

Chapter Three

The first time Agatha moved through time, she tried to save a cake. She hadn't done so intentionally; it had, in fact, been as much a shock as anything. Knowing she had such an ability would have made all the difference. Had she known, she wouldn't have wasted the hour crying beforehand. Or the hour of confusion after she failed. She would have planned. She would have thought it through. And she would have still had a cake to show for it.

As birthdays went, thirteen was supposed to be epic. The transition from girly things to young womanly things. From polka dot dresses with frilly pom-pom lace to form-fitting skirts and button-down collared blouses. From a fascinating horror of disgusting boys to a sudden and decisive fondness for disgusting boys. From cakes in the shape of Disney Princesses to cakes shaped as more refined, adult, characters, like Stuart the Minion from *Despicable Me*.

She had worked for two months to design and coordinate the perfect birthday party. Two months finding the perfect design for Stuart. Two months piecing together the perfect list of friends, should-be friends, and a couple on-again off-again friends who needed to see how much of a mature adult she was becoming. And despite her mother's insistence on hiring a magician named Dodger—she had always insisted on magic tricks for birthdays and Agatha only relented in an effort to keep her happy—she had ultimately enjoyed his performance. Especially the part where he made her sometimes-enemy Joyce cry after producing a picture of her dog, who had recently died, that Agatha knew for a fact she kept in her purse, from the inner pocket of his coat. After she left the party screaming about how Dodger was “a stupid dumb stealer” Agatha gave him two dollars for a tip. And though Dodger had made them disappear before her eyes and she later found two dollars in her back pocket, it had still been the best two dollars she had ever spent.

Stuart was the centerpiece. A two-foot long yellow thing of beauty, one eye wide beneath a solitary spectacle, the merest hint of the word *ba-na-na* lurking behind an expressive smile. She had poured through images, stressing her way through a few sleepless nights to select the perfect representation of the pill-shaped minion. The baker felt it was too large. She insisted. Her mother said she might want to scale it back. She insisted. The baker and her mother debated her stubbornness. She insisted.

She won. It was an important reflection of the woman she was becoming, she said. An important decision that would be the first of many that would define her. All in all, she felt certain it was the most mature she had ever been about anything.

When the guests starting arriving and the compliments and praise began rolling in, she knew it had all been worth it.

Countless times she had imagined the moment when *Happy Birthday to You* hit its final note, when the candles awaited her wish-laden breath, when the entire room held still in wait. She had prepared a statement. A well-prepared and mature speech of gratitude and hope for the years to come. For all that the moment meant to her.

The moment, however, did not play out quite as she had imagined. Not at all.

Judy, who was more than doing her share to belt out *Happy Birthday* at volumes anyone in the neighborhood could hear, hadn't seen the balloon at her feet. Nor had she seen Agatha's dog Rufus, his shaggy main obscuring his view of the cake just out of reach, beside her. Perhaps she had chosen the wrong day to wear heels for the first time—if for no other reason than they outclassed Agatha's glittery flats by a mile—but it hadn't been her fault. Not really.

When the balloon popped, Rufus bolted in the only direction his body and mind seemed willing to take him when fear set in. Forward he went, his large frame collecting a chair that wedged into the edge of the table, spun it enough to send Stuart cascading off the table and into Agatha. Most of his lower half collected along the front of her dress—her beautiful new, flowery yellow, mature dress—and spilled to the floor. One of the candles burned a hole in the fabric before going out, a few of the others somehow still burning in the pile of cakey mush that sat on the floor.

Except for Rufus, who was trying to fight his way free of the offensive chair from underneath the table, the room went silent. It could have been seconds, or possibly hours. Agatha couldn't make heads or tails of time. When the moment caught up to her, when time relented, she lost it.

She lost it in a very not mature way. To say the party ended in a rush would have been like insisting Rufus was a brave brave boy. Agatha didn't stick around to see her friends leave, or to accept Judy's heartfelt attempts at apology. No, Agatha threw a chair, pushed the rest of Stuart to the floor, screamed at Rufus, then sprinted to her room in a torrential downpour of sobs and buried her face in a pillow. If she had her way, the pillow would have taken mercy upon her and suffocated her then and there. Instead it just absorbed a monsoon of tears and held her face for an hour as if it were the most delicate piece of china on earth.

Her mother didn't come to check on her. It wasn't her style. She believed in letting Agatha burn off the tears, until the raw emotion faded and some facet of common sense returned. Had she done so, had she taken that one moment to console her daughter on her most horrific day ever ever, the time jump might not have happened. Agatha might have just cried into her mother's arm instead of a pillow. She might have talked it through rather than allowing it to well inside until the damn broke. Until her thoughts took her to places she had never gone. Until the only thing that mattered was having that moment back.

Perhaps due to the throb of her head, or the overwhelming convulsions of her lungs, Agatha registered nothing. No sensation at all. One moment she had her face buried in her pillow, the next she was standing in the midst of her friends as they sang. Stuart rest on the table, whole, thirteen candles burning bright. Her dress, unscathed and beautiful, swung as she spun to Judy. By the time she took hold of the reality of what she was experiencing, the balloon was at Judy's heel. She reacted without thought, without consideration, without anything resembling a plan.

Agatha lunged for the balloon, swiping a foot to clear it free of Judy's step, landed a clean and effective kick, sending it flying into the air and harmlessly off of her friend Henrietta. This part had worked perfectly. The part where Rufus destroyed her birthday, however, had only been redesigned. Judy, startled by Agatha's kick, jumped to the side, her heel driving into the tail of the innocent and cake-curious Rufus, who issued a resounding yelp, bolted and initiated the whole Travesty of Stuart all over again.

Only two differences remained from Agatha's trip through time: Stuart missed her entirely, collecting in a heap on the floor where she had stood seconds before, and she didn't cry. Sure, her inability to capitalize on the re-do left her stunned and devastated. But the fact it had happened at all overwhelmed any emotional outburst in calm wave of curiosity.

Had she imagined it all? Was it nothing more than a magic trick, not too unlike the wizardry of Dodger the Magician? Or had she actually traveled back in time? If so, how?

Amidst the chaos of her mother sweeping everyone outside, where the party continued in a haze of fractured memory, Agatha considered the possibilities. A time or two she even tried to go back again, but she couldn't focus. Not with Judy apologizing at her non-stop. Not with the questions hammering into her brain.

Three days passed before she tried again. She managed to move back the ten minutes of concentration it took to make it happen. A week later she went back an hour. Two days after she went back six hours to enjoy a particularly pleasant Saturday again. One month after her birthday, she traveled back an hour, then returned immediately. Each effort came easier. Until she could shift with the merest measure of focus. Until time began to seem more like a pool she could swim at her leisure.

Until the day she lost her grandmother's ring. Then the Keepers arrived and everything changed.