

Chapter 18

The very next day, you get a call from Greg.

"I think it's about time I went through the storage shed," he tells you. "There's a lot that Rose left behind that I don't know what to do with."

He laughs, but there's no real joy behind it. He's mourning, just like you, and this can't exactly be *easy* for him--and it shows, you can *hear* it.

"So...I take it you'd like me to join you," you respond.

"If you want to. I thought it might be good for you. For both of us. But I get it if you'd rather not."

"...I probably should, shouldn't I? I mean, it's not like you could handle that on your own." You pause--that came out wrong. "At least, *I* couldn't."

"You're right, though. I really don't think I can on my own."

You sigh quietly. This is probably *necessary*, on multiple levels, but you definitely can't say you're looking forward to it. "Okay. I'll be there at noon."

The storage unit is on the other side of town, so you opt to drive.

Your car needs a tune-up pretty badly. It's an old used thing, and its age is starting to show. You don't have much money, but you're pretty sure you could do a lot of the work yourself; you know how your car works pretty intimately at this point.

This is an easier thing to think about than the *reason* you're driving.

Unfortunately, Beach City is a small enough town that it's not actually that long of a drive to the storage unit, and you're there in what feels like distressingly short order. Right at noon, like you said.

Greg's already there, of course. He greets you with a smile and a wave, and you respond in kind as you exit your car.

Greg's a good guy, honestly. Always has been. You could never truly bring yourself to hate him--oh, you definitely *resented* him, but that was more a matter of circumstance than anything about Greg himself.

(Realistically, the whole thing *might* have been more Rose's fault than anything else. But that thought feels...wrong. Unfair. Rose doesn't deserve that.)

"Vidalia's watching Steven," he tells you as you approach him.

You recognize Vidalia's name immediately, but the truth is that you've only met her a handful of times. The most you really know about her is that she and Greg were close friends in high school, and that she wound up attending the same college as him--the same college where he met Rose. She had a kid in high school, you seem to recall. What was his name? Sour Cream? No, that couldn't possibly be a real name.

You don't *really* know her, but she seems cool. And responsible. That's very important. You're pretty confident Steven will be safe with her, from what everyone's told you.

That's...a relief.

"So it's just us, then," you say.

"Yeah. Is that an issue? Because if it is, I get i--"

You cut him off. "No, it's not an issue. It's...probably for the best, actually."

(You still don't entirely trust yourself. In fact, you still sometimes wonder if it would be better if you weren't involved in Steven's life at all.)

Greg simply nods. There's not a lot to say there--you're pretty sure he can tell exactly how you feel about the whole thing.

"Shall we get started?" you ask, after a long pause.

"Yeah, let's."

It's a pretty big shed, and yet it's still so full it looks liable to spill out onto the pavement if you so much as looked at it funny.

"We've got a long day ahead of us," you note, frowning at the mess.

Greg nods. "Want me to order us a pizza for dinner later? If you're still here, that is." He chuckles. "If not, I'll just order one for myself."

"Hmm." You're not huge on pizza, frankly, but it's probably the easiest option--Fish Stew Pizza (where did they even come up with that name?) is the only place you can think of in Beach City that delivers. And you'll probably be a bit hungry by evening anyway. "I suppose. Easy on the cheese, though."

"Got it."

"...Where should we start?"

Greg hums. "We should probably figure out how to organize all this first. I've got some boxes in the van, maybe we could label 'em."

"That's actually a pretty good idea," you reply, your lips twitching into something vaguely resembling a smile. So far, this is significantly less terrible than you'd expected.

You're about a third of the way done cleaning the place out, nearly done for the day, when you find the flash drive.

It's lying there in a box of trinkets near the front, which the two of you had decided to look through as you took a break to eat dinner--thankfully, Fish Stew Pizza took your request for light cheese seriously.

The box is a simple wooden affair, painted white. Full of jewelry, mostly. A few hair accessories and various shades of pink lipstick. And, of all things, a *flash drive*.

(She always was disorganized. Chaotic, even. With anyone else, it might've driven you mad.

With Rose, it was part of why you loved her.)

You turn the drive over in your hands. It's unlabeled, but...somehow, it feels *significant*. Like she put it somewhere odd for a reason.

"I think," you say, letting out a breath you didn't even realize you'd been holding, "we should have a look at this. Do you have your laptop in your van?"

"Actually, yeah, I do. It's probably nothing, but who knows? There might be *something* neat on there." Greg grins, and you find yourself smiling back.

Another little piece of Rose, you think.

Part of you still wants to respect her privacy. It's silly, you realize, but what if there was something on there she didn't want anyone to see?

No. No, that couldn't be the case. Rose told you *everything*. There were no secrets between you, and even if there were...she can't exactly stop you.

Greg boots the laptop up--it's an old thing, and painfully slow, both by his own admission, but it'll do. He sticks the drive in once it's on, and when the file window opens up, his eyes widen.

"What is it?" you ask, suddenly very, very nervous about...something. You're not entirely sure *what* you're nervous about, in all honesty, but your anxiety is spiking, and there's a part of you that says, *I could just leave now, I'm sure Greg would understand, I could drive home and not have to--*

But you *do* have to. At least, you feel like you do.

“There’s a couple videos on here. Just two. And...they’re labeled ‘To Steven’ and ‘To Nora.’”

Nora. They would’ve named him Nora if he’d been a girl, and the memory of Rose telling you that she and Greg had picked out names hits you like a punch to the gut.

“Is there anything else?”

“Yeah. A couple of text documents.” He pauses. Sighs. “Judging by the file names, one’s for me, and the other’s for you.”

“So she left this for us,” you conclude. “She wanted us to find this.”

Did she just forget about it?

“...I think I’m going to watch the video for Steven, Pearl. You can leave if you’d like, I get it.”

You stare at the laptop. “I don’t think I should.”

He nods, and opens up the file. And there she is.

Rose.

There she is. *There she is.* Clad in a hospital gown, propped up in bed.

“Hey, Steven. It’s me...your mother.” A smile spreads across her face, wide and so *genuinely* joyous. *“I’m so excited to bring you into the world!”*

Chapter 19

You drive home so recklessly that you’re pretty sure you’re going to either get a ticket or crash, and you don’t even care.

Your eyes are still blurry with tears from the video. She *knew* she was going to die. She *knew*! And you were too stupid to see it, even with how obvious it was that her health was failing, because you *believed* her when she said she was fine.

(Maybe you just *wanted* to believe. To this day, you’re not really sure.)

And she did tell you she was fine. Every time, *every single time*, she told you she would be okay. And every time, you bought it, even when you worried she was being overly optimistic.

For the first time in the five and a half years since you met Rose Quartz, you’re *angry* at her. Not annoyed, or a bit upset, but well and truly *mad*.

She could’ve told you what the doctors had told her.

She could've told you *something*.

But she told you nothing at all, or at least nothing *factual*, and you feel like the biggest fool in the world.

As far as your mom was concerned, you were just spending the night at Garnet's house--which, to be fair, was not completely false.

You just left the part about your date with Rose out.

"Do I look alright?" you asked Garnet, frowning. You'd spent hours picking out an outfit, finally settling on a pink skater skirt, a light blue cardigan over a yellow blouse, and light blue flats. Casual enough to not attract your family's attention, but nice enough to wear out, hopefully.

She just smiled at you. "Lovely."

"And you think she'll like this outfit?"

"Doesn't matter. She's already into you, you know."

You blushed furiously at that, and stammered, "A-are you sure about that?"

"She told me as much, and she asked you out. So yes." You weren't sure you believed her about that--granted, Garnet had absolutely no reason to lie about her saying that, and she had a point about you being the one who got asked out, but how could someone like Rose be interested in someone like you?

There was a brief silence, broken by the sound of someone knocking at the door.

Rose.

You turned to Garnet. "So...you're sure I look alright?"

And Garnet laughed. "Pearl, you could be dressed in rags and she wouldn't care."

"...You're sure?"

"Yes. I promise." She grinned. "Now go get her."

You nodded, and headed to the door. And the sight that greeted you when you opened it left you breathless.

Rose had opted for a rather retro-chic pink dress with white polka dots, along with the same strappy white sandals she'd been wearing the day you met her. She'd done her makeup, too--subtle smoky eyes and pink lipstick. You felt even more underdressed than before.

That is, until she took your hands in hers, and spoke.

“Pearl, you look beautiful.”

You ultimately pull over in the Funland parking lot, unable to bring yourself to keep driving. You're not too far from the cliff you jumped from, and part of you considers walking over there. Giving the whole thing another try.

You walk the other way instead, then turn and head towards the beach.

It's a chilly evening, so there's no one around--no tourists, no swimmers, no one. You're good with that.

There's a piece of driftwood maybe thirty feet from the boardwalk itself, and you sit down on it. For a while, you just stare at the ocean, and then the tears begin to fall again.

You sit there, and you practically *scream* as you sob.

You're not sure how long you're there, even after the tears stop, replaced by pure emptiness. An hour, maybe? Maybe more. Maybe less. It feels unreal, *everything* feels unreal. Maybe you didn't survive, and the world you're currently struggling to exist in is your personal hell—

This train of thought is ultimately, after God knows how long, interrupted by your cell phone ringing. You pick up.

“Pearl,” Garnet says.

“H-hello, Garnet.”

“You're upset, I see.”

God, is it that obvious? “Very.”

“Greg called. Come on home, it's very late.”

You briefly take the phone away from your ear to glance at the clock. 9:32 PM.

“It is, isn't it?”

Garnet clicks her tongue. “Okay. Wait until you're sure you're good to drive. Bye.”

“Bye.” You hang up.

You don't head home until around ten, and given how spaced out you are, that's probably still too early. You come this close to hitting a tree.

Right now, you think that wouldn't have been so bad.

You'd been to that park, the one with all the fancy gardens with plaques about the various plants, a handful of times on field trips, but never in a situation like...whatever this was.

It was late to be out, at least for you. The sky had long since gone dark. It was a clear night in October, and you could see just about every star in the sky.

But the most beautiful thing of all, moreso than the gorgeous flowers or breathtaking night sky, was Rose Quartz.

"I want to major in botany," she told you, carefully reading the plaque designating a form of hibiscus. "There's so much I find fascinating about plants, and they're so beautiful..."

"You're beautiful," you said, and then turned red as a tomato. "S-sorry, it's just—this is the first date I've ever been on. I don't know the protocol."

She grinned, broad and brilliant. "Pearl, you're doing just fine! I'm having a really good time with you."

"Really?"

"Of course. I wouldn't have asked you out if I didn't like being around you!"

"So...is this a date?"

She doesn't respond, not verbally, at least. Instead, she scans the flowerbed, eventually picking up a single hibiscus flower.

She puts it behind your ear, smiles warmly, and kisses you right on the mouth.

"She lied to me."

Garnet lets out a heavy sigh. "Yeah. She did. She should've been up front with you."

"Was she up front with you?"

"Pearl, I'm going to be blunt here." *Oh boy.* "I'd assumed she'd told you. She told me, at least. I just...I thought you were just in denial..."

You shake your head, the tears welling back up in your eyes. "No." You look away. "I mean...I probably *would've* been in denial, you're right, but she told me over and over that she would be fine. She *told* me the doctors said she'd be okay. Every time."

Garnet puts a hand on your shoulder, and you pull her in for a hug, sobbing into her shoulder as she comforts you.

It almost makes you feel a little better.

Almost.

—

She was your first kiss, and you can still taste her lipstick.

Chapter 20

You head to your room in a curious haze of heartbreak and fury, a haze you've been in since you watched that *damn video*, and sit down at your computer.

There's an email from Greg. Your hands shake as you open it.

To: pearl_finnegan@hmail.com

From: mruniverse@hmail.com

Hey Pearl,

I've attached the letter Rose wrote for you. I hope you're doing a little better.

-Greg

The letter. Of course! The letter! Maybe that'll clear things up, maybe you'll *understand*, and then...then things might be a little less awful.

You open the document immediately, not even thinking to respond to the email.

—

My Pearl. My darling Pearl.

The nickname makes your heart flutter and sink all at once. "My Pearl." She'd always call you that, and it made you so *happy*, because you *were* hers, and you never wanted to be anyone else's.

You pause for a good moment, staring at the wall above your laptop screen, before you even think about continuing. It's hard. It's so, so hard to think of her lying to you, all while treating you like the highest royalty. You can't reconcile it in your head.

God, but you were always so weak for Rose. And despite all that you've learned tonight, you still are.

There's a lot I should've told you. I know I should've been more honest about my condition with you. In fact, as I'm writing this, I'm not sure how much longer I'll be alive.

But please, please understand: I've been lying because I don't want to see you hurting. I know you already are. I can't bring myself to contribute to that, or to watch you hurt anymore.

I'm so sorry if all this hurts you. That was never my intention.

I love you so much, my Pearl, and I know you'll be there for my child. That's my dearest hope of all, that they'll grow up around good, caring people, like you.

With so much love,

Rose

<3

It's short. It still tells you all you need to know.

She didn't *get* it. She didn't get that *not* telling you would hurt worse. And somehow that hurts more than any actual *malice* might.

"Did you love me, Rose?" you whisper to the air, knowing there's not going to be a response. Not ever, not...

Rose is dead. She's *dead*, and she'll never be able to apologize to you, and you're not sure, honestly, that she'd *mean* it if she could.

Reading the letter didn't make things better at all. In fact, if anything, it did the polar opposite. Did she really think of you like that, as someone who would be *spared* pain by her lying to you, and lying to *you alone*? Did she think you were too fragile to know the truth, despite knowing so much about her, so much that *no one else* knew?

Was she even thinking of *you* at all?

You don't sleep that night, not a wink.

—

You spend the rest of the week in a daze, to the obvious concern of everyone around you.

When you're not empty, dissociated, you cry. You cry and cry and cry, and it's—

It's *just* like when she died. Losing Rose once was hard enough, and now you're terrified you've lost her again. Or, worse, that you never *truly* had her in the first place.

The day before your next session, Garnet knocks on your bedroom door. "Pearl, we need to talk about all this," she says.

"I know," you reply, quietly, your voice breaking—you've been crying so much. "I'll..."

"Please come out. Or let me in. Either works."

After a moment, you open the door. You're still in your pajamas; your short hair is sticking up at odd angles. You haven't showered in days, and you hate yourself for it.

"Come in."

She does, sitting on your bed and motioning for you to join her, which you do.

"She never said," Garnet begins, "that she was *certain* she'd die."

You look away for a moment, before looking back up at her. "She sounded certain in the letter. Maybe she didn't tell you everything either."

"Sounds like she didn't." Garnet frowns, and you see pure *anger* flash across her face for just a second. "She always was secretive. I never quite understood it, but..."

"She lied to you, too."

"Yes, she did."

"Not just about her health."

Garnet looks right at you, puzzled. "Tell me more."

"What did she tell you about her family?"

"She said her parents were dead. House fire."

You could almost *laugh*. "They're not. And there was never a fire."

You look Garnet right in the eyes, and it's deeply uncomfortable, *all* of this is uncomfortable, but you manage to speak.

"And Quartz wasn't her real last name."

You tell Garnet everything—every secret you promised Rose you'd keep, her name, her moms, *everything* she'd lied about, or sworn you to secrecy about, and oh, how you *despise* yourself for breaking that oath.

And in that moment, Garnet looks angrier than you've ever seen her.

The next day you have therapy, so you reluctantly manage to drag yourself to the shower, turning the water up as hot as you can stand it. Maybe a little hotter, in all honesty.

You wash the built-up oil out of your hair, and scrub your body. You feel like it shouldn't be anywhere *near* as hard as you're finding it, such a simple task, and yet here you are.

It's a quick shower, just enough to get clean. You step out, towel off, get dressed, and head downstairs. Your session isn't until the afternoon, but given that you've barely *eaten* in days--oh, you're not *starving* yourself, of course, or at least not *trying* to, but not even the few foods you genuinely love have sounded appetizing lately--you should probably eat something.

You settle on an apple. You like apples, usually.

As you sit at the dining table and dig in, you hear what sounds like arguing. Specifically, you hear what sounds like *Ruby and Sapphire* arguing--something you've never heard before. You can't help but eavesdrop.

"She lied to *all* of us!"

"I know, but--"

"Garnet's really upset. Pearl's even *more* upset!"

"We couldn't have *known*!"

"We *should've* known. We should've known she was *hiding* things, that she was *hurting* them!"

"Sapphire, how could we have possibly known that?"

You sigh heavily. You can't help it.

You throw the apple away, with only a few bites taken out of it, and head back to your room. You've been feeling downright *ill* over all this, and you just can't eat anymore. Your stomach already aches.

What am I even supposed to do?

What can I do?

The drive to the office is filled with a tense silence, and you find yourself very, very relieved to see that Peridot has arrived early.

“Hi, Pearl!” she chirps. She’s clearly in a good mood, and you hope she brings up whatever has made her so happy during your session. It might lift your spirits a bit.

No it won’t.

“Hello, Peridot,” you reply, giving her a fake smile. “You seem to be in good spirits.”

“I am! Oh my God, I can’t *wait* to tell you guys all about it.”

“I look forward to it.” This time, your smile is almost genuine.

You’re quite thankful that Peridot can’t seem to tell that you’re upset. You don’t know her that well--you barely know her at all, really--but Amethyst and Lapis like her, and you don’t want to ruin her happiness right now, especially considering that she seems to be the *niciest* person in the group.

Amethyst told you, that fateful evening, that this was not always the case. “She used to be kind of an asshole,” she’d said. “But like...I think she just needed someone to actually be cool to her for once. She’s just grown a *ton*.”

You try not to focus on that night, but it’s still in the back of your mind. It always is.

There’s a lot that’s always there, always nagging at you. *You hurt Amethyst. Rose is dead. Your mother never loved you at all.*

Rose might not have, either.

Chapter 21

The look Peridot gives Amethyst as the latter walks in, you think, might explain why she’s so happy today. You don’t want to be presumptuous, of course. It’s just a look you recognize entirely too well.

It’s the same happy, loving smile you wore in every photograph you took with Rose, and you can practically *hear* the gears turning in your head.

You were wrong. It wasn’t Lapis that Peridot had a crush on--or at least, if she *was*, she wasn’t the only one in the group Peridot was into. It makes sense, really. They’ve been close for a

while, if what Amethyst has told you is any indication. And Amethyst speaks of Peridot in a way she doesn't seem to talk about anyone else.

Peridot and Amethyst sit down together, leaving you to sit on the other couch, which is fine by you. It's a *lot* less awkward being there, here in this office, when you're not sitting next to Amethyst.

You're still not entirely sure how she feels about you now. She doesn't seem to *hate* you, which is something of a relief, but not hating someone is different from actually *liking* them, and in spite of everything, you want Amethyst to like you.

(It had been such a fun night at first, after all.)

You glance at your phone. 4 PM on the dot. Lapis still hasn't arrived, which is strange. So far, at every session you've both attended, she's arrived a good five minutes early.

You look over at the girls sitting across from you. Peridot has begun to look rather nervous, fidgeting with the strings on her hoodie and looking desperately at Amethyst as if she'll have some idea what to do, what's going on...

"This is really odd," Sapphire says quietly, clearly more to herself than anyone else in the room. "She didn't say she wouldn't be coming in..."

"Maybe she's just running late?" Peridot suggests, but she just looks even more concerned than before.

Amethyst says nothing. She just sits there, suddenly very sullen, her dark purple fingernails digging into her crossed arms.

There is--was?--*definitely* something between Amethyst and Lapis. You've never been entirely sure what was going on there.

For better or for worse, you feel like you're going to find out soon.

Minutes pass. Still no sign of Lapis, nor any indication from Sapphire that she's contacted her in any way, shape, or form. The silence is downright suffocating.

"Okay," Sapphire sighs, looking at the clock on the wall. 4:07. "Let's begin, shall we?"

"I went on a date!" Peridot tells the room, smiling broadly, as if she wasn't concerned at all earlier. Clearly she has other priorities this session, and you're not entirely sure you blame her. After all, you do too.

"Oh?" Sapphire asks. She looks pretty happy. Proud, actually.

You don't know a whole lot about Peridot. You know she's got the social skills of a small soap dish, and that she always wears the same hoodie, and that she's Amethyst's best friend, and that's about the extent of things--yeah, Amethyst told you a fair bit about their history together, but not really enough to fully understand Peridot.

"Yeah! We went to the beach at night, it was really nice." She pauses. "I think I heard someone crying off in the distance? But there wasn't really much we could do there, and we were kind of busy, so..."

You freeze, not that you'd been moving much to begin with. *She heard you. They both heard you.*

You opt to say nothing, at least for now. You doubt Peridot can really see how you're feeling right now, and that's probably for the best. It feels wrong to not let her have this.

Amethyst shrugs. "There's not a lot you can do there when you're busy makin' out with someone."

Okay, so it *was* Amethyst. Probably--no, definitely.

"So...you two—" you begin, before Peridot cuts you off.

"Yeah!" She's blushing hard, and she looks at Amethyst with a big smile.

"It was a good time," Amethyst adds with a nod. "The beach is great at night when there's no one else there to bother you."

"That's wonderful!" Sapphire says.

"Yeah," Amethyst replies, blushing nearly as hard as Peridot. "It really is."

You can't help but envy them, and that only makes you hate yourself more. You look down at your lap, shaking slightly.

"Pearl, do you want to talk?" Sapphire asks. She sounds worried, but...she knows what's going on, at least.

You nod.

"Go on."

"It's Rose. She lied to me about her condition when she was pregnant. She said she'd be fine, but she knew she wouldn't be." You heave a sigh. "She wrote me a letter before she died. I read it just the other day. And...she said she was lying to spare me the pain, but...I don't know. I don't know *anything* anymore."

Tears well up in your eyes. "I don't even know if she actually *loved* me."

Peridot and Amethyst stare. "Damn," Amethyst says. "That sucks. That sucks a *lot*."

You're a bit surprised that Amethyst seems to care, in a way. After what happened...she should *despise* you.

But it's becoming increasingly clear that she doesn't. That maybe, despite everything, she *cares* about you.

You don't know how to feel about that.

"...Yeah," you finally respond. "It's awful. But I think I'm still in love with her." Involuntarily, you let out a bitter, mirthless laugh. "I'm in love with a dead woman who might've never felt the same. It's *pathetic*."

"Are you *sure* she didn't love you?" Amethyst asks with a frown.

"No, but I have my suspicions."

"Like?"

"She told me she loved me more than anyone else. That she *always* would. So when she started seeing Greg on the side, I didn't know how to feel. I wanted her all to myself. Is that weird?"

"No," Sapphire says firmly. "It's not weird."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Sapphire frowns. "You seem very monogamous, and that's fine. Maybe you went overboard at times, yes, but she shouldn't have dragged you into something you didn't really want."

"I suppose. And...once she got with Greg, she started ignoring me. Barely responded to my texts. She'd always say she was busy, but at this point...I'm not convinced. I believed her then, though. I really did." You pause to wipe your dripping nose. "She never even called me her *girlfriend*. I thought that was just how she was, but..."

"Lemme guess," Amethyst bursts in, and she looks downright *mad*. "She acted more serious about Greg?"

"...Yeah."

"And she just *ditched* you for someone new and shiny, and didn't even bother to *break up with* you first? Did she even ask if you were *okay* with it?"

You shrug. "Not really. She just asked if I was the jealous type."

Amethyst is visibly seething at this point. “That’s not *right*! At all! You--you should’ve had a say in things, okay?”

“I just wanted her to be happy. That was the most important thing to me, even if it meant I couldn’t be happy.”

“You realize,” Amethyst says, “that that’s *super* fucked up, right?”

You do, on some level. But it doesn’t *feel* that way. It makes all the sense in the world to you.

Rose wasn’t like you. Rose *mattered*.

Peridot cocks her head to the side slightly, confused. “Why wouldn’t you want to be happy?”

“It’s not that. It’s—”

“It’s close enough,” Amethyst interjects. “Seriously, you *really* need to get over this girl.”

You don’t think you can, not really.

But there’s something you *can* do. You’d told yourself you wouldn’t.

There’s just no other option you can think of, and for the rest of the session, you barely speak.

You just *plan*.

Chapter 22

You feel guilty, on some level. You know you’ll hurt people, you know from *experience*, and yet...

You can’t go on like this. You just *can’t*. It’s too much at this point, and you can’t stand it any longer.

Things have only gotten worse, in a lot of ways. Well, in one way, really, but it’s a *big* way. Rose was everything to you, and the thought that she might have not loved you, that what she did was *messed up*, is far too much to bear.

And so you search.

You can’t do it somewhere public. Not after last time. It was pure chance that the fishers saw you jump, but it’s a chance you don’t want to take again.

Slitting your wrists would be too risky--according to your research, you could just survive with nerve damage. Hanging? No, too easy to mess it up and die in pain. You’re not sure you have

anything you could overdose on, or poison yourself with--nothing that wouldn't lead to an *agonizing* death, anyway. There's no gun in the house. You have no fucking clue what to do.

You just know that you'd be better off dead.

It would be nice, you think, to be able to cry. But the tears won't come. *Nothing* will. You feel empty inside, as if you were already dead...

It's not like things would be much different for the Carlsons, really. They were doing just fine before you showed up on their doorstep, soaked from the rain and sobbing. Sure, they'll be sad for a while, but they're not like *you*. They're actually capable of moving on.

Why can't I move on?

As you sit at your desk, staring blankly at your computer screen, you hear your phone buzz. You ignore it.

It buzzes again. And again. And again.

Finally, you give up and check it. To your surprise, it's a series of texts from, of all people, *Amethyst*.

"hey pearl

"uh thisll probly sound rly weird but

"i need ur help

"hey pearl r u alive"

You sigh.

"For given values of 'alive,' I suppose."

"idk what u mean but okay

"anyway i need ur help

"its abt lapis"

Against your will, you find yourself distracted from your thoughts, at least to some degree. Not fully, of course. You're still contemplating how to go about killing yourself *properly*. But you text Amethyst back regardless, and you're frankly not sure *why*.

"What about her? Where was she yesterday?"

"so like she has this on-again off-again gf rite

"jasper

"aka my shitty cousin

"were fb friends for som reason and she just changed her relationship status 2 in a relationship and uh

"p sure she and lapis r back together

"which is a problem bc theyre fuckin awful 4 each other and good at ruining each others lives basically?"

You frown. *"So what do you want me to do? I'm a bit busy."*

"its 3 am p ur not busy

"u have a car rite"

"Yes."

"good

"bc i dont and neither does peri

"jasper lives in ocean town and public transit here is trahs"

"You're asking me to drive you to your cousin's house?"

"yeah prolly on saturday

"look lapis is a cunt but idk if she deserves jasper

"vice versa too"

"Okay. Can I request something of you?"

"go 4 it"

"I need someone to talk to right now. Could you please call me?"

"yeah

"i can do that"

"Thanks."

You head downstairs, phone in hand, and go out onto the porch. Your phone starts ringing just a few moments later, and you pick up.

"Hi," says Amethyst.

"Hi."

"What's up? And be honest."

You freeze. How do you respond to that when you've been actively contemplating suicide?

Garnet's words echo in your mind. You can't just keep this bottled up anymore.

"...I want to die. Badly."

There's a moment of silence on the other end, before Amethyst responds, "Jesus. I'm...wow. I'm so sorry." She sounds sincere.

"What do I do?"

"Uh...not that?"

"Beyond not killing myself."

"I really don't know. I mean...I've felt the same way, y'know? Never acted on it, but..."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's hard. It's hard, and sometimes it feels like nobody understands."

"Nobody does, though."

"That's not true. I mean, I don't get *exactly* what you're goin' through. But the hopelessness? The depression? Yeah, I get that. I really, really do." She sounds like she's choking up a little, and you feel a pang in your chest.

You feel evil for even *considering* suicide now, even though you really don't see any other way out. "I'm sorry, I—"

"What are you apologizing for? It's not like what happened was *your* fault."

"Me talking about killing myself was."

"That's, uh...not really how it works." Amethyst takes a deep breath. "Look. Can you do me another favor? Please?"

"Yes?"

"Don't off yourself."

"I guess I won't. Not tonight, at least."

"No. Not ever. I'll be *so fucking pissed* if you do, Pearl. I'll come to your funeral and shit on your corpse at the viewing if you do. That's a promise."

"...Okay."

"I have to at least try to get some shut-eye. I have school in the morning."

"That's important."

"Yeah. You should try and sleep too, 'kay? Maybe you'll feel a little less crappy in the morning."

"I doubt it. But...thanks, Amethyst."

"Any time, P. Night."

"Goodnight."

She hangs up, and you're not sure how to feel. Not even a little.

You don't sleep that night, despite your better efforts.

—

"You didn't sleep," Garnet notes as she passes you at the dining table. You're on your second cup of tea, and still only semiconscious.

"Not a wink."

"Mm. Sorry about that." She points to the fruit basket on the kitchen counter. "Ruby picked up some grapefruit at the store. She seemed to recall that you liked that."

"I do. Tell her I said thanks."

"Will do."

You get up and grab a grapefruit, pausing as you take the knife to cut it open. *You could do it right now, you could just—*

No.

Not now.

Not ever. You told Amethyst you wouldn't.

You cut it in half, and are faintly surprised that you don't cut your hand open in the process.

You're hungry. *Really* hungry. You haven't felt truly hungry in what feels like so long. It feels weird.

No, scratch that. It feels *normal*. You'd forgotten what normalcy of any sort truly felt like.

The grapefruit is the most delicious thing you've ever eaten.

Chapter 23

It would be a stretch to say you were in a *good* mood after your conversation with Amethyst, but you do feel marginally less awful. It's something, probably.

(You still feel lost, completely and utterly lost. You're not on the brink anymore, though, or at least for *now* you aren't. A small victory, but a victory regardless.)

