

Chapter One

Donnell Shepherd measured the distance from the register to the cooler of milk in a short list of pros and cons. The overwhelming pro involved the Peanut Butter *Cap'n Crunch* at home, a dinner he had been holding out for close to a week to have. The clear cut winner on the Con Ledger rest in the six pair of eyes staring his way, looking anything but patient about the delay. A quick check of his phone told him the approximate three minutes and nineteen seconds it would take to get the milk, fall into the back of the line, and pay would leave him little hope of catching the train to get to work by eight. One more time, the foreman had said. Just one more, and he'd be another stat for the politicians to rally behind.

He didn't want to be that kind of stat.

"Hey, buddy!"

Donnell eyed the heavyset man at the back of the line, the intent in his gaze, the way his blue vinyl coat swelled his arms to the size of tree trunks. Several others in line ahead of him nodded, voicing agreement, prepared to spell out the meaning of the two words if Donnell failed to understand.

Avoiding another glance at the cooler, he set the soda and pack of mini-donuts on the counter. The milk would have to wait. He still had a mountain of Ramen noodles left in the pantry anyhow. The old man at the register, Chen or Jinn or maybe Lin— even after seven years as a customer, Donnell wasn't sure—rang the items up, thick lens of his glasses magnifying his dark

pupils. He indicated the total, hand offered to the digital screen as if generating it by way of magic.

Setting his phone aside, Donnell dug into a pocket, producing a few balls of wadded bills. He rolled them forward, waited for his change. The balls of money sat there for a few seconds as the men exchanged looks. Donnell pushed them further. Chen Jinn Lin grumbled, muttering as he unfolded the bills, landing a handful of coins on the counter in a rattling clutter. Several pennies bounced off Donnell's work boots, scattering across the floor.

"Your change," the old man grinned.

Donnell gathered what change he could, snatching his phone from the counter as the woman next in line pressed forward, ushering him away. "Thanks," he said, hustling off without a look back.

The donuts fit snug in the interior pocket of his coat. Hungry though he was, he could eat them on the train. Donnell tugged at the coat zipper, getting nowhere, cold air drafting through the opening and along the dark skin of his arms, a biting chill cutting to the bone. He gave up, unsure why he even bothered trying. It had been one year, six days, seventeen hours and twenty-three minutes since the zipper last worked. Donnell checked the sky as if hunting for storm clouds, finding only blue clarity staring back, drove his hands into the outer pockets to force his coat shut, and made his way along the crowded sidewalk, head down. The station for the B train out of Flatbush was only a few blocks. As long as it was on time, he could still make it.

"Ten minutes, sixteen seconds."

The man turned slowly, clearly confused, jade eyes set against pale skin and neatly combed black hair. He studied Donnell, casting a wary look around the cramped train. "I'm sorry?"

"It'll take me ten minutes and sixteen seconds to get from the station to the site. We're still five minutes and fifty-two seconds away. I have fourteen minutes and ten seconds, or I'm fired." Donnell focused on his phone, tapped the time as if hoping to knock it backward. "I shouldn't have gotten donuts. I didn't need donuts." The train bucked, Donnell edging into the man, settling back into his seat with a forced smile.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You asked," said Donnell, one eye closed, counting aloud, fingers displaying the result.

"No, I didn't."

“You did. Yes. When I kept looking at my phone. You asked why I was doing that so much.”

Again the man analyzed Donnell, arm pulling away to avoid contact. “Did I?”

Donnell nodded. “We’re making good time, though. I think the conductor is driving too fast, but I won’t complain, you know? Maybe I can run.” The fingers danced again. “I can make it to the site in eight minutes and thirteen seconds if I run. I would have approximately two minutes to spare. I can run fast. It’s possible I make it. One more stop.”

The train slowed, drawing to a stop at a crowded platform. The doors opened, several people pressing their way out, a dozen more entering. The last, a haggard looking young man, tattoos covering his neck and hands, leaned into a pole, green standard army jacket pulled tight, bloodshot eyes darting from Donnell to the remaining passengers.

