annabeth hopes she and Percy will cope as well when it’s time for her to go into labour.

“Okay,” Piper breathes, “call the damn taxi.”

Annabeth scrambles for her phone and calls for three separate taxis to take them to the hospital. When she hangs up she calls Thalia, asking her to meet them at the hospital with Leela and Piper’s overnight bag. And then they are all in motion again.

“Jeez, pushing out a kid sounds painful. You sure you want to do this, Annabeth?”

Annabeth narrows her eyes at Leo and shifts in the uncomfortable plastic seat. They’ve been in the waiting room of this hospital for an hour as the distant sounds of wailing women echo down the halls. They haven’t seen Piper and Jason since they were escorted down one of those halls after they arrived. Beside her, Percy is fidgeting. She settles a hand on his bouncing knee and raises an eyebrow at him.

“Sorry,” he murmurs.

“Where’s your head, daydreamer?”

He looks at her and shrugs. “Nothing. I don’t know, stuff. This is going to be us in, what? Six months.”

She smiles and leans into him, resting her head on his shoulder. It’s then that Thalia arrives, bustling in with an enormous bag on her shoulder and a sleepy Leela in hand. Percy and Annabeth both stand to greet them. While Percy scoops up Leela into his arms and moves to sit down again, Annabeth walks with Thalia down the hall towards where Piper had been escorted off to.

Once they find Piper and Jason, drop the bag off and give a brief round of hugs, they are out of the room again and wondering down the hall together. They find themselves in front of a glass panel behind which lie an array of cots with sleeping babies.

“So,” Thalia says, “you’re double knocked up then?”

Annabeth rolls her eyes. “If that’s your way of asking if I’m having twins, then yes, I am.”

Thalia leans against the wall, staring through the glass at the sleeping babies. “So Percy’s dick has power boost technology, who would have guessed?”

Annabeth chokes on air. “Thalia.”

“Oh come on, you’re too mature for dick jokes now that you’re having a baby?”

“Two babies,” Annabeth corrects and catches Thalia’s slight smile before her face falls into a frown. “What?” Annabeth asks.

Thalia shakes her head and stares at the sleeping babies.

“Thalia. Just say whatever you need to say.”

She shakes her head just slightly. “You’re starting a family. I guess you’re a model citizen now.”

Annabeth sighs. “Do we really have to do this?”

Thalia keeps staring at the glass, Annabeth wonders what she sees; the babies - innocent and new to the world - on the other side, or her own reflection - aged with bitterness and disappointment.

“How long ago did you get the order?”

“The order for what?” Annabeth asks, exhausted.

“To get knocked up.”

“I didn’t. We didn’t.” Thalia looks up at her now and Annabeth steps towards her, expressing her words in earnest. “I made this choice, Thalia. Not the government, not our councillor. Percy and I.”

“Did you?” she questions, crossing her arms over her chest. “You knew you’d be getting the damn order soon enough so isn’t this-” She gestures to Annabeth’s stomach. “-just you pre-empting it?”

Annabeth feels herself stiffen and takes a step back. Thalia’s words ring through her, shaking her like a bell and she hears some truth in them. If the laws were not in place and everything in her life was absolutely her choice, then she wouldn’t want to start a family until she was at least twenty five. She’d build her career first, maybe she would travel, explore this world before settling down.

But that is not the world she lives in. She lives in a world of restricted choices and stolen time; and she must do with it what she can.

As her resolve threatens to shake, Annabeth places a hand on her stomach. No. She chose this, she wants this.

“Thalia, I love Percy.”

“I know you lo--”

“No, listen to me. I did choose this. I could have waited and pushed him away and our marriage might have been annulled and I would have carried on life as before. But I chose to let him in and now I love him, and I chose to start a family with him.”

Thalia won't meet her eye. Annabeth steps closer and takes her shoulders, waiting until her friend looks up.

“I want you to be part of my kids' lives, Grace. I want you to babysit them and be their cool auntie Thalia and help them look cool in their punk phases.”

That pulls a laugh out of Thalia and Annabeth grins at her. “Be happy for me, okay? Because I'm happy.”

Thalia stares at her, blue eyes bright and sharp. And slowly, she nods. “Okay, Bee. I'll be here.”

And for now, that's all she needs to hear.

It's half past four in the morning when Annabeth finds herself alone in the tiny waiting room; the others have gone off to find some form of entertainment as they wait for Piper to birth the spawn. She opens her eyes at the sound of squeaking and sees Percy's sneakers walking across the linoleum floor towards her. He's carrying a styrofoam cup in hand and he looks exhausted; hair all over the place and drooping eyelids. Annabeth wants to kiss him but she settles for smiling warmly as he takes a seat next to her.

“Before you say anything, you can't be jealous of this coffee because it tastes like tar and old socks.”

Annabeth laughs. “It does smell pretty weird.”

He puts it down on the floor and tucks his arm around her shoulder. Annabeth leans into him, letting her eyes close to the sound of Percy's steady breathing.

“Merry Christmas,” she murmurs.

Percy chuckles and kisses her hair. “Merry Christmas, Annabeth.”

Annabeth could fall asleep to the feeling of Percy's thumb stroking her neck, the warmth of his body next to hers in the cold room. But he moves, nudging her off his shoulder and standing up. Annabeth frowns at him as he stands above her, looking suddenly sheepish.

“What?” she asks.

Percy quirks a little smile. “This was supposed to be romantic. Like, sweep you off your pregnancy swollen feet, romantic.”

“Percy...”

She trails off as he gets down on one knee. “In case you didn’t already know this about me, I’m pretty impatient, so I can’t wait to do this any longer. And since this is one of my Christmas presents to you, and it’s technically Christmas, you can have it now.”

“What?”

He looks up at her and smiles, reaching into his jacket pocket and withdrawing a little red box. Annabeth’s breath catches because it can’t be, he can’t really be...