Garnet seems to notice, and smiles as you're about to step outside for a cigarette. "You look good today," she tells you, and you smile back at her. It's one of the most sincere smiles you've given in a long, long time.

"Thanks." You open the door, pausing, and add, "Would you like to join me outside?"

"I'd love to."

The two of you sit on the porch steps. It's a nice March day--jacket weather, but not too chilly, and mercifully dry.

"I talked to someone last night," you mention as you light up.

Garnet's eyes widen behind her shades, barely perceptible save for the movement of her eyebrows. "Tell me more."

"You're not going to believe this, but...it was Amethyst."

"I thought you'd had a fight."

"We did, about a month ago." You scrunch up your face. "It's in the past. I think we've managed to move it makes past it somehow. At the very least, she doesn't seem to dislike me. I don't think she would've helped me out last night if she did."

"Probably not."

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you talked to her, then."

"So am I. I, um...can I tell you something?"

"Of course."

"I was really hoping I wouldn't wake up in the morning. I was making *plans* again. And then she texted me out of the blue about something *completely* unrelated, and...we talked for a bit. About that." You take a drag. "I think she may have saved my life."

"Good." Garnet's expression is unreadable. You genuinely can't tell what she's thinking.

So you ask.

"I've been very worried about you."

"I know."

"For a very long time. Since *before* Rose died. You've always been depressed."

"Yeah. I have. Just...not like this. Not as bad as I've been."

"But still not great."

"No, I suppose not."

Garnet adjusts her shades. She always seems to do that when she's nervous, you've noticed, a little personal tic. Truth be told, that small gesture makes *you* anxious.

"I should've said something sooner. Maybe then..."

She trails off, but you know exactly what she's thinking. *Maybe then you wouldn't have tried to kill yourself.*

"You didn't like to talk about it," Garnet continues. "If I'd at least *tried* to coax things out of you, maybe I would've been able to *help*."

She wipes her eyes, barely lifting her sunglasses. She's crying, just a bit.

"No," you insist. "I would've done it anyway. There was nothing you could've done."

"Maybe not. But..."

"No. No buts."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to get dark like that."

You finish off your cigarette, and snuff it out in the ashtray. "I know. You're just trying to help."

"Yeah."

"And I made it dark in the first place."

"Not exactly. I've been ruminating on this for a *long* time."

"I'm sorry. I should've opened up to you." You look away. "You helped me. You and Ruby and Sapphire. You *took me in* when Holly kicked me out, Sapphire got me into therapy...you've done a *lot* for me."

"You've done a lot for me too, you know."

You look back at Garnet. "Have I?"

"You were my first friend here, Pearl. You have no idea how much that means to me."

"Thanks," you say softly.

"No. Thank *you*."

—

On your first day of sixth grade, your homeroom teacher split you into pairs.

You were an awkward, gangly preteen with little in terms of social skills. It wasn't that you liked being alone—it was simply that it was difficult for you to really talk to people. You had no close friends, just people who more or less tolerated your presence.

"Pearl Finnegan, Garnet Carlson, you're sitting over there."

You sat down at the desk, and a tall girl with an afro and sunglasses sat down across from you.

"You must be Garnet, then," you said.

"Yes. And you must be Pearl." She had an English accent. You didn't comment on it, but you made a note of it regardless.

"Yeah." You glanced at the piece of paper on the table. Icebreaker questions. "So, um...favorite snack food?"

"Popcorn."

"Huh. I don't think I really have one. Do apples count?"

"If you eat them as snacks, probably." She shrugged, looking just as awkward as you.

"Fair enough. Apples, then."

"Favorite book," Garnet said. It wasn't a question, the way she said it.

"Oh, I have too many. I don't know that I can pick just one!" You laughed nervously, avoiding eye contact. "Sorry, I'm not very good at talking to people."

"Neither am I."

You felt an instant kinship with Garnet. She looked cooler than you, and she may have been, but she also seemed just as scared as you.

"Tell me about yourself," she continued.

"Well...uh, I've lived in Beach City since I was four. We moved here from Ocean Town. I don't remember it well."

"I moved here from London a few months ago. My mums are both from around here, but one of them went to university there. They missed it here, so we moved."

"Huh. What's London like?"

"Big. Busy." She smiled. "I think I might actually prefer it here. It's quieter."

"Yeah. It's not bad. Has it been hard to adjust at all?"

"A bit. Less so than I'd feared it would be, but there's definitely a lot I'm still not used to."

"You said 'mums.'"

"Yeah. British terminology."

"That's not what I mean. You said 'mums,' plural."

"Yeah. They've been together for ages."

"They're, uh..."

"Gay? Yeah."

"I see." You were not entirely sure how to react. You had zero problem with it, but your mother...

"Are they good parents?"

"Excellent parents. I love them dearly."

You gave a rueful chuckle.

"Lucky."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's fine! Really, it's fine."

The two of you chatted about yourselves until the bell rang. "What's your next class?" you asked her as you stood.

"Math."

You couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment. "English here. Uh...would you like to meet up again at lunch? Or am I being presumptuous?"

Garnet grinned. "Absolutely. I'll see you there."

As you walked to your English class, you couldn't help but smile. You had a friend now, maybe.

Don't mess this up, Pearl, you thought. But the fact was that you weren't terribly worried. Your new friend was scared and confused, just like you.

(Lunch was a delight.)

Chapter 24

Saturday rolls around faster than you'd anticipated, and you're vaguely startled when you hear a harsh pounding on the door.

"Someone's here!" Ruby calls from her spot on the couch.

"Yeah," you reply. "They're here for me. Some friends."

Ruby beams at that. "Have fun!"

You don't particularly feel like telling her that it's not about *fun*, so you simply smile. "I will. Seeya, Ruby."

"Seeya later. We're having spaghetti for dinner, by the way."

"Wonderful. I'll try to be back in time." You've always been fond of Ruby's spaghetti—the sauce is always *just* the right consistency.

"We'll save you some if you don't."

"Thanks."

You open the door. "Hi, sorry, I was talking with Ruby. Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah," Amethyst replies. "Calling shotgun, by the way. That okay with you, Dot?"

Peridot nods, and the three of you head to your car and get in.

"I'll load up my GPS," says Amethyst, fiddling with her phone. She enters the address and hits start.

"So," you ask, "can you give me a bit of background on all this?"

“Okay, so Jasper is my cousin. Mom’s sister’s kid. My mom and my aunt are really close, so I had to interact with her a bunch after I moved in. And like, my *aunt* is chill, but Jasper...man, I have no clue what her deal is.”

She shakes her head. “She was always a bully. She’d make fun of me for being short, for being adopted...basically everything. But I thought she was cool when I was a kid. I mean, I was *twelve* when I wound up here, thirteen when the adoption was made official. I was young and dumb, and I wanted her to think I was cool, y’know? I wanted to *impress* her.”

You think back on your mother, on the fact that you worked yourself raw in school and ballet in the vain hope of earning her approval, and you nod. “I can understand that.”

“Anyway, dunno if you knew this, but Lapis is originally from Ocean Town. She went to school with Jasper, and when I was fourteen they started dating. So I had to be around Lapis a lot too, since they were basically fused at the hip at the time.”

Amethyst sighs heavily. “And Lapis was...she could be cool sometimes. Like, actually cool. But most of the time she was a bitch, and...not just to me. She and Jasper fought like, all the time. They totally ruined my sweet sixteen—I had made the stupid mistake of inviting Jasper, she brought Lapis along, and they had a fucking screaming match in the backyard and broke up. Peridot can vouch for that.”

“Yup,” Peridot says. “It was a nightmare. Uh, is it okay if I just listen to my music on the way there?”

“Yeah, go for it.”

“So what happened after that?” you ask.

“They fucking *got back together*. And I kept telling them, ‘this is a bad idea,’ and they wouldn’t fucking listen! And I’ve lost count of how many times they’ve done this. They date, they break up, and then one of them comes running back to the other. It’s this whole cycle.”

Tears begin to well up in Amethyst’s eyes. “I don’t know why I care. They *suck*, both of ‘em. But...I dunno. They’re *bad* for each other. They just make each other suck even more.”

You’re not sure what to say, so you just say, “Wow.”

“Yeah. It’s *really* messed up. *They’re* really messed up. I never want a relationship like that.”

“Yeah. Neither do I.”

“I mean...what about Rose?”

“No,” you snap. “That was different.”

Amethyst makes a noncommittal noise, clearly unconvinced. Your hands grip the steering wheel tighter, tighter, white-knuckled and shaking.

No. Rose and I had something good. At least at first. It's not the same, it's not—

"Uh, you okay, P?"

"Yeah," you lie.

—

You haven't been to Ocean Town since you moved to Beach City as a little girl, so your memories of the place are hazy. It was a dump, you recall that much—all crumbling buildings and long-closed stores. And it was never the safest place to live, or even to visit.

Somehow, it's actually *worse* than you remember now. You're not sure if anything has actually *changed*, but you are, at the very least, acutely aware now of what a sketchy place this is.

The apartment building, like nearly every building you've passed since crossing city lines, is a ramshackle old place. It looks more like a cheap motel than an actual apartment complex, and were it not for the sign reading "SEASIDE APARTMENTS" in front, you'd strongly suspect that it *was* one.

"We're here," Amethyst announces. "You're gonna wanna park on the street, the superintendent gets super pissy if you park in the lot without a permit."

You follow Amethyst's directions, parking as close to the entrance as possible given the circumstances. "Okay."

Amethyst hops out of the car and opens the back door. "Yo, we're here, Peri," she says, prodding her shoulder and causing her to startle for a moment.

"Um. Right. Yes." Peridot stuffs her headphones and tablet in her backpack and exits the car as well. You join the two of them.

"She lives on the second floor," Amethyst explains as you walk. "Careful taking the stairs, some of them are pretty loose."

"That seems like a *colossal* safety hazard," Peridot notes.

"Yeah, but it's not like they're gonna fix it anytime soon."

"Why does she even live here?" you ask. "Is it just what's most affordable?"

"I have no idea. My aunt and uncle have since moved a few towns over, but Jasper stayed. And like, it's not even convenient for her—she works in Bayburg." Amethyst shrugs as she starts up

the steps, which audibly creak beneath her feet. “I guess she just feels a connection to this shithole. It’s fitting.”

You let Amethyst get up the staircase before heading up yourself. The staircase wobbles slightly beneath your paltry weight—you really don’t trust this place’s structural integrity. Judging by her own hesitation, neither does Peridot.

Thankfully, though, you all make it up in one piece, and Amethyst leads you to one of the doors, at the end of the walkway. Apartment 218.

You watch as Amethyst steels herself. She looks nervous. Downright scared, even. Her hand visibly shakes as she raises it to knock, and as soon as she’s knocked on the door a few times, she flinches, just a bit.

You glance over at Peridot, who looks even more terrified. You’re starting to have some regrets about all this.

Stupid, stupid, I should know better than to get involved in things like this, I can’t even handle my own life—

The door swings open, revealing a tall, muscular woman with immaculately bleached hair and tattooed arms and *flawless* eyeliner and *oh no, she’s hot*.

“Jasper,” Amethyst says, rather curtly.

“What the fuck are you doing here, runt?” Jasper growls.

“Not here to talk to you. You got back with Lapis, didn’t you?”

“That’s none of your business. Fuck off.”

“Just let us in, bitch. We’re staging an *intervention* here.”

“Nah.”

Amethyst is trembling now—whether from rage or fear, you can’t say. Maybe both.

She swallows, probably more obviously than intended, and speaks. “I keep telling you. I’ve been telling you for, how long, four years now? Like, I know I’m a dumpster fire too, but I’m not *stupid*. You’re fucking *awful* together, and you’re *hurting* each other—“

The door slams shut in Amethyst’s face, and she snarls, her expression going very dark, very fast.

“Well, then *fuck you too*, you rancid bitch!” she screams, kicking the door. “Fuck you, and fuck Lapis! You deserve each other, you *stupid fucking cunts*!”

Peridot reaches a hand out, but Amethyst flinches away before she can even touch her. “Are...are you okay?” Peridot whispers, wide-eyed and shaking herself.

“No!” Amethyst is hyperventilating, and her words stumble out rapidly, loudly, barely comprehensible. “Ugh, I just want her to fucking *die* already! She’s *bad* and she’s *always* hated me and I just—I wish I could just beat the everloving shit out of her, but she’s so much bigger than me, she’s so much *stronger* and she could *kill* me if she wanted to and—”

Her speech devolves into screaming sobs, and she curls up in the fetal position with her back against the wall.

You turn to Peridot. “What should we do?” you ask, as quietly as possible.

Peridot scrunches up her face. “I think we need to leave her alone for a bit. Amethyst, meet us at the car.”

Amethyst doesn’t reply. Doesn’t even look up. She just *cries*.

Peridot begins to gingerly make her way down the wobbly staircase regardless, and you follow suit.

—

“Ugh,” Peridot groans, one hand fisted in her bleach-fried hair and the other holding her phone. She’s playing some kind of game on it, though you’re not entirely sure *what* kind. You’ve never been terribly into video games. “Why does she have to be like that?”

“Who?”

“Jasper. She’s *such* a piece of work. I haven’t interacted with her too much, but I’ve never even come close to enjoying those interactions.”

“Are they always this, erm...explosive?”

“Occasionally. Not usually, though. Usually one of them just...” Peridot gestures vaguely, accidentally pulling a few strands of hair out as she moves her hand and letting out a little yelp. “Usually one of them just storms out. They only get this nasty when Lapis is involved.”

“Hmm. I see.”

Peridot, you can’t help but notice, is trembling still. She opens her backpack and pulls out a small medication bottle and a can of Monster.

She notices you looking, and shrugs. “Klonopin. Anxiety medication. I try not to take it very often, because my doctor says it messes with cognition, but I really, *really* need to calm down.” She cracks open the energy drink—which you can’t help but think is a questionable choice of

beverage, given the circumstances—and takes a pill. “Anyway. Question. Do you have a favorite Pokemon?”

You find yourself mildly surprised by the question—not because Peridot doesn’t seem like the type to be into Pokemon, she absolutely *does* seem like the type, but because it came completely out of left field. “I don’t really know any of the Pokemons, sorry.”

“‘The Pokemons’?”

“Uh, yes?”

“Okay, so first of all, Pokemon is both the singular and the plural, so jot that down. Second, that’s hard for me to conceive of. I believe you! It’s just weird to think about how there are people who aren’t into that sort of thing.” She eyes you. “What are you into, then?”

You realize you’re genuinely not sure, and it scares you. For a long moment you wrack your brain, searching for *something* you actually take pleasure in.

“I did ballet and fencing in high school,” you reply after entirely too long. “And books are nice.”

“Books! Any in particular?”

“I’ve been reading the Discworld series. Um, I really enjoyed Coraline as a kid, and I tend to default to saying it’s my favorite, for the nostalgia if nothing else, but I haven’t read it in years. My copy’s not exactly structurally sound anymore.”

“Huh, cool. Was it better than the movie? This band I’m really into was going to do the score and I’m still mad that they didn’t get that opportunity.”

“Haven’t seen it, so I can’t say. Probably, though. I feel they usually are. Not always, of course, but more often than not, I prefer the book to the movie.” You smile at Peridot, feeling, despite everything, lighter than you’ve felt in ages. “That’s just me, though.”

“Fair enough. Oh, but speaking of watching things, have you ever seen Degrassi?”

“No. What’s it about?”

Peridot laughs. You’re not sure if the medication has already begun to take effect or if you’ve somehow managed to improve her mood a bit, but she definitely seems more at ease. More interestingly, she seems at ease with *you*, and everything you’ve heard from Amethyst tells you that’s a rarity. “Oh, you don’t want to get me started on that. I could talk about it for hours. You’d probably just get bored.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Maybe not, but people usually do.” She shrugs. “Although if you’re really okay with it...”

"I am. Tell me all about Degrassi."

Chapter 25

You have learned more about Degrassi during the course of your conversation than you had ever intended to know. You're not sure a teen soap opera is something *you'd* enjoy, but it sure makes Peridot happy, and her enthusiasm is legitimately infectious.

Actually, you've learned quite a bit about Peridot herself as well. She likes making art—sculptures especially—and got an emotional support dog back in November. She's a practicing Jew, although she readily admits that she doesn't keep kosher ("I tried for a brief while, but burgers without cheese are just *sad*," she explains). Her parents, she tells you, are trying their best, but they don't really connect with her as much as she'd like.

"I'm so glad they *finally* let me get my dog, though," Peridot says, grinning. She pulls up a photo on her phone, a picture of an adorable stubby-legged puppy with golden fur. "I can't believe I haven't told you about her already. Her name is Pumpkin, she's such a good girl!"

"What kind of dog is she?"

Peridot shrugs. "A mutt of some sort. We suspect part corgi, judging by her legs. But she's a rescue, so we're really not sure."

"Makes sense. She's cute, either way."

"Isn't she? And she's so friendly! And...when I'm feeling down she always comes over and cuddles with me. It's like she can tell when I'm sad."

You smile. "That's wonderful."

"You should meet her someday! She jumps on people sometimes, fair warning, but I'm trying to train her out of it."

"I think I'd like that." And you honestly would. You've never had a pet yourself due to a combination of your mother's nature and some mild allergies to pet dander, but you've never been *opposed* to animals, and Pumpkin is objectively adorable.

Plus, Peridot is proving to be pretty fun to talk to. All this talk of dogs and soap operas is helping to get your mind off things, and given what just went down between Amethyst and Jasper, you need that.

You're starting to worry a bit, though, in the back of your mind. You haven't been keeping meticulous track of time, but you've been waiting on Amethyst for a while now, all things considered.

“Should we...” you begin, but Peridot cuts you off.

“She’ll come over when she’s ready,” she insists. “Sometimes it takes her a while to cool down.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. She needs some time to herself.” Peridot turns her attention back to her phone. “Do you play any games?”

“I’m afraid not, no.”

“Ah. This one is pretty fun, it’s a stupid freemium game but it’s still a nice distraction. And I’ve gotten *really* good at it.”

“Freemium?”

“You have to pay actual money for certain things. I don’t bother, of course, but that’s mostly because I don’t have the funds.”

“I see. That sounds frustrating.”

“It i—” Peridot begins, but suddenly, her eyes widen. “Look.”

“At what?”

“That car. The blue one. That’s Lapis’ car.”

Peridot quickly zips up her bag and stands, turning to you.

“What?” you ask.

“*This*,” Peridot sighs, “is the part where we intervene.”

—

Amethyst is still curled up on the walkway, but she’s stopped screaming and sobbing, at least. Peridot was right, you suppose.

“Hi,” says Peridot.

“Hey,” Amethyst replies, her voice hoarse. “Let’s just go, okay? Nothing is gonna come of this.”

Peridot visibly tenses up. “Um, about that...”

Amethyst’s head shoots up. “What?”

You hear footsteps behind you, and all three of you turn around.

“What are *you* doing here?” Lapis spits.

Amethyst scowls, drawing herself up to her full, unimpressive height. “I could ask the same of you.”

“Jasper and I have both changed,” Lapis insists, and Amethyst laughs bitterly.

“You keep saying that. You say that *every time*.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I’ve known you for *years*, Lapis. And you know what? You *still* act like a fucking high school freshman! You haven’t put in *any* work on actually improving yourself! You just...keep running from your problems and acting like it’s everyone else’s fault that your life sucks! But you know what? Maybe things would be better for you if you could fucking *learn* from your mistakes! But you won’t. I *know* you won’t.”

Amethyst is glaring daggers at Lapis, but you can see her lower lip quivering a bit. “No fucking wonder you haven’t been at therapy, huh? You don’t *want* to get better!”

“Yes I do!”

“Then why do you keep pulling this shit?”

“Because I still love her, okay?”

“No! *Not* okay! You’ll just break up again and bitch about her for months until you come crawling back to each other, it’s—it’s what you *always* do!”

“Says the girl who’s never going to find *anyone* with the shit *she* pulls.”

Peridot speaks up. “She has me.”

Lapis is silent for a moment. “Peridot, *why* are you dating her? Why do you *trust* her?”

“Wow, hypocritical much?” Amethyst crosses her arms. “It’s okay for *you* to date *Jasper*, of all people, but I’m just some loser who doesn’t deserve love?”

“Just go,” Lapis snaps. “I don’t want to see you here again.”

Amethyst clenches her fists, and looks for all the world like she’s about to punch her. Peridot places a comforting hand on her shoulder.

You just stand by awkwardly.

Lapis pushes past the three of you, and when she enters the apartment, she slams the door so hard you swear you can feel it. “Um...” you begin.

“Let’s go,” Peridot says quietly.

The drive home is beyond tense.

This time, both Peridot and Amethyst sit in the back. The only talking any of you do stems primarily from Peridot, who, judging by what she's saying, is showing Amethyst some memes.

Amethyst, for her part, barely replies. When she does, it's quiet, apathetic. Given context, it's eerie.

Why did I agree to this? What did I think would happen?

You almost pass by Amethyst's house, only stopping because Peridot points it out. "Sorry," you say. "I was a little distracted."

"I'll see you Tuesday," Peridot says, and she and Amethyst hop out of the car.

You drive home in complete silence.

Chapter 26

"I'm not sure when Lapis is going to be back."

Sapphire frowns, but doesn't look especially shocked. "I see. Thank you for letting me know. Dinner will be ready soon, by the way."

"Of course." You turn to walk to your room, but pause. "Um...has this happened before?"

Sapphire bites her lip. "Yes. But...usually I can see it coming—I've talked her out of it a few times. This is unusually sudden, even for her."

"Should we be worried?"

"No...no, of course not. She'll come back. She always does, in the end." She doesn't sound convinced in the slightest, but you decide not to press her further. It'll come up on Tuesday, you're sure.

Maybe it *should* be a more pressing matter, but really, for *you*...it just isn't. Lapis can wait.

"Supper's on!" Ruby pipes up from the kitchen.

"Oh! Wonderful."

After finishing your spaghetti—which is, as always, *excellent*—you excuse yourself to your room. There's a lot swirling around in your mind, unbidden, uncomfortable.

The whole mess with Lapis and Jasper was, ultimately, less of a distraction from your issues than you'd hoped. There's just one thing Amethyst said that you can't get off your mind, and at this moment, it's eclipsing all else.

"What about Rose?"

It can't have been *that* bad, not really. Rose...she gave you what you needed. Affection. Attention. *Love*, or something that at least resembled it at the time.

No. You don't want to think about that. You don't want to think about how maybe it *was* unhealthy, that maybe she *hurt you*—

But, of course, you can't *not* think about it.

You think back as you lie in bed. Red flags. There must've been *something* you were too foolish to notice...

And then a name pops into your head, a name that you haven't thought of in years, and with it comes a flood of guilt.

You pull out your phone, open Facebook, and type "Bismuth Engels" into the search bar.

You'd rather not think too much about what happened with her. It's not that you have anything whatsoever against Bismuth. But *Rose* did, and...

Well. That was that.

Her profile is, naturally, the first to come up—it's not like she has a terribly common name. It's definitely her, with the same rainbow dreads she had way back when. Without thinking about it too long, you hit the friend request button.

To your surprise, no more than ten minutes later, she accepts it. And even more surprisingly, she messages you immediately.

"PEARL!!!

"it's been so long holy SHIT"

You wince.

"It has, hasn't it?"

"I'm really sorry I ghosted you like that. I don't know why I did it."

"i think i have an idea

"rose's idea right?"

"Yeah. I don't know the details, but I know the two of you had a falling out..."

"I think I felt like I had to pick a side."

"yeah i getcha

"i'm not mad at you anymore if that helps

"haven't been for years

"i know you had it BAD for her

"you still together?"

There's a pain in your chest, in your soul, as you respond.

"She's dead, Bismuth."

"WHAT

"what happened???"

You tell her everything. *Everything* that's happened over the past few months, the past few years.

It takes her a while to reply, and when she does, it's just a single sentence.

"jesus christ that's fucked"

"I suppose so."

"no seriously pearl

"thats FUCKED

"like...what the hell?"

"glad to hear garnet's doing okay though

"i'd love to hang out with you guys again

"y'know, if you'll have me"

"Why wouldn't we?"

"It's time we heard your side of the story anyway, don't you think?"

"yeah. good point."

You're sitting on the porch when Bismuth arrives Sunday evening.

"Hey, Pearl!" she exclaims as she sees you, and runs up, pulling you in for a hug--which you gladly reciprocate. You're less nervous than you thought you'd be, actually. You're just genuinely so, so happy to see her again.

Which, for once, is why you're crying.

"Uh, something wrong?" asks Bismuth.

"No. Quite the opposite, in fact. Come on in."

Garnet's waiting right inside, and Bismuth gives her a hug as well. "Garnet," she says with a grin, "how you holding up?"

"Fairly well, all things considered."

"Great to hear it."

"Would you like something to drink?" you ask, wiping the tears from your eyes. "We have some stuff in the fridge. Take your pick."

"Thank you so much, I'm parched!" Bismuth goes and rummages around for a few moments, before returning with a can of root beer. "So how's life with the Carlsons been?"

You shrug. "It's an improvement in just about every way. I wish I'd ended up here under better circumstances than I did, but...it's definitely better than life with my mom."

The three of you sit down together on the couch, and in this moment, you feel surprisingly content. People care. It's one of those things you know consciously, of course, but it's so hard to internalize, nearly impossible at times.

Now is not one of those times.

"So tell us about what you've been up to," Garnet insists.

"College, mostly. I've been working on getting my AA, and then I'll be off to a four-year school. I'm majoring in architecture."

You nod. "Are you still into blacksmithing?"

“Of course! I drop by the forge at least once a week. Made a *kickass* sword recently, I have some pics on my phone!” She pulls the photos up--it is, indeed, an awesome sword.

It's shocking, really, how easy all this is proving. Eerily so.

It's *got* to be too good to be true. Right?

That night, you get an enthusiastic text from Bismuth.

“that was so much fun!! we should hang out again soon”

You can't help the excited little heart flutters you get at her text. She still *likes* you. She still actually enjoys your company. Given context, that means a lot.

“So is it okay if I ask what happened with you and Rose?”

“ugh it was so dumb

“i barely even remember what the argument was about. something about her shitty parents

“but she got really mad at me

“it got physical

“i got expelled over it”

Your blood runs cold. *“I'm so sorry.”*

“you're not the one i want an apology from pearl, you're cool in my book

“but i guess i can't get an apology from a dead person huh”

“Unfortunately.

“I wish you could. I wish we both could.”

“yeah. me too.”

Chapter 27

Expelled. She got Bismuth *expelled* over a fight *she* instigated.

It explains a lot. You really wish it didn't, but it *absolutely* does.

Rose had been frustratingly vague to you and Garnet about the whole situation, just saying that she'd seen a nasty side of Bismuth and advising them to stay away. She'd seemed distressed in her own right, and you and Garnet had agreed not to press her at that time.

And then you just never did. You didn't question any of it, not hard enough.

You don't know what you would've done had you heard Bismuth's version of events when Rose was still alive. You don't know that you would've believed it at all—no, you're *sure* you would've sided with Rose. It's making you sick.

It's very late. Everyone else has gone to bed, and you're just lying awake, your guilt only serving to fuel your usual insomnia.

Sighing, you pick up your phone from your nightstand. You can talk about all this in a constructive environment on Tuesday, and you intend to, but now? Now you just need to *vent*.

You send Amethyst a text. *"Are you awake?"*

She responds in short order. *"yeah i made some bad life choices so i cant fuckin sleep"*

"Bad life choices?"

"drinkin a monster at 11 pm

"so i have an excuse 4 bein awake at this hour its just a rly shitty one and my fault anyway lmao

"hbu"

"It's just my thoughts again.

"I'm feeling really guilty about something that happened a while ago. Is it alright if I rant about it a bit?"

"go nuts"

"I had this friend in high school, Bismuth. She hung out with Rose, Garnet, and me.

"She and Rose got into a fight, and Bismuth got expelled for it.

"I didn't know that she'd been expelled. I just thought she changed schools.

"Rose just said that she'd seen a different side of Bismuth, and told me and Garnet to stay away."

"so given what i kno abt u

"u did"

"Yeah. We all wound up ghosting her. I didn't even question it back then.

"I reconnected with her the other day. She told me everything she could recall.

"I mean, she's not mad at me or Garnet, but I'm absolutely mad at myself.

"I don't know if I would've believed Bismuth if Rose were still here.

"Look. Have you ever been so in love with someone that you'd do literally anything for them?"

"uh

"no?

"like 4 example i lov peri n want her 2 b happy but i have like

"limits?

"the more u say abt rose the more im convinced she was not a good gf like at ALL

"u cant control someone and then say u love them without bein a huge hypocrit

"or however u spell that i cannot b assed 2 look it up"

"It's spelled hypocrite."

"k cool thx but thats not the point im trying 2 make here"

"I know.

"I don't know why I'm still this attached."

"bc freshmen r dumb and impressionable and u fell 4 the wrong girl back then?

"like fuck i told u abt my shitty ex

"and idk if i woulda left her if she hadnt been BLATANTLY a huge bitch

"idk what rose was actually like but u make her sound like she acted all sweet"

"She was."

"wow u still think that?"

You wince.

"You didn't know her.

"You have no idea how easy it was to love her."

"point taken i guess

"but jfc p u gotta realize that she was terrible 4 u at this point like srsly

"i kno thats rly hard but u gotta TRY u feel me"

"I am trying.

"It's just so difficult to internalize. I really thought she was the best thing to ever happen to me for so long.

"I wanted to spend my whole life with her. All my plans for the future had her in them.

"Do you understand?"

"uh

"sorta?"

"I don't know how to feel about her, Amethyst.

"It hurts."

And really, that right there is the long and short of it. It *hurts*, all of it, and despite everything, despite the progress you've made, you feel hopelessly lost.

What else is new?

You wipe the freshly-formed tears from your eyes.