“If I get fired, I don’t know what I’ll do. The Super’s a stickler about rent. He doesn’t take excuses. That’s what he told me. No excuses. I’m forty years, five months and ten days old. I can’t lose my job.” Donnell eyed the man, wagging a finger at his suit. “You’re dressed nice. I wish I could dress nice. Never had the money.”

Army Jacket Guy had a hand buried out of sight, as if holding tight to something of which he had no desire to let go. Donnell attempted a smile when their eyes met, but quickly withdrew. The man to his side stared at him. He tried to look past, to survey the cityscape as it zipped by, drew together another fractal grin, then busied himself watching the clock on his phone.

“You have an affinity for time.”

Donnell nodded. The man’s voice tickled his ear. He twisted a finger in the canal, offering some relief. “Time is important. How can you be anywhere you need to if you don’t know what time you need in which to arrive? Not that I’m always on time. I used to wear watches, but they always broke.”

“You damaged them?”

“More or less. They just stopped working. I don’t have that problem with the phone. I suppose because I can turn it off.” He demonstrated with a touch of a button, shifting the phone to a pocket. He managed a few seconds before retrieving the phone and powering it back up. The man stared at him, unblinking, impassive.

The train bucked. Army Jacket Guy nearly bowled over, his hand dropping free to brace on a rail, coat opening enough to display a silver gleam alongside a grooved black casing tucked in the waist of his jeans. He met Donnell’s gaze with a shake of the head.

He needed no coercing. Any interference would only add time. He had none to spare.

“You believe you are responsible for breaking your watches because you were able to observe them too frequently?”

“Maybe. Like I said, they all just stopped working. What does it matter?”

The man tilted his head, squinted. “The only reason for time is so that everything doesn’t happen at once. Einstein.”

The words had no more than found his thoughts when something responded. Donnell had no choice but to believe he had thought them, as they had happened in his head, but he had no idea where they had come from. “Time isn’t precious at all, because it is an illusion? Who is Eckhart Tolle?”

In a flash, the man drew a silver object the length of a pen from an inner pocket of his jacket, red light pulsing from the tip, a piercing whine emanating from within. He gripped Donnell by the arm, drew him close, leveling the tip just above his ear. Something clicked in his ear, loud, pain quickly following as several sharp points—he wasn’t sure how many—drove into his scalp.

“Do not struggle.”

“Drop it!”

The car erupted in screams, people scuttling to move clear, the steady clack of the train cutting through the remaining whimpers and cries.

The man paused, device driving harder into Donnell’s skull, angled his head enough to stare upon Army Jacket Guy and the gun pointed in his direction. He blinked several times, locked on the gun as if analyzing its capabilities.

“NYPD.” He moved his jacket enough to flash a badge. “Put that ... thing down. Then hands in the air where I can see them.”

“I cannot. I would advise you against rash action. You will not survive it.”

The whine on the device heightened. Something popped and Donnell lurched, his skull numbing as if pierced by an icy needle. He closed an eye, his other watering until the officer was but a blur.

“One last warning, bub. I don’t wanna have to take you down. Not here. Not in front of everyone. But I’ll do it. Drop it. Now.”

“You do not understand. He is the progenitor. I must complete my task. Everything depends on it.”

It happened fast. First the whine, rising as if coming from inside his head. Then unbearable, searing pain, setting him rigid as it bolted the length of his spine. A shout. A gunshot. Screams all around. The train braking to an emergency halt. The pain subsiding, his head clearing. Donnell opened an eye, spot on the man in the suit, hand over his chest, something close to curiosity drawing across his pale face. His shirt pooled in blood, he relaxed, fell against the window and died. The device fell from his grip, clattered upon the floor, tips stained in Donnell's blood.

For a moment, everything stilled. Then the man's body convulsed, ripples distorting his suit, rising to his face. His skin glowed blue, the distortion becoming more pronounced. Donnell made it to his feet, backing clear, as everything exploded in light. A wave captured him, tossing him into the door, his body blistering in pain, the collapsing sound of bodies followed by silence filling the car. Warmth coated his head and neck as he slid to the floor, unable to feel his legs, breath short and difficult to come by. His vision hazed, darkness intruding on light, images fuzzy. The world flickered, like the invasion of static on a television screen, then settled. Pain trickled free, leaving him numb, disoriented, the distinct smell of smoke the only thing to convince him he was not dead.