“I know we’ve already done this,” he says, “and we’ve done everything in the wrong order, but I’m happy with my lot. I’m so happy to have you in my life, Annabeth. And I’m so lucky.” He opens the box and sitting there, in folds of velvet, is a gold ring with a diamond settled into the middle of the band. Just like those from the movies. Annabeth blames the pregnancy hormones on the tears welling in her eyes. “Will you marry me?” he asks her quietly. “Again?”

She all but falls out of the chair to wrap her arms around his neck and press herself to him. She draws away, on her knees in front of him, and takes his face between her hands. “I’m the lucky one,” she whispers. “Yes, I’ll marry you again, you goofball.”

He grins at her and pulls her left hand from his face. She watches as he slides the ring onto her wedding finger, where it will stay, for the rest of her life.

Chapter End Notes

A/N

so this is my final chapter :(I can’t believe it’s finally come. I’m so sad to let this fic go because it’s been such a joy to write. I can only apologise for the ridiculous length of this chapter, but there were so many things that I wanted to include.

I just want to add here how grateful Rachel and I have been for your enthusiasm. With your help, this world has grown bigger than either of us imagined and as a result, we’re going to be novelising this world with our own characters.

I also have to admit that much of the ‘soulmate discussion’ between the group over dinner comes from insights from readers, especially that of my awesome friend, Dan (son-of-rome on tumblr), as well as discussions between Rachel and I on the topic.

another admission. yes the last scene is somewhat inspired by Chuck, because he and Percy are both loveable dorks in love with beautiful, smart, blonde women (what can i say? i have a type)

so yes, good bye and thank you!! see you next Sunday with the final chapter which will also serve as the epilogue :) xx

I wanna live with you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Percy used to look up at skies like these and call them gray.

He had always missed the different colors that could be splashed among the gray strands of a sky like this one. Sometimes, when the house is quiet and there's nothing else to do, he hunts for those colors in Annabeth's eyes. And when the sky is like this, all misty and shadowy and seemingly nondescript, Percy can find the darker and lighter pieces of blue and gray that he often locates within the eyes of his wife.

Perhaps, if Percy had been paying attention for the first twenty-two years of his life, he would have been able to pick out the different grays in a world that had seemed colorless to him. But he had been so busy searching for something that hadn't existed, and he had never stopped to kick puddles on rainy days and see the different pinks and blues that accompanied his image in the rippling water.

Back then, his reflection had seemed like nothing without his soul mate's next to him. Now, his reflection would seem like nothing without Annabeth Jackson.

The difference between these two things is not lost on him-- will never be lost on him. Never again.

"Did I tell you that I love you at any point today?" Percy questions, tilting his head to the side and frowning. His wife of seven years is standing behind him, her arms wrapped around his torso, her chin on his shoulder. She's equal in height to him with the slight heel on the boots that she's wearing, so when she presses her cold cheek against his, he's able to simply close his eyes and nuzzle softly against her.

"Hmmm," replies Annabeth, speaking just loud enough that he can hear her over the raucous children on the playground. "I think you said it this morning. After I poured coffee into your mug and before you poured it all over your shirt."

“Well, that’s a prime timeslot.”

“Oh, I know. I feel very privileged.”

He turns his head to make a silly face at her and is rewarded with a kiss on his nose. Annabeth leans in closer, so that their noses are pressed together, and says, “I love you too,” before pushing his new glasses further up, pressing the bridge against the spot between his eyes. The thick black frames are new, and he isn’t quite used to the way they slide down his nose. But Annabeth loves them, and that makes Percy want to wear them every moment of every day, even if he only truly needs them for reading.

Percy is pretty sure that Annabeth is hoping his eyes will get steadily worse until he’s forced to wear the glasses constantly. She denies it when he asks, though, and won’t stop protesting even when he tickles her. Which doesn’t really mean much, except for showing that she feels bad about desiring optical misfortune for him.

“How was work yesterday?”

Percy wrinkles his nose and heaves an exaggerated sigh, letting his warm breath mingle in the cool winter air. Annabeth brings her hands up to his mouth and smirks.

“Put your annoyance to good use, will you?”

Dutifully, he blows hot air onto her cold hands.

“Work wasn’t awful,” he says between huffs. “I’m just having a hard time with this one couple. I need them to be honest with me, but they’re still treating me like I’m the enemy, not like I’m the only person in that entire building who has the power to help them.”

“I think that people who are against the Timers often feel like it’s them against the world,” Annabeth says mildly, her eyes searching the playground. When she spots Nova, she smiles and waves. The girl returns the wave before refocusing herself on Ben, tousling his dark-hair playfully before giving him another push on the swing. The dark-haired boy screeches in

delight, kicking his tiny feet in the air. “Even though they don’t always feel congruent with each other, ironically enough.”

“I know that you’re right,” Percy admits. “*I know*. It’s just... getting them to see that in themselves seems impossible when I have to monitor what I say to them so carefully. I can’t just run my mouth about the Timer laws and how they’ve changed over the years and how-”

“Daddy! Mommy!”

Percy manages to open his arms just in time to catch the seven-year-old bundle that is running at him. Sophie is tiny, but she tends to forget the fact that she isn’t a toddler anymore, and Percy can’t help but grunt loudly when his little girl catapults herself into his chest.

“Hey, sweetie,” Annabeth says, trying not to laugh. “Are you having fun?”

Sophie nods vigorously.

“I am,” she says, green eyes bright with enthusiasm. Her arms are wrapped around Percy’s neck, swinging her feet back and forth from where she dangles, but he’s used to this by now. Sophie is a daddy’s girl, and they seem to go through this exercise every time he gets home from work. He just makes sure that he doesn’t tug on any of her waist-length blond hair as he secures her into place against him. “But guess what?”

Percy can’t help the smile that plays at his lips as he stares down at his baby girl.

“What?” he asks, scrunching up his eyes at her and straightening his mouth in a serious manner. Sophie starts to giggle, and when Percy looks down, he sees Annabeth tickling her side playfully. Their eyes meet and Percy just grins at her cruelty.