"im sorry"

"Why?"

"bc that fuckin sucks and idk what 2 say that might help"

"It's okay. I just needed to talk about it to someone. I don't need advice right now."

"gotcha

"is there anything i can do 2 make u a lil less sad"

"No. Not really."

"then go tf 2 sleep bc its like one in the morning and ur not hopped up on caffeine

"at least im guessing ur not"

"I'm not, no. I just can't get to sleep."

“valid tbh

“should i keep txtng u?”

“That would be nice. I could use a distraction, I think.”

“oh man heres a vid u might like”

She sends you a link, and you click it without really thinking.

Oh. So she was Rickrolling you. You're not sure why you're surprised.

You can't help but snort.

“lmao gotcha

“sry i HAD 2”

“Thanks, actually. I needed a laugh.”

“well im good at goofs so

“if u ever need that hmu”

“I think I might take you up on that.

“Thank you, Amethyst.”

“np p”

For the rest of the night, you text back and forth. She links you to a few music videos and Vine compilations, which you watch quietly as you lie in bed. It's nice, honestly. Having friends is nice.

At least, *you* consider Amethyst a friend at this point. You don't know if she feels the same. So you ask.

“um duh

“y would i be talkin 2 u if we wrent friends”

A smile crosses your face, unbidden.

The sun is starting to rise outside, and the light pours in through the window. You sigh--trying to sleep is definitely futile at this point. At least tea exists.

You head downstairs, phone still in hand, and to your surprise, you quickly discover that you're not the only person awake. You glance at your phone. 5:30 AM. Weird.

"Thanks for telling me," says Sapphire. She's standing in the kitchen, talking to someone on the phone. "Please inform me when she'll be back."

She turns and sees you. "Good morning, Pearl. How'd you sleep?"

"I didn't."

"Hm. I see." She looks distracted, like there's something on her mind. It makes sense--you've no idea what that phone call was about, or who was calling, but if someone really needed to talk to Sapphire this early in the morning, it must've been important.

"Who were you talking to?"

Sapphire heaves a large sigh. "Jasper, actually. Lapis is in the hospital again."

"...What for?"

"I'm not sure of the details. She just said she found her unconscious in the bathtub."

Your blood runs cold. "Did she--"

"I don't *know*."

"...Sorry."

"No. No need to apologize."

"Okay."

"I'll move," Sapphire says after a pause, exiting the kitchen. "You're down here to make your tea, yes?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Chapter 28

"So did you hear about Lapis?" Amethyst asks you as she walks into Sapphire's office that Tuesday--earlier than Peridot, for once.

"That she's in the hospital?"

Amethyst nods. She looks frazzled. While you managed to squeeze in at least a few hours of sleep last night--not *enough*, but unlike the night prior, you *did* sleep--it looks as if Amethyst wasn't nearly as lucky. She flops down onto the couch across from you, sighing heavily.

"Jasper called me," Amethyst informs you. "She was really messed up about it."

"Do you think she--" you begin, but Amethyst cuts you off.

"No. She's never gotten anywhere near that brutal with her, and I think deep down, she's too scared of Lapis to even *try* anything like that."

"Wait. *She's* scared of *Lapis*?"

"Uh, *yeah*. Lapis is a fucking nightmare. She completely shattered Jasper's nose at *least* once. She's not afraid to hold back, y'know?" Another heavy sigh. "I don't think Jasper could defend herself against Lapis if that girl had a gun to her head. I don't get it, she could take her on so goddamn easily, but she *wouldn't*. She's just verbal with Lapis."

Amethyst rolls over onto her side and gestures at the little scar on her upper lip. You'd never paid it a ton of mind, but a memory of that scarred upper lip against yours flashes through your mind, entirely against your will or desire.

"She gave this to me," she tells you. "Punched me in the mouth when I was thirteen. I had to have stitches and dental surgery, for fuck's sake. And I *still* have this stupid ugly scar to show for it! But..."

Amethyst rolls back onto her back. "She wouldn't do anything that bad to *Lapis*. Much less knock her out. I really do believe her when she says she found her in the tub, because that's the kind of thing that's actually happened before."

"...I see," you say, and what else *is* there to say?

The door swings open, snapping everyone to attention. "Hey, guys!" Peridot chirps as she walks in. "Sorry I'm late, I had to finish a project for class. So what did I miss?"

"Just a bunch of Lapis bullshit," Amethyst groans. She pulls herself up and motions for Peridot to join her, more listlessly than you've come to expect.

"Um...is everything okay?" Peridot asks as she sits down.

"Absolutely not."

Sapphire gives Amethyst a pointed look. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"I mean, what is there to say that hasn't already been said? Lapis is in the hospital, there is a zero percent chance it's not her own doing *again*, and I'm sick of all the drama." She looks down at her lap, hiding behind her hair. "Can we *please* focus on, like, literally *anything* else?"

Peridot's eyes widen. "Wait, Lapis is in the hospital?"

"Yeah. Look, I'll--I'll fill you in later, 'kay, Peri? I'm tired of all of it. We were talking about it before you got here."

Peridot frowns. "Ah. I see." She sits down next to Amethyst and looks right at her in clear concern. "Hey, Amethyst?"

"*What?*"

"Are you okay?"

"No," Amethyst snaps. "I didn't sleep, and I'm *pissed* at Lapis, okay?"

"...Okay," Peridot sighs.

"Let's talk about that, Amethyst," Sapphire says.

"Ugh, I just told you! I don't *want* to go on about that cunt anymore!"

Sapphire shakes her head. "Not that part. You just seem very stressed in general. Is something else going on?"

"Not really. It's just...my life was going great for a while, y'know? I have a girlfriend, and another actual friend, and my grades are improving enough that I won't have to repeat my senior year, and then *this* shit happens. Like, *Jasper* called me. My absolute bitch of a cousin is trying to

insert herself into my life again, just because I'm in a therapy group with her nutjob girlfriend, and I'm sick of all of it! I'm *so goddamn sick* of all of this!"

Amethyst sniffles a bit. "Everything happens *so much*."

You don't know what to say, or how to help. You look at Sapphire helplessly.

"That's not something you can control," says Sapphire. "It's Lapis and Jasper's problem, not yours."

"But I'm *involved* now."

"You don't have to be. I'm worried about Lapis too, but...no one should be making that *your* problem."

"Jasper's sure trying to make it my problem. And I can't just cut her off. I hate her, but she's *family*. I like my aunt and uncle and I don't wanna cut *them* out of my life, but...their daughter just *sucks*."

And in that instant, you finally know what to say.

"It doesn't matter if she's family. My mother is family. Maggie is family. I don't talk to *them*. And you don't talk to your biological mother, do you?"

"*Fuck* no."

"Well...Jasper's no different, is she?"

Amethyst just stares at you. "But...what if the family I have that *doesn't* suck gets upset about it? I don't want that, her parents are cool, and *my* parents are cool, I just..."

She breaks down then, sobbing into her hands. Peridot places a comforting hand on her shoulder.

She seems pretty sad herself now.

"I'll be back," Amethyst sighs several minutes later. "I really need a smoke."

"...Is it alright if I join you?" you ask.

"Yeah, I guess."

The two of you step outside. It's nice out--spring is here in full force. Amethyst pulls a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and lights up, scowling, still shaking with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry about what's going on," you say, lighting your own cigarette and taking a drag.

"Yeah. Same."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"...Just be here." She looks you right in the eye. "Please, don't leave me."

That hits you hard. "I won't. I promise."

You mean it.

You re-enter the office, Amethyst trailing just behind you. "We're back," you announce.

"Wonderful," Sapphire replies with a smile. "Are you feeling any better, Amethyst?"

"Not really. But there's not much I can do, is there?"

"Just ride it out. I know that's tricky, but remember the calming techniques I taught you a while back, and remember that we're all here for you."

"...Okay." Amethyst's voice is small, fearful. She's in a bad state still, but...at least she's not sobbing anymore.

"And get a good night's sleep tonight."

"I'll try."

You sit and look at Amethyst, and you *ache*.

Chapter 29

You don't notice your phone vibrating. Of course you don't--you're still in the session, still trying to think of what to say.

"I've been feeling very conflicted," you finally manage. Amethyst glances up at you, looking sympathetic, if a bit preoccupied--not that you blame her for that, given context.

"About what?" Peridot asks.

"The whole mess with Rose. We had this friend, Bismuth, and...we just ditched her, because Rose had this huge fight with her. And I never even *questioned* her version of the story." You heave a sigh, looking down at your lap. "I decided to reach out to Bismuth the other day, and she told me her side. I believe her! I do. But I don't think I would've if Rose had been there. Am I making sense?"

"Not really," Peridot replies. "What's the logic behind that?"

You shrug. "There isn't any. Just a lot of conflicting emotions that I can't entirely wrap my head around. I think if Rose told me the moon was made of cheese I would've believed her. She was very convincing somehow. Charismatic, I suppose you could say."

You try to look Peridot in the eye, but she immediately averts her gaze. "I loved her, and I hung onto every word she said."

"You sure that's love?" Amethyst pipes up. Her voice is still raw from crying, but her gaze is steely.

"Of course it was. I--"

"Did she return the feeling? At all?"

"Yes, actually," you snap. "Maybe not towards the end of her life. Maybe she *did* stop loving me. But she loved me once. I *know* she did."

Your first Valentine's Day with Rose was a school day, and you honestly had no clue what to expect.

It wasn't as though you had any experience with romance. You'd never been on a single date before Rose came along, and neither had Maggie or Rita, at least as far as you could tell--not that you had any intention of telling either of them about your relationship, for a number of reasons. And like hell would you ever ask your mother for relationship advice, even if you weren't gay.

So when you found an envelope in your locker, sealed with a pink lipstick kiss, you felt a little guilty. You hadn't done anything for Rose.

Your hands shook as you opened the envelope. Inside was a card with a groundhog on it, smelling faintly of her favorite fruity perfume, and you opened it up, leaning against the locker as you read.

"Hey, Pearl!

"I hope you enjoy the card. I know it's SUPPOSED to be a Groundhog Day card, but I couldn't help myself!! It was just too cute!

"Meet me at the park after school? I have a club meeting at lunch today but I'd LOVE to take you out tonight!

"Love and kisses,

"Rose"

You couldn't help but grin all day.

On your walk to the park after school, having told your mother that you were going over to Garnet's to watch a movie, you swung by the store. You couldn't just show up without a gift--she deserved it.

After perusing the shelves for far longer than you'd meant to, you ended up purchasing a little pink plush whale and a single rose. It wasn't much, but you hoped dearly that she'd enjoy the gifts.

Rose was sitting on a bench at the park, and as soon as she noticed you, she grinned broadly and waved you over. You took your backpack off and set it down next to the bench before sitting next to her.

"Happy Valentine's Day, cutie," Rose said, smooching you on the forehead and eliciting a giggle.

"Same to you. Um, I actually got you a few things, let me get them out of my bag."

She gasped. "You didn't have to do that!"

"I wanted to." You pulled the rose out first, deeply relieved that the stem was still intact. "I'm sorry if it's a bit on the nose."

"No, it's beautiful! I love roses."

"Oh! Good. Uh, and here," you added, handing the plushie over as well.

"Oh my God," she breathed. "This is so adorable! And it's pink, too! Oh, thank you, Pearl, I love this!"

You smiled, and she kissed you again. "I got you a little something too. Close your eyes and hold out your hands!"

You complied, and felt something small and cold drop into your hands. Opening your eyes, you saw a small necklace--a little gold heart-shaped locket with a pink rose on it. In the middle of the rose sat a small pearl. You opened the locket up to find two photos, one on each side. A beautiful photo of Rose, and a photo of yourself that you couldn't help but think looked horrid in comparison.

(Then again, anyone would've looked awful in comparison to Rose.)

You didn't know what to say. "Rose..."

"Oh no, do you not like it?"

"No, I love it! I just...this is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. I don't deserve this."

"But you do deserve it. You're so wonderful, Pearl. You deserve the world."

You just hugged her close and cried into her chest, thanking her over and over.

You still have the locket on, of course. You've worn it every day for five years now, and feel nearly nude without it. You only take it off to shower, and the idea of losing it, much less getting rid of it on purpose, terrifies you.

Trembling, you pull it out from under your shirt. "I...she gave this to me. There's pictures of us inside. Do you understand how much that meant? I'd never felt so *loved*. And now...I don't know."

Amethyst frowns. "I was wondering about the necklace."

Oh. Right. You didn't bother to take it off when you slept with her, did you?

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I just...I didn't really think about it all that hard at the time, but I *noticed* it. I didn't realize it was that sentimental."

"I'm glad you didn't ask," you admit.

"Yeah. Yeah, so am I."

"So the necklace is kind of like my hoodie, then?" Peridot pipes up. "A comfort thing?"

"Yes, but...maybe not for the same reasons. It's sort of a symbolic thing." You glance at the clock. Time's almost up.

"It's fine, though," you say, completely unconvincingly. "Really. It can wait."

When you get home, you check your phone. Bismuth was texting you.

"hey lemme know how therapy goes today!"

"it's on tuesdays right?"

You pause. *I talked about you, and everything around me is falling apart again.*

"It was okay. I'm working through the whole Rose thing." Painfully reductive, but technically not a lie.

"that's great!!!"

"wanna get coffee this weekend?"

You smile, relieved that she's changed the subject. *"I'd love that."*

"sweeeeet! common grounds?"

"Sounds good."

"aight, how's saturday night sound?"

"i'll pick you up"

"Sounds wonderful. I'll see you then."

Good. Something to look forward to. For the moment, you're going to focus on that--a nice weekend with a good friend.

You successfully manage to think about happier things, like what to wear when you hang out with Bismuth, for a grand total of maybe half an hour. Your ringtone snaps you out of it--a call.

"Amethyst?" you say to yourself as you look at the caller ID. You pick up. "Hello, this is Pearl speaking--"

"Holy *fuck* Pearl, you are not gonna believe this," Amethyst says breathlessly. "Uh, can you come over? It's easier to explain in person, and--I dunno, I *really* don't want to be alone, and--"

"Okay," you respond. "I'll be over in just a bit. Is everything okay?"

"It is absolutely fucking not."

She hangs up.

Amethyst is on her porch again. Everything looks just as it did on that fateful day in February, save for the presence of a badly dented car in the driveway. You can only assume, given Amethyst's lack of a car of her own, that it belongs to one of her parents.

"Are your parents home?" you ask as you approach.

She shakes her head. "No. That's Jasper's car. You can tell from the dents and the fact that Lapis scratched 'bitch' into the door."

Looking closer at the car, you see that Lapis did, in fact, scratch that very word into the faded yellow paint. At least, someone did, and you're pretty sure that had it been Amethyst who did it, she'd be bragging.

You sit down on the steps to the patio. "Is that why you wanted me here?"

"Sorta. Part of it." Amethyst pulls a pack of cigarettes from her bra and lights one. "That, and I'm kinda worried about you. But mostly my idiot cousin and the cunt she's dating."

You frown, concerned on so many levels. "How's Lapis doing?"

"She's awake and grumpy, but--oh my *God*, it's the dumbest fucking thing. See, she had a fight with Jasper, 'cause of *course* she did. And she got really pissed and locked herself in the bathroom with a bottle of some really fancy vodka, which, I might add, Jasper had *just* purchased, and she *chugged* the damn thing. She wasn't even trying to off herself for once, she just drank the nice booze Jasper bought to make her mad. And she could've fucking *died* for that."

Amethyst looks like she's about to start crying again, but blinks back the tears as she takes another puff. "And like, Jasper's parents are really mad at her for all the bullshit with Lapis, so she got it in her head that staying with *us* for a while would be a great idea."

Oh. Okay, now it makes sense.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" you ask.

"Uh. I dunno. I just really don't want to be alone in the house with Jasper, y'know? And Peridot's not able to come over, she has an English paper she's working on." She furrows her brow.

"Need a smoke?"

"That would be nice. Thank you."

She hands you a cigarette, along with a purple Zippo lighter, and you join her.

"I'm just...ugh. I told Sapphire that Lapis was okay, and like, the basic story, but I didn't want to eat into her free time too much. But holy *fuck* am I mad."

"I can't say I blame you."

"Thanks, P."

She looks right at you, and says, "And by the way, you know how I didn't comment on your locket? 'Cause I wanted to thank you for..." Her voice lowers, as if she's telling you a secret.

"Y'know. Not commenting on my scars."

Your eyes meet hers for an uncomfortable moment, and you quickly avert your gaze. You'd barely even noticed them, intoxicated as you were, but as you replay the incident in your mind, you see them--white lines crisscrossing her brown skin.

"...Is it okay," you reply slowly, "if I ask what happened?"

Amethyst shrugs. "I get mad at myself sometimes. It's stupid."

"And--"

"And I've cut before, yeah. Like, I'm getting way better about it, but. Yeah." She takes another drag, and attempts to blow a smoke ring. "I get so mad at myself, and it makes me *suck*, and I punish myself for sucking. But I've been clean for more than a month now, and that was--there were other things going on."

You're pretty sure you know what those other things were, and you feel like vomiting.

"I'm so sorry," you manage to croak out.

"Wasn't your fault." She pauses. "I mean, it was at first, but like--I told you to *kill yourself*. I was being a huge dickwad. And...yeah." Amethyst sniffles. "I didn't go too deep that time, I didn't need stitches or whatever, but...yeah. Sorry. I'm really, *really* sorry."

"I know."

Amethyst snuffs her cigarette out. "So I wanna know. Why did you put up with Rose doing all the shit she did?"

You look down at the glowing ember of your cigarette. "I didn't know anything different."

Amethyst looks right at you. "Okay. Look, I can sorta relate, y'know? I...I didn't know that loving parents were a real thing until I was a teenager, y'know? I didn't have any frame of reference for it. The only friends I had were other foster kids, and half of 'em had it even worse than me at some points. Like, I remember watching *The Simpsons* for the first time in fifth grade, and just being completely *confused* by Marge, because she actually loved her kids. And then I finally got a real home, a real *family*, and it was just...so surreal."

She lights up another cigarette. "You never dated anyone else, right?"

"No. No one."

"So you just kinda thought that's how relationships worked? That you'd do literally anything just to make her happy, no matter what that meant for you?"

You're a little shocked at the astuteness of her observation. "...Yes, actually, I did."

"That's not how it's supposed to be. You know that now, right?"

"I guess, but--"

"Shh. No buts. I know I didn't know Rose, and I know that you loved her and all, but...I guess I just don't get it."

"No. You don't."

"What was so special about her specifically, anyway?"

Everything. "She was one of the first people to ever really care about me. At all. For so long it was just her and Garnet, really, and Garnet's not one for relationships, and--she was so beautiful and charming and warm. If you'd met her, you'd understand. Trust me."

"Maybe, yeah. But she still kinda fucked you over. Maybe it's time for you to stop denying that."

As much as you hate to admit it, Amethyst is, at least to some extent, *right*.

"She made her choices," you sigh. "I couldn't have talked her out of things if I'd wanted to. She always did what she wanted."

"Cool motive. Still sucks."

"I suppose. I just can't figure out how to feel about her. It's terrifying, the...*uncertainty* of it all."

Amethyst nods. "Now *that*," she says, "is a mood."

The two of you sit in silence, just smoking and staring at the sunset. "Thanks for being here," she finally murmurs.

(You can't help but think that in a different timeline, a timeline with fewer awful mistakes, you might've loved her.)

Chapter 30

For whatever reason, on the day of your rendezvous with Bismuth, you find yourself more self-conscious about your appearance than you have in a long, long time. You spend a good half-hour pulling things from your closet, while Garnet indulgently sits on your bed and provides input.

"I like that jacket," she tells you as you stare at a blue denim jacket you'd honestly forgotten you'd even owned. It's been a while since you bothered to dress up at all. In fact, you're fairly sure the last time you did was Rose's funeral.

"Think I should wear it, then? Does it look okay with the rest of this?" You gesture at yourself, clad in the jacket, a teal tank top, and a simple pair of dark blue skinny jeans. "Is it too casual?"

"I don't understand why you're so concerned. It's not like you're going on a *date*." Garnet pauses, then smirks and adds, "Unless there's something you're not telling me."

You shake your head furiously. "No, it's not a date. She just wants to check up on me."

"Then I'm still confused as to why you're concerned about looking too casual. She's your friend, she's not going to mind. Although, if it matters, I think you look perfectly fine."

"Thanks." You give yourself a once-over in the mirror hanging from your closet door, furrowing your brow. Your hair looks nice, at least, but the dark circles under your eyes are pretty prominent. *Ugh*.

You conclude, begrudgingly, "Good enough."

Garnet smiles. "Perfect."

"Uh, do you know what time it is?"

She glances at her phone. "5:50."

"Okay. She'll be here in ten minutes, then. I'll go wait." You smile back, sincerely grateful.

"Thanks for your help, Garnet. Should I bring you back anything from the cafe?"

"I wouldn't object to a cheese danish, if you don't mind."

"Okay. Text me a reminder?"

"Sure thing."

You grab your purse, head downstairs, and step out into the warm spring air. It's a beautiful evening, truly.

Bismuth pulls up right on time, in a faded red pick-up truck. You stroll on over and hop in, smiling at her. To your relief, she's dressed even less formally than you, in a dark blue tank, brown overalls, and a periwinkle flannel.

Honestly, it suits her better than something fancy would.

"Nice to see you again," you say.

"Nice to see you too! Ready to go?"

"Of course."

Common Grounds is open until nine, but by the time you and Bismuth get there, it looks next to empty.

You'd insisted on paying separately in the car, despite Bismuth's assurances that she could cover it. "I don't want to burden you too much," you'd told her.

"You sure? It's not a burden, really."

"Yeah. I'm sure. Thank you, though."

You walk inside, and sure enough, the place is empty save for the clerk at the counter. You're certainly not complaining, and there's a definite spring in your step as you walk up and order. Your phone buzzes, and you check it. A text from Garnet.

"cheese danish."

"I'd like a medium chai, a spinach quiche, and a cheese danish," you tell the short young woman at the counter. She looks familiar, and you're positive you've seen her before, though you cannot for the life of you place *where*.

"Coming right up. That'll be \$11.50."

You pull a twenty from your purse and hand it over. When she hands you back your change, you decide, impulsively, to put a few dollars in the tip jar. You're in a shockingly good mood, and it feels *right* to pay that forward.

"Uh...thanks," the clerk replies, seemingly a bit thrown off. "Hey, you're Pearl, right?"

"Uh, yes? I'm so sorry, but...who are you?"

"Oh, we didn't really hang out much. I'm Sadie!" She holds her hand out, and you shake it. She looks over at Bismuth, and says, "Hey, I think I kinda remember you too! Bismuth, right? Where'd you go?"

"Uh...it's a long story," Bismuth replies, fiddling awkwardly with her hair. "I'll have a caramel macchiato and a blueberry bagel--wait, do you have cream cheese?"

"Yup, I can give you a little tub of it on the side."

"Then yeah. Caramel macchiato, blueberry bagel with cream cheese."

"\$8.70." Bismuth opts to pay with a debit card.

"So how have you been, Pearl?" Sadie asks. "I, uh...I remember what happened with you and your sister. I'm really sorry, that was so messed up."

How do you reply to that? You barely know Sadie--you think you had social studies with her your senior year, but that's about the extent of your interactions with her, at least until this very moment. Telling someone you've spoken maybe three sentences to in the past that you attempted suicide seems like a bad idea, and everything has been *so heavy*...

"I've been...alright, I suppose. It's also a long story." You laugh nervously. "But I have a roof over my head. I'm living with Garnet and her moms now."

"That's good, at least!" Sadie hands over your orders. "Have a nice evening, okay?"

You grin. "I will. You too."

You and Bismuth sit outside, at a small picnic table on the deck. The weather, you both agreed, is too lovely to stay cooped up inside the cafe itself.

"So Ruby," you tell her, "is a Girl Scout leader, right? She led Garnet's troop when she was younger, and had so much fun that she decided to keep doing it. She's stressing out over cookie sales right now, but I don't think she needs to, really. Things are going fine there."

Bismuth laughs. "I asked what was up in *your* life, Pearl."

"Ah. Well...there's not a ton to say. Most of what's going on has been happening *around* me, not *to* me."

(You must admit, it's a bit of a refreshing change of pace.)

"Lapis is in the hospital, though," you continue. "She drank a whole bottle of vodka. I'm not as concerned as I probably should be, but I also don't know her very well..."

"Wait, Lapis?"

"You *know* her?"

"Kinda? She went to the same community college as me for a while before transferring last year, but she was a year above me, so I can't say I knew her *well*. Mostly I just heard things about her and that Jasper girl."

"Yeah. Amethyst has...uh, a lot to say about that."

"Who's Amethyst?"

"One of the other girls in my therapy group. It's her, me, Lapis, and this other kid, Peridot."

"How's all that going? Therapy, I mean."

"Surprisingly well, overall. I mean...there's been some very, very rocky patches, but on the whole, I think it's helping a lot." You can't help but smile. "Thanks for asking, it means a lot."

"Any time." You can't help but notice that Bismuth is blushing furiously.

"Uh, are *you* okay?" you ask, confused.

"Yeah, it's just...uh. Look." Bismuth gives a heavy sigh. "I...I kinda have a crush on you."

You're not sure how to respond, but ultimately croak out, "Is this a date?"

"Only if you want it to be."

An inexplicable panic overtakes you, and you stand so fast you get dizzy. "I'll be back," you blurt out, and you flee to Bismuth's truck, sitting on the edge of the bed. Shakily, you light a cigarette, taking care not to get any ash in the truck bed.

How do you even react? It's not that you don't like her. It's not that at all--in fact, you'd be lying if you said you didn't find her incredibly attractive, and so nice and caring, and such a good friend...

No. Right now, you realize, you don't think you can--*should*--be in a relationship. Despite everything, despite all the awful things you've learned and realized about Rose, you still love her, and it wouldn't be fair to Bismuth.

You can't stand the thought of hurting her the way you hurt Amethyst.

It's all you can do to keep from screaming in frustration, in pure anger at yourself. You finish your cigarette, and can't stop yourself from immediately lighting another. Not that it's doing much, if anything.

After what feels like a long time--*how* long, you don't know--Bismuth approaches the truck, holding a doggy bag and your unfinished chai. "It's okay if you don't want to," she murmurs, setting the food and drink down next to you.

"I'm so sorry. I'm not ready. Not yet." You wipe the tears from your eyes. "It's not your fault, Bismuth. I'm sorry I freaked out like that."

"No need to apologize," she responds, a slightly sad smile gracing her face. "I was just starting to worry I'd upset you. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Yeah, I'm...I'll be fine."

"Still want a ride home?"

"Of course."

You drive home largely in silence. As you exit the car, however, grabbing your food as you leave, you turn to face Bismuth.

"Thanks," you tell her, "for still caring about me after everything. It really means the world."

"Of course. You...do you still wanna be friends?"

"Absolutely! I'm not upset. Not with you, anyway."

"Stay safe, Pearl."

"Thank you," you reply with a slight smile. "I will."

(Despite your better efforts, you don't sleep a wink that night.)

Chapter 31

Bismuth had texted you on Sunday morning, just a single sentence.

"are you sure you're not mad at me?"

You'd taken longer to respond than you should've. You *weren't* mad at Bismuth, not in the slightest, but you *were* mad at yourself. You told her as much, typing and re-typing your reply several times before sending it.

"Positive. It's really not you."

You're exhausted when Tuesday rolls around. Between Saturday and now, you've only gotten maybe four hours of sleep total, and you are running on fumes.

Part of you is tempted to beg off this week, but you ignore that part. *It's not as if I'd be able to sleep anyway.*

As you sit and wait for everyone to arrive, you glance nervously at your phone. Sure, Bismuth has been texting you normally since, but the guilt weighs on you, oppressively heavy. You're aware on a conscious level that there's not much *reason* to feel that way, but...

But feelings aren't always logical, and this is a prime example of that.

As you ponder, Peridot and Amethyst burst in. "Welcome," says Sapphire.

"Yo," Amethyst drawls. She doesn't seem as exhausted as she did last week, but that's not saying much. She still looks very, very tired, and flops down on the couch, her short legs hanging over the arm. Peridot takes her seat next to her.

"So Lapis isn't going to be here this week," Sapphire explains. "She called, and she's out of the hospital, but...she says she's not up for doing much today." She sighs, and mutters something under her breath that you can't quite make out.

"Figures," Amethyst grumbles.

"Do you know when she'll be back?" asks Peridot. Sapphire just shakes her head.

Peridot's face falls for a split second, but she perks up in an instant. "Ooh, I know! We should make her a card!"

Amethyst raises an eyebrow, but doesn't say anything. You're silent too.

Sapphire speaks up, after a pause. "That sounds like a very nice idea." She gives a soft smile to Peridot.

“Okay!” Peridot chirps. “Hey, Amethyst? Pearl? Let’s go to my place after this. I don’t have all my art supplies with me right now, but I have plenty at home!” She looks incredibly pleased with herself, and it lifts your spirits, just a little.

“Sounds like a plan,” you respond.

Amethyst simply nods.

“Something happened on Saturday.”

“Tell us,” says Sapphire.

“Well...as I’ve mentioned, I recently reconnected with Bismuth. We went out for coffee.”

“Like a date?” asks Peridot.

“Uh. That’s the thing. She told me she likes me, uh, like that. And I’m flattered! Really, I am. And I *do* like her a lot. But...”

You groan. “*Ugh*. I’m just *still* not over Rose. Not enough for me dating *anyone* to be a good idea. And I kinda freaked out, even though I *know* it was a disproportionate response. She was so nice about it, and I just feel *bad*. I know I shouldn’t feel guilty for it, but I do.”

“You’ve always had a tendency to feel guilty for things that you can’t necessarily help,” Sapphire notes. “It’s a pattern. It’s something to work on.”