The door opened, spilling Donnell onto his back, halfway out of the car. Figures shuffled past. Voiceless activity. Blurs of movement that might or might not have been people. The man in the suit, carried by two more suited individuals, grazed his shoulder as he was taken from the car. Donnell tried to follow them, eyes drawn as far to the side as possible, but he found it difficult to focus. Everything hurt.

"What was he doing here?"

"We do not know," replied a second voice.

"They are all dead," said the first. Two suited men stood above him, pale, dark hair, shadowy in the murky light.

"Not all," said the other, staring down at Donnell. "This one is still alive."

The other man peered closer, scanning a palm-sized metallic object close to Donnell's chest. "He will not survive. Time will take him."

"We must leave. We must take no chances. Kill him." Before the other could respond, he walked off.

Donnell could feel his heart race. He really should have gone without the donuts. If only he had left himself more time. Now he would die, which was worse than being fired. He had no idea what would happen after he died.

The man stared at him, a sense of unease teasing his expression. A gun pointed down, the bulbous weapon looking more like a tiny silver blimp in the man's hands. But there was no mistake.

"My apologies," the man said, then pulled the trigger.

Chapter Two

Agatha Blume paused mid-stroke, brush locked in a battle with a tuft of brown curls, and waited for the knock. The three-beat wake-up call arrived on time, precise, pointed, her mother's voice muffled through the door. Same as every morning.

"Agatha, sweetie, time to wake up."

The door opened, as if the pronouncement alone was all the invitation needed, her mother's slim face wedging into view. Just after her thirteenth birthday, Agatha had complained her way into a screaming fit about the constant invasion of her privacy. She wasn't a kid anymore, she had insisted. The least her mother could do was to wait for an answer. The argument that followed lasted until Hurricane Betty tore her apart, leaving a trail of verbal debris that included bills paid, meals cooked, clothes washed and general momness employed over her time on this Earth. The grounding had been severe. Agatha spent a month in her room, cut off from everyone, meals brought to her on trays, the glorious intro into her summer vacation stalled.

It should have been the worst month of her life. All that time, just ticking away into boredom. But Agatha didn't mind time. She could deal with time. It was the Keepers that bothered her.

If nothing else, the grounding managed to cure the tension with her mother. She realized the problem wasn't that her mother annoyed her and lacked appreciation for her desire for privacy. The problem was that she let it happen in the first place. That she let the moment arrive at all. Remove the moment and there was no argument, no way for her mother to annoy her. No annoyance, no arguing, no yelling, no grounding, no problem. For more than three years, peace had reigned, and she had no desire to break the unspoken truce.

She just needed to be careful about it. A toe in the water here and there. Enough to stay ahead of her mother. Too much and the Keepers would notice. And this time, they might find her.

"I'm up." She set to brushing her hair again, fighting through a new tangle. Some days she thought it would be best just to chop it all off and be done with it. But she didn't have *that* kind of face. The kind without freckles. The kind that didn't require hair to make it worth looking at.

A face like Judy's. She wasn't *that* kind of pretty. Truthfully, she wasn't sure she was any kind of pretty. The hair, frustrating though it could be, at least framed her face well. Made her brown eyes pop. Or so she'd been told by Justin.

Granted, that was before Friday. Before *The Incident at The Magnificent*. She'd had the whole weekend to come to terms with the fact that Justin's opinions no longer mattered.

"Oh. So you are. I didn't hear you. I'm beginning to think you don't need me anymore."

She was across the room in a few quick steps, a generous *tsk* over the small gathering of clothes at the foot of the bed, settling on Agatha's reflection in the mirror, brush taken from her hand. The curls obeyed her sweeping strokes in a way Agatha could never manage. It was like magic. Or they, too, feared her wrath.

"You're growing up so fast. Where has the time gone?"

Agatha stared into her mother's reflection, fighting a smile. "Nowhere, as far as I can tell."