“Mommy, stop! I don’t want you to be *tickling* me when I meet my soulmate!”

The smile slips from Annabeth's face immediately.

"What, honey?"

"My soulmate," repeats Sophie, releasing herself from Percy's neck and letting him place her on the ground. "My Timer said that I had *three whole minutes*, so I went to find you."

Annabeth drops to her knees and pulls back the decorative cover that stores started selling for Timers a few years ago. Some people had begun to prefer not having to stare at the numbers all day, every day, letting the digital numbers tick them off into insanity. Some people had decided that they'd rather be adventurous and not let numbers dictate what they did and where they went in their final 24 hours. It had become stylish for people to cover their Timers when they weren't zeroed-out yet. Percy and Annabeth had bought Sophie a cover simply because she claimed that all of her classmates had them and she wanted one too, but they had both admitted that it was a relief to not have to see the numbers so constantly.

They hadn't checked it in a while, except when they bought Sophie a new cover for Christmas once, and for her seventh birthday the following year. The most current one is brown with small turquoise polka-dots. Sophie had picked it out herself.

There are only a few minutes left on Sophie's clock, and suddenly Percy wishes that they had prepared themselves a little more. From the desperate look on Annabeth's face, he knows that she wishes the same. They had known that this was coming, but Percy knows that he's as stunned as Annabeth looks, and he also knows that it's their fault. God, they should have talked to Sophie about it first! They should have told her their story; made sure she knew that hers would end just as happily as theirs did.

At least she doesn't have to get married-- not right now. At least she'll have time to fall in love with her soulmate before they are shoved together for the rest of their lives. Although, Percy will be the first to admit that, if he doesn't like his daughter's in-laws, he's sneaking his family out of the country and that is that.

"Who do you think it is?" his little girl is saying, standing on her toes and bouncing excitedly. Annabeth buries her face in her free hand, still crouched on the ground despite the fact that Sophie is fidgeting to get out of her grasp.

Percy leans down to his wife and takes her by the elbow, pulling her up to him.

“It’s going to be okay,” he murmurs in her ear, but she’s shaking and he knows that he can’t fix this for her. He can’t give her more time.

“Where’s Ben?” she asks dazedly. “And Nova? I told Piper and Jason that I would watch Nova while they took Leela to the... I need... we should... they-”

It’s too overwhelming to think about his own feelings, so Percy focuses on keeping Annabeth’s in check. He wraps her hand in his as they stand behind Sophie, who is searching the playground happily.

“She has no idea,” Percy whispers, staring at their daughter. He looks up at Annabeth, and when he meets her eyes, he finds that they are wide and terrified. “She’s too young to understand what an entire lifetime with someone means.”

He closes his eyes at the high pitched beep.

“What is that beeping noise, and how do I make it stop?”

Annabeth pauses, her paint roller pressed firmly against the wall, and turns around to look at Percy.

“That,” she says, “is the beep of me meeting my new soulmate, who is excited at the sound of corn dogs being ready, unlike the swine that I am married to currently.”

Percy’s eyes widen.

“Holy fuck, there are *corn dogs*?”

“THAT’S THE SPIRIT!” Annabeth yells after him as he runs into the kitchen.

It is a mark of how much Percy loves Annabeth that he waits until he gets back into the nursery to eat his corn dog. They sit on the floor, munch on their food, and stare at the blank wall that is in front of him.

“So, given the fact that this bedroom has to be gender neutral, I’m thinking that we forgo the turquoise paint that we bought and switch to pink,” says Percy thoughtfully.

“I hate pink. I’m not rocking our children to sleep in a pink bedroom every night,” Annabeth tells him, swatting him on the arm with the hand that is not holding up her corn dog.

“It was just a suggestion,” says Percy lightly. “A *good* suggestion, I might add.”

Annabeth spares him one disdainful look before slapping her leg and starting to stand up.

“Get up,” she directs. “It’s time to paint.”

With a loud groan, Percy uncrosses his legs and uses the wall to pull himself up. He scrutinizes their small nursery and scratches his nose musingly.

“Is there any way that we can turn this into a drinking game?” Annabeth stares at him, glances down at her stomach, and then pointedly looks back up at him. “Right. You’re pregnant.”

She exchanges a sarcastic glance with Pinky, who is perched on top of one of the cribs.

“I’m so glad that one of us forgot.”

“Stop ganging up on me with *my* Pinky!” Percy teases, wrapping an arm around Annabeth’s waist and pulling her close so that he can kiss the top of her head. “I just think that it would be more fun to do this with our friends.”

“What friends?” Annabeth asks, and this time, she sounds glum. “Jason and Piper just had a baby, Hazel and Frank are friends who can barely look at each other, and Leo is... well, to be honest, I don’t really know what Leo is doing. Where is Leo? Have you seen him since the baby was born?”

“He gets on these weird engineering kicks and disappears for weeks,” says Percy, searching the floor for a paint roller. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“You have surrounded us with odd people, Mr. Jackson.”

“Yet you cannot *stop* yourself from loving me.”

Annabeth rolls her eyes.

“Ready to paint, Perce?”

He wrinkles his nose at the walls which are covered in a base coat. It had taken them long enough to do that-- applying the actual color is going to take two eternities and one small forever.

“Why do we have to paint again?”

It sounds like a question, but really, he’s whining.

“Because we want to get it done before the Honeymoon,” Annabeth recites, monotone.

“Because Piper is letting us use her dad’s house on Nantucket for two weeks so that we don’t have to be surrounded by paint fumes.”

“Well, in that case, what a thoughtful wedding gift. And here I thought we were just going to be able to bang in peace for two weeks,” Percy says lightly, eyes scouring the floor for the paint roller that he’d borrowed from Jason. When he picks it up and turns around, brandishing the paint roller in Annabeth’s direction, she is staring at him, her head tilted to the side.

“Are you nervous?” she questions, watching him closely for his reaction.