“I *know* that, it’s just...it’s hard to accept.”

“I know.” Sapphire smiles. “If you’re not ready to date yet, that’s completely fair. It takes time to get over these things.”

“I suppose. I mean, Bismuth isn’t upset with me. She was just worried that *I* was upset with *her*.”

“Were you?” Peridot asks. “Sorry, I can’t tell.”

“Well...not upset with *Bismuth*, no. But I *was* upset. Mostly with myself, honestly. I still am.” You gesture vaguely at yourself. “I haven’t slept well in days.”

“Do you *ever* sleep?” Amethyst pipes up, speaking for the first time in a while. Her silence has been deeply uncomfortable, and you must admit to a sense of relief at her finally talking--even as you scowl at her snark.

“I *try* to, but I’ve struggled with insomnia my whole life. Believe me, I’d sleep more if I could.”

“Opposite problem here,” Amethyst admits. “I have sleepy bitch disease.”

“Hypersomnia?” you ask.

“Yeah, that thing. It’s why I drink so many energy drinks.” She looks right at you. “So uh, I don’t really get that. Like, I get it, but I don’t *get* it, y’know?”

“I sleep pretty normally,” Peridot notes.

“God, Peri,” Amethyst chuckles, “you are the luckiest girl in the world.”

“Jasper still hasn’t fucked off.”

“Wait,” Peridot interjects. “Does that mean she’s *moving in*?”

Amethyst shrugs. “Hell if I know. I hope not. I never thought I’d say this in my entire fucking life, but...I’d take her bullshit relationship with Lapis over this.”

“That bad, huh?” you say, and she nods.

“Yup. She is literally the only person on the planet who can wake me up in the middle of the night. She just doesn’t shut up, ever, and she *especially* doesn’t shut up about *Lapis*, and I think she sleeps even less than Pearl? I keep hearing her stomping around at all fucking hours.”

Amethyst points to the recently-formed dark circles under her eyes. "So yeah. Not even my hyper-whatever can help, and I'm just...*so fucking tired*."

"Uh, I have a Monster in my backpack, would that help at all?"

"Peridot, you are legit the best girlfriend ever. But no. Doubt it would." She runs her fingers through her hair, clearly agitated. "I just want to *sleep* again!

I want life to be *normal* again, not this--this shit I'm dealing with right now."

"I know," Peridot sighs.

"Have you spoken to your parents about this?" asks Sapphire.

"Not yet. It's dumb, but I'm kinda scared to. Last time I complained about some bitch living with me I got sent to another foster home. And I *know* that my folks won't pull anything gross like that, but..."

"Trauma is like that, Amethyst." Sapphire looks her in the eye, and Amethyst immediately looks away in obvious discomfort.

"Yeah, but...my egg donor abandoned me when I was seven. I got shuffled to another shitty foster family for 'being difficult' when I was nine. It's been almost a *decade*. Anyone who wasn't nuttier than a fruitcake would be over this by now!"

"Not true," says Sapphire. "You don't just 'get over' these things. It takes time, and it takes *work*, and even then...it's not going to disappear."

That hits you hard. Even if it wasn't directed at you, you *relate* to Amethyst right now, and Sapphire's words *terrify* you.

You speak then, your voice small and pitiful. "Does that mean we'll never get better?"

"Not at all. You might not ever be in a perfect place, but progress is progress. It's something to be proud of." Sapphire smiles at you, but her expression quickly turns serious. "Maybe neither of you will ever stop hurting entirely. But...think of it like this. Have any of you ever broken a bone?"

Amethyst nods. So do you; they cracked your sternum and a few ribs resuscitating you. To your vague and frankly inexplicable surprise, Peridot shakes her head no.

"A broken bone hurts. It hurts a lot, and if it's broken badly enough, it might always hurt. But it'll hurt less over time, and there's ways to manage that pain."

"I'm confused," says Peridot.

"It's much the same with emotional trauma. Amethyst may never completely stop hurting from her mother, and Pearl may never completely stop hurting from Rose. But over time, the pain becomes more manageable. Do you understand, Peridot?"

"I think so, yeah."

Amethyst doesn't say anything, not verbally, but her frightened expression says it all.

You look at her, and she meets your eyes. Her lip quivers.

Your heart hurts, and it hurts for both of you.

Peridot seems completely unsure of what to talk about. Given context, you don't blame her.

As such, Sapphire allows the three of you to leave early. At that, Peridot visibly perks up.

"My place?" she asks excitedly, and Amethyst, despite everything, smiles slightly.

"Yeah," she says quietly. "I think I'd like that."

Chapter 32

Peridot's house is a bit smaller than most of the houses in your suburb, but it's not as tiny as the apartments you grew up in. It is, however, in dire need of some repairs and a new paint job, and Peridot apologizes for this as she leads you inside.

"My parents are home," she whispers, "so try to be quiet."

She leads you and Amethyst to her room. The door is decorated with several posters and a "do not disturb" sign, and creaks slightly when she swings it open.

Her room is extremely well-organized, but the color scheme and overall design could best be described as chaotic. Chartreuse walls, covered in even more stuff--not just posters, but old magazine covers, liner notes, weird clay masks. The curtains are bright yellow with forest green leaves printed on them, and pulled back to reveal the window overlooking her back yard. On one side of the room sits a complicated computer setup that you cannot figure out the utility of; on the other side sits her bed, and on the bed lies Pumpkin, taking a nap.

"Pumpkin!" Peridot squeals, and the dog perks her head up, hopping off the bed and running over to the three of you, tail wagging madly. She cuddles up against Peridot's legs, and she grins broadly, scratching Pumpkin behind the ears.

Amethyst scooches past Peridot, flopping down on her bed. You decide to join her, sitting on the edge, and after a few moments of cooing over Pumpkin and how she is, quote, "a good girl, yes she is, *who's* good? *Pumpkin's* good, that's *who's* good!", Peridot closes the door behind her and begins rifling through her drawers, eventually pulling out some cardstock and pens.

"Now," Peridot begins, sitting down on the lime green beanbag chair next to her bed, "Amethyst, you probably know this better than me, given, uh, everything--what's Lapis *into*?"

"Uh." Amethyst looks a bit uncomfortable at the question. "I really don't know, bitch is an enigma. She was on the swim team in high school, got a scholarship from it."

You're hit with flashbacks to the three days you spent in the psych ward. Lapis spoke very little about herself for the majority of your stay, but you managed to glean a few things. She liked art, particularly painting; she had a thing for marine life; her parents ignored her entirely most of the time, and she wanted nothing to do with them as a result. And, yes, the swim team thing.

"I think she once mentioned that dolphins are her favorite animals," you say a few moments later, after wracking your brain trying to think of *anything* you know she enjoys, even after several months of knowing her.

"Wait," Amethyst interjects, sitting bolt upright. "How did you know that? I don't think she's ever mentioned that in therapy..."

Oh. They don't know, do they?

"...We were roommates in the psych ward," you finally admit. "I didn't know her well...she didn't tell me a lot. But I remember she had dolphin-print pajamas, and a little dolphin Beanie Baby, and I asked her about that at some point. It's all pretty hazy now."

"Oh jeez," says Amethyst, "living with her must've been awful. So sorry you had to put up with that."

"It wasn't even the worst part," you mutter.

"What was it like?" Peridot asks. Part of you wants to tell her to learn to read a room, but most of

you knows that it's not really *her* fault that she's not the most perceptive person around. She's not dumb, from what you've seen--far from it--but she's *oblivious*. Amethyst seems to find it endearing most of the time, but this time, she just sighs heavily.

Regardless, if nothing else, you think Peridot deserves an honest answer. "The worst part was waking up. I was so confused and upset, because I'd *failed*." You chuckle ruefully. "I was in a lot of pain. Lots of bruises, a lung injury, some broken bones...it hurt, but knowing how badly I'd screwed up might've been worse."

"Is it still a screw-up if the results wound up being not so bad?" Peridot ponders. "Like penicillin!" You and Amethyst stare blankly at Peridot. You know the origins of penicillin, you're just not sure how it's even slightly similar to a botched suicide attempt.

"So," Peridot explains, not waiting for any further response, "this guy Fleming was working on a staph culture, and mold grew on it. Disgusting, right? But the mold wound up preventing further bacterial growth, and without it I'd probably be dead from pneumonia right now! And if *you* hadn't completely fucked up your attempt, it would be, uh...like that."

(Thinking about it, you suppose she's not wrong.)

"Regardless," you continue, "I don't recall much from the first day or two after waking up. I kept drifting in and out, and I was still in rough enough shape that everyone was concerned." *That might've been the worst part, really.* "I healed up eventually, and they sent me to the psychiatric ward. But I don't see how any of that is really relevant to the task at hand."

"It's not really," Peridot tells you bluntly. "I just wanted to understand."

As the doctor undid the velcro straps on your arms, you groaned. "Why did you tie me down, anyway?"

"You were practically seizing. We didn't want you tearing anything out."

"Why would that have mattered? I didn't want to live. You know that."

"I'm a doctor, it's my job."

"Ugh. I should've gotten a DNR."

"Well, I'm sure your friends are glad you didn't. It would've been so tough on them to lose another loved one."

You rolled your eyes. "Trust me, my friends would've survived. They're stronger than I am."

The doctor said nothing as she finished untying you and began taking your vitals. You didn't say anything, either.

"Okay," she finally said. "Oxygen saturation is a bit lower than it should be, so we're going to have to put you back on oxygen for a while."

You weren't really listening. You just stared at her swollen belly, silently panicking.

"Uh, your heart's really speeding up. Are you alright?"

You shook your head, unable to speak.

"What's wrong?"

Everything. Rose is gone. I'm still here. I want you to go away and leave me alone, because you could die the same way as her and I don't want to think about it anymore--

"It's nothing," you sighed, as she put the blood pressure cuff on your arm. "I'm just tired."

"That's very understandable, given what happened. Let me finish up here, and you can take a nap, okay?"

"Okay."

You didn't sleep after she left, not at all. You just stared at the wall, wondering where the hell you went wrong.

There was a part of you, a big part, that detested the fishers who pulled you from the water, the paramedics, the doctors and nurses. Realistically, you were well aware they thought they were doing the right thing, something noble--even heroic.

You might've thought they actually were if it had been anyone else. As it was, though, you felt a level of contempt for them, a cold resentment that made you hate yourself even more.

You watch Peridot as she draws, brow furrowed in concentration. She's a good artist, as it turns out--the cartoony dolphin she's drawing is pretty cute. You admittedly have no clue how *Lapis* might feel about it, but it's worth a try, right? It's better than nothing.

"How's it look so far?" Peridot asks with a grin, holding up the sketch.

"It's good," Amethyst says, seemingly in slightly higher spirits. Pumpkin has curled up next to her on the bed, and she pets the chubby little dog as she speaks. "It's real good."

You nod. "You've got a lot of talent."

Peridot blushes, taken aback, before smiling broadly. "Uh, of *course* I do," she chuckles.

You don't think she actually means it.

"God, Peri," Amethyst sighs, after a pause. "I wish your parents would let me stay the night."

"Ugh, I *know*, right?" Peridot groans.

"I mean, yeah, but like...I really don't wanna be around Jasper, okay? I know I'll go without sleep again." Amethyst looks at Pumpkin, who has fallen asleep, snoring softly.

"I wish I could let you stay here," Peridot replies. She looks like she's about to cry. "I really, really do."

The three of you just sit for a long moment, before you hear a shout from another room.

"Peridot, supper!"

She stands, shoulders slumped. "Sorry," she murmurs, "but you have to leave now."

Amethyst nods. "I know." She kisses her girlfriend on the cheek. "Love you, Dot."

"Love you too."

"See you next week," you say awkwardly, before leaving and walking the half-mile to your house.

Around one in the morning, you get a series of texts.

pearl i kno this is rly sudden but uh

can i com over

jaspers being jasper and im in fuckin hell

You're not entirely sure how to answer. Ruby and Sapphire have long since gone to bed--you can't really ask them. They probably won't mind, though, right? They didn't mind when you began sleeping here. And you've grown fond of Amethyst, really, fond enough that the idea of her being here is actually quite appealing.

Ruby and Sapphire probably won't mind if you're quiet.

omg p ur gr8

ill be over in a few

You stuff your phone into the pocket of your pajama pants, go out onto the porch, and wait.

Chapter 33

Amethyst shows up at your door around twenty minutes after her last text, a well-worn purple canvas backpack slung across her shoulder and some gauze wrapped around her thigh. She's obviously been crying, and when she sees you on the porch, she embraces you tightly. You just stand still for a moment, unsure how to respond to the gesture, and she quickly gets the hint and pulls away.

"Sorry," she says.

"It's fine, it was just...unexpected. Come on in."

"I think I need a smoke first. I'm shaking here."

You nod, and Amethyst sets her backpack down on the porch before sitting on the steps, pulling a cigarette from her bra. "I know it's short notice. And like, I'm sorry to impose. I just cannot be in the same house as that *bitch*."

"I can understand," you tell her, and it's true. Even when you were very young, you never really got along with Maggie, and things only got more acrimonious as you grew. (You wonder, briefly, if she's changed at all, but quickly shake the thought from your mind. It's not important right this moment.) "She seems like a terrible person."

"She's the *worst*. She's been picking on me since the day I moved in with my fam, and like...she used to beat the shit outta me. She's stopped with *that* at least, but she broke my fucking DS earlier, and that is way more than I'm gonna put up with at this point. She's *twenty*, for fuck's sake, and she just...snapped one of my things in half because she was mad. She won't fucking *grow up*."

"...DS?"

"Video game system, not really important. I barely even use it anymore, but it's the *principle* of the thing."

"Ah." You frown. "I'm sorry."

"Eh. Not *your* fault." She takes a long drag. "I don't know how long she's staying. My parents'll probably kick her out once they find out she broke my shit, but...what if they *don't*? What if they decide to pity her and let her stay, like--like they did with *me*?"

Amethyst sniffles a bit, wiping her eyes on the hem of her tank top. "They felt bad for me. It wasn't even supposed to be a permanent placement--they just saw this tiny fucking goblin child with all her shit in a garbage bag, sobbing, and they were the only foster home I'd had where I felt loved at all...I'm lucky as shit, I know it. They're nice people. That's the *whole problem* right now."

She glances at her backpack, then turns her gaze to you. "They gave me this backpack when I first moved in. I'd been hauling my stuff around in trash bags my whole life, and I cried like a baby when they gave it to me--I didn't even believe it at first. I thought it was some sick joke." Amethyst unzips the bag, and pulls out a stuffed pink lion. "And...fuck. The place I stayed at before that had a lot of other kids, right? Mostly other girls, mostly older than me. And the foster parents were *awful*. Almost as bad as...uh. Y'know, the chick who pushed me outta her pussy

eighteen years ago. But the older girls were so cool--like the big sisters I never had. They gave me this plushie before I got forced out. They gave me my *name*."

"And?"

"And I never saw any of them again. I don't even know if they could find me if they wanted to--I changed my last name when I got adopted. They've all aged out now, and I couldn't even begin to guess where any of them are..."

A lightbulb goes off in your head. "Do you have a Facebook? Maybe you could look them up."

"...Ugh. Pearl, I'm an *idiot*, because that literally never occurred to me." She facepalms, nearly dropping her cigarette. "I should. Yeah. I should've done that *years* ago."

To your horror, Amethyst shoves the lit cigarette into her bare arm, wincing as the flesh burns before yanking it away. "I'm the stupidest asshole you'll ever meet, P," she grumbles. "I don't get why you're bothering to help."

"Because I *like* you, Amethyst," you murmur, eyes fixed on her freshly-burned arm. "So can you please...not do that?"

"Sorry." She looks at the burn herself, an angry weeping sore amongst a cluster of scars--round white keloids, around the same shape and size, clearly visible against her tawny skin. *So it's not just cutting, then*. "Sorry. I'd...I'd been getting better about it..."

"I know."

"I was so proud. A month was the longest I'd gone since I was a little kid, and I broke the streak earlier." She gestures to her bandaged thigh. "And I just fucking did it *again*."

"Let's go inside and get you cleaned up, alright?"

Snuffing her cigarette out on the ground, she stands. "Okay."

There's plenty of first aid supplies in the upstairs bathroom, so you guide Amethyst there. She sits down on the toilet, refusing to make eye contact, and holds out her arm without a word.

"This is going to sting," you warn her as you begin soaping up a hand towel. You apply it to the wound, causing her to wince a bit, making a face; the regimen is completed with a bit of neosporin and a small band-aid. "Is your thigh clean?"

"No."

"May I see it?"

"Fine." She unwraps the hastily-applied gauze, revealing a few jagged, bloody gashes. Your eyes widen involuntarily--these are some *nasty* cuts.

You don't say anything; you're fairly sure that would make matters worse at the moment.

Instead, you just clean the cuts, causing her to cringe in pain despite your best efforts not to hurt her further.

The medicine cabinet is devoid of gauze, to your consternation, but you have some larger band-aids, so you begin applying those to the cuts, covering Amethyst's thigh in a patchwork of bandages. She just watches you work, gaze fixed on your hands. She's sniffing a little.

You'd love to tell her things will look up. The only problem is, you don't *know* that. Besides, you're acutely aware that it would only anger her.

(You know *exactly* how the platitudes feel.)

So you just patch her up silently, and when you finish, you wash your hands, scrubbing the blood from your cuticles.

"Where am I sleeping?" she asks, her voice very, very small.

"Uh..." You hadn't really thought that part through. "You can sleep on my bed. It's a twin, so I'll just take the floor." *Assuming I'm able to sleep at all.*

She nods, and stands. "Show me the way."

You lay on the floor in the dark, staring at your phone--currently the lone source of illumination in your room. Amethyst is curled up on her side in your bed, her stuffed lion tucked under one arm, with just the top of her head peeking out from under the blankets.

"Thanks," she whispers.

"You're welcome." You squint at the screen. "Do you need help falling asleep? Would it help if I played some music?"

"Maybe? I dunno. Probably wouldn't hurt."

"Okay." You open up Spotify--your dinosaur of an iPod is on its last legs, so you finally caved a few weeks ago and began using your phone for music. "What would you like to listen to?"

"You pick. I can't think right now."

You think back to the music collection she showed you. There was a bit of everything, but with a few genres more heavily represented than others. Lots of rap, metal, and classic punk, if memory serves you right. Not a ton of overlap with your preferences, really, but you think you have a compromise.

"Have you heard of a musical called Hamilton?"

"Uh...I think so? Dunno much about it."

"Hm. You might enjoy it."

You press play.

The final song finishes, and you glance over at Amethyst. It's ungodly late now, but she's still awake.

"That it?"

"Yeah."

"I liked it." She laughs, and as concerned as you are for her--she has school in the morning, after all, and while *you* managed to get through high school on hardly any sleep, you're well aware that it wasn't actually a good idea--it's a relief. She's cheered up, at least slightly. "It was more interesting than 7th grade history. Covered a lot of the same stuff, but my teacher was boring as shit and kinda had it in for me."

"Were you here already in 7th grade?"

"Yeah. It was my first school year in Beach City. Didn't know anyone there." She pauses. "I still don't really have many people I actually know. I was scared to make friends at first--like, I thought I'd just get sent to another home in another district before I finished the year. 'Sides, it's a small town--everyone already knew everyone. I didn't have an in."

"If it helps, I never had many friends either. Different reasons, I was just really shy and awkward, but...I had two friends by the time I graduated, and I was involved with one of them. And now..."

"Yeah."

For a long time, the two of you lay in awkward silence.

"I'm gonna try to sleep," Amethyst finally declares. "Night, P."

"Goodnight, Amethyst. Sleep well."

You don't sleep a wink, and you can't tell if she does either.

Chapter 34

You give up on sleeping around six in the morning.

"Do you want some tea?" you ask Amethyst as you get up from your spot on the floor. "You have school, you might need the caffeine."

"Do you have anything else caffeinated?"

"Garnet has some coffee. Would that work?"

"Yeah. So long as you've got sugar."

"We should." You turn the light on. "You should probably get up. And get changed, assuming you have a change of clothes packed." You pause, then add, "You...*did* pack clothes, right?"

"...Fuck. I *knew* I was forgetting something." She sniffs her armpit, frowning. "Ew. My shorts should be okay, but the shirt needs a wash, like, yesterday."

"I don't think my clothes would fit," you reply.

"No shit, Twiggy." She says it fondly, a little smile gracing her lips.

That's when you remember.

"Hang on," you tell her, and open up your shirt drawer. There it is: Rose's shirt.

You pull it out, staring at it, your heart hurting like hell. Selfishly, a huge part of you doesn't *want* to give it to Amethyst, not even if she gives it back as soon as she gets out of class. But...

But it's the only thing you own that will fit her, and the feeling it gives you when you look at it is so *complicated*. Conflicted.

You want to keep it, but as you think further about it, you decide that it's probably for the best to let it go. *Amethyst needs it more than me.*

"Uh, *hello?* Earth to Pearl?"

"Just give me a moment," you murmur. You bury your face in the fabric, taking a deep breath—one last chance to inhale her scent. Cotton candy body spray, dirt, sweat, roses. (It doesn't comfort you the way it once did.)

You hand the shirt to Amethyst, who scrutinizes the design for a moment. "Huh, think I've heard of 'em," she comments, gesturing to the text--THE MOUNTAIN GOATS. "They're like...They Might Be Giants for people with really bad depression, right?" She takes off her tank top and pulls on the tee. "Or something like that."

"Yeah, basically. They're pretty good." You can't help but crack a smile.

"I guess I'll have to look 'em up so I don't look like one of those poseur assholes, and just hope no one bothers to ask what my favorite song is or whatever."

"Here's hoping."

A while into seeing Rose, near the end of your freshman year, she made you a mix CD for your birthday.

"I really hope you enjoy it!" she'd gushed. The disc read "FOR PEARL" in pink marker, with little hearts scattered around it, and you could've sworn you felt your heart stop for a moment when she handed it to you after school.

You put it in your little portable CD player and listened as you walked home, too excited to wait. You didn't even know the names of any of the songs--you had yet to read the handwritten liner notes she'd included in the jewel case. That would have to wait until you had made it back to your apartment. But you could still listen to it, so you did.

About half of the way home, you decided to stop at the store. You were thirsty--it was a hot day, painfully sunny and bright. You kicked yourself for not thinking to pack sunscreen in your backpack, knowing damn well that you'd have a nasty sunburn to contend with the next day. After swinging by 7-Eleven and picking up a bottle of orange juice, you opted not to go home. It was a Friday, and you'd already finished much of your homework in study hall. Your mom wouldn't be pleased, you knew that, but you couldn't bring yourself to care. If anything, that just made it more exciting. Besides, it was your birthday. You deserved this.

Instead, you made your way to Rose's house.

You'd spent the vast majority of your life in apartments, but you could at least comprehend Garnet's house. If you were asked to picture a house, hers would probably be exactly what came to mind--a perfectly average middle-class dwelling.

Rose's house was an entirely different beast. Somehow, no matter how often you visited, it was always bigger than you'd remembered.

It dawned on you when you were halfway up the long, winding driveway that you should ask her if it was okay for you to come over. After a short text exchange, she confirmed it was, and you soldiered on.

Amethyst calls her parents as you make her a cup of coffee.

"Hey, Mom, I--ugh, I *know*, I'm sorry that I ran away like that, I'm at a friend's place...no, it's just...Jasper. I need--I need for her to go away. What? *Fuck*. No, you don't get it! She broke my stuff! I can't handle this. Uh, well...I'm gonna go to school soon, I just wanted to let you know I'm okay. And...and I don't want Jasper to be there when I get home. Please...okay. Love you too, Mom."

She hangs up, sighing heavily. "Mom says she's gonna talk to Jasper. I hope she leaves, but..." You set the steaming cup in front of Amethyst, along with a few sugar packets. "Do you take it with milk?" you ask.

"Nah. Thanks, P." She rips the packets open all at once, dumping the contents into her coffee.

"And I'm sorry if I kept you awake."

"You didn't. I wouldn't have slept anyway. Did *you* get any sleep?"

"A little, I think."

"Well, a little is better than none."

"Guess so." She chugs her coffee, seemingly not caring in the slightest if she burns her throat.

"Pretty good coffee."

"It's nothing special. Store brand."

"Huh." She takes another gulp. "Uh, you sure Garnet's okay with me drinking her coffee?"

"She'll be fine. She has plenty left."

"Okay."

You hear footsteps behind you, and turn to face the source. Garnet, as it turns out, woke up early today.

"Morning," she says.

"Good morning. Uh...say hi to Amethyst?" Amethyst waves from her spot at the table.

"Hello, Amethyst. Nice to see you again." Garnet smiles. "By the way, I overheard, and yes, the coffee thing is fine."

"You're up early," you comment.

"I thought I told you," she replies, looking a bit confused. "I have a job interview this morning. I wanted to make sure I had time to get ready."

You think back. She probably mentioned it in passing, but you don't recall. "Sorry, I forgot about that. Where's it at?"

"The coffee shop. I'm hopeful. It'll be nice to have something to do."

"You'll do great," you tell her, and you fully mean it. "What time?"

"Uh...8:30."

You look at Amethyst, and then back at Garnet. "I could drive you there. We can drop Amethyst off at school on the way."

"Sounds good, assuming it works for Amethyst."

"Yeah," Amethyst says, nodding. "I think I'd like that."

"Do you want to listen together?"

You grinned. Nodded. "I would love that!"

"Wonderful!" You handed the CD over to Rose, who put it in the boom box on her bedside table and pressed play before cuddling up against you on her bed. You blushed furiously, thinking back to the weekend.

As of just one week prior, you were no longer a virgin. You'd never thought you'd ever appeal to someone like that, that you'd deserve anyone's attention--and yet there was Rose, so perfect and so inexplicably enamored with you.

"Something on your mind?" she asked you, before giving you a peck on the cheek.

"Just you."

"You're so cute. Oh, I love this part!" She hummed along to the song, some strange artsy rock number, and your heart leapt in your chest.

"I love you," you blurted out.

She laughed and kissed you deeply, but said nothing--and at the time, you didn't think she needed to. You believed, truly believed, that she loved you too.

"You listen to interesting music," you noted.

"I hope that's a good thing."

"It is."

She kissed you again, before moving her head down to your neck and planting a sucking kiss on your throat.

"What if it leaves a mark?" you gasped, shocked. "My mom will kill me, I--"

"Shh. It's okay. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. She doesn't have to know."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Okay. If you really don't think she'll find out."

"She won't, honey. You'll be fine." She ran a hand through your ginger bob, showering you in kisses, in adoration. "I'll always make sure you're safe, okay?"
You smiled, flushing cherry red, so deeply in love. "Okay."

Beach City High looks no different now than it did when you and Garnet graduated two years ago, save for a few changes in the graffiti--old tags painted over, then promptly defaced again. Rinse and repeat.

"Oh, I painted that one!" Amethyst pipes up, pointing at a crude, sloppy dragon on the side of the steps.

"I like it," Garnet comments. You're actually a bit amazed at how well they've been getting on all morning--for all they only ever shared that one class, they're meshing nicely.

"Thanks, Garnet. I know it's not the best, but I kinda like how it came out."

Amethyst hops out of the car once you've parked. "Thanks again," she says, slinging her backpack over her shoulder. "For everything."

"You're welcome. I'll see you soon, alright?"

"Okay. See you guys later."

Garnet waves as you drive off. "She's nice," she notes.

"Yeah," you reply. "She's cool."

"Spoke to my mums, incidentally. They're not upset about Amethyst staying the night." Garnet frowns. "Sapphire seems concerned for her, though."

"I'm not surprised. Things are rough for Amethyst right now, and...it shows."

You don't go into detail on *how* it's showing, of course. She told you--*showed* you--in confidence, and you're very, very used to keeping secrets. It's really nothing, not for you. (You recognize it means a lot more to *her*.)

You don't remember the music, not clearly. You just remember her touch, the intimacy. Part of your mind screamed that you really shouldn't be doing this, that her parents could come home any moment, that you'd be in so much trouble if anyone found out.

Most of you didn't care.

You just let it all happen, and you loved every last moment.

It was the best birthday you'd ever had, and she was entirely responsible. You'd never been so happy, and if you lost her...

No. She wouldn't leave you. She loved you. You were safe with her, and you'd never felt more alive than when you were with her, squirming beneath her touch. You didn't want to leave, not ever.

But you had to, eventually.

Once you were dressed, you took a swig of the orange juice you'd purchased earlier, forgotten on the nightstand, and grimaced. "Ugh, ew, pulp, I guess didn't check the label closely enough..."

"Need something to get the taste out?"

"Please."

She kissed you again.

Chapter 35

"Good luck!" you tell Garnet as she enters the coffee shop. She turns back and grins, waving.

"Thank you! I'll let you know how it goes."

"Do you need a ride home?"

"No. I'll walk. But I appreciate the offer."

You nod. "Okay. Seeya, Garnet!"

"Later."

You get back in your car, and for a moment you just sit there. It's warm, so you roll down the windows, letting the ocean breeze pass through. You have no real obligations today, and you kind of wish that weren't so--you're not at a point where you could handle working full-time and you know it, not the way you've been, but you do *wish* you were. It'd be nice to have an actual income.

Part of you misses school. You always wanted to go to college, but life, and death, got in the way. And then, of course, you got in your own way--your utterly idiotic suicide attempt, which you've come to realize might just be your biggest regret in life.

Maybe in the fall you'll enroll at the local community college. You haven't decided yet; it's a ways off, and you don't even know exactly what to focus on yet. Still, you're *considering* it, and that's something.

You turn the stereo on and drive off, not entirely sure where you're going. There are options, lots of options, and you can't deny how lovely the weather is today--staying inside just feels like such a waste.

You don't really think about your destination as you drive. You simply meander about town, turning down various side streets as you blast your music.

And then you pass the park, and can't stop yourself from turning into the lot.