"Almost seventeen. Seems impossible to believe. Soon you'll be a woman with options."

She pulled Agatha's hair into a bushy ponytail, her slim neck and freckly face more pronounced. Agatha winced. "Ugh. I look gross with my hair back."

"You're beautiful."

"You're my mother. You have to say that. It's, like, code or something."

"'Like' isn't a place holder. You sound simple when you use it that way. You're not simple. Proper grammar defines the intelligent woman." She nodded to a pile of books. "You finish your assignments?"

"Of course," she lied.

"Good. Keep your grades where they are and you can go to any school you want."

"You mean I won't get grounded."

"That too." The hair fell back around Agatha's shoulders. Her mother kissed the top of her head. "Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes. I serve my prettiest daughter first."

"I'm your only daughter."

Her mother smiled from the doorway, then closed the door behind her.

The bus wobbled its way over another speed bump, metal frame groaning in protest, the perpetual conversation of students broken the length of a hiccup as they fought for balance on the slick seats. Agatha kept her gaze out the cloudy window in the back row, early morning sunlight

rising atop the trees, creeping into the neighborhood enough to grace the rooftops of the large homes. It always amazed her that a bus even dared breach this area. Very few of the kids needed it. Most of them had both parents who had plenty of money and time and sleek vehicles to make impressionable entrances. If not for its one notable stop, Agatha might never have known it existed. Then again, if not for its one notable stop, she might not have had a best friend. Or a case of anxiety over seeing her again. Agatha didn't have to look ahead as the brakes of the bus squealed to a stop. Judy would be there. Judy was always there. Ivy League schools expected perfect attendance, after all. The way Judy talked about it, grades were almost secondary.

A scramble of feet and greetings welcomed the bus. Agatha sunk lower. Maybe she would choose another seat. If she knew what was best, she'd avoid Agatha altogether. Of course, she probably didn't know. How could she? She probably hadn't seen her in the theater at all. It's not like she stayed long.

Agatha chanced a look. Judy smiled at her halfway down the aisle, arms gripped tight around her bundle of books and notebooks, Christie close behind. They were besties, had been since Kindergarten, when Christie's family moved in next door, so it came as no surprise to see them in coordinated outfits. Judy, with her sailor-stripe shirt and blue shorts, black hair back in a ponytail; Christie in matching shorts, stripes of her shirt yellow, blond hair back as well. Christie even donned a pair of blue wire-rimmed specs, similar to those Judy had worn for years. Christie could see fine. She just couldn't be not-Judy for a day.

They slipped into the seat ahead of Agatha, turning to face her, both smiling as if Monday was the greatest thing ever. Agatha gave an unimpressive attempt at a smile, returning her gaze to the increasing speed of the houses passing by.

"What's up, Ag? You look totally bummed."

Agatha flinched, muscles almost forcing her eyelids shut, mind on the hunt for an exit point. She took a breath. Not now. Not here. She would just have to endure. "Just a stupid weekend."

"Ugh. Tell me about it," said Christie, her heightened pitch coming off as if it were a question. "Total drag."

"Weren't you at the lake house?" asked Judy.

Christie fell somewhere between a shrug and a dismissive sigh, "Yeah. Two days with no signal. Totes annoying."

Agatha grumbled, a bit too loudly, tried to cover with a cough. ‘Totes annoying’ summed up her feelings on Christie most often. The fact that she was always around, following Judy with the magnetic connection of a puppy, didn’t help much either.

“You posted, like, a week’s worth of selfies on Saturday.”

“Well, what else was I supposed to do?” Judy cocked her head, ponytail dragging along her shoulder, her rebuttal cut short by Christie’s palm. “You wouldn’t understand. Trapped in a stupid dusty house with my stupid brothers at some stupid lake. Some of us didn’t have a whole weekend to be all glowsticky over a date we had Friday.”

There it was. Agatha sighed. At least she knew she wasn’t losing her mind. It had been Judy.

“Christie,” she said between gritted teeth.

“I mean,” Christie spat, almost falling over the seat as she struggled to find the words. “Like, you know, some girls might have. I heard Becky had a date, I think.”