“Nervous for what? Banging?”

“No. This. Painting the nursery. We’re getting *married* tomorrow. I picked up the paperwork to change my name earlier today, and after Monday, I’m not going to be Annabeth Chase anymore.”

Percy rubs the back of his neck awkwardly, staring at the soft white carpet.

“I think I would be more nervous if we weren’t doing this. I mean... a vow renewal means something that a marriage doesn’t. It means that we love each other enough to actually make an effort. That’s more than a marriage. And ever since you brought up the idea of renewing our vows, the idea of living without doing it seems... stifling. To live with someone for the rest of your life and not want to do this with them? That’s the thing that makes me nervous. I want to raise these babies with someone who is my wife in every sense of the word, not my wife simply by marriage.”

She laughs, the sound bitter in the air. They’re on opposite sides of the room, but he feels close to her, like he could brush back some of the hair that has fallen into her eyes.

“Wife by marriage.” She sounds disgusted. “That’s equivalent of... wife-in-law. How impersonal.”

Percy shakes his head.

“Nope. Don’t think about it. Doesn’t apply to us.”

He grins at her, and Annabeth stares at him with a straight face until Percy flares his nostrils, pulls on his ears, crosses his eyes, and sticks out his tongue. After that, Annabeth can’t help but laugh. She walks into his arms and kisses him, backing him up against the wall. By the time he’s opened his eyes, she has one paint can open and is rubbing it onto the wall.

“Ready?” she asks, quirking an eyebrow as Percy gapes in amazement.

Her paint roller is narrowly missing his hair. If he were a lesser man, he would not be able to stand for this.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice at this point,” he says, ducking out of Annabeth’s arms. She laughs loudly, eyes following him as he crosses the room.

“I call this wall,” he says decisively, opening the paint can that he’d brought with him. “This is my wall.”

“Weirdo,” Annabeth snorts. She pauses. Frowns at the wall. “Is it strange of us to be doing this on the night before our wedding? Should we be doing something else? They used to have parties on the night before they got married, you know.”

“I’m not really sure if we have any other option,” Percy points out, turning towards Annabeth just in time to see her lean into the wall. Before he can warn her, Annabeth’s protruding stomach rubs up against the paint, getting his old t-shirt covered in turquoise. “All of our main ‘people’ are unavailable. Do we have any other friends?”

“That depends,” Annabeth says. “Is Grover talking to us yet?”

“Very funny.”

“I thought so, yeah.”

“I could call my mom,” Percy suggests. “We could hang out with her and Paul instead of painting tonight.”

“My god. Our life has become lonely and pathetic and we haven’t even had the kids yet.”

He doesn’t know how to stop smiling at the fact that she’s just said ‘our life,’ so he tells her that it’s because he really likes the paint color before allowing her to drag some of it onto his cheek.

They decide to paint until it is done, watching turquoise splash across their walls as the sun sinks in the sky, displaying its own set of unique colors. Percy watches it slink out of sight as he paints by the window, only turning around a few times to see the way the shadows affect Annabeth’s face.

His wife flicks on the lights at some point, and soon after that, Percy puts on the radio despite the fact that they could probably talk for hours and not run out of sarcastic things to say to each other. Annabeth sings along without realizing it, and Percy sings the most lewd and most romantic lyrics in her ear, both of which cause her to blush.

Eventually, he checks his phone and sees that it is past twelve.

“Happy wedding day,” he say quietly, showing Annabeth the screen.

She doesn’t look tired, despite the fact that they’ve been painting all night. Instead, she shakes her head, her eyes filling with tears.

“*God*,” she exclaims. “Apparently I’m not over the emotion part of the pregnancy.”

“Or maybe you’re just super happy to be marrying me,” Percy says offhandedly, already turning back to the last white section of his wall.

“Actually, you might be right,” sighs Annabeth, pausing as she scratches her head. “Have I actually gotten to the point where I can’t tell if my emotions are real emotions or hormone emotions?”

“Have I mentioned how glad I am that *I’m* not the pregnant one,” jokes Percy.

“Me too,” Annabeth says drily. “You wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

He saves his revenge for later, when they’re brushing their teeth together. Annabeth is sitting on the bathroom counter, freshly showered and in one of his old t-shirts. As she goes in to spit out her toothpaste, he ducks under and does it before she can, smirking widely as Annabeth puffs out her toothpaste-filled cheeks indignantly at him. When she finally does spit, she crosses her arms over her chest and glares until he kisses the pout off of her lips.

“Looove you,” he sings, quirking an eyebrow. Annabeth just groans and shoves him away with her open palm.

“I love you too,” she says, sounding regretful of this fact. “You big baby.”

“I am not a baby!”

“You literally just revenge-spat.”

“How did you just create a name for it?”

“I’m creative,” Annabeth shoots back quickly, keeping the fast-paced rhythm of their conversation going. Percy nods knowingly and allows her to wrap her arms around his neck, knotting her ankles together at his waist when he lifts her from the bathroom counter.

“I am so ready to go to sleep,” he tells her, stifling a yawn.

“Me too,” Annabeth says, burying her face in his cotton t-shirt. “Mmm. You smell like you.”

“Do I now?” he asks, amused.

“Mhmmm,” Annabeth moans, rubbing her nose along the length of his collar bone. “This shirt is soft. I think I’m going to spend our entire Honeymoon wearing this t-shirt.”

“And I’m going to spend our entire Honeymoon trying to get this t-shirt off of you,” promises Percy as he tugs back the covers and gently lowers Annabeth to her spot on the left side of the bed. She releases him long enough for him to walk around to the right side, then grabs his hand and pulls him back to her, lowering his mouth to hers as soon as he’s close enough.

“Goodnight, husband. See you at the alter.”

He chuckles.

“Or for breakfast.”

“Oh no. As a wedding gift to you, I’m letting you sleep in tomorrow morning.”

“What a selfless woman you are,” he says passionately, then wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her against his body. “Let me know if you have a hot flash,” he adds before tucking his chin into her neck and falling asleep.