The funeral was in an hour.

You stared at yourself nude in the bathroom mirror, furrowing your brow. You'd woken up with serious bedhead, and though you'd just showered, your hair was still stubbornly sticking up in the back.

Today, of all days? Seriously?

After several minutes of combing, you gave up with a sigh, accepting that your hair was just not going to behave today no matter what you did. Honestly, you shouldn't have even cared. It wasn't like Rose could see you now. But the idea of seeing her off looking like garbage felt fundamentally wrong.

You got dressed then, donning the outfit you'd carefully picked out the night before--a baby blue blouse and a pair of navy slacks. Aside from your hair and the slight dark circles under your eyes from lack of sleep, you looked alright.

For a moment, you stared back into the mirror. It had always baffled you that Rose found you attractive; you wouldn't say you were ugly, but you were no model, and nowhere near as beautiful as her. She had been so far out of your league.

And yet.

You rubbed your eyes, trying very hard not to break down crying. As you pulled your gaze away from the mirror, though, you were snapped out of your reverie by a tube of pink lip gloss sitting on the counter.

For a moment, you were confused. You never wore much in the way of makeup, and neither did Garnet. Then it hit you.

"Rose must've forgotten this the last time she came over," you murmured to yourself as you picked up the tube, turning it over in your hands.

Your immediate, unthinking impulse was to send her a text, offer to give it back next time you hang out. You got as far as opening your texting app before you realized that it would never happen, that she was dead and you'd never speak to her again, and you felt like an absolute moron.

"Get it together, Pearl," you muttered. And then, because it felt right somehow, you opened the lip gloss and applied it to your lips. It was sticky and tasted sickly sweet, and you couldn't help but wonder how Rose managed to deal with the sensation of that glop on a daily basis.

You put the gloss in the pocket of your slacks.

The cherry trees are in full bloom, and it doesn't take you long to find hers.

You had been firm that there'd be some sort of memorial site for Rose, and after much discussion, you and Greg decided on the park. She'd always been so fond of the plants, especially the cherry blossoms, and this tree had always been her favorite--and so it became your favorite as well.

There it is, that beautiful tree, and inlaid in the back of the bench in front of it is a plaque, decorated with engraved roses.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF ROSE QUARTZ

6/30/94 - 8/15/16

Friend. Mother. Lover.

You heave a sigh, and sit down on the bench. *Why did I come here?*

You lay down, staring at the clear blue sky. You haven't visited her memorial in months, not since shortly before you tried to end your life, and the guilt of it eats away at you, so harsh you could scream. You didn't want to think about it, didn't want to actually *believe* it, for so long. But she's gone. It's over. Isn't it?

Tears begin to spring to your eyes, despite your best efforts. You feel so pathetic, so helpless, so *lonely*. There's a hole in your heart that nothing, no one, can truly fill.

Maybe it'll always be that way.

You just sit, sob, let it out. You're not sure how long you spend lying there crying.

But it's clearly loud enough to alert someone, and you're snapped out of your daze by a voice.

Rose had wanted to be cremated when she died, she'd told you years prior--for environmental reasons, she explained. You didn't think you'd ever actually have to let that happen.

You were fine with her plans there, but you'd insisted on a viewing before the funeral proper.

You hadn't been with her when she died--they wouldn't let you in the room as she was giving birth--and you wanted to see her one last time.

(The last time you saw her alive, in any sense of the word, was two days prior to her death. She was deeply unconscious, hooked up to a myriad of machines, but she wasn't dead, not yet. You didn't say goodbye. You said, "I'll see you later. I love you.")

The funeral home was suffocating, the grief of everyone around you nearly tangible. You weren't surprised at how many people were in attendance; Rose was always popular, always surrounded by people. What did surprise you was how much attention people you'd never met in your life paid to you.

"You're Pearl, right?" asked one tiny girl--and she was a girl, not a woman, maybe not even a high schooler--with auburn pigtails.

"Um...yes?"

"I'm real sorry about what happened," the girl said, looking you right in the eye. "Uh, you don't remember me, do ya?"

You squinted. She looked vaguely familiar, like you'd seen a photo of her at some point, but you couldn't place her. A relative, maybe?

"I'm Spinel," she continued. "Rose's cousin. I don't know if we've actually met, but...she talks--talked--about you a lot."

That was when the tears began in earnest for the first time that day. You wiped them away, sniffing. "I'm sorry about this too."

Spinel hugged you tightly, uncomfortably so. You had no clue how to respond.

It hadn't just been her, either. Everyone was so solicitous, so concerned for you, and for Greg as well.

It freaked you out.

In a panic, you pushed Spinel away. She looked hurt, and you quickly apologized--"I'm so sorry, I just--I need to go." You felt bad for the kid, but you felt even worse for yourself.

Pearl, you selfish ass--

You ran outside, leaning up against the wall of the funeral home and shakily lighting a cigarette. You couldn't handle this, you just could not.

It wasn't long before you heard a voice, and you startled, nearly dropping your cigarette.

"Is everything alright?" Greg asked. You just shook your head.

"They're all mobbing you too, huh?"

"Yeah. I don't even know most of these people."

"Me neither. It's really freaky." Greg laughed awkwardly, mirthlessly, before his expression turned deadly serious. "The viewing is in a few minutes, Pearl. You might want to come inside."

You didn't look at Greg, instead taking another drag before snuffing the cigarette out on the ground. "I suppose I should."

Spinel has grown a bit since the funeral--still tiny, but she's hit a definite growth spurt. Her hair's a bit longer too, though still pulled into high pigtails. She cocks her head to the side, frowning.

"Pearl?"

You nearly fall off the bench as you sit up, startled. "Uh...hi."

"Uh, long time no see?" She scratches her head. "Just sayin' hi to my cousin."

"Shouldn't you be in school?" you ask.

"I mean, I *should* be, yeah. But I ain't, so." Spinel shrugs, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her overall shorts. "There's nothing important goin' on today."

"How old are you, anyway?" You don't want her here. You don't want *anyone* here except you and Rose.

"Thirteen."

"You're too young to be ditching."

"How old are *you*?"

"Twenty in a few months."

"Then *you're* too young to lecture me." Spinel flicks your nose, and you damn near rip her arm off. You're upset, so upset, she's interrupting your moment--

"Jeez, Pearl, what's your *deal*?" Spinel huffs, jumping away. "You ain't the only one who misses her, ya know."

"I know," you groan. "But I'd really appreciate some time alone. Please?"

"Ugh. You don't fuckin' get it. You're not the only one she *abandoned*, y'know?"

"She didn't abandon us," you insist. "She died. There's a difference."

"Then how come she didn't even tell me she was pregnant? I--I didn't even know she was havin' a kid until she was *dead*! You...you ain't the only one she hurt, okay?"

You stare, trying to process what you've just been told. "She didn't tell you at all?"

"No. Last time we talked was before she even woulda been pregnant. She just...stopped talkin' to me." Spinel glares at you, before quickly turning her gaze to her boots.

The worst part is that you're not even all that surprised. Upset, absolutely. But *surprised*? No. Not really. Not anymore.

"I'm so sorry," you finally choke out. "I had no idea."

"No," Spinel spits. "Ya didn't."

You don't know how to respond. It's not *your* fault that Rose is gone, right? That she wasn't truthful with Spinel? With *you*?

"I'm sorry," you repeat.

Spinel says nothing to that. She just flops down on the ground by the bench.

"She wasn't honest with me either," you continue.

"Bitch," Spinel grumbles.

As much as you hate to admit it, you almost agree.

When you saw Rose--no, Rose's body--in the casket, you could no longer keep even the slightest semblance of composure.

It was definitely her, but she looked...off. Her once-tan skin was now ghoulishly pale, and her dye job, which she'd taken so much pride in, had faded to a vaguely pinkish blonde and begun to grow out prior to her demise, revealing her pitch black roots. There was no expression to her face, none at all, and you broke down then and there, sobbing incoherently, nearly screaming.

"Rose, I'm--I am so sorry, I should've been there...I never got to say goodbye to you, and I--God, Rose, I love you, I love you--"

Garnet put a hand on your shaking shoulder, trying to comfort you and failing horribly. Nothing, nobody, could comfort you now.

As she began to tug at your hand, gently coaxing you to leave Rose's side, you leaned down and planted a kiss on the corpse's cheek. You could see the smudge of candy pink lip gloss you left behind.

"...Goodbye, Rose," you croaked as you pulled away from the body. "I'll never stop loving you."

For what might as well be an eternity, you and Spinel just sit in near silence, broken up only by sniffles.

She looks up at you. "I know you're not the person I should be pissed at," she finally admits. "I don't even really *know* ya."

"You said she talked about me a lot."

"Yeah."

"What did she say?"

Spinel is quiet for a long moment. "She said she liked you. A lot."

You can't help but notice her wording. Liked. *Liked*.

She never loved you. You absolute idiot, she never loved you.

Without another word, you bolt up from the bench, and flee. You make it to your car, and as soon as you're inside, you let out a long, guttural scream.

And to think I thought I was getting better...

The screaming quickly turns to sobbing, and you lean your head against the steering wheel, not even caring that you're honking the horn.

You drive home recklessly, far too fast. It's a lucky thing that your house is so close to the park.

"Hey, Pearl!" Ruby chirps as you throw the door open. "Having a good morning?"

"No," you mutter.

"What's wrong?"

Everything. As usual.

"It's a long story," you tell her. "I need some time alone."

Before Ruby has a chance to say anything, you run up to your room, bury your face in your pillow, and scream your lungs out, until your throat is raw and your voice is gone. You just lie there, face-down, for ages, before you finally drift off, your sleep debt finally catching up with you.

Chapter 36

Garnet, you discover after waking up from your impromptu nap, got the job. You're happy for her, of course, but you can't shake the weird feeling in the back of your mind, the fear that things won't ever truly look up for *you*.

(Not that you tell *Garnet* that, naturally.)

You just spend most of the week in your room, thinking. The house feels so *different* without Garnet present. Empty isn't the right word--Sapphire and *especially* Ruby are still moving around the house, making sound, trying to engage you in conversation.

You haven't been very responsive. There's too much on your mind.

Tuesday doesn't come soon enough. But it comes, and that's something.

As usual, you're there early, and to your surprise, so is Amethyst. She's leaning against the building, a cigarette in one hand and her cell phone in the other, a look of frustration on her face.

"Go on in," you whisper to Sapphire. "I'll be out here for a bit."

Sapphire nods, and enters the building. You join Amethyst at her spot, glancing surreptitiously at her phone screen for a second before thinking better of it. "Hey."

Amethyst whips her head around, startled. "Oh. Hi." She looks away again. "Jasper *finally* left on Friday, but..."

She slumps, sliding down the wall until she's sitting on the ground. "I shouldn't be upset about this, it's no one's fault. But..."

You barely hear what she says next. "Sorry, could you repeat that?"

"Peridot and I broke up," she mutters, barely any louder--you have to strain to hear her. "We're still friends, no hard feelings, it's just...she's not into me like that. She's pretty sure she's not into *anyone* like that, and I feel awful for being upset about it because it's not like she can *change* that, but. I liked her. I *really* liked her."

Amethyst stares at her phone. "Don't get me wrong. I'm glad she figured that out about herself! Really, I am. I just wish I hadn't been what made her realize."

You sit down next to her, placing a comforting hand on her shaking shoulder. "I'm so sorry," you say, voice scarcely above a whisper. "That's tough."

"Yeah." She sniffles, burying her face in her knees. "She's not coming in today--wanted to give me some space to vent, y'know? She feels *awful*, and I feel awful about *that*. It's hard. It's real hard."

She snuffs her cigarette out on the ground, not even bothering to smoke half of it. "It's not fair," she grumbles. "It's not her fault, but...it ain't mine, either. It's just because life sucks, God hates me, and the universe doesn't give a fuck."

Ouch. You feel that, deep in your soul, and you ache--for Amethyst, yes, and for *yourself*.

"Yeah. It's hard, I know."

"You have more of a right to be upset than I do."

You shake your head. "That's not true."

"No. It *is*. Peridot's not dead. She's still gonna be my best friend. She didn't--she didn't *hurt* me the way Rose hurt you."

On some level, you want to object--*no, Rose didn't hurt me, she wasn't that bad, she just...didn't understand.* But deep down, you know Amethyst has something of a point. Not regarding her own feelings, of course, but...

But she's right. Rose *did* hurt you.

It's time you stopped pretending, and you know it. That's just far easier said than done.

Amethyst stands, shoving her phone in her jeans pocket. "C'mon. Session's about to start."

It's been ages since you last saw Lapis, and you're a bit unnerved by how she smiles at you and Amethyst when you enter.

You take a spot next to Amethyst on the couch, thinking about what to say. You've got so much on your mind, so much going on.

You can't help but feel a bit relieved when Lapis speaks first.

"I'm doing better," she notes. "I'm back in my dorm, at least."

"You're just gonna go back to Jasper," Amethyst grumbles, unwilling to meet Lapis' gaze. "You always do."

"Shut up. I'm not. We're *through*." She crosses her arms. "And for the record, I left a twenty on her kitchen counter. She can get more of that shitty vodka if she wants."

"That's not really the problem," Sapphire points out. "You did it to hurt her, correct?"

"Well...yeah? But we'd been fighting for weeks." Lapis gestures at her nose. "She broke my nose in an argument, so I punched her in the tit and locked myself in the bathroom with her booze." She shrugs. "We've had worse fights."

"You could've died."

Lapis says nothing to that. She just frowns, idly picking at her nails.

"Ugh, you don't *get* it!" Amethyst shouts. "You don't care about anyone other than yourself, you--you don't even care about *yourself*, do you?"

"So what?" Lapis snaps. "Neither do you!"

"That's not true and you *know* it!" Amethyst punches the couch cushion. "I care. I care a *lot*, about--about Peridot, and Pearl, and me, and *plenty* of other people! I just don't care about *you* anymore, and clearly you don't either!"

Sapphire frowns. "Please, calm down."

"Don't *fucking* tell me to calm down."

"Just...remember your breathing exercises. Your coping mechanisms."

Amethyst looks right at Sapphire, helpless, hurting. "I can't calm down," she sighs. "Life *sucks*."

"Then tell us what's going on."

She doesn't speak. She just curls up, burying her face in her hands.

"Amethyst?" you murmur.

"Peridot dumped me, okay? She said she's pretty sure she's aro-ace, and that it's not about me and that we're still gonna be friends forever, but--what if we drift apart? What if I'm ruining her life by being around her?"

"You're not," Sapphire insists. "She told me, and she said she's not upset with you in the slightest. She really looks up to you, you know."

"I just..." Amethyst begins to cry in earnest. "What did I do to deserve the life I have? This is the *least* of my problems, it's just the most *recent* one. Even with Jasper finally gone, it's...life is fucking *hard*, okay? And I know I don't even have it that bad! Not anymore! But...*fuck*."

She just sits there and sobs for a moment, before briefly looking up from her hands to glance at you. "You can talk," she says hoarsely, and she can't keep from weeping as she speaks.

You freeze. There's so much to say, and you cannot for the life of you find the words.

"Uh...I'm..." You can't speak. You can't do this. Not today, not...no. You can't.

Amethyst deserves better than your presence right now. She deserves to be listened to, deserves to be *heard*, and--you can't give her that. You simply *can't*, not when Rose is still on your mind, so unwilling to leave your thoughts for even a moment.

You feel your heart pounding, threatening to burst from your chest. You can't *breathe*, and without a word you flee the room, opting to hide in the bathroom for a bit. You lock yourself in a stall, and try to breathe, try to calm yourself even slightly. You haven't been this anxious in so very long.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

How are you supposed to talk about a dead girl's lack of love for you when there's just been a *breakup*? You can't. You'd be stealing the spotlight, talking over Amethyst, and that would just be so *unfair*.

No. You can't talk about it, not today. Not when Amethyst's wounds are so raw. For now, you'll just keep it to yourself.

You've been burdened with so many secrets over the years. What's one more, really?

You can handle it. It's not that bad. You'll just keep telling yourself that.

You don't feel sad, really. You don't feel *anything*, save for a vague sense of *deja vu*. You know this numbness, this *emptiness*, all too well, and it *terrifies* you.

You lose track of time entirely, for God knows how long. Truth be told, you lose track of *everything*.

You're barely aware of your surroundings when Sapphire's voice cuts through the fog. "Uh, is everything alright? You missed..." She pauses. "Uh. Pretty much the entire session, actually." "Ah."

"Can you come out?"

You stagger to your feet from your perch on the toilet, standing on wobbly legs, and throw the door open with far more force than intended, nearly hitting Sapphire in the face.

"...Sorry," you finally manage to say, after far longer than truly necessary.

"You don't seem well."

"I'm fine. Really. I just...forgot to take my pills this morning, that's all." It's not true, of course--you've been diligent about taking your medication since your discharge. It's not *enough*, naturally, but it's been helping, usually. Just not right now.

Sapphire frowns. "Have you set an alarm?"

"Uh. Yes."

"Okay. Try to remember tomorrow, then." She looks you over. "Really, though, there's something going on. It's pretty clear."

"I'm *fine*," you spit.

"No. You're not."

You don't say anything to that. What *is* there to say?

"Let's talk about it later," Sapphire sighs. "We need to get heading home for dinner."

You just nod, numb, not really there at all.

You crash when you get home, more exhausted than you've been in months. You don't know what to do, who to talk to. Garnet and Bismuth are too close to the issue--and hell, Ruby and even Sapphire are as well. You barely know Lapis outside of therapy. And of course, Amethyst and Peridot...no. Definitely not.

So you just stare at the ceiling, still in a daze, a pitiful wreck of a person, and let the tears fall.

Chapter 37

There's a knock at your bedroom door, three firm raps.

"Dinner's ready," Garnet informs you.

"I'm really not feeling well," you reply.

"Ah."

"Yeah. Uh, tell Ruby that I'll eat later."

"Will do." There's a pause, and then the door flies open. You barely process it.

"Uh." Garnet looks you up and down. You're lying in bed, your pillow damp with tears, and you're vaguely aware that you probably look like a bit of a mess. "You don't *look* well."

"I'm not. I think I'm sick." You're not, really--not physically, at least. It's all coming from your mind, and unfortunately, your mind does not like to shut up.

I couldn't be there for Amethyst because I'm too wrapped up in my own problems. I'm a terrible friend. I don't understand why you still tolerate my presence, much less claim to enjoy it.

You, of course, say none of that.

Garnet sits down in your desk chair, crossing her legs. "I can't claim to know what's going on," she admits. "But I'd like to know."

"No. Trust me, you don't."

She raises an eyebrow. "Hm. So this is about Rose, I'm guessing."

Goddammit.

"...Yes."

Garnet frowns. "I see. Please, explain."

"Do I have to?"

"Eventually, yes."

You groan, rolling over in bed. "And you promise you won't be upset?"

"Not sure why I would be."

"She was your *friend*."

"*Was*." Garnet shakes her head ruefully. "Sorry to speak ill of the dead, but after all she's done, I'm not sure I'd still *want* to be friends with her."

"No. You would." You pull the covers up over your head, unable and unwilling to meet Garnet's eyes. "She was charming like that."

"Fair point. That said, you didn't deserve to be discarded like that. And *Bismuth*...I can't believe it. There was so much I should've seen earlier."

"You couldn't have known."

You didn't know her like I did, you think.

"I suppose. Still..."

"Garnet," you sigh, "please go eat. I'll talk later. Okay?"

"Later, then."

As Garnet leaves the room, you peek out from under the blankets. What are you even supposed to do now? Why does it still wound you so deeply to hear Garnet speaking of Rose so poorly?

Wait.

There's one person you might be able to talk to, who might understand.

You grab your phone from the nightstand and text Greg.

"I need to talk to you. Let me know when you get this."

He texts back about fifteen agonizingly long minutes later.

"sorry, was putting the kid to bed! 😊"

"what's up?"

"It's about Rose. I'm kind of panicking." "Kind of" is the understatement of the century, but you don't want to worry Greg too much.

"uh...what about her?"

You're not entirely sure how to answer that question tactfully, so you reply with a question of your own.

"Did she ever talk about me?"

"yeah, sometimes. why?"

"I'm still not sure how she really felt about me."

"uh."

"you're not gonna like this answer, pearl."

Your heart sinks, and you don't respond for far too long.

"pearl?"

"Go on."

"i thought you were her ex or something until i actually met you."

"she didn't like to talk about her past. i didn't want to press her, y'know?"

"and i didn't realize you two were still involved until i actually spoke to you."

"i should've said something, huh?"

"Yes, you should've."

"You never should've dated her." You're furious, but the truth is, Greg's not the one you're mad at, or at least he shouldn't be. You gave so *much* of yourself over to Rose, and what did she think of you in return? What did you do wrong, to make her lose interest?

You don't respond to Greg's next messages. In fact, you don't even bother to look.

You went to Funland with Rose one night, a few days before she told you she was pregnant, and at the time, you had no clue it would be your last real date with her.

"I love rollercoasters," she commented as the two of you strolled off the coaster.

"They're fun," you agreed. You were never as into the rides as Rose, but she could make anything enjoyable. Her enthusiasm was just so contagious. "I get nervous, though. I don't know if the rides here are actually up to code."

"Well, we haven't died yet, have we?" she joked.

You couldn't help but snort. "Fair enough, I suppose."

"You hungry?" she asked.

"A little."

"Me too. Let's get something to eat."

You walked over to the corn dog stand. Corn dogs were never your thing, but you were pretty hungry, and Rose was offering...

You spend the next few days trying to avoid thinking about it, and failing miserably.

On Friday night, Sapphire calls you out on it. "You need to process this," she tells you.

"Everyone's really concerned about you."

"I know."

"Look. You told me you'd talk about it later."

"I *know*."

Sapphire sighs. "Please just tell me what's going on."

"I think you can probably guess," you snark. You're *pissed*--not at Sapphire, of course, but at the circumstances, and Rose, and most of all, *yourself*.

You should've seen the signs. She hadn't returned your feelings for a long, long time, and you were too stubborn, too *stupid*, to see it.

"Rose?"

"Yeah."

"What about her?"

You swallow, scared to speak. "She...it's complicated."

"I have time, you know. Tell me the story, okay?"

You cringe, but nod, and squeak out, "Okay."

Sapphire sits down on the couch, and motions for you to join her, which you do. You take a deep breath, steel yourself, and finally, *finally* manage to spill your guts--it comes out in fits and starts, horribly disconnected and rambling, and by the end of your tirade you're in tears again.

"Wow. That's...wow." Sapphire's eyes are wide, her fists clenched; despite maintaining her usual calm tone, she's *angry*.

"I mean...I must've done *something* wrong, right? Something that made her want to leave me?"

Sapphire shakes her head sadly. "Pearl, that's not always how it goes. It very well could've just been...well, Rose."

"She wouldn't have behaved like that without a good reason."

"Are you really sure of that?"

You're not. You're really not at all.

But you say yes regardless, because you *want* to believe it--that you could've done something differently, that had you been better she would've stayed by your side. That maybe, just maybe, she never would've been with Greg if you'd been a better girlfriend, and she would still be here.

You and Rose sat on the beach atop a picnic blanket, eating your corn dogs and stargazing. It was a warm, clear summer night, and life was absolutely beautiful. Even as unhappy as you were deep down with her other relationship, you were fully capable of living in the moment when she was around, just happy to spend time with her.

(Time with her had been in short supply as of late. She just kept saying she was busy.

You believed her.)

"Did I mention that I love your new haircut?" she asked, mussing your hair with her free hand, eliciting a laugh from you.

"Thanks," you said with a grin. You'd just gotten your hair cut a few weeks ago, from a chin-length bob to a pixie cut. It was taking a bit of getting used to, but you were finding that you quite liked it. (Perhaps more importantly, you now knew that Rose liked it.)

She smooched you on the forehead. "You're such a cutie, Pearl."

"You're the cute one."

She took your hands in hers, frowning, suddenly dead serious. "Pearl, I do want to apologize. I'm sorry I couldn't take you in back when your mom kicked you out."

"That's not your fault," you replied with a shrug. "Apartments aren't cheap, and I wouldn't want to live with your mothers."

"I know. I just wish I could've done something."

You kissed her softly on the lips. "It's fine. Really. Ruby and Sapphire have been really great--I have my own room and everything, they've let me have the guest room..." Your hand found its way to her hair. "It's nice, actually. I've only been there for about three months, and it already feels more like home than home ever did."

"I'm so glad. I just feel bad that I couldn't actually help you." She paused. "Are you done with your corn dog?"

You look at the half-eaten corn dog, nearly forgotten in your other hand. "Yeah."

"Hang on, I'll toss that real quick." You handed her the dog, and she threw both yours and hers towards a nearby trash can.

"Damn. I missed."

You burst into laughter then, hugging her, burying your face in her soft pink curls. "And you still think I'm the cute one?" you teased.

"Of course I do, sweetheart."

The next day, you finally manage to actually read Greg's messages.

"i understand if you hate me. i really do."

For whatever reason, you actually *don't*. There may have been things he could've said, things he could've *done*, but there's a key difference, and that's that Greg is actually *apologizing*. Rose is dead. Rose can never apologize, never explain herself, never make it up to you.

"I don't."

"I'm sorry I freaked out like that."

"honestly? i don't even blame you."

"i think i would've freaked out too."

"I shouldn't have taken it out on you, though."

"who else could you have taken it out on?"

He's got a point. The guilt over your outburst hurts like mad regardless.

It was getting late; Funland had closed a good hour ago, and most of the shops on the boardwalk had locked their doors, the 24-hour convenience store being the only holdout.

Rose glanced around the beach, around the boardwalk, and finally whispered, "We're alone," a mischievous grin gracing her face.

You grinned back. "Would you like to...uh..."

"Yes. Yes."

She grabbed the blanket and pulled you to your feet, practically dragging you to a secluded portion of the beach, by the face of a low cliff. Your heart pounded, the thrill of it all so overwhelming and yet nothing compared to her majestic presence.

As Rose lay the blanket out, you stared at her, unable to look away. Something about her looked different--there was something unusual about the shape of her stomach, visible beneath the hem of her crop top. You shrugged it off. She'd probably just put on a bit of weight, or maybe she was a bit bloated. Nothing to be concerned about, right?

When the two of you lay down beside each other, though, when you began to touch, to tug at each other's clothes, you stopped thinking about it entirely.

This was too good to ruin with such absurd worries. And, frankly, it was a bit hard to think at all with her working such magic with her hands, snaking one under your tank top, the other rubbing you through your shorts. "Don't stop, oh God, Rose, keep doing that--"

She pulled her hand from your breast and put it over your mouth. "Shh, Pearl. You'll get us in trouble."

"Mm." Rose uncovered your mouth, then, and you whispered, "Sorry."

"Shh. No need to apologize. Just keep quiet, darling."

Chapter 38

Late that night, as you lie in bed staring vacantly at the wall, you're forced to socialize.

Amethyst bangs hard on your window, shaking the glass. It's not enough to snap you out of your godawful mood, but it *is* enough to bring you back to reality.

You sit up and open the window. "Amethyst, what are you doing here? It's three in the mor--"

"Dude, I have the *best* news. Lemme in."

"Can you tell me tomorrow? I'm trying to sleep."

"Okay, but like, are you *succeeding*?"

"...Not really, no."

"Cool, so let me in then."

You roll your eyes, but in all honesty, the idea of some good news for once is deeply appealing.

"Alright." You scooch aside, allowing Amethyst to climb inside, onto your bed. "But can you warn me next time?"

"Yeah. Sorry. But like, this is *awesome*, okay?" She whips her phone out and shows it to you. It's open to Facebook--specifically, the friends list of one Amethyst Diaz. You only recognize a handful of the names on there, but she's gesturing to the list excitedly.

"Uh...what am I looking at?"

"I found my sisters! Look, this is Jasmine, and that's Carmen, and that's Jay, and--just. Holy *shit*, Pearl." She's tearing up, but the smile on her face looks completely sincere. "Thanks for telling me to reach out to them."

"That's wonderful," you say, and you mean it, you genuinely do. "But why didn't you just text?"

In an instant, Amethyst's expression turns serious. "Look. You were acting really fucking weird at therapy, and like--I've been talking with Garnet, because she's actually super cool, and she's worried too. So I'm here to *cheer you up*. Girls' night out."

"At three in the morning."

"Uh, when else?"

"You're impossible."

"You say that like you're *not*."

You give up, realizing that you're not going to be able to get out of this so easily. "Fine. Fine! I'm not going to be sleeping anyway..."

"That's the spirit. Get dressed." She looks you over, squinting in the dark of your room--the only illumination comes from the streetlight outside. "Unless you sleep in your clothes?"

"I don't. Give me a moment and I'll meet you outside."

"You're moving in with him?"

"Of course!" Rose gushed, seemingly oblivious to your discomfort. "He needs a place to live other than his van, and I can finally afford a studio...we need a place to raise the baby, don't we?"

"You said we'd move in together, Rose!"

"I know. And someday you can move in with us too! It's a small place, so not yet, but I'm sure we can make it work once we end up somewhere a bit bigger..."

"I don't want to live with him."

Rose waved off your concerns. "Oh, come on, Pearl. You've been doing great around him!"

"That's not even the problem, it's--I don't know, it's just..."

I want you all to myself, you wanted to say, but you didn't. You just trailed off.

She kissed you softly on the lips, silencing you. "Someday, I promise," she whispered as she pulled away.

It was a promise she'd never follow through with. Just a few weeks later, she was in the hospital for the first time. (The beginning of the end.)

You still clung to her words, and did until the day she died.

You step out into the night. Amethyst is sitting on the porch steps, fiddling with her phone.

"What are we doing, exactly?" you ask.

"I just kinda wanted to walk and chat, y'know? The weather's gorgeous tonight, let's enjoy it."

"Um. I suppose."