The bus squealed to another stop, turning free of the haughty homes, onward to the last of its stops before reaching the school. Judy’s heavy breath drew her attention forward. The two girls gaped at her in anticipation, as if testing the waters. Agatha considered her words, pondering the possibility of the truth if only to see the reaction. To witness the meltdown. But then she would have to find some way to reset things and it just wasn’t worth it.

“So, what’d you do this weekend, Ag?”

“Watched a movie,” she said, finding some satisfaction in Judy’s guarded, wide-eyed, nod.

“Oh, yeah? What movie?”

She held it a moment. Let the worry consume Judy. It wasn’t the most friend-like thing to do, but it sure beat going out with the guy your supposed best friend likes, so she let it ride. “I don’t know. Some Rom-Com. Just something my mother wanted me to watch with her. Whatever.”

“Oh! Oh, right. Yeah. Moms, am I right?” Judy giggled it off.

“Totally. Moms,” echoed the Christie-shaped puppy.

Agatha smiled, let the moment go. “Yeah.”

The note, wadded ball of paper that it was, smacked her in the back of the head and fell harmless at her feet. Agatha wheeled to glare at the culprit, found Justin smiling from a row over and three seats back, and glared harder. For a few seconds, as Mister Hogan continued on about molecules and the nature of the universe—something science-y she had paid little attention to—she ignored

the message. Finally, reluctant to even give him the pleasure, she reached for the note. It took her a good thirty seconds to unbind it without attracting Mister Hogan's attention, but he was completely focused on his graph on the chalkboard.

Deciphering Justin's handwriting could be trying. It was horrible. All compacted and squiggly, letters practically making out with other letters, and other letters' best friends. Agatha drew a tight breath, scanning the brief one-sentence letter with something akin to indifference, if indifference really hated what it was doing at the moment.

R U mad at me why what did I do?

Agatha carefully folded the note a few times, swearing under her breath. She chanced a look at Justin, who picked that moment to sweep a hand through his intrusive brown bangs, offering a clear view of his beautiful blue eyes.

Ugh.

The note spun under her fingers. She considered tearing it up, or balling it up and drop-kicking it across the floor, or standing up mid-lecture and slapping it on the desk in front of Justin and his stupid beautiful blue eyes. Another glance and another heart-wrenching smile across the perfect skin of his perfect stupid face. Agatha steeled herself, rage tempting an almost irrepressible desire to cry, snatched her pen in a death grip, pried the note back open and wrote down two words.

The. Magnificent.

When Mister Hogan began a series of skin-crawling chalk lines across the board, Agatha dropped the note beneath a foot and kicked it backward. It stopped a desk short, but Justin wasted no time, all but falling out of his seat to reach it. Mister Hogan glanced back, but stupid cool Justin played it off as a dropped pen, and somehow managed to make everyone laugh in the process.

So stupidly cute.

His smile vanished in three seconds. When he looked up, his face flushed somewhere between anger and mortification, his mouth opened, eyes cutting from Mister Hogan's back to Agatha. Whatever it was he thought he might say, or do, Agatha wanted no part in. She focused on the board, seeing nothing, her mind already engaged in the script she intended to follow in the hall after class. Judy might have escaped her wrath for now, but Justin wasn't going to be so lucky.

She was somewhere in the midst of the barrage of insults that would reduce Justin to tears before the entire school when the class erupted in groans.

“If you studied, you’ll have no problem,” Mister Hogan was saying as he approached the first row with a stack of papers.

Studied? Studied for what?

“This quiz is over the two chapters you were supposed to read this weekend, most of which I covered for you today, with a few bonus questions for anyone who was brave enough to read ahead. So if you were paying attention at all, you’ll be fine.”

Sweat beaded on her forehead. Pop quiz? As if she needed another reason to hate science. Trying to understand any of it took an overwhelming amount of her time and energy. Time and energy she might have been able to divert to keeping Judy’s perfectly manicured claws off the boy she liked.