When Percy wakes up, he is in an empty bed. As per usual, he rolls over to Annabeth’s side and buries his face in her pillow, trying to fall back asleep. But his life is never that simple, and he is quickly interrupted by a small child leaping onto his bed.

“Uncle Percy!” Leela sings, slapping his cheek. “Daddy told me to wake you up.”

“He did?” Percy’s words are smushed against his pillow.

“Yep,” giggles Leela. “He said that you wouldn’t want to wake up but you wouldn’t hit a little girl. And then he told me not to repeat that because it made him sound like a bad parent.”

“Whoops,” says Percy, lifting his head from the pillow and smiling blearily at her. “I won’t tell.”

He was totally going to tell. There was no universe in which Percy wouldn’t snatch the opportunity to rib Jason about this.

The rest of the day is an insane whirl as Percy gets tossed from place to place. He is pushed into a kitchen chair and forced to eat a breakfast that is more like lunch. Then he is pulled into the bathroom so he can take a shower, then marched out of his apartment and tossed into a borrowed car. He allows Jason, Frank, and Leo to throw him in any direction he needs to go. They have their assignments, and his is simply to listen to them.

Although, from the way they’re acting, Percy wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve got earpieces with Annabeth’s voice bleating in their ears.

At least his mom calls him while they’re in the car, which effectively calms Percy down. He can hear noise in the background, and his mom tells him that there’s a group of girls all fighting over how they should do Annabeth’s hair while Piper works silently, sticking with the hair that she and Annabeth had planned.

“Can I talk to her?” Percy asks, suddenly realizing that he hasn’t talked to Annabeth in about twelve hours, and that is totally unacceptable. But his mother just laughs in his ear and promptly hangs up the phone. “Rude,” he says, turning to Jason with a bewildered expression. “Do all the women in my life know things that I don’t know?”

Jason considers this carefully. Percy can see him ticking off the females that Percy is close to—Annabeth, Hazel, his mom, and Piper.

“Yeah, definitely,” Jason says, nodding definitively. “That’s bad luck, dude. A lifetime of always being the last to figure it out.”

“I’m going back to college in August, Jason. I think I’m the last for just about everything.”

“You’re not the last person to fall in love,” says Jason, sounding upbeat as the car pulls up at the inn. “You’re also not the first.”

“Thanks?”

“Don’t mention it.”

Jason opens the car door first, then allows the other boys to crawl out after him. Although Percy and Annabeth have visited their wedding venue a few times over the past couple of weeks, he takes a moment to study it, wanting to capture everything about what it looks like on their wedding day. As he stares, snow drops onto his lashes and clings to them, dripping down his face when he blinks.

The rooftop of the white building is lined with snow, making it look like it’s directly out of a Christmas card. It’s reasonably small, and old, but Annabeth had called it charming the first time she saw it, and Percy agrees. His mother is old friends with the owner, and they had been lucky to rent out the hall at a cheap price. As they cross the porch to the heavy front door and pull it open, Percy finds himself walking into a warmly heated building with old wooden staircases and soft red carpet which has dimmed in color over time. And he loves this place. This is the place he gets *married*.

For real this time.

“We did the decorations last night,” Frank comments casually as he takes over from Jason, leading Percy into the reception hall.

“Who did?” Percy asks, following him.

“Me, Hazel, Leo, and Piper.”

“I was at home with Nova and Leela,” Jason admits. “Nova’s too young to leave with a babysitter.”

He’s so amazed by their decorations that he doesn’t even reply. There are fairy lights strung all across the walls, unlit given the fact that it’s still light out. There are folding chairs set up for the guests, and a little table for the officiant to stand behind, and a tiny aisle for Annabeth to walk down, lined with flowers.

They’re getting married in two hours, at 3 o’clock because that’s when Annabeth thinks that the sun is prettiest, and Percy wonders if other people used to get jittery before their weddings. He’s fidgeting with his ring as he surveys the room, trying to imagine it filled with the twenty-five people that they had deemed most important to them.

In truth, he doesn’t even know *why* he’s nervous. He’s already married. He’s already living the life that he’s going to be living for the rest of his life with Annabeth.

But, in a way, this feels like one of the last things they’re ever going to do that is for themselves and not for the babies. And, because of that, he wants today to be perfect.

“You gotta change,” Leo says, slapping Percy on the back. “You can’t remarried in that hoodie.”

“C’mon, there are two rooms for us upstairs,” Jason says. “I checked in earlier today.”

It's all too easy - so easy that Percy is pretty sure something is going to go horribly, horribly wrong. They tromp up the stairs and find themselves in a small room, with all of their tuxes lined up neatly. Leo looks at his with great disdain, wrinkling his nose when Jason suggests that he put it on early.

He knows when Annabeth arrives because Frank looks down at his phone, then casually moves to stand in front of the door, looking like a bodyguard when he crosses his arms over his chest. It makes all of them laugh, and Frank turns a bit red but doesn't shift from his position until the girls are already in their room down the hall.

"You know that this is pointless, right?" Percy asks, taking the soda that Jason is handing to him. "I'm not going to burst from the room and run down the hall screaming my love for Annabeth Chase."

"Jackson," Leo says absently from where he is sitting in front of the desk and fiddling with the inside of the lamp that is there.

"What?"

"Didn't you say that the paperwork was cleared today? She's Annabeth Jackson now."

They all sort of stare at each other, slow grins blooming across each of their faces. Percy is smiling because Annabeth is now Annabeth Jackson and his friends are smiling because he looks like an idiot when he grins like this and there are guests probably on their way or just arriving his wife is down the hallway getting ready to marry him in an hour.

"In any case," Jason says, "he's not going to run after her. Percy has more self control than that."

They all glance at him, then at each other, and then there's a subtle shift as the three boys slightly move their bodies so that they are situated closer towards the door. Percy rolls his eyes and takes a seat on the bed.