You walk down the sidewalk, through the little suburban neighborhood you share. "I'm doing a lot better than last week," she tells you, smiling. "It was just...a lot all at once. But Jay responded to my message earlier, and she hooked me up with the rest of the fam, and that's...it's nice." She shrugs, adding, "And Peridot and I had a good talk. No one's mad at anyone, and I think she's happier now."

Amethyst looks down at her worn canvas high-tops. "That's really all I could ask for."

"You're lucky," you say, not really thinking.

"Huh?"

"Sorry. Just..." You laugh bitterly. "I wish I could have a talk with Rose. I'd like an apology."

"I don't get why you're still so hung up on her."

"Neither do I, at this point."

You *don't*, honestly. The best guess you have is that she gave you meaning, *purpose*...but it sounds so stupid.

"Why did you freak out like that on Tuesday?" Amethyst finally asks.

"I didn't want to talk about what was going on. Not when you'd just been dumped."

“...Uh, wow. That’s...that’s really sweet. Seriously. But you gotta look after yourself, ‘kay? I was really scared.”

Shit. “Sorry.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“I assume you won’t let me *not* talk about it.”

“I mean, probably not, but if you wanna put it off even more be my guest.”

“Fine. I’ll bite. Rose was...” You can’t find the right words. “She was...a very complicated person, and not always entirely honest. With anyone.”

“What did you find out this time?”

“I ran into her little cousin the other day. Rose didn’t even bother to tell her she was pregnant. And she didn’t tell anyone we were involved...not her cousin, not her boyfriend, no one. I think the only people besides me she ever told were Garnet and Bismuth.” You shake your head. “I have to wonder about a lot now, really.”

“Like?”

“The apartment.”

“Okay, you’re gonna have to explain what you mean by that.”

“When I got kicked out, she told me she couldn’t have me stay with her--that her family wouldn’t approve, and that she couldn’t afford her own place yet. But...it was less than a year later when she and Greg got an apartment, and she didn’t invite me to join her. Not in that place. She just kept saying *someday*.”

“Never followed through, huh?”

“She couldn’t have even if she’d wanted to. Her pregnancy began to go badly, it wasn’t like...like I could live with her in the *hospital*.”

“Jeez.”

“Yeah. I just wish I could *talk* to her again. Ask her why she did what she did, you know?”

“But you can’t.”

“No. I can’t exactly talk to a dead woman, Amethyst.”

“Exactly.” Amethyst looks right at you, her face lit up by the streetlights. “You’re never gonna get closure, and that *sucks*. But you gotta accept it, y’know?”

You stop dead in your tracks. “I don’t even really know who I *am* without her,” you admit, and somehow, even saying it is a weight lifted. Not enough, not by far, but it’s noticeable. “I can’t just...let go of her like that. It’s just--it’s not that easy.”

“Did I ever say it would be easy?”

“No, but--”

“No buts. We’re *both* working through some shit. I know how it is.”

“You don’t.”

“Okay, maybe not, like, the same exact *situation*. But you *know* I feel you on the identity bullshit.” Amethyst brushes a lock of hair from her face; her dye job, you’ve noticed, is fading to a vaguely purple-tinged platinum. “I’m probably not the best person to ask for, uh...*advice*. But I can listen, and I can commiserate. Would that help? At all?”

“It might. I’m not sure.”

“Can’t hurt to try, right?”

“I guess.”

Rose was in decent shape when you arrived that day, all things considered. She was still under observation following her seizure, but she'd returned to lucidity, and you were happy to be able to chat with her as if nothing was wrong at all.

It wasn't that you weren't worried. On the contrary--you were an absolute anxious wreck, and it was a constant struggle to keep yourself from looking up her symptoms online and worrying yourself further. But Rose had said she'd be fine, she wasn't worried, so...

You set the flowers down on her bedside table, and sat down in the uncomfortable plastic chair. "Feeling better?" you asked hopefully.

"Much," she assured you. "I'm hoping I can get out soon."

"I'm sure you will." You smiled, glancing down at her stomach. Six months along. "You're going to be a great mom, Rose."

She laughed at that. "You've got a pretty low bar for that, Pearl. Although I suppose I do too...but I hope you're right. I'm not going to make the same mistakes our parents did."

It was strange how that hit. Mistakes. No, your mom knew exactly what she was doing. Rose's mothers may have been oblivious to the harm they were doing, but yours...

But of course, you knew she didn't mean anything by it. It was the sentiment that mattered.

"You won't," you assured her. "Little Steven or Nora is gonna have the best mom ever." You kissed her, and couldn't help but notice her lips were dry. "Uh...are you thirsty? Can I get you a drink?"

"That would be marvelous. Diet, if you would--the doctors don't want me overdoing it on sugar."

"Okay. Back in a few." You left the room, and spent a few minutes searching for the vending machine before realizing it was around the corner.

"Aha!"

You had a few dollars in your pocket, and you fed them into the vending machine, getting a diet Coke for Rose and a bottle of water for yourself. You weren't gone long. Fifteen minutes, tops. It was long enough. When you got back, they wouldn't let you in.

"So where do you wanna start?" Amethyst asks as you turn the corner, heading towards the beach.

"I suppose the beginning."

Chapter 39

You barely remember your father.

You know he was slim with red hair and a large nose, just like you. That's *all* you remember, the vague, fuzzy mental image of a man. He was gone by your fourth birthday, after all--how could you possibly recall more?

"My mom never told me what really happened to my dad," you tell Amethyst. "I'm pretty sure he's dead--most of the evidence seems to point that way. Can't be sure, though. Finnegan isn't that unusual a last name, and his first name was very common. There are plenty of obituaries, but I'm not sure if any of them are *his*."

"You looked?"

"For years. Holly *hated* it." You shake your head ruefully. "I don't think she actually liked him. Or anyone, really." *Except maybe Maggie, but even that...*

"Jeez."

"Yeah. I've more or less given up on looking. I just wanted closure, but...I dunno. I should've known I'd never get it."

"Guess so."

"I don't know if things would've been different with him around, honestly. Maybe he was just as bad as her. Still..."

Amethyst nods. "Family bullshit is a lot."

"Oh, I haven't even gotten started."

It didn't occur to you that you might like girls until you met Garnet. Up until then, you'd simply assumed you'd end up a spinster, like your mother had warned of, and honestly you had accepted it. You had no desire to spend your life with some guy.

Then you met Garnet, who was so pretty and cool, and you slowly came to realize that maybe the idea of spending your life with a woman was actually appealing.

It terrified you.

"Garnet," you told her one day in seventh grade, halting, hesitant, "I think I might be gay." She'd smirked. "I could tell from day one. Bit surprised you hadn't already figured that out, actually."

"This is serious, Garnet! My mom...she's really weird about these things. I can't tell her. Ever."

"Ah." She pursed her lips, deep in thought. "Well, your secret is safe with me. I'm sorry about your mum, though."

"I mean, you've met her. You know she's awful."

"Yeah, and I never want to meet that woman again."

"Exactly!" You tugged at your hair. Bit your lip. "I'm really freaking out right now, okay? What if she finds out?"

"Hmm."

"Garnet!"

"I'm thinking."

"Okay, just--"

"If anything ever happens," she interrupted, "you have my number."

"Uh. You don't really mean that, do you? I wouldn't want to impose."

"I do mean it." Garnet smiled that soft, mysterious smile of hers. "Hopefully it won't come to that, of course."

"I'm sure it won't, just..." You hugged her then, nearly crying with relief. It was off your chest, at least. "Thank you, thank you, thank you--"

(Really, you'd never thought she'd have to make good on her offer.)

"I never really got it," you sigh. "I wanted to argue with her, after actually looking up the verses she kept citing. Historical context and translation differences and such. But I knew better. I knew better than to argue with her about *anything*."

"Yeah, I kinda get that." Amethyst snorts. "'Course, I was kind of a little shit. That's pretty much what got me kicked out of the place with Jay and the others--I kept, quote, 'talking back' and 'being difficult.'" She's doing air quotes with her fingers, rolling her eyes.

"I think that's the big reason she never seemed to like me much," you muse. "I tried not to talk back or argue, but...I was a bit on the rebellious side. I got grounded all the time, because I would sometimes be home a few minutes late, or I'd get a B on a test, or whatever."

"A B? Seriously? I'd *kill* for that!"

"She had extremely high standards," you reply with a shrug. "We all had to be...well. *Perfect*."

"Do you think she realized that perfection is literally fucking impossible?"

"If she did, she didn't especially care."

"Weird. At least mine just gave up on me completely."

"Oh, mine did too! It just took her longer to decide I would never be the trophy daughter she wanted me to be." You can't help but laugh, amazed at the *absurdity* of it all. You're tired, so tired of everything, and you're almost starting to find it comical. You can't get your life together, you're a pathetic excuse for a person, but at least you're not *Holly*.

"I was seventeen," you continue.

"Pearl, is it true that you and that Rose girl have been...ahem. Involved?"

You just stood there slack-jawed for a long moment. Your mouth went dry, empty, and you just stared.

"Answer me!"

Finally, you managed to squeak out, "How did you figure--" before stopping yourself. You couldn't dig yourself deeper. No. Not with your senior year so close to ending. Just four more months, and you'd be done.

"You were, then?" The look of horror, rage, despair on Holly's face might've moved you had it come from nearly anyone else, under nearly any other circumstances. With her, though, it just infuriated you. "You're such a disappointment, I can't believe you'd let her do that--"

That was when you hit your breaking point. You'd been keeping this close to your chest for years, and she was just devaluing things like that? Devaluing Rose?

"Let her, Mom? I didn't. I wanted it. I wanted all of it! I--I still want it! And you can't understand, you never could, it--it's not like you've ever been in love--"

"Get out," she spat. You stood there in shock.

"Get out," she repeated. "I'm not having a dyke in my house."

"What?"

"Out. I don't want to see you in the morning, Pearl."

Tears began to flow from your eyes. It was actually happening. You should've known it would, but it hits differently than you'd expected.

You didn't want your mother's love or acceptance at that point; you had given up on that a long, long time ago. Still, you'd thought you could make it a bit longer than that, at least long enough to get out on your own terms.

She wouldn't even give you that.

"Fine," you growled through the tears, storming off to your room to pack. Maggie was there, sitting atop her bunk bed.

She didn't even seem to notice you there. But you knew. You knew she'd told your mother about Rose--there was no other way she could've learned.

"You told her," you hissed.

"Huh?"

"You told her. I--I can't believe you'd do that, I thought you'd keep my secret--"

"What's going on?"

"She kicked me out. Shut up and let me pack."

"I didn't realize she'd--"

"Shut up!" you cried.

"Ugh. I didn't think..."

You didn't look at her after that, didn't listen to the rest of her excuses, and you just continued to pack your bags, silent save for the occasional pesky snuffle.

The beach is empty, unsurprisingly.

Amethyst plops herself down in the sand, hair fanning out beneath her. "That's fucked," she says. "I'll fight her."

"I could say the same about *your* mother."

"Yeah, I guess. But it's been over a decade now, y'know? I'm...not over it, but it ain't as *fresh*."

"I suppose." You sit down next to Amethyst. "I mean, it worked out. The Carlsons are fantastic. I just wish I'd had a mother who gave a damn about her kids."

"Yeah," Amethyst agrees. "We...we both deserved better, huh?"

"Yeah. We did."

"So what about Rose?"

You pause. "She made me feel loved. Like I was actually *special*. It meant so much."

(But you *weren't* special to her, were you?)

"I always felt like I was a terrible person," you add. "It was drilled into my head, and I actually believed it." You still do, on some level.

"Mood," Amethyst replies. "Huge. Fucking. Mood."

It was nine PM, and you were alone. Just you, your backpack, and an ancient suitcase of questionable structural integrity.

It was mercifully dry out, but bitterly cold, and exceedingly windy. You pulled your coat tighter around yourself with one hand as you walked, bracing yourself against the wind.

Seventeen and homeless. Great job, Pearl.

You knew where to go, at least for the night. You'd text Rose in the morning, but for the time being, you were simply determined to get to Garnet's house on the other side of town. It was closer anyway--Rose lived just outside the city limits. But it was still a good two miles away, and the warmth the exercise provided wasn't enough to stave off the harsh winter air.

By the time you showed up on Garnet's doorstep, you were shivering uncontrollably. You glanced down at your hands, and noticed the nailbeds were bluish.

With nearly numb hands, you knocked on the door. As you waited for a response, you shoved your hands into your coat pockets, hoping to warm them a bit. It didn't help much.

It was Ruby who answered the door. "Hi Pearl!" she'd squealed, grinning broadly. "Nice surprise."

"Uh...about that. Er, could I come in, please?"

Ruby let you inside, and you collapsed on the couch, painfully tired, and let the tears fall.

"And it was all for nothing," you mutter. "She's *gone*. I--I got outed to my horrid excuse for a mother over someone who just wound up screwing me over anyway, and she can't even *apologize*."

"That's rough. God. That's...I'm so sorry."

Amethyst stares up at the sky. "It sucks to not have answers."

"It does. It really, really does."

"You deserved a better lover."

You want to agree. Truly, you do. But you can't.

Chapter 40

Around four-thirty, the two of you decide that it's time to head home. Amethyst insists, however, on stopping by the convenience store on the way back.

"24-hour stores," she comments, "are proof that sometimes the universe isn't *always* awful."

"Are you trying to be inspirational or something?"

"Absolutely not. I'm just saying they're important to me and I'm glad they exist."

Amethyst holds the door open for you, giving an exaggerated bow as she does. "After you."

"You're ridiculous," you say, not unkindly, as you enter. Amethyst trails behind you, before making a beeline for the energy drinks.

It's weird. You're feeling so much better now, all things considered--talking about it was a colossal weight off your chest, and Amethyst's presence has, over the time you've known her, become a welcome thing in your life. Still, you can't stop thinking about what she said.

"You deserved a better lover."

Really, at this point, it shouldn't sting. You should be able to acknowledge that Rose wasn't the paragon you thought she was. You *want* to.

But every time you so much as think it, you remember the good times. How caring she could be, so loving and sweet. How she knew you so much better than anyone else. Her body against yours, skin to skin, practically *fused*.

It *hurts*.

"Yo, P!" Amethyst calls from over by the coolers. "Can you help me out here?"

"Uh..." You join Amethyst, who is holding a can in each hand. "What do you need help with?"

"I'm indecisive as fuck and can't decide which to get. Like, I should *really* only get one, 'cause I'm trying to cut back a little on the caffeine, but *which*?" She holds the cans up to your eye level. You don't know the first thing about energy drinks; you tried a Red Bull once in high school and hated it, but that's the full extent of your knowledge.

"I've never had either of those," you explain. "I'm not really a fan."

"Okay, then which one has a cooler can?"

"Do you really have to get one of those at all? They're vile. And also bad for you."

"I like 'em," Amethyst replies with a shrug. "And like I said, I'm cutting back, and *besides*, you smoke, so it's not like *either* of us are exactly the picture of healthy living."

"Point taken. They're still disgusting." You pause and think. "Although you *could* always get both and put one in the refrigerator for later when you get home, right?"

"You," Amethyst chuckles, "are a fucking genius. Yeah, I'll do that. I'll be good and won't just drink both first."

"Can I hold you to that?"

"Hopefully. Probably not."

"Fair enough."

"You want anything? My treat."

"Uh, maybe a drink, yes." You look at the assortment of beverages lining the wall, ultimately settling on iced green tea.

"Cool. I'ma go get a snack. Hungry?"

"Oh, no thank you. I appreciate the offer, though."

"Weirdo," Amethyst snorts. "I'm getting nachos. Crappy cheese sauce is the food of the gods."

"You really will eat anything, huh?"

"Uh, excuse you, but it's *delicious*. But yeah, pretty much. I ate a whole side of wasabi on a bet once."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted five bucks, duh. Plus it's really not that bad."

"And *I'm* the weird one."

"Let's be real, P. We *both* are."

You guess she's not wrong.

It's five in the morning by the time you get home, and you feel oddly invigorated. The sun is just beginning to rise, lighting up the sky.

"Amethyst?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. Uh...hug?"

"Hell yeah." Amethyst hugs you tightly, and this time, you hug back, breathing in the smell of coconut conditioner and sweat. As you pull apart, she asks, "Oh, by the way, should I just give you the shirt back on Tuesday? I can bring it over earlier if you--"

"Keep it," you blurt out, shocking yourself significantly more than Amethyst. "It fits you better anyway."

"You sure?"

"I am." You are.

You're beginning to let go, in bits and pieces. It thrills you, scares you, and delights you all at once, and you hug Amethyst again.

"Thank you," you whisper.

Tuesday rolls around again, and for the first time in forever, everyone is present.

Sapphire, you notice, is quite pleased with this. "How's everyone doing?" she asks, her voice a bit more chipper than usual.

"Pretty good!" Peridot chirps.

"Not dead," says Lapis.

Amethyst looks at you, as if to tell you to go first, so you do just that. "I'm doing better," you reply, and it's the truth. For now, at least.

"Good," Amethyst says, grinning. "And I'm doin' *great*, actually. I'm sorry I was so moody last week. Everything was just so raw, y'know?"

"I'm so glad you're doing okay!" Peridot gushes, and Amethyst laughs.

"Peri, you've seen me at school. You know what's up."

"I do! It's just really exciting."

"So I already told Pearl about this too," Amethyst continues, "but I found my foster sisters! We're gonna get pizza on Friday after school lets out, I'm so stoked."

"See? Told you it was really exciting!" Peridot smiles broadly; you can't stop yourself from smiling back.

"Congrats," Lapis drawls. You can't tell if she means it or not--Lapis is so guarded, even more than you.

Amethyst pulls her phone out, opening up the photos app. "Jasmine sent me this old picture of some of us," she explains. "See? That's me, and that's her, and Jay, and Carmen, and Chip, and Gina...that's not *everyone*, it was a huge group, but still."

You look at the photo. Amethyst is in the middle, by far the shortest in the group; her hair is dirty blonde, cut chin-length and horribly messy. She's smiling, showing off a missing tooth, but the smile doesn't meet her eyes.

"I'm so excited to see 'em again," she reiterates, and you can tell that right now, her smile is genuine.

"This is gonna sound so fucking weird," begins Lapis, "but I'm dropping out, and I'm actually excited for it."

"Uh...why?" asks Peridot.

"Art school's a ripoff, Peridot. It's not like I'm learning a whole lot new, I'm *constantly* stressed, and I'm just putting myself in a ton of debt. So I'm gonna be looking for an apartment in the area, and a job. It just seems more practical at this point."

"It's fine to not finish college," Sapphire responds. "My wife never went at all, and I nearly burned myself out with grad school." She grins. "It sounds like you've really thought it through!"

"Yeah, I have! I've been considering it for a while now, but...life got in the way of making much in terms of plans."

You're fairly sure you know what she means by that.

"It be like that sometimes," Amethyst notes.

"Yeah." Lapis smiles, and you think it might well be the happiest you've ever seen her.

"It's kinda cool to finally know what I am," admits Peridot. "I wish I hadn't hurt you like that, Amethyst. But I'm happy that I *know* now, if that makes sense?"

Amethyst nods. "It does, yeah. And trust me, you breaking up with me was the *least* of my issues. It was just a weird week."

"And," Peridot goes on, "speaking of school, I might get to graduate early! I'm taking the exit exam on Friday, wish me luck!"

"Damn. That's *awesome*." Amethyst chuckles. "You going to college?"

"I plan to! Community college at first, then I'll transfer to a four-year school. I've got it all planned out!"

"What do you want to major in?" you ask.

"Mechanical engineering!" Peridot looks incredibly proud.

"She's good at it," Amethyst is quick to point out. "She *slays* at robotics tournaments."

Lapis looks right at Peridot. "Just don't burn yourself out, okay?"

"I won't. I really like school, for the most part. It's just the *students* I can't stand!" Peridot laughs, perhaps a bit too hard.

Lapis snorts. "College ain't much different. But I think you'll do alright. You're smart."

Peridot blushes a bit. "Wow, thanks."

You brace yourself for what you're about to say. It's still entirely too hard to speak about Rose--about what Rose *did*--and the mere act of *thinking* uncharitably of her still turns your stomach with guilt. It's hard, almost impossible, to let go.

But you're *starting* to, bit by bit.

"Amethyst," you start, "you know what you said the other day?"

"Which thing? I say a lot of stuff every day."

"You said..." The words want to catch in your throat. For a moment, they *do*.

You finally force it out.

"You said I deserved a better lover."

Amethyst shrugs. "Well, I was right."

"I think...I think maybe you were." You shake your head, smiling faintly. "I'm not sure. Maybe I don't deserve a good partner, and I know I'm not ready to start looking for someone new. Not yet."

You think about Bismuth. You haven't seen her in person in a few weeks now, not since your disastrous not-date, and you feel another twinge of guilt. For all you've made amends--if there was really anything that *needed* fixing--you kind of wish you were ready for her. You're not sure you'd say you have *feelings* for her, not yet, but she's gorgeous and an amazing friend, and maybe one day you'll develop those feelings. Maybe you won't.

You're gonna have to ask her to hang out again sometime soon. It's nice to have friends.

You realize you've never had this many friends before in your life. *Real* friends, who are trying their damndest to be there for you.

"Thanks for taking the shirt," you say to Amethyst. "I don't think you know how important that was."

"Maybe I don't. Maybe I do. But thanks for giving it to me. It's comfy. Soft." She pauses. "The band's pretty good, too."

"You're welcome. And...thanks again. I know I keep saying that, but--"

"Shh. No buts. It's fine."

It's not really *fine*. Maybe things won't ever be completely fine. But it's *better*, and that's a step in the right direction.

As you all spill out of the office, Amethyst comes up to you.

"So this is gonna sound weird, but like--Peridot and I were gonna go to prom this weekend, right? Like, as friends. But we've decided prom is dumb, so..."

"So?"

"We're gonna hang out at my place in our fancy outfits and just chill. Uh...would you like to join us? You can bring your friends if you wanna. Garnet's cool, and that Bismuth chick sounds cool too."

"I'd really like that."

"Sweet!" Amethyst pumps her fist in triumph. "Dress code is whatever the fanciest bullshit you own is, 'kay?"

"Sounds like a plan. Seeya then?"

"Seeya then." She waves goodbye as she walks off.

Chapter 41

The tux you wore to prom, the one you blew most of your savings at the time on, is still hanging up in your closet.

It should still fit. You haven't gained any weight since then, and you'd already stopped getting taller by that point.

Given context, you feel a bit odd about wearing it. You went with Rose, and you can't shake your memories of your prom.

"It's so loud in here!" you complained, struggling to be heard over the blaring music. It wasn't even good music.

"I know! Isn't it fun?"

"Uh..."

"Let's dance."

"Rose, I--"

You couldn't get another word in. She took your hand and all but dragged you to the dance floor. You were a good dancer, and you knew it. The ballet trophies you left behind at your mother's place were evidence enough of that. But there's a difference between doing a routine on stage and being pulled into a group of gyrating bodies, with barely any room to move. The stench of sweat and spiked punch filled your nostrils, and you felt like you were about to throw up. Panic overtook you, and you began to hyperventilate.

You clutched your stomach and fled, pushing past crowds of people and likely pissing a few of them off quite seriously. You didn't care. You needed out.

You didn't hear Rose calling your name. You'll never know if she even bothered.

Despite the way your heart aches when you look at it, you decide to try it on. Amethyst *did* say the dress code was, quote, “the fanciest bullshit you own,” and the fact of the matter is that the tux fits the bill.

It still fits flawlessly, to your relief. In fact, you actually look quite nice. You admire yourself in the mirror hanging from your bedroom door for a moment before heading over to knock on Garnet’s door.

That wasn't so bad.

“Come on in,” Garnet shouts from inside. You do just that.

She’s sitting on her bed in a tank top and athletic shorts, and grins when she sees you. “Looking sharp. And I’m glad you decided to drop by before we head out. I’m having trouble deciding over here.” Garnet gestures to the two outfits lying next to her on the bed—one a long lacy white dress, the other a black suit.

“That’s the suit you wore to prom, right? And the dress you wore when Ruby and Sapphire got married?”

“Yup. I like them both.”

“Same. Uh...hm. I’m sorry, I really don’t know which I prefer...”

She looked good in both, after all.

You can practically see the lightbulb go off in Garnet’s head. “I think I have an idea,” she tells you. “Uh, you should probably leave so I can change.”

You nod. “Seeya in a few.”

Garnet, as it happened, was standing outside the gym, leaning against the wall and playing some rhythm game on her phone. When she saw you throw the doors open and run outside, she glanced over at you, raising an eyebrow.

“Pearl,” she said.

“It’s too much,” you gasped. “It’s so loud and crowded and...ugh. I don’t think Rose even noticed I was upset until I ran.”

To be fair, it was still loud, even outside--you could hear the awful music thumping, making you cringe. But it wasn’t as immediate a concern anymore.

You joined Garnet at her spot against the wall, shakily lighting a cigarette, school rules be damned. “She’s been acting so weird since she got with him.”

“Explain how.”

“You haven’t noticed? She barely pays attention to me anymore, I--I had to yank her arm to get her to even go to prom with me. She’s...I don’t know. I think she’s focused on Greg. I don’t get why.”

Garnet simply shrugged.

“I’m freaking out, Garnet, it’s--ugh. I need some punch.”

“It’s already been spiked.”

“Exactly.”

When Garnet comes down, she’s wearing the dress with the suit jacket layered over it. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, it looks very nice, and you tell her so.

“Thanks.”

You check your phone--Bismuth is arriving around six, and it's 5:50 now. Any moment, really. So you and Garnet decide to wait outside.

It's a beautiful spring evening, warm without being hot. "Lovely weather," you comment.

"Indeed."

Bismuth drives up around five minutes later, clad in slacks and a white button-down. Her dreads are pulled up in a ponytail, and she smiles sheepishly as she approaches.

"Think this looks alright?" she asks.

You're a bit flustered. You may not be ready to love again yet, but Bismuth is...well. She's *hot*.

You cannot deny this fact. "It looks great," you say. Garnet just nods.

Bismuth blushes a bit. "It's the nicest thing I own."

"Then it works," Garnet points out.

"Suppose so. Y'all ready to head over?"

You look at Garnet, who gives a thumbs-up, and you grin.

"I think we are."

You chugged the punch, feeling the burn of alcohol in your throat. "Thanks for going in for me," you murmured, already more than a bit tipsy. What did they spike this with, anyway? "Uh. I think I need more."

"I figured you might," replied Garnet, picking another cup off the ground and handing it to you.

"Take mine. I'm not huge on it."

"Thanks." This time you sipped--you didn't want to get too drunk. Just enough to calm you a bit, loosen you up. You knew Rose would probably be sad that you left, and concluded that a bit of liquid courage would help assuage your anxiety about going back into the gym, all crowded and far too loud. Or, at least, it wouldn't hurt.

You weren't much of a drinker, primarily due to being underage and not having a fake ID. Rose had one, had ever since you met her, but you had never bothered to ask her where, or how, she got it. It didn't matter too much under most circumstances--yes, drinking was nice, but it wasn't a necessity.

The upshot of this, of course, was that between your lack of experience and petite frame, you had next to no alcohol tolerance. You were maybe a third of the way through the second cup of punch, and you were definitely feeling it, but you didn't want to waste it, so you paused, sighed, and gulped down the remainder.

"Wow," Garnet commented.

"I don't wanna go back in."

"You know, you don't actually have to."

"Yeah, I do. Rose is still inside. I'll be fine, okay?"

You stumbled as you marched back inside, slamming the door behind you. Rose was by the refreshments table, chatting with someone. (What was his name? Laramie? No, that couldn't be right.)

"Rose!" you called out, praying you'd be heard over the din of the music.

She turned her head to look at you, and her eyes brightened. "Pearl!"

You staggered over, nearly collapsing into her bosom. "Rose. Let's go."

"Are you sure? Aren't you having fun?"

"No, I'm--it's nerve-wracking in here, I want to go."

Rose pouted. "I'll meet you outside in half an hour, then. Okay?"

You accepted it, and she kissed you on the lips before you stumbled back outside. You wondered if she could taste the booze.

Garnet was still out there. "Half an hour," you grumbled, slurring your speech. You sat down on the ground, not even caring about your tuxedo, and buried your face in your knees. "I wanna go home."

"I can call my--"

"No! I don't...don't wanna leave without Rose."

"Mm." Garnet pursed her lips. "Well, no more punch."

"Don't want more. Already drunk."

"I noticed."

"Shut up."

Amethyst and Peridot are waiting on the porch of Amethyst's house, chatting. You can't hear much of their conversation from the sidewalk, but you think you overhear a few excited words from Peridot about that teen soap opera she's so fond of.

"We're here!" you call out, and Amethyst perks her head up.

"You came!" she squeals.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Uh, this is Bismuth. Bismuth, meet Amethyst and Peridot."

"Pleased to meet ya," Bismuth added.

"Hell yeah," Amethyst said, giving an impish smile. "Come on in! I got Cards Against Humanity." And so, you enter.

You kept checking the time. It had been nearly 45 minutes, and Rose still wasn't there.

Garnet, by this point, seemed a bit concerned herself. "I think I might check on her," she declared. You didn't respond, and Garnet shrugged and went inside, emerging a few minutes later with Rose by her side.

"Sorry, honey," Rose whispered as she knelt down and hugged you. "I lost track of time."

"S okay," you replied. You weren't sure, even then, if you really meant it.

Rose helped you to your feet. You were still wobbly, still drunk. "You ready to go home?"

"Please."

She drove you and Garnet home mostly in silence, save for her music playing from the stereo. Better by far than the garbage at the dance.

You went back to your room with her, and she showered you with attention, with love. For hours, you cuddled, kissed, fucked, and it was like she hadn't done a single thing wrong. In moments like this, you truly believed she still loved you more than anyone.