Mister Hogan reached her row. The quiz made its way back. She scanned it, reading through each question while the rest of the class began working to survive it. Twenty question, plus the two bonus. She didn’t know any of them. Between ignoring her classwork while grieving over the whole Judy-Justin debacle and trying to ignore his existence in class while burning a hate-hole in the universe, she had no idea what any of it was. At best she would fail it gloriously. Based on her current average, a fail of that magnitude would drop her a letter, out of the top five of her class, and into the path of Hurricane Betty.

It couldn’t happen. She was two weeks away from her driving exam and the possibility of never having to take the bus again. Ever.

Agatha considered her choices, but found no other alternative. The clock seemed to accelerate in response, the rapid-fire tick taunting her thoughts. Twelve past one. That would be pushing it. She would need more than twelve hours. Not by much, true, and still not much more than a toe in the pool, but enough to create some ripples. The Keepers might feel it.

Agatha closed her eyes, working through the previous night. It had been midnight before she went to sleep. Close to it, anyhow. Before that, she had read. In her bed. Right. That was it. After talking with her mother about the upcoming entrance exams. That had been just before eleven.

Eleven. Just over fourteen hours.

She could do it.

Everything would be fine.

Agatha scanned the quiz once more, making a mental note of the questions. When she felt confident she had the highlights memorized, she pushed the quiz forward, hands clasped on the desk before her, and focused. Somewhere behind her she could hear Justin's *psst* calling her. He wanted help. She always helped him.

Right now she needed to help herself. He could deal.

The air cooled, her skin pimpled in goose-flesh. The familiar feeling of compression locked her in place. Then it released. Sound whirred, like the chatter on the bus amplified, voices gaining in strength here and there, then falling to silence entirely. She kept her eyes shut tight, listening, searching, waiting for the voice she didn't want to hear. The voice that meant she had gone too far.

But it never came. The feeling of momentum slowed. It was over.

Agatha took an exaggerated breath, opened her eyes, and let the breath free. The soft light of the lamp on her nightstand cast a yellowish glow over the book in her hands. She dropped it, still haunted by the shock she felt every time she jumped, pushed the blankets away and scanned her room. No one was there.

She was safe.

Taking a quick moment to chastise her negligence, Agatha calmed her nerves.

"Never again, Agatha. Never again."

Without any further hesitation, she grabbed her science textbook and studied.

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 an accident 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 confused hour of doing nothing 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 Chronos—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 Chronos was “a stupid dumb stealer” Agatha gave him two dollars for a tip. And though Chronos 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 goggle, 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 it was the perfect size. Her mother said she might want to scale it back. She insisted her thirteenth birthday

only happened once. The baker and her mother debated her stubbornness. She insisted this was the Stuart for her.

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 in the least.

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 Judy's heel popped the balloon, Rufus bolted in the only direction his body and mind seemed willing to take him in the face of certain looming death. 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, wailing and whimpering as he attempted 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 raging rush of screams and accusation 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 dam broke. Until her thoughts took her to places she had never gone. Until the only thing that mattered was having that moment back, no matter the cost.

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, rounded 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, sent it flying with a clean and effective kick, where it bounced 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 instead in a heap on the floor, 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 Chronos 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 afternoon pool party 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.

Chapter Four

While her fellow students raced against the clock, Agatha spent the final twenty minutes of class staring at her completed exam, the remnants of her decision far more trying than the test itself. It had been a stupid decision. If she had completed her weekend assignments she would have been prepared, and she wouldn't have had to chance an encounter with the Keepers just to pass a test. She wouldn't have had to relive a morning she could have done without.

Oh, sure, she could have simply jumped back to the time she left. She could have avoided her mom, the bus, Judy, even Justin. And for a few minutes after her studies, she contemplated the very possibility; however, the risk wasn't worth it. Reliving a period of time precisely as it was could be frustrating, especially when that time included fighting the urge to yell at your best friend when you desperately wanted to, but she couldn't send ripples across the pool. She couldn't *change* things for anyone else, no matter how badly she wanted. True, telling Judy off, or ignoring Justin's note would have given her some satisfaction, but every jump came with the underlying possibility she could change too much. That some alteration, even as small as a word, would undo everything she had gone back to fix, much as it had with Cake Stuart. For that reason, she tried to reset as much as she could. Sometimes, the cake just had to fall.