“Let’s just hang out until we get called down,” he suggests. “Leo, you can tell us what you were working on when you went missing for multiple weeks.”

There isn’t a knock on the door until Frank is nearing the end of a long story about his experiences with a fish when he was six years old. Jason calls for the person to enter, and then Percy’s mom is sticking her head into the crack between the door and the frame and telling him that it’s time to go downstairs.

The staircase seems shorter on the way down than it had on the way up, and he holds tightly onto the banister for just a moment too long, his knuckles turning white. When he lets go, it’s only to step closer to his mother, who is smiling gently at him. He thinks that she can probably hear his heart beating out of his chest, or maybe she just knows him well.

“There’s just twenty-five people,” she says to him, pausing at the entrance of the room. Their guests are all murmuring among themselves, and as Percy’s eyes search the room, he suddenly realizes that he’s not at all worried about the wedding. Nope. He’s worried about the after part.

Because Annabeth’s mom is here.

“Twenty-six,” he says shakily. “Look.”

He only knows that it’s Annabeth’s mom because her hair is cascading down her back in the same princess ringlets that Percy had been so taken with the first time he had seen Annabeth. Although her hair has streaks of gray in the blond, it is cut in the same way as Annabeth’s usually is, and has been left down.

Oh *god*. He totally hasn’t been thinking about this! He’s been thinking about baby, and then babies, and then how little sex they’re going to be having once there are babies. What he hasn’t been thinking about is the fact that Annabeth hasn’t seen her mother in years, and she hadn’t even expected her mother to come when she sent out the invitation, and now Athena is sitting at their wedding with her limbs locked close to her body and her mouth set in a hard line across her face.

“Mom?”

“Yes, dear?”

“I take it back. I don’t want to be remarried.”

“What are you nervous about?” Jason asks, his voice disdainful. “Annabeth doesn’t give a damn about that woman’s opinion. It doesn’t matter whether or not she likes you. You two are *already* married.”

Now that Percy thinks about it, he’s pretty sure Jason’s opinion of him matters way more than Annabeth’s mom’s. At least in Annabeth’s eyes.

“Maybe she won’t even know that it’s you,” Leo says, trying to be helpful.

“Yeah,” Percy replies drily. “Who could the asshole standing at the end of the aisle in a suit possibly be?”

“Annabeth’s coming down in a minute,” Jason says, glancing at his phone. “You ready, Jackson?”

He taps his wrist twice, right over the Timer that lies there.

“Born ready,” he says, and there’s a twinge somewhere in the depths of his stomach for the part of him that is still mourning the boy who used to believe that. The boy who used to believe that love was manufactured by something bigger, not created by two people who chose each other in the most quiet of ways.

He waves to a few people as he walks down the aisle, purposefully avoiding the eyes of Annabeth’s mother. He wonders if she can *tell*- tell that Percy doesn’t know why she’s here and doesn’t know how to handle that fact.

“So, now’s the part when you go and stand at the end of the aisle,” Percy’s mom says gently, reaching a hand up to tousle his hair slightly. “C’mon, honey. You won’t get there by staring.”

He barely notices Annabeth’s dad saying hi to him, and her step-mom giving Percy an encouraging smile. Percy keeps his eyes focused solidly on Annabeth’s mom, and he knows that as soon as Annabeth enters the room, all she’s going to do is focus on this woman instead of focusing on what they’re doing.

It kind of stings, actually.

Except Percy tries his best to ignore it as Hazel enters the room, clad in a pretty dress and carrying a violin case. He returns her cheerful smile as she sits in a chair and starts to play. And then Hazel’s music fills the room and Leela teeters down the aisle, carelessly throwing around flower petals. They drift to the floor of the carpet that creates the aisle, occasionally landing on the knees of wedding guests when Leela throws a bit overzealously.

Piper follows her down the aisle, holding a small bunch of white flowers against her dark red dress, a proud beam still on her face as she gazes at her eldest daughter. Percy tries not to laugh when he sees Jason taking rapid pictures of the two of them on his camera phone. As soon as Piper has taken her place, his eyes dart away from their family and over to his own.

His family has just peered around the doorway and is peeking out at the audience, clutching tightly onto her small bouquet of flowers, which look like red daisies. When she sees Percy looking at her, Annabeth’s face brightens, and she walks all the way around the doorway. The guests stand up, and for a moment, Percy thinks that Annabeth is going to see her mother and panic. But she doesn’t look at the guests- she gazes at him as he stares at her, trying to control the flutter of his heart as he looks at her.

She is beautiful. She’s wearing a simple wedding dress: lace all over, with sheer sleeves that come down to her elbows. There’s a white sash just above her baby bump, which she is clutching the flowers in front of, but Percy can still see it. Her hair is down and curly, except for a braid that winds around the back, and she’s wearing more makeup than he’s ever seen her in, but not in a bad way. She’s glowing, is all. And she’s glowing at him.

He reaches out for her hand before her dad can even have the chance to offer it. Annabeth is already touching his palm by the time her father has finished kissing her cheek and nodding seriously at Percy.

They stare at each other, and suddenly Annabeth gets the giggles and Percy gets the giggles and they're both trying to stifle their laughter as the officiator makes a short speech welcoming everybody to the joining of this man and this woman. Percy kind of floats through the rest of the ceremony.

He goes back into focus when it's time to do his vows, though, and only because Frank, standing behind him, pokes him in the back to get him to pay attention to what's going on. Percy startles, and Annabeth smirks at him as he fumbles for the vows in his tux jacket.