You could forgive her for anything.

Chapter 42

You've played Cards Against Humanity a handful of times in the past, but you were never especially good at it. You just don't have a vulgar enough sense of humor, as far as you can tell. Despite that, you're enjoying yourself quite a lot. There's something truly *nice* about the laughter around you, the friendly trash talk, the fact that you're actually being accepted. You can't help but snort at some of the cards played, and while you get by far the lowest score at the end, you don't really care. You're content to just sit on the couch and watch Garnet and Amethyst playfully duke it out during the final round.

As you all count your cards, Garnet smiles. "I win."

Amethyst counts hers again. "Fuck. Yeah, you win. Only by one card, though."

"I still won."

"Yup."

Amethyst gets up from her spot on the couch. "I'll be back in a sec," she announces. "Gotta bring something in from the kitchen."

She ducks into the kitchen for a moment, before emerging with a large round cake. On it, in sloppily-applied icing, is a simple phrase: "FUCK PROM." It looks heavenly--you're not normally huge on cake, but you're absolutely willing to try this.

"I made it," Amethyst explains as she cuts the cake, handing out slices on paper plates to each of you. "It's chocolate with raspberry filling. Hope it came out edible."

You take a bite. It's more than just edible. It might be the best cake you've ever eaten, in fact. Moist and soft, and sweet without being cloying.

"It's scrumptious!" you chirp, and the blush on Amethyst's face couldn't possibly be deeper.

After you're all done eating, Peridot suggests that Amethyst put a movie on.

"Sounds fun," Amethyst agrees. She goes over to look at a bookshelf by the TV, filled with DVDs. "Uh, any preference?"

You murmur amongst yourselves. (Frankly, you don't really care what movie you watch, and say as much.) Ultimately, upon Peridot learning, to her dismay, that there are no Star Trek movies available, you agree that Amethyst might as well just pick one herself.

"Okay, unironically enjoyable or so bad it's good?" she asks. When she doesn't get an immediate response, she adds, "Eh, fuck it," and grabs a DVD from the shelf. "We're watching Frozen unless anyone objects."

You'd never pegged Amethyst for a Disney buff, but you're not fully surprised, either. No objections are raised, and she puts the disc in the player.

You're definitely *not* flustered when she sits down right next to you, practically atop you, on the couch. Nope. Not even slightly. You'll just keep thinking that and pay attention to the movie instead of the fact that you keep being surrounded by pretty girls.

It's strange what the movie stirs in you. It just hits too close to home in a way.

Your sister *hurt* you. You haven't spoken to her in almost two years now, not since you both graduated. You *couldn't*, not after what she did.

But you realize that you never asked her *why*. It's not that you forgive her, because you don't, and might never. It's not even that you *love* her--you never had the close relationship Elsa and Anna had, not even when you were little. Still...

Still, you wonder. *Was she just as much a victim of our mother as I was? Has she changed? What would even happen if I talked to her?*

"Excuse me for a moment," you say, and you head out through the sliding glass doors to the backyard.

It's a nice backyard, albeit overgrown. There's a big oak tree with a swing hanging from it, and you can picture Amethyst, even now, swinging from it and shrieking with laughter. You sit down on the steps of the back porch, and sigh heavily as you light a cigarette and pull out your phone. *Should I?*

You just sit, frozen with indecision, and stare at the screen, until the door creaks open again.

"You okay, P?"

"Um. Yes? Kind of?"

Amethyst squeezes past you and sits on the swing, looking at you with concern. "Do you not like the movie? I know it's kinda divisive, maybe I shoulda gone with Hercules--"

"No, it's not that. Not really."

"Then what is it?"

"I told you about my sisters, didn't I?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"I'm just wondering about Maggie."

"She's the cunt, right?"

"I...um, I suppose you could put it that way, yes."

"Is there a reason you care?"

"We have the same mother, Amethyst. We had the same *upbringing*." You shake your head, and take a drag. "I wonder if Maggie learned it all from her. I want *answers*. She couldn't have told my mom about it without *some* reason. Not the way she reacted."

"Does your other sister have any idea why?"

"Rita? I'm not sure. She said...she said she wished she could've done more to help me, back when we met up again. But that doesn't mean she knows."

"Have you asked her?"

"No. I haven't."

"Why not?"

She and Maggie are close. At least, they were. I don't want to risk hurting Rita over this. Our so-called family is broken enough as it is.

"It's complicated," you finally conclude.

"I wish I knew what to say," Amethyst admits. "Nothing in life can ever be straightforward, huh?"

"Not in mine, at least."

"Yeah. Same."

In the dim light of the setting sun, Amethyst is painfully stunning. Her hair's tied up in a messy bun, and the jacket to her dark purple suit is unbuttoned, but somehow the messiness of her look *works*, at least on her. She looks right at you from the swing with those big dark eyes of hers, and asks, "Do you wanna watch the rest of the movie or nah?"

"I think I need a bit."

"Understandable. You want me to leave, or..."

"No," you reply, a bit more forcefully than you'd intended. "Please, stay."

"Aight." Amethyst jumps off the swing, landing on her feet, and joins you on the deck. "Pretty out, huh?"

"Yeah. It is."

"I like it back here. Especially around this time-- we're facing west, so you can get a really good look at the sunset."

Indeed, it's a beautiful sunset. Amethyst lays down, her short legs hanging off the edge of the deck, and smiles. "Thanks for comin'. I'm having fun. Way more fun than I woulda had at prom."

"Definitely. Prom's not worth it."

"Yeah. A lot of cash for a shitty dance and some ugly photos." She gestures at the house. "Now *this*? This, I can get behind."

"I think I can too." You smile back at her.

By the time you go back in, the movie's over, and Peridot and Bismuth are having a spirited debate over whether Darth Vader would be able to beat Wolverine in a fight. Garnet sits on the sidelines, acting almost as a moderator.

"No, see, Vader has the power of the *Force* behind him!" Peridot explains. "What's Wolverine got? Adamantium bones can't save you when you're being Force-choked!"

"He has that healing factor," Bismuth notes. "And cool claws. Vader's just some old guy who needs a weird suit to survive!"

"He's an old guy who needs a weird suit to survive *who knows the Force*."

"We're back," Amethyst interrupts. She pauses, then adds, "Also, if Wolverine has an adamantium *trachea*, he might be able to survive the Force-choking. But like, I dunno if he does?"

"I don't *think* so?" Peridot offers.

Garnet looks up from her phone. "Can't find any info there online."

"I barely know either of these characters," you whisper to Amethyst.

"That's fine," she responds. "I'm just glad everyone's having fun."

And truth be told, you're having fun too.

Chapter 43

Amethyst decides that anyone who wants to spend the night can, and to your faint surprise, you're the only one to accept the offer.

You don't know why you do, really. You think you might just need a distraction from the thoughts of your sister, of what she did, of what *you* might do.

Just a thought, you try to tell yourself. But the thought won't pass. It's stuck firmly in your brain, your stupid brain that won't give you a moment's peace.

You sigh as you flop down on Amethyst's bed. You should've brought pajamas, and you say so.

"I've got some shirts that might work," she replies with a shrug. Digging through her clean laundry pile, she pulls out several tops, rejecting most of them as being "too small to cover your ass," before handing one over to you--an oversized, even for her, black tee, advertising some horror movie you've never seen.

"Thanks," you say. "I'll go change."

You return wearing the shirt. To your immense relief, it covers everything that needs covering, and is quite comfortable.

"Lookin' sharp," Amethyst chuckles. She's changed too, now clad in a violet tank top and plaid boxers, and she's let her hair down. You notice, perhaps a bit too late, that she's touched up the color to a lovely shade of lilac. "Wanna listen to music?"

"That would be nice, yes."

She puts on some old punk number, and lies down on her side atop the covers. "It's nice to spend time with you," she says quietly.

"Thanks. I like it too."

"I've been thinking about what I wanna do, you know. Like, after high school."

"And what would that be?"

"I'm taking a gap year, and then...I think I might wanna be a social worker," she informs you.

"Like...all the ones I saw as a kid sucked. I wanna be a *good* one. I wanna help kids like me."

You're a bit blown away. "That's very noble."

"Maybe. I just think it's necessary, honestly."

"Regardless." You think for a moment. "I'm probably going to start looking for a job soon."

College can wait. I'm not ready for that level of pressure all over again."

"Yeah, same. Hence the gap year I'm taking. What kinda job are you thinking?"

"Not quite sure. I might see if the car wash is hiring--Greg works there, he could probably vouch for me."

"Huh, good plan." Amethyst gives you a wry grin. "You are *such* a clean freak, huh? Garnet was telling me all about how your room is like...always perfect."

"I just like everything to be in its place. And cleanliness is nice."

"You'd be perfect for that job, then."

"Probably."

"Go for it, then!"

"You know," you eventually say, "I think I just might."

This is nice. It's good. Last time you were here, things went south so badly, but...

This is different.

This is *good*.

You talk for a good long while, but ultimately, Amethyst falls asleep, snoring softly and removing all distraction from your thoughts.

The house is quiet as you walk to the guest room--her parents got home hours ago, but they've no doubt gone to bed themselves by now. You curl up in the bed, and try in vain to sleep.

It never comes.

After a good hour of trying, you give up. The thoughts won't leave, won't even quiet down, not while you're alone like this.

You open Facebook on your phone, and begin to search. To your surprise, though, you can't find any Maggie Finnegan's in your area, nor any that even slightly resemble your sister.

Did she block me?

You head to Rita's profile then, looking through her relatives list. You see yourself, though you're a bit surprised to see that your mother is no longer listed as such--nor, upon further examination, are they still friends.

So I guess she gave up on pleasing her too.

There is one name, though, that's both familiar and entirely foreign. Margaret Finn, listed, just like you, as a Rita's sister.

Maggie had *never* gone by her given name. And yet here was a girl named Margaret, clearly, judging by her profile picture, the exact girl you're looking for.

As you click through her profile, which, you discover, is completely public, you learn a fair bit about where she is now. She's living in New York City, working as a model. She's single, and the only relative listed on her account is one Rita Finnegan. She's smiling in every photo, and in none of those photos does it look at all genuine.

She's not happy, either.

It's all you can do to keep from shooting a friend request her way. Ultimately, however, you decide to wait. It's worth at least talking to Rita first.

You open Messenger, and begin to type.

"Hi Rita! I apologize for the intrusion, but I'm really curious about something.

"It's about our sister."

That'll do for now. She's probably asleep anyway.

You don't recall falling asleep, but at some point you must have, if the clock is any indication.

You smell something sweet coming from the kitchen, and decide to investigate.

Amethyst is in the kitchen, cooking, and she beams when you enter. "Sup, P? Just making some French toast."

"It smells good."

"Thanks! I've been tweaking this recipe for ages now, I think I've finally got it damn near perfect. Want some?"

"Oh, thanks for the offer, but no thanks. I'm not very hungry." It's the truth--that cake last night was incredibly rich, and still sits like a brick in your stomach. Mostly, though, you just want to be polite. You've never been terribly fond of French toast.

"Ah well. Worth a shot." She shrugs. Flips the toast. "My parents are still sleeping in, so I decided to make us all breakfast. If you're not gonna eat it, I can guarantee we will."

"Good. Wouldn't want your hard work going to waste!"

"Hell no."

You simply wait until she's finished cooking, leaning against the fridge and watching her work.

Judging by the cake last night, she's got some real culinary talent, and it's amazing how focused she looks--as if looking away for only a moment would set her house ablaze.

Finally, she says, "Ta-dah! All done."

"You know, maybe I'll have a bite," you decide. It's not like trying it will kill you. "Just a little, though."

"Nice." She tears a small hunk of toast off and hands it to you. It's good--*really* good. And you'd thought your whole life that French toast was just yet another food you hated.

"It's fantastic."

"Really?"

"Really." You smile at Amethyst. "You're good at this."

"Aw, shucks, P. I try."

"Well, I should probably be heading home," you announce. "Thanks again."

"No, Pearl," she says. She pulls you into a hug. "Thank *you*."

You arrive home to see that Rita has responded to your message.

"what is it?"

Well, you can't avoid it now. *"Do you know why she told our mom about me and Rose? Did she ever tell you?"*

"no, i'm sorry. she didn't.

"i think you need to talk to her yourself, pearl.

"she regrets a lot of things."

That's all you need. *"Okay. I will."*

You send the request, and you wait.

Chapter 44

It takes Maggie three weeks to respond, during which time you fall into a routine.

Wake up, assuming you slept the night before. Shower. Breakfast. Errands, if necessary. Lunch, or at least a snack. Therapy on Tuesday afternoons. Sometimes you hang out with your friends. Dinner. Try to sleep. Rinse and repeat.

Things have been, for the first time in forever, pretty uneventful. No big revelations or breakdowns; the most notable thing to happen since the party was Peridot getting her test results, and proudly gushing about how she and Amethyst would be graduating together.

Notable for *Peridot*, certainly, but its effect on your own life was negligible at best.

It's actually really nice, and you feel lighter than you have in so, so long.

That all changes the day you drive to the car wash to apply for a job, and see Steven there in his car seat, so much bigger than he was when you last saw him.

How long has it been? You last saw him at Christmas, and he was four months old then...it's been close to five months. You haven't seen him in over half his brief life, and you can't help but feel like a failure all over again.

"I'm sorry it's been so long," you sigh, casting a rueful glance at Steven. Rose's son. *Greg's* son.

"I understand," Greg replies. "I know things have been a lot for you since...y'know."

"That's one way of putting it."

"So what brings you over? Your car looks pretty clean..."

"Is this place hiring?"

"Oh my God, Pearl, you're a *lifesaver*! We've been short-staffed for ages. Yeah, we're hiring!"

"How do I apply?"

"Just go on in and ask for an application. I'm sure you'll get it, we haven't had a lot of interest..."

"Great. Thanks, Greg!"

You scurry inside, and you apply.

When you emerge from the building, Greg is sitting on the bumper of his van, cradling a crying Steven in his arms, singing a lullaby. He doesn't look up until finishing the song.

"Oh, hey Pearl!"

"Hi. Uh, I filled it out. Interview is tomorrow. Thanks again."

"No prob." Steven is still crying. "Sorry, he's being a bit fussy."

"Babies can be like that." You sit down next to Greg, staring at the child. "He's got your nose."

"He's got Rose's hair."

"Yeah. He does."

"Hey, would you mind holding him for a bit? Some sick riffs might calm him down!"

"Uh...sure," you finally say, a bit shocked at the proposal, and more than a bit terrified. *What if I hurt him?*

Greg doesn't seem to see how concerned you are, though, and hands the sobbing, squirming bundle over to you. He pulls out his guitar from the back of the van, and begins to play, begins to sing. You think you recognize the song--no, you *know* you do. It was on the mix Rose made you.

Steven begins to calm down quickly, giggling at the music, and strangely enough, it's calming you too. He smiles up at you, and your heart just melts; he grabs your nose in his tiny hand, and you can't help but laugh. *There was nothing to fear.*

"You're a good dad," you tell Greg as he finishes the song.

"Aw, thanks! I'm doing my best."

"I can tell. That's all you can do, right?"

You can feel your phone buzzing in your pocket. You ignore it.

"He's a cute kid," you continue.

"Isn't he?" Greg takes him back, blowing a raspberry on his cheek, to his delight. "He's getting so big!"

"He really is. Nine months now, right?"

"Yup. Isn't that right, kiddo?" Steven just grabs at Greg's finger, and he sighs fondly. "I'd better put the boy to bed."

"Yeah, he needs his sleep. I'll see you soon."

As you get in the car, you check your phone, and see a single message from one Margaret Finn. Maggie.

"*Pearl?*"

You stuff the phone back in your pocket, and drive on home.

How can you respond to that? She hasn't added you back, you notice upon actually looking at her profile, but she *did* message you, and that's more than you'd truly expected, especially after

three weeks' time. She just gave you next to nothing to go off of. Even if she'd said something more substantial, though, you're not fully sure you'd be able to think up a good response.

And so you finally, a good hour after receiving the message, simply type, *"Maggie."*

"Oh my God, how have you been??"

You blink. Does she not remember? Does she think *you* don't remember?

"That's not important right now," you respond. *"I'm messaging you because I want answers."*

"Answers???" 🙄

"You outed me. Why did you do that?"

You wait, watching the screen as she types. It's taking an agonizingly long time. You want to throw your phone across your room.

"That," she finally replies, *"is a long story."*

"But I didn't think Mom would go that far."

"You should've known."

"I know that NOW."

"And school..."

"I was just venting to some friends about it. About HER. I didn't even know word had gotten out at first."

You're truly unsure of how to feel. If Maggie is being truthful at all, she didn't do it just to hurt you. It wasn't just a wild attempt to screw you over. But you don't know if you can believe her or not. For all you know, she's just making excuses.

"I think," you say, *"that Messenger is the wrong medium for this conversation. I need to be able to know you're sincere about this, and I can't tell through text."*

"Are you still in Beach City?"

"Yes."

"I'll drive down next weekend."

"Wait, seriously?"

"Pearl, I need closure too, you know."

"You really did it?" Amethyst asks when you hang out on Monday evening, eyes wide.

You're at Funland--her idea, but one you gladly agreed to. You haven't been to the amusement park proper in so long, not since that last date with Rose. The idea of making new memories there, memories you can truly *cherish*, is unbelievably appealing, and besides, it's a distraction. Right now, you're playing a midway game.

"Yeah," you reply, winding up to throw the ball. You don't want any of the prizes, but you like to show off, and your aim has always been stellar. (That doesn't mean you've ever *succeeded* at the game--you've been convinced it's rigged for years.) "I'm going to be talking to her in person on Saturday."

"Dang. Uh, hope that goes well?"

"So do I." You throw the ball, and only knock over a single bottle.

"It's rigged," Amethyst comments. "Every game here is."

"I suspected as much," you grumble. "How about we ride something?"

"Ooh, can we ride the Thunderbird?"

"Sure. I don't think I've ridden that one." You *know* you haven't, actually. It's a new ride since you last went to Funland.

"Fuck yeah."

(The ride is fun enough, but really, you're just happy to be thinking about anything else.)

Therapy comes the next day, as always. This time, you know exactly what to talk about. It's significantly easier to talk about your relatives than about Rose. As vile as what they've done is, there's a key difference, one that eats at you from within: you *trusted* Rose. You *never* trusted your family.

"It's funny," you note. "It somehow worked out in my favor. Getting kicked out, I mean. It was awful, yes, but it could've wound up so much worse." *Holly probably hoped it would've.*

"So you gonna thank her for that?" Lapis snarks.

"No...no, it's not like that. I'm still angry at her for doing it. And I don't know if she's truly remorseful or not. Rita thinks she is, but...Rita's very trusting." You shake your head. "It's strange, though. Maggie's not using the *name* she used to use."

"Weird," Amethyst says. "Stage name?"

"I mean, possibly? Do models have those?"

Amethyst shrugs. "Fuck if I know. It was a thought, at least."

"I'll ask," you decide. "She's going to be barraged with questions anyway. What's one more?"

Chapter 45

You drive to Common Grounds with Garnet on Saturday, immensely relieved that she's working today. You have an out, if need be--you've agreed that if things get heated with Maggie, Garnet will fake a migraine and you can go home. Obviously, though, you hope it doesn't come to that. You're still waiting to hear back about the job. The interview went alright, and you're hopeful, but you can't stop anxiously checking your phone to make sure you haven't missed the call. Then again, you're also waiting for Maggie to message you, so you have *something* of an excuse. She does message you, after about half an hour of waiting--you'd arrived early so Garnet could start her shift. "*I'm about half an hour away,*" she informs you. So you wait, and you continue to nibble at your croissant and sip your chai, and you think.

Maggie arrives slightly earlier than she'd estimated, and you steel yourself for the coming conversation. It's gonna be a rough one and you know it, and part of you wishes you hadn't reached out. Then you wouldn't be in this situation.

"Hey," she says awkwardly, sitting down across from you.

"Um...hi."

Maggie barely looks any different than she did two years ago. Her hair is still blonde, cut short and spiked; her nose, broken in a childhood fall, is still slightly crooked. But there's a difference in her expression.

She looks worried. Frightened, even.

"Don't let Mom know," she whispers, leaning in close. You can't help but think about the hypocrisy of her saying that.

"I couldn't if I wanted to," you respond.

"...Right. Sorry."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am!"

You look her in the eyes. They're shaped just like yours, but hers are brown, not blue like yours and Rita's. She's on the verge of tears.

"I *am*," Maggie repeats. "Look, Mom...she always said we could tell her anything, right?"

"She never told *me* that."

"...Shit. Fuck. I should've figured." She runs a hand through her gelled hair, clearly anxious.

"It's...I don't know. I believed her, and--and I thought she might be *upset*, yes, but..."

"Why did you tell her, though?"

She frowns. "I was freaking out. You'd been acting so weird."

"Was I?" You're genuinely unsure.

"Yes. You seemed so sad all the time, and you were so *temperamental*..."

Thinking back, you suppose she has a bit of a point there. You were a mess back then.

(You're *still* a mess, and maybe you always will be.)

"I was worried," she adds. "I told Mom that you'd been acting odd, and...she asked for details. I was scared to *not* tell her."

The saddest part is, it makes perfect sense. What would've happened to her if she'd kept mum?

What would've happened to *you*?

You don't forgive her. You simply *can't*, not yet at least. But maybe one day you can.

"I see," you finally sigh. "That...that makes a lot of sense."

"I'm sorry. I really am."

"I know you are." You smirk. "I can't quite forgive you for what you did. I'm not at that point--maybe someday. But...thank you for telling me."

"So you still hate me?" She looks utterly crestfallen.

"No. I don't hate you." And to your surprise, you truly don't.

"Um. Do you...do you still want to catch up at all?"

You think for a moment, and conclude that you do.

"Let me get a snack first," she says.

"I dropped out of college," Maggie admits, staring into her coffee. "It wasn't that I didn't want a degree, it's just--I got a modeling contract, and I couldn't juggle both work and school."

"How's that going?"

"Oh, the *modeling* part is going great! But..." She trails off, and you cock your head to the side in confusion.

"Mom wasn't happy," she finally sighs. "She's not happy with *any* of us. She hates that I dropped out and am, quote, 'selling my body,' she hates that Rita's working on a major she thinks is useless and that she dyed her hair...and then there's you."

"Yeah."

"I was sort of hoping," Maggie continues, "that Mom would forgive you when we graduated. I mean, you were *valedictorian*. I'd hoped that she'd be proud of you."

"You know how she feels about homosexuality," you reply. "The only way she'd be proud of me is if I magically stopped being gay."

"I mean...yeah. I dunno. I didn't always think she was even *wrong* about it. I know better *now*, but back then..."

Maggie takes a sip of her coffee, wincing as it burns her tongue. "I thought she must've had a point. I *trusted* her." She laughs sadly. "Isn't that stupid?"

You look back on your own misplaced trust. "No," you tell her firmly. "It's not."

She dips her biscotti into the cup and takes a bite. "*It is*, though. I didn't think for myself much back then. My feelings and thoughts...they were never relevant."

"Holly hurt you too," you realize, and barely even notice that you've said it out loud until she nods.

"The worst part is, I think she rubbed off on me." Maggie's eyes are downcast, her expression deeply rueful. "I didn't do it just to hurt you, but I didn't stop to care if it *would*. I never thought the consequences through, even a little. And I'm only just now starting to do my own thing. It's like we were her *slaves*, not her daughters."

"It kind of was, wasn't it?"

"She only wanted one kid, you know." Maggie looks back at you. "She wasn't expecting triplets. I mean, who *does*? But...she shouldn't have taken it out on us. On *you*." Her eyes are wide as she puts a hand atop yours. "I actually always admired how you were never as willing to just--just *put up* with her."

You can't believe she's actually saying that. She *admired* you? You're not an admirable person. You're a disaster on legs.

And as so often happens, you start to cry, just a bit.

"You okay?" she asks, a note of genuine worry in her voice.

"No," you reply, a slight smile on your face. "And I never have been."

Finally, Maggie asks a question you've been dreading this whole time. "So is Rose doing alright?"

You laugh. You can't help it, you're too shocked to do anything else.

As soon as your anxious laughter subsides, you speak. "She's dead. She's been dead for nine months."

"Oh, jeez...I'm so sorry. What happened?"

"Childbirth."

"But wasn't she with you? How'd she even get pregnant?"

You take a deep breath, and you tell her the whole sordid story.

The doctor walked out of Rose's room, a frown on her face, and simply said, "I'm sorry. The baby seems fine, but...the mother didn't make it."

You didn't respond, not at first. You just stared slack-jawed at her. No. That's impossible. They must be thinking of some other woman with a complicated pregnancy. There's just been a mixup.

Rose can't be gone.

You looked at your friends, the closest thing you had to a true family. Ruby had already started to cry, and Sapphire was hugging her, trying to comfort her and failing; you could see tears streaming from her good eye, too. Garnet was, as always, harder to read, but there was a distinct look of shock on her face.

"You must be mistaken," you finally blurted out. "She can't be--"

"I'm very, very sorry, ma'am. But I'm not mistaken. She's dead. Her body just couldn't take the stress anymore..."

"No!"

"Please, ma'am, sit down."

"Let me see her."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"Let me see her!"

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to call security if you don't calm down--"

"How can you expect me to be calm about this?" you shouted, trying to push past her, trying to catch one last glimpse of Rose. The doctor wouldn't let you through.

At that point, you collapsed to your knees, sobbing, screaming. No. No, no, no--

It was Garnet who got you up off the floor, who escorted you out to the car. You were still screaming, completely incoherent, completely defeated.

She said nothing--she never was much of a talker--but you could see the tears streaming down her face from beneath her ever-present shades. No one was taking this well. How could they? How could anyone who knew Rose, even tangentially, not be heartbroken by her untimely demise?

You sat down in the back seat in the fetal position, and screamed until you lost your voice.

"Jeez," Maggie says when you finish. "I'm sorry that it ended like that."

"Yeah. Me too."

You're sniffing more than a bit, but you're oddly proud as well. Yes, your explanation of events was awkward and rambling, punctuated with fits of crying, but...you still gave it. It's something. It's progress.

Maggie looks at her smart watch. "I have to get going relatively soon. I have a photoshoot tonight."

You nod. "Okay."

"Hey, uh, Pearl?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. I really am. And I hope your life looks up."

"It's starting to. Thank you, Maggie." A pause, before you remember your other question. "Wait. Why'd you change your Facebook name?"

"Oh, that?" Maggie gives a nervous chuckle. "Well, I didn't want Mom finding my modeling page. She found it anyway, naturally, but by that point I'd already gotten a contract."

"You're scared of her, huh?"

"Oh, terrified! But it's fine. I'm miles away from her now."

"Are you sure it's fine?"

"Not really, no."

"Then talk to someone. Someone who can help you--because I can't. Not enough."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Thank you for the apology, and the explanation. I really do appreciate it."

"And thank *you*," she says as she stands to leave, "for not clawing my eyes out."

You check your phone as she leaves. One missed call.

Chapter 46

You got the job, you learn upon calling the number back. You start tomorrow.

The relief you feel is immense. It certainly took them long enough to call. Really, though, you suppose what counts is that they called at all. You're employed now, or at least soon to be. It's amazing how far your life has come in just a few short months.

When you arrive at the car wash the next morning, Greg's already there, playing some quirky pop tune on his boombox and singing along as he carefully scrubs down a muddy truck. Steven is present too, sound asleep in his car seat.

"Howdy!" he calls out with a wave, which you return. "You got the job, I take it?"

"Yeah!" You grin. "I got it."

"Great! Happy to have you aboard." He tosses you a sponge, which you barely manage to catch. "We've got a couple cars waiting."

You look at the lot. Greg's right. "Indeed we do."

You begin to get to work on a large sedan. It's encrusted with dirt and dead bugs, a filthy thing, and you smile wide as you clean it up. Every swipe of your sponges and rags feels like you're accomplishing something tangible. Yes. This was a good idea.

The two of you chat as you work, as the CD in the boombox continues to play from track to track. You ask him about Steven--he's been doing very well, apparently, perfectly happy and healthy.

"He's even started to say 'dada,'" Greg informs you, swelling with pride. "Or...he's trying to, at least. It comes out as just 'da' most of the time, but hey!"

"He's a lucky kid, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"He has *you* for a father. He's going to be surrounded by love."

"Well," Greg laughs, "I'll certainly do my best to raise him right."

"I know you will." You have an idea, and it scares you a little even now, but you blurt it out regardless. "If you ever need a babysitter, I'd be glad to volunteer."

"Really?"

"Really."

Steven, you can't help but notice, is starting to wake up from his nap. He squirms and wiggles in his car seat, making little noises.

"I'd be more than happy," you add, and you shoot a smile at the little boy.

Work is long and exhausting, but incredibly fulfilling regardless. Amethyst was absolutely right--this job may as well have been made for you.

As you drive home that night, you pass by the beach. More specifically, you pass by the cliff you'd jumped from back when you attempted to take your own life.

It's funny, really. You hadn't thought you had a future, not with Rose gone. You really, truly had thought ending it all was the only option available for you.

It was a foolish choice. You've come to that conclusion by now. There would've been no hope of things getting better for you had you died.

It's not a comfortable thing to think about. Of course it's not. You involuntarily find yourself speeding a bit as you pass the cliff, before slowing down to the speed limit once you're away.

Still...

Still, this is, all in all, the happiest you've been in a very long time.

Amethyst messages you that night, asking how your first day went.

"Quite well!" you tell her.

"o damn nice

"anyway i mostly messaged u 2 ask

"r u comin to my GRADUATION???"

"I thought you'd never ask."

It's an exciting thought. It'll be better than your own graduation, that's for sure. No drama to bring her down, hopefully. It's what she deserves.

"so ur comin??"

"I just implied as much, didn't I?"