"Okay," he says, staring hard at the page. He'd made Hazel write out the vows in her neat handwriting - right after she proofread them to make sure he didn't accidentally say something insulting - so Percy can actually read what's in front of him, which is a true blessing. "Okay. So. The thing is, usually, in vows, people divulge this information to their future spouse that the spouse didn't know. I researched. They tell a secret, or a story, or an opinion that the other person has somehow changed. But... Annabeth, the thing is, you know *everything* about me. All my little pieces... they're yours. If I somehow magically get famous, there's nobody more qualified than you to write my biography. And I would write yours. We'd sit side by side and write each other's biographies and tease each other about our progress. And I don't know when, but, at some point, that became my definition of love. Because of you. Love isn't automatic or guaranteed. It's knowing someone even when their skin gets turned inside out. I'm not whimsical about it anymore - I don't believe that everybody has the ability to fall madly in love with their soul mate. I don't even believe that you're the only person I could have ever fallen in love with. But you are the person that I fell in love with, and it's not because your name is written across my wrist. It's because of all of your good and your bad, and how they compile into this woman who takes my breath away at any random moment. I love the little things about you, and the big things. I love our friendship, and our passion, and our teasing. I love our love story, and I'm so glad it's ours. And it is. It is ours. It doesn't belong to anyone else but you and me and now these babies. And, to me, that means more than a Timer ever could."

He watches Annabeth exhale slowly and smile a watery smile that he's sure she'd blame on hormones if they were standing anywhere but at an altar getting married in front of twenty six of their closest friends and family. She turns away from him slightly to accept a piece of paper from Piper.

She unfolds the paper and takes in a breath. "Right. Tough act to follow." This gathers a few laughs from their audience and Percy grins at her, pleased. "Percy," she says, and saying his name seems to ground her. "It was never part of my plan to love you. For such a long time, the numbers on my wrist were counting down to an inevitable fate I had no wish to meet. But I had no idea that what was waiting at the end of that clock... was you; incredible, wonderful, impossible, you. And I did fall in love with you, with my eyes wide open. I don't believe that there is a bigger plan out there, I don't know about destiny or fate or what is supposed to happen to us in this life. But if there is any truth in all of that, then I believe we are only fated to do the things we would choose to do anyway. Because I choose you in every capacity there is. Whatever bigger plan there may or may not be, whatever is written on my wrist, I choose you, and I will always choose you. Because you're the unexpected love of my life, Percy Jackson."

They don't give each other rings. Instead, the officiant asks them if they promise to love and cherish and honor and respect each other, and they do.

When they kiss, Percy thinks of his first kiss with Annabeth, and how she had lunged across the room at him and thrown herself into his arms and how she hadn't known how much she would love him yet, but she did know that she could love him someday. He remembers how that felt, and when he conjures that feeling, it makes him kiss her even harder. He loves her all the more for how far they've come.

"Your hair is a mess," Annabeth mumbles against his lips as he pulls away.

"You're not helping," he teases, wiggling his eyebrows.

She pulls him back down to her and kisses him again, winding the strands around her fingers while their friends and family clap for them.

The fairy lights are turned on as they move to the part of the room set up with tables and dancing, standing in a line to wait to greet their guests. His mom and Paul welcome Annabeth to the family by hugging her warmly. Percy gets pats on the back from both of Annabeth's brothers. Piper is crying, and that makes Annabeth cry because they're both totally messed up from hormones. But that doesn't explain why Jason's crying, and then he sets off Percy, so naturally they gruffly shake hands before Percy pulls Jason into a hug.

Annabeth's mother looks too much like her daughter, almost to the point that it is overwhelming. Percy tugs Annabeth closer to him with the arm that is wrapped around her waist, squeezing as Athena approaches and Annabeth stiffens against him.

"Mom," she says, her voice shocked. "You... you're here."

Athena nods.

"I was grateful for your invitation," she says, and her voice is so controlled that Percy suddenly can't see her as Annabeth anymore. This isn't how Annabeth acts. This isn't what she sounds like. "It seems that you two are very happy."

Her eyes flicker down to Annabeth's stomach.

"Twins," Annabeth replies, answering her unasked question. "A boy and a girl."

"Oh."

Her voice is guarded, but when her eyes flit to Percy's and search his face, he realizes that she's not guarding herself against Annabeth. She's guarding herself against herself. What she has done to this child - the way she has affected her.

"You're welcome to meet them," Percy blurts out, ignoring Annabeth's incredulous look. "I... if you want. You have Annabeth's number."

She ducks her head guiltily.

"Thank you," she says. "And... have a lovely Honeymoon."

Annabeth chews on her lower lip as she watches her mother walk away.

“Okay,” she says, exhaling the word. “Okay. Was there a different way that I could have handled that?”

“Yeah,” Percy admits. “But I think you were okay.”

“I don’t know if I want her to meet the babies,” Annabeth whispers nervously.

“If she says she *wants* to meet them, would you change your mind?”

She tilts her head thoughtfully as the next person moves up in line, and he lets her continue to think as he greets the next person.

They eat dinner and all Percy can think is how badly he wants to get Annabeth on her own. He hasn’t really talked to her all day, and he doesn’t seem to have a chance to talk to her now, even as they eat dinner together. Annabeth is talking to his mom and Percy is leaning behind her to talk to Piper and everything is crazy.

Eventually, Leo speaks into the microphone and asks that they please stand on the floor to share their first dance as husband and wife. Hazel gets out her violin and plays the song that Annabeth picks and Percy spins around the floor as Annabeth nearly falls asleep on his shoulder, leaning the entire weight of her body on him. He lets her nap until the song ends, and then other people join them and there’s music spurting from the speakers, and Annabeth snaps back to earth with a start.

“Hey, wife,” Percy says, beaming at her. “You wanna get outta here?”

She frowns, smiling, and tilts her head at him.

“What do you have in mind, deviant?”

He glances around to see if anyone is watching them, but nobody is. Hazel and Frank are standing awkwardly next to each other, trying to decide if they're going to dance together. Jason and Piper are slow dancing to the fast beat, and Leela is skipping around the two of them. Nico is dancing terribly, and Will is trying to help him while roaring with unsuppressed laughter. And Thalia has her arms crossed and is glaring at Annabeth's mom, who is standing closest to the door.

Percy grabs Annabeth's wrist and tugs her towards the stairs of the inn. A few minutes later, they're tip-toeing down the stairs wrapped up in coats and hats and mittens over their wedding clothes. Annabeth has boots on, and Percy has a scarf covering his skinny black tie. They quietly open the door and shush each other as they close it as quickly as they can.

It only takes a few moments after that to rush across the street and start leaping around in the snow.

A few moments later, they're screeching with laughter as they throw snowballs at each other. Annabeth's hair begins to fall, and she doesn't even care when he tells her.

"Now it's as messy as yours," she says mischievously, and he's kind of closing his eyes and tilting his head to kiss her when she smashes a snowball over his head.

"This is too violent!" Percy pronounces. "We just got married. We need to make love, not war."

"It's too cold for that," says Annabeth flippantly.

"What? No, you freak. I mean we should create something beautiful!"

"We already made babies; isn't that enough for you, Mr. Jackson?"

“Just build a snowman with me, woman!” he hollers.

He fastens his tie around the snowman and Annabeth makes eyes and a mouth out of pebbles and they take a picture with it, grinning at his camera. When Percy pulls up the picture on his phone, checking to see what it looks like, Annabeth stands on her toes to lean over him, resting her chin on his shoulder.

“We created this,” she murmurs in his ear.

“Are you just talking about the snowman, or?”

“I love you,” she replies, ignoring his question. She kisses him, soft and long and tender and he wants to stay like this forever, just the two of them and their wedding snowman.

They only pull apart when she smashes another snowball over his head.

“I’m Sophie,” says his daughter. She doesn’t stare at her wrist. Instead, she looks at the little girl on whom her Timer had bottomed out. “It’s really nice to meet you.”

Annabeth whimpers quietly in Percy’s ear and he wraps an arm around her waist to squeeze her hip.

The little girl has her arms wound around the legs of her mother and is staring at Sophie, peering out at her from her dark brown hair. Percy watches her carefully, beginning to smile as he sees her molton brown eyes and large nose.

“Sweetie, say your name to Sophie,” her mom says, ruffling her hair tenderly. “Be polite.”

“I’m Rivka,” says the petite girl, a slow smile starting to play at her lips. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And I’m Shaina,” says her mother warmly, sticking out a hand to shake Percy and Annabeth’s. “This is my soul mate, Cormac.”

“I’m Percy,” says Percy to the little girl and her mother and father. “This is my wife, Annabeth.”

“Ben’s around here somewhere as well,” Annabeth says, speaking for the first time. She’s flustered; her cheeks are slightly flushed and she looks so intensely uncomfortable that Percy wants to extract her from the situation just so she can compose herself. “Sophie’s twin brother.”

“Can we go play?” Sophie asks Percy.

“Why don’t you ask Rivka?” he nudges gently.

Sophie nods, then steps forward and holds out a hand to her soul mate.

“Rivka,” she says politely. “Would you like to go on the swings?”

The little girl hesitates before nodding and releasing herself from her mother. The four of them watch them walk away, standing in silence. Finally, Annabeth turns to Percy, searching his face with frantic eyes. He glances back at Rivka’s parents, who are both staring uncomfortably at the ground.

“I’m sorry!” Annabeth bursts out suddenly. “I’m just... not ready.”

Shaina lets out a sigh of relief.

“Me neither,” she admits. “She’s my baby.”

“Sophie’s my baby too!” Annabeth says enthusiastically.

“But we should make sure they grow up as friends,” says Shaina, watching the two girls with a small smile on her face. “They’ll be close by the time they get married.”

“Soul mates can be difficult,” Cormac says quietly.

For a moment, it’s awkward again.

“Yeah, hopefully it won’t be like when we first got together,” says Percy, teasing his wife. He gestures towards her with his thumb. “You should have seen this one. Getting her to like me was like trying to chip away a wall of stucco with a hammer.”

“That’s me,” Annabeth says cheerfully, immediately launching into the familiar banter that the two of them share. “Hard hearted.”

“But if worked out in the end,” Percy says. “Y’know. She’s okay.”

“He’s okay,” she echoes, laughing at him. “Kinda getting gray, but we’ll get over that eventually.”

“I am not!” Percy says indignantly. “That was one hair, Annabeth Jackson!”

“I guess I’ll keep you,” she shrugs, scrunching her nose at him.

When she meets his eyes, he sees the woman he is married to - the one who is his, without walls at all. And he sees different colors of gray and blue and white, all streaked across her irises. There is so much more to them than just icy gray. And there is so much more to Percy and Annabeth than strictly soulmates. They are life partners, they are mommy and daddy, they are two people who are irretrievably in love and fell too hard to get back up.

As Shaina and Cormac turn towards their children, Percy lifts up Annabeth's wrist and presses a tender kiss to his name.

"You know what my first thought was when I met you?"

She smiles, and he can tell that she's still skittish from what has just happened.

"What?"

"I thought 'wow, she's kinda hot.' And then I thought that you were too hot for me, but you'd have to get used to it if we were going to grow old together and make babies and live happily ever after."

Annabeth snorts. "You thought I was too hot for you?"

"Still do, honey."

"And are we still living happily ever after?" she inquires playfully, turning towards him so she can wrap her arms around his neck.

He doesn't even have to consider.

"I think we always will be."

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: That's a wrap, folks!

Doesn't everybody say that on the last chapter of a long fic? I thought I'd be cliché.

We want to thank you so much for all of your amazing reviews and posts on tumblr and messages. We never expected anyone to comment this vigorously on the SH universe - Hannah had to make an FAQ! How cool is that? Questions got frequently asked!

As Hannah and I move forward to expand this universe into a novel, we're never going to forget the universe from which Percy and Annabeth came. As I said to her a few days ago, "Our babies are having babies." And it's true that they did. But it's also more than that. Our babies grew up and fell in love and changed for the better because of each other. And then we got to share it with you.

You can tell us your favorite moments and parts and tears in a review or on our tumblrs. We're Annabeth and Rongasm.

Love, Rachel and Hannah.

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