"k thats fair

"anyhoo im rly happy 4 u

"congrats on ur job!!"

"Thanks, Amethyst."

"aight ima go 2 sleep now bc im fuckin tired

"night p"

"Goodnight."

You don't sleep soundly that night, not in the least. You hardly ever do. But you *do* sleep, and that's more than you often get, so you'll take it.

Your graduation ceremony was a nightmare.

You felt the whole time that you should've been happy. High school was over forever. No more working yourself to the bone, no more backstabbing classmates. But...

But, of course, you weren't happy at all. Your mother--if you could truly call her that--was in attendance. Of course she was. She had two other daughters graduating, the daughters she had, as far as you could tell at the time, decided to love.

(Really, how were you supposed to know better back then?)

You were valedictorian. You had to give a speech. The school wouldn't let you not, despite your pleading.

You plastered on a big fake smile as you walked, as you stood there on stage, waiting to speak. You had to do this. You couldn't fail.

And then you saw Holly in the audience, and your mouth went dry as a desert.

You awake in the wee hours of the morning drenched in sweat, haunted by your half-remembered dreams. Nightmares, more accurately, nightmares about your own graduation. Your mind flicked through images as you slept, some real, some made up. It was a catalog of everything that went wrong, and everything that potentially *could've* gone wrong. (And, realistically, some things that wouldn't have actually occurred, like you giving your speech and realizing midway through that you were buck naked. Dreams are strange things.)

You groan as you climb out of bed. It's not the *worst* series of dreams you've had, but it still leaves a horribly sour taste in your mouth.

You feel disgustingly filthy, able to smell the sweat covering your body, and so you pad over to the upstairs bathroom, strip, and hop in the shower, turning the heat up as high as you can without scalding yourself. The water relaxes you, and you sigh in relief.

It's a nice long shower, and by the time you're finally done in there, you feel a bit more prepared to face another day.

You get dressed, and move to put your locket back on--even after everything, you can't help but cherish it. Part of you is tempted to take the photo out, but it feels wrong somehow. It's fine. You don't have to open it.

When you put it on, though, the clasp on the chain decides that it's finally giving up the ghost. The locket clatters to the floor, and your eyes go wide.

It's *fine*. Really. You can get a new chain for it; they're not expensive. But the fact that, for the first time in years, you're not wearing it...

Well. It hits hard, maybe a bit harder than it should.

You pick the locket up off the floor, sighing heavily. Maybe one of your housemates has a chain they wouldn't mind parting with. You head back to your room, and set the locket down on your nightstand.

"Um," you began, tapping the microphone to see if it was on--which it was. You continued, "Uh." Wow, Pearl, you thought. So much for every teacher who praised your eloquence.

The audience just stared right at you. Some looked concerned. Others were cringing. A few were laughing.

"Uh...hi!" you finally said. "Um...I didn't really prepare much of a speech...didn't have the time, you see..." The part about not having time was technically a lie--you could've easily made time--but you really didn't prepare anything, which, for you, was strange.

(Then again, everything was strange now. Strange and scary.)

"So...hm. Congratulations on graduating? Onward to better and brighter things?" You didn't believe what you were saying, not at all, but it felt like what you were under an obligation to say.

"Uh. Sorry. I'm not a great public speaker."

"No shit," you heard someone mutter from the front row. (You didn't recognize the voice. They most likely had never spoken to you.)

"Uh...so...yeah," you finished lamely, before practically running offstage to have a good cry.

You sit on the edge of your bed, turning the locket over in your hands, and you open it almost without meaning to.

That photo of you and Rose granted you comfort not too terribly long ago. Now, though...

You're not even fully sure you want to see her face, her *gorgeous* face, ever again. Maybe that's a bit strong, but for now at least, it's true. You don't want to look at the photo, and yet you cannot look away.

Eventually, a lightbulb goes off in your head. You remove the photo, setting it gingerly on your desk, and reach under the bed.

Rose's ashes.

You take a small pinch of what was once the love of your life, and you pack it into the locket.

There's still the significance, because you still *need* that, but you won't have to look at her.

You take a tube of superglue from your desk drawer, and carefully seal the locket shut.

Chapter 47

You and Garnet decide to swing by Amethyst's place a few hours before the ceremony. She's still home, and she greets you excitedly when you ring the doorbell, hugging you, then Garnet.

"You're really coming?" she asked.

"Of course," Garnet replies.

"Hell. Fucking. Yes." Amethyst beams. "Come on in!"

You do, and Amethyst crashes onto the couch. "Did I tell you about our senior prank?"

"No," you respond, "I don't believe you did."

"Oh my God. So like, Peridot built this robot, right? Some weird thing on wheels. I wasn't really paying attention when she said what it was *supposed* to be for, but I convinced her that I had a much better idea." She chuckles. "It was remote controlled, and we hooked an old Polaroid up to it. We went around the school taking secret photos of teachers being embarrassing, and hung 'em up all over the school."

"I like that," Garnet comments. "The senior prank when we were graduating was just some kids coating the gym floor in olive oil."

"Okay, but that's pretty great too."

"Trust me. It wasn't."

Amethyst pulls a stack of photos from her backpack. Each one is captioned in sparkly purple gel pen with the name of the teacher pictured. You recognize the majority immediately--Ms. Vlasak, the art teacher, caught screaming at a student. Mr. Myslin, that awful history teacher you had your freshman year, picking his nose. Dr. Helvie, the English teacher you'd always actually rather liked, reading some cheesy bodice ripper.

You laugh. It's a good prank, honestly.

"I decided I'd better take the photos down from the walls," Amethyst explains. "I wanted to keep 'em."

"You could make a scrapbook," you suggest. "That way you're less likely to lose them in that messy room of yours."

"C'mon, P, I *told* you, I have a *system*!" she insists. Then she adds, "But yeah, that probably is a good idea."

She looks up at you. "Hey, Pearl?"

"Yes?"

"Just realized I never asked exactly when your birthday is. Sometime in June, I think you said? Can't recall."

"June 12th," you inform her, and it hits you that it's coming up in less than two weeks. You hadn't even thought to make plans.

"Damn, that's soon. I'll try to think of a good gift for ya."

"Oh, you don't have to--"

"I *want* to."

Amethyst pauses, then gives a wicked grin. "Think I should go naked under my robe?"

"No," you and Garnet say, practically in unison.

Amethyst rolls her eyes. "Killjoys."

It's a sunny day, and a damn hot one to boot. You're more than a tad concerned about Amethyst and Peridot overheating in those black graduation robes. (It wasn't nearly as sweltering when you graduated.)

"Eh, I'll probably be fine," Amethyst says with a shrug.

"It *is* pretty hot," Peridot admits.

"See, *that* is why I was gonna go nude under my--"

"*Amethyst*," you groan.

"Fine. But really, don't...*sweat* it." Amethyst winks, giving you finger guns, and you can't help but giggle a bit at her awful pun.

"You're gonna do great up there," you tell them. "Better than I did, at least." Granted, that's a very low bar, but you think they might need to hear it anyway.

"Thanks," says Amethyst. She glances at her phone. "Well, it's almost time. C'mon, Peri, let's *graduate*."

"Fuck yeah!"

The two of them walk off, and you head over to the football field where the ceremony is being held. A stage has been set up, along with hundreds of folding chairs. *Just like last time*. You see Garnet already sitting in the back, and you join her.

"I'm happy for them," you sigh.

"Same."

"Amethyst was really worried, you know. She was scared she wouldn't graduate on time."

"Well, good thing she will."

"Yeah. It *is* a good thing."

The ceremony is long and, frankly, incredibly dull. You don't recognize the valedictorian--some girl with her natural hair tied in a ponytail--but her speech is the real highlight of the event, eloquent and well thought out. You smile slightly. As much of a disaster as your own speech was, at least your friends are getting a *good* one.

You don't bother to watch most of the ceremony, really. Most of the kids up there you've never seen in your life. You just wait for two names. The principal is going alphabetically by surname, as always, and when he calls out, "Amethyst Diaz!", you perk up, waving to her as she walks onstage and takes her diploma. You can see that she's crying, just a little.

She joins you and Garnet, diploma in hand, and gives a watery smile. "I did it," she whispers. "I actually *did it*."

Peridot is the last to walk, and when she does, Amethyst cheers loudly. "Fuck yeah, P-Dot!" she shouts, and as Peridot steps offstage, you see Amethyst run up to her and hug her tightly.

Amethyst's adoptive parents, you learn, are both a lot taller than her, and you have to wonder if that's part of why she's always seemed so insecure about her height.

"Thanks," her mom says, "both of you. You've been a really good influence on her."

You snort, involuntarily. "She's been a good influence on *me*," you reply. It's the truth. Somehow, somewhere along the line, Amethyst became one of your dearest friends, and she's helped you through so much.

You just hope they don't know about your little drunken encounter with their daughter, but, realistically, they probably don't. As much as she clearly loves her parents (and vice-versa), there are some things you can only assume she won't tell them about. You can't say you really blame her.

"Huh!" Her mother seems pleasantly surprised. "Well, she's really glad you came."

"She likes you guys a lot," her dad adds. "Talks about you all the time."

"That's very flattering," you say, smiling softly. "I appreciate you saying that."

Her dad shrugs. "It's the truth."

Before long, Amethyst runs up, and engulfs both her parents in a huge hug. Her robe has been discarded, leaving her in a purple blouse and black slacks.

"Hey, P! I see you met my fam. Uh, this is my mom, Andrea, and my dad, Antonio."

"Pleased to meet you," you chirp. And then, in a lower voice, you add, "Thanks for loving her."

Antonio offers to drive you and Garnet home, but you politely decline. "We drove here ourselves," you explain. "Need to get the car home, you know?"

"Of course," he responds. "Drive safe, okay? Don't die." He's grinning.

"We won't," Garnet assures him.

"I'm having a party at my house tonight," Amethyst pipes up. "Y'all are invited, natch."

"Well then," you tell her, "I'll see you there. What time?"

"Uh, maybe 8:30?"

"Sounds good."

You drive home, windows down, stereo turned up as loud as it'll go. You don't recall which CD you've put in.

As it turns out, it's one Greg gave you. You don't remember the circumstances--a peace offering, perhaps?--but you do remember enjoying it.

You sing along.

"As I got hit by a car, there was a message for me..."

"Greg gave this to you," Garnet comments.

"Yeah. It's a pretty good album."

You only get three and a half songs in before arriving home, and as Garnet gets out of the car, you opt to sit in the driver's seat and finish the song. You could never stand music, at least music you enjoyed, being cut off mid-verse. You keep singing.

"I'll be thinking of an unrelated thing," you conclude, before getting out yourself.

The attendees of the party are the same as at Amethyst's little anti-prom. Bismuth and Peridot are getting on famously--"I swear," she'd told you, "that kid is the best thing since sliced bread." Currently they're having another friendly debate, this time about the merits of various sci-fi franchises.

"No, no, no," Bismuth insists. "Battlestar Galactica is good and all, but have you even *seen* Firefly?"

"Yeah, but it was so *short*. I need more meat to my stories!"

"That's because Fox is the worst network ever."

"They canceled Futurama too," Amethyst notes. "So, y'know, they can suck my long clit."

"Futurama got brought back," Peridot says.

"On a different network. Fox is shit, I repeat, Fox is *shit*."

"You ain't wrong," Bismuth laughs.

"And y'know what? I see your Battlestar Galactica and your Firefly, and I raise you a Rick And Morty."

"That's the one with the crazy fanbase, right?" you inquire.

"Well, yes, but like...it's still a good show." Amethyst smirks at you. "You'd probably hate it, though. Super crass."

"I like Star Trek," Garnet says. Peridot's eyes widen, and a huge smile crosses her face.

"I like that one too!" she squeals.

"Hey, Pearl," Amethyst asks, "what's *your* favorite science fiction thing?"

"Uh. Do books count?"

"I guess?"

"In that case, I'm very fond of Dune. Haven't seen the film, though." You look around the room--no one seems to recognize what you're talking about. "Uh...am I the only one here who's read that one?"

Everyone answers in the affirmative. "Ah," you say.

You hear the oven timer go off in the kitchen. "Oh hey, cupcakes are done baking! BRB."

She scurries off into the kitchen, and you're filled with the inexplicable urge to join her. There's something very fascinating, even beautiful, about the way she cooks.

"Wanna help me decorate?" she asks you as she pulls the cupcakes from the oven. "Icing's on the counter."

"Sounds fun."

"Okay, good, because it'd take me *way* longer to do it myself."

"You know what they say. Many hands make light work."

"Some cliches," she agrees, "are true."

The cupcakes are delicious, red velvet with cream cheese icing--all completely homemade, Amethyst reveals. "I got the recipe for the cake itself from my mom," she explains. "Old family recipe. But the icing is all mine."

"You're a damn good cook," Bismuth comments through a mouthful of cake.

Amethyst blushes deeply, and grins. "Aw, thanks! I try."

"Well, you're very much succeeding." Bismuth finishes off her cupcake, and moves on to licking the excess icing from her fingers. "*Delicious.*"

You can't help but agree. Amethyst, you've concluded, could make *anything* edible.

"So, uh. Slumber party?" Amethyst offers.

This time, everyone agrees.

At around midnight, you decide to step out into the back yard for a smoke. Amethyst joins you.

"Nice night, eh?" she says, lighting up.

"Yeah. Yeah, it really is." It's true. This is *lovely*.

It's a clear, starry night, and Amethyst asks, "Do you know any constellations?"

You nod. You've always been fascinated by space.

"Rad. I don't. I know the Big Dipper, and I *kinda* know what the zodiac constellations look like, but I've never been able to pick 'em out."

"Hm. Well, that's Orion." You point out the constellation in question.

"Weird name."

"He was a hunter in Greek mythology."

"It's all Greek to me," she jokes.

You continue pointing out the constellations, the notable stars, the few planets visible. Amethyst watches and listens, enraptured by the stars. At least, you can only assume that's why she's paying such close attention. She *did* ask, after all.

"Cool," she says when you're done. "Very cool."

"Isn't it? Space is so interesting."

"Space kinda scares me. You know aliens could come down and abduct us any moment, right?"

"I can't tell if you're joking or not."

"I mostly am."

"Ah. Got it."

Amethyst crushes her cigarette under her boot, and leans up against you. "I still can't believe I really graduated," she murmurs. "I was so worried I *wouldn't*."

"I'm proud of you."

"So am I."

Cicadas chirp around you, and for a while, that's the only sound being made. Eventually, though, Amethyst stands and stretches, sighing as she does. "I wish I were sleepier."

"You're probably just still running on adrenaline."

"Yeah, probably something like that." She wanders over to the rope swing. "Gotta get that energy out."

As Amethyst swings, you continue to converse. You're not really sure how long you're out there. It's easy to lose track of time in situations like this, when you're genuinely enjoying yourself.

By the time the two of you re-enter the house, though, everyone has fallen asleep in the living room. You must've been out there a while.

"I'm gonna try and sleep. You should too."

"I'll try," you respond.

Amazingly enough, you succeed.

Chapter 48

You wake up one morning to a knock on your bedroom door, and a shout of "Happy birthday, Pearl!"

You clamber out of bed to open the door. Ruby is standing there, smiling widely.

"I had almost forgotten," you admit, more than a bit embarrassed.

It's a Monday, and normally you'd have work today, but you'd called out in advance, as Ruby reminds you on your way downstairs. You had *completely* forgotten about that, but it comes as a nice surprise. As much as you genuinely love your job, you want to be able to celebrate uninterrupted.

Celebrate.

It's your twentieth birthday. You thought you wouldn't live to see it. (At the time, you had no desire to.)

After opening the gifts the Carlsons got you--a few books, a nice black leather jacket that you'd been quietly coveting for a while, and a sturdy new chain for your locket--you decide to go for a walk. It's another sweltering summer day, but you honestly don't mind. Cold always bothered you more than heat.

Beach City is a tiny little town, to the extent that you always thought calling it a *city* was a bit of a stretch. You know from experience that you could cross the town on foot.

You live about a mile from the boardwalk, and you decide to head that way. You pass Amethyst's place on the way. She's sitting on the porch, playing some video game.

"Amethyst!"

"Hey, P! Happy birthday!"

"Thanks." You smile. "My party's at five. Don't miss it."

"Oh, you *know* I'll be there. Uh, do you have a favorite kind of cake?"

"I liked the red velvet cupcakes a lot."

"Noted."

"I'll see you then, okay?"

"Hell yeah. Seeya!"

You keep walking, waving to Amethyst as you do.

The boardwalk is crammed with tourists, as expected. You can hear peals of laughter and joyous screams coming from the rides. You have no intention of going on any yourself, but it's nice that they're having fun.

You swing by Common Grounds to say hello to Garnet--she's on the clock right now--and to get some chai. Iced, you're thinking.

She stands at the counter, making some sort of latte. Her movements are deft, precise. You've no doubt it'll be delicious, even if coffee has never been your thing. Everything here is, and Garnet seems to be very good at her job.

"Hello, Pearl," she says as you come up. "Hope you're having a nice birthday."

"I am. Thanks for the chain." You look down at the necklace, glued shut and hanging from a brand-new silver chain.

"No problem. Give me your order, though."

"A medium iced chai and a spinach quiche, if you would."

"Got it. Nine dollars even." You hand a ten to Garnet, and she gives you a dollar back. You put it in the tip jar.

Your meal is done before long, and you sit down in an armchair--one of the chairs Amethyst has once insisted was among the most comfortable in the cafe--and eat. The quiche is just as good as you remember.

It's been, so far, a *good day*.

Your next stop is the park, less by design and more because you happened to pass by. But you figure that so long as you're here, you might as well go to the memorial bench.

The bloom's come off the cherry trees by now. You don't mind. That's just how it works. You sit down, pull the new book you'd packed from your bag, and begin to read.

The interruption comes quickly. You're barely five pages in when you hear footsteps running towards you.

You look up from your book, squinting in the bright sunlight to make out her face. "Spinel?"

"Yeah. Uh, mind if I sit here?"

"Go for it."

Spinel sits next to you, but keeps her distance. You appreciate that. "Sorry for, uh, blowin' up at ya a while back."

"I understand. You miss her too."

"Yup." She twirls one of her pigtails around her finger. "You probably miss her more though, eh?"

"I don't think," you sigh, "that it works that way. But yes. I do miss her. A lot." And maybe you'll never stop missing her. Maybe there will always be a Rose-shaped hole in your heart. Maybe you'll never *truly* be over her.

Maybe that's okay.

"I don't even remember her all that well," admits Spinel.

You almost want to say that might be for the best, but you don't. It's not even totally true. You did, and do, love Rose. Even if she *did* hurt you badly.

You'll probably *never* stop hurting, really. But over time, the pain has grown more manageable. Not *better*, necessarily, but...manageable.

"I could tell you stories," you finally say. "I'm not sure you'd like them, though."

"Huh." Spinel furrows her brow, staring at her shoes. "Y'know, I'm not sure I *wanna* hear 'em.

Not yet. I ain't ready."

"Very reasonable."

"So whatcha readin'?"

"It's called American Gods." You hold up the book, showing her the cover. "I just started it, though. It was a birthday gift."

"Is it your birthday today?" she gasps.

"Yeah."

Spinel's lips curl up, and she begins to loudly sing Happy Birthday.

As you head home, you say to yourself, "Nice kid."

It's 5:15, and guests have already begun to arrive. You stand on the porch, greeting your friends as they arrive. First Bismuth, then Peridot, and then, to your surprise, Greg and Steven.

"Hi there," Greg greets. "Hope you don't mind that I brought Steven--I couldn't find a babysitter in time."

"I don't mind at all. Come on in." You let Greg and Steven inside, and you wait for Amethyst.

She arrives fifteen minutes late with cake, apologizing profusely for her tardiness. "Cake took longer than expected," she explains.

"It's fine. You're not *that* late."

"Can I come in?"

"Please do."

She sets the cake down on the dining table. It looks absolutely decadent, even if the words--"HAPPY BIRTHDAY PEARL"--are sloppily applied, and in some cases misspelled.

"I fucked up the writing," she points out. "Is it still a typo if it's not, like, *typed*?"

"You know, I'm honestly not sure."

"Well, in any case, it's gonna be good."

"I'm sure it will."

"I brought candles too."

"Wonderful."

You all sit down at the table, and Amethyst sticks two candles into the cake, spelling out the number twenty. She pulls a lighter from her pocket and lights the candles. "Okay, make a wish and blow those babies out!"

You don't extinguish the candles in one go, and briefly wonder if Amethyst is pranking you with one of those candles that doesn't blow out. But after a few puffs, the flames die.

(You don't tell a soul what you wish for. You likely never will.)

The cake, as promised, is mindblowingly good. Steven is mostly just playing with his slice, happily smearing the icing all over his chubby cheeks. Amethyst laughs heartily. "He's a real cutie," she comments.

"He is, isn't he?" Greg gushes.

"Babies are *weird*," says Peridot.

Amethyst casts her an admonishing glance. "Peri, do you ever think before you talk?"

"I do *sometimes*!" Peridot looks over at little Steven, who seems to have concluded that icing is also an acceptable substitute for shampoo. "He *is* kinda cute, though."

He really, really is. It helps, you think, that he really looks more like his father than Rose. You don't think you could handle seeing the spitting image of her, not even now.

Steven, though? You *love* him. He's already got so much personality, so much *joy*. It's infectious.

He grabs Amethyst's finger, and she smiles down at him, tickling his belly and eliciting shrieks of happiness. It brings a smile to your face, too. She's going to be a fantastic social worker, if this is any indication.

"She's really getting along well with him, huh?" Bismuth notes quietly.

"Yeah. I had no idea she was so good with kids."

"Guess you learn something new every day."

Greg has to leave early to put Steven to bed, but before he goes, he hands you a gift. "I think you'll like it," he says.

"Thanks, Greg. I'll be sure to tell you what I think at work tomorrow!"

"Great! Seeya then!"

"Seeya then."

You walk back inside, turning the present over. It's a thin rectangular box--a CD, you assume.

You set it on the coffee table with the rest of your gifts, and sit down on the couch to open them all up, as your friends watch attentively.

You open Greg's first. It's a CD, or, more accurately, *two* CDs. The Les Miserables soundtrack.

You can't describe how moved you are--your old copies had long since been worn out from overuse.

You continue opening the presents, commenting happily on each one--a little sculpture of a clam from Peridot, a gorgeous custom dagger from Bismuth.

Amethyst's comes last. It's not as neatly wrapped as the rest, but you don't care at all. You unwrap it just as carefully as you did the others.

Inside the box sits a little pink plush lion, and you're this close to weeping.

"Are you sure?" you ask.

Amethyst nods. "Positive. He's kind of a weird reminder of my old life, and...I think you need him more than I do."

You don't know what to say. You just hug the plushie, breathing in the scent of Amethyst.

After a while, you choke out, "Thank you."

It's late now, and every guest save for one has left.

You sit on the back porch with Amethyst, a glass of questionably legal red wine in your hand.

You're very picky about wine, and always have been, but Ruby and Sapphire have figured out what you like, and they got you a bottle for the party--though, of course, you've all been warned not to overdo it.

You don't intend to.

"Ever wonder," she begins, "what it would've been like if we'd met under different circumstances?"

"Occasionally." And you do. It's hard *not* to wonder. What would you have become? Friends? Enemies? Lovers? You're not sure.

"I know it's weird that I met literally *all* my friends through therapy," she comments. "Directly or otherwise."

"That's not *that* weird."

"Huh." Amethyst shrugs, and takes a gulp of wine.

"You're supposed to sip that, you know."

"I know. I just don't *care*."

"You are *impossible*."

"Damn right." She polishes off her wine. Your glass is still largely full. "But like...I wish I'd met you sooner, y'know?"

You feel much the same way, really. On some level, you think you might not have done what you did if you'd had more friends. It was easy enough to justify leaving the Carlsons behind--the thought, however inaccurate, that only three people on the planet would care if you died was, in a strange sense, a comfort when you jumped. But you have so many more people around you now, more people who *care* about you.

Maybe you would've tried anyway. You'd hit rock bottom, and you're not convinced anyone could've changed that, given the circumstances. At that point, you truly thought nothing could save you from your past. From yourself.

From *Rose*.

"No use dwelling on it," you finally reply. "But agreed."

"The past is in the past, eh?"

"Sort of, yeah."

It'll never be *truly* in the past, not entirely. You're always going to carry around pieces of your old life, your old self, your old girlfriend. That can't be helped.

Still. *Still*. In this moment, you're *happy*, and you're not about to let anything take that away from you.

You won't always feel this way. You know that--you're still clinically depressed, and you've been strongly considering getting a full psych evaluation. You can't always be happy, or even content. But for now you *are*, and that, you think, is what really matters.

Epilogue

Your name is Pearl Finnegan, and one year ago today, you jumped off a cliff into the ocean and prayed you'd never wake up.

It's funny. You had been completely sure of your decision at the time. Even upon waking up, you were sure you didn't want to live. Part of you still doesn't. But it's a *much* smaller part now, shrinking bit by bit.

You're trying to take it one day at a time. Some days are harder than others, naturally--you blew up at Garnet just last month over some minor comment you scarcely even remember, and sometimes you just curl up in your room and cry, but...

But. Some days are fantastically *easy*. It's a rollercoaster for sure, but you're starting to come to terms with it.

Get out of bed. Take a shower. Take your pills. Brush your teeth. Eat breakfast. It's a simple, comforting routine, and it's a bit of a balm on your soul. You've always liked routines.

As you sit at the dining table eating a grapefruit, Ruby loudly plops down in the chair across from you. "We're having our Christmas party on Friday," she enthuses. "You're inviting your pals, right?"

"Of course I am."

"Sweet! I'm making gingerbread."

"Excellent." Truth be told, you've never cared much for gingerbread, but you're fairly certain Amethyst will love it, at the bare minimum. You're well aware that you're abnormally picky.

You spend the morning of the party baking cookies and thinking.

You don't want to use Rose's recipe this year, you conclude. It's not that it's not a great recipe, it's simply that you don't want to think about her right now. So you pore over cookbooks and recipe sites, ultimately deciding on a simple chocolate chip cookie.

They come out burnt, and you don't even care. There's plenty of food available.

You decide to set the burnt cookies aside. Maybe someone will eat them. Amethyst seems willing to eat *anything*, and you must admit, you're kind of hoping she'll go to town on your little mistake.

"I smelled smoke," Garnet notes with a bit of concern as you exit the kitchen.

"Oh, sorry. I just burned the cookies is all."

"Ah. That happens."

"It does. Sorry, though."

"No worries."

You decide to step outside for a smoke. It's frigid out, so you bundle up. When you exhale, you can't tell for sure if it's smoke or condensation.

It's still far from the coldest you've ever been. (That was a year ago.)

The party is now in full swing. Amethyst, true to form, is devouring the cookies you burned, and declares them to be "not that bad, actually," while Garnet shakes her head fondly. Peridot and Bismuth are sitting on the floor playing some handheld game--you've got next to no knowledge of video games, so you can't tell *which*, but you make out Peridot gleefully shouting something about a "super-effective move." Ruby and Sapphire have hung up some mistletoe, seemingly entirely as a shameless excuse to make out.

You sit down on the couch next to Greg, and look right at Steven, a toddler now, curled up asleep in Greg's lap. You just sit there and watch him sleeping, making quiet little noises in his slumber.

And then he wakes up, and begins to cry.

"Aw, kiddo," Greg sighs. "What's wrong?"

"Dada, hungry!" cries Steven.

"Uh," you ask, "he's saying he's hungry, right?"

"Yup. Uh, can you watch him for a sec? Gotta get him a snack."

"Yeah. Sure."

Steven climbs into your lap as Greg heads to the kitchen, and begins grabbing at your nose. It's incredibly cute, even if it's not the most comfortable situation physically.

"You like my nose, huh?" you murmur.

"Yah!"

You smile at the little boy--*her* little boy--as he climbs all over you.

Greg returns shortly thereafter, a piece of the cake Amethyst made in hand. "Here you go, Schtuball," he coos, and Steven grabs the cake from him and begins to chow down, getting crumbs everywhere.

(It's fine. You can clean up later.)

Steven's still in your lap, and he happily babbles through mouthfuls of cake. Greg looks down at him.

"I think he likes you," he says.

"He was grabbing my nose," you respond, laughing a bit. "I think you're right."

"Yeah, he'll do that if you let him."

"He's a good kid."

"Yeah," Greg agrees. Steven holds up his arms, and Greg lifts him from your lap, swinging him around, making him chortle. "He really is."

Again, Amethyst is the last to leave. She grabs her coat and begins to head out the door, before stopping dead in her tracks, nearly causing you to bump into her.

"Look," she says, pointing at the top of the doorframe. You glance up. You're under the mistletoe.

"I...uh. Look. I know you're probably not ready to date again. And I know you probably wouldn't wanna date *me* in the first place." She looks down at her scuffed Docs. "But I *like* you. A lot. And...I dunno. I'd love to kiss you, y'know?"

You're floored. Maybe it should've been obvious that she had a thing for you.

"Um."

"I mean. Y'know. It's totally fine if you don't want--"

You silence her with your lips.

"Maybe I'm not ready yet," you whisper as you pull away. "I can't make any promises or commitments. But..."

"But?"

"Maybe someday. Just...don't wait for me. I don't want to hurt you like that."

"Wow." Amethyst just stares at you, wide-eyed. "That's...really considerate."

"It's just rational, really."

There's a long, awkward pause before she kisses you again.

That night, after Amethyst leaves for home, you head back up to your room. You regret a lot of things in your life, from your relationship to your graduation speech to your suicide attempt.

You don't regret the kiss.

Things aren't perfect. They never will be. *You* never will be.

(Nothing can be, can it?)

But you are, for now, at *peace*. And that'll do. That'll do just fine.

Your name is Pearl Finnegan, and that night, you sleep soundly.