The wings of the butterfly creating a hurricane somewhere else and stuff.

And the experience always softened concerns she had endured the first go-round. When the protesting moans of her classmates rang out simultaneous to the ricocheting clang of the bell, Agatha latched onto her backpack and turned in her exam in a hurried rush, no thought given to anything shy of where she had to be next. Of getting the day of with, already. She hadn't forgotten Justin, exactly; he just didn't have the place in her thoughts he had before.

She jumped when he called her name, loud enough to be down the hall rather than the five feet away he stood. Unwilling to seem too eager, Agatha waited a few seconds before facing him, gaze intentionally drifting away from him and down the hall, brows raised as much as she could manage without looking like a plastico Housewife of Whateverville. She said nothing.

“Hey,” he said, the attempt at a casual greeting accompanied by his trademark sweep of the bangs. “Crazy test. Hogan.”

Students filed past, a few flitting to lockers lining the hall. Two girls—freshman, she figured by the overblown sense of fashion and Cover Girl paint job—sped through conversation as they dug through their lockers, a boy nearby leaning in for a few thoughts of his own. They giggled. He adjusted the bill of a blue ball cap down, offering a better look at the pristine white letters “L.A.” that crossed over one another. Wearing a cap was a solid violation of dress code, possibly detention-worthy, but whatever. Principal Jones would find him. He never missed a dress code violation. Agatha adjusted her backpack, fighting the urge to drop it on Justin’s foot.

“I mean, so what was up with that note?”

Grammar had never been Justin’s strong suit. As long as Agatha had known him, she’d spent a portion of her energy each day correcting him. At times, it seemed he did it on purpose.

“Is that what you mean, or are you asking me a question?” Agatha slumped. She hadn’t intended to say it. He didn’t deserve any response, much less the wealth of snarkiness at her disposal.

“What? Fine. Never mind, all right? What did the note mean?”

Agatha stared. When his beautiful blue eyes locked on her, the Wounded Puppy in full effect, she returned her gaze to the chatty girls and the dress code violator. “What do you think it meant?”

Justin shifted, a hand shooting to scratch at nothing behind his ear. “What, like, the movie place?”

The freshman girls closed their lockers, books bound in thin arms, chatted their way down the hall. The boy in the hat remained, leaning into a locker, smiling her way. “Yeah,” she replied, almost off-hand. “What else could I mean by The Magnificent?”

“I mean, I know what The Magnificent is, all right? But what about it?”

“What about it? What do you mean ‘what about it’?”

This served as enough to stump Justin into a succession of blinks. “Huh?”

“Ugh.” Agatha managed a clumsy facepalm, her pack threatening to dip off her shoulder if not for a quick grab on her part. “Seriously? You have no idea what I’m talking about?”

Now the boy in the hat laughed. Clearly at her given his attention was focused her way. Between the infuriating boy in front of her and the infuriating boy laughing at her, it was a wonder she liked boys at all.

“I mean—”

“Would you stop starting sentences that way? You sound like an idiot!”

“Whatever. Geez, Ag. You’re in a mood.”

“Of course I’m in a mood! You of all people should know why!”

“Because you want to go watch a movie?”

Agatha steeled herself, trying in vain to ignore the intrusive boy in the hat, who seemed to have taken to their conversation as if it were some type of sideshow. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s what’s got me so moody, Justin. I want to go watch a movie.”

“Well, that’s cool. We should go sometime. I wish I knew that before. Judy and I went to a movie on Friday.”

This time the pack did fall. Unfortunately it landed on her feet, the full weight of three text books all but crushing her toes into squishy nothingness. Agatha bit her lip, working to contain the desire to yell, hop-dancing like a flamingo with no rhythm. “Seriously? You did not just say that.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You really don’t get it, do you?”

“Ag, I have no idea what you mean. Could you please just tell me?”

“I’m not going to tell you something you should already know.”

“Then could you tell me the something I obviously don’t know? Because I have no idea what’s bugging you.”

“No! I won’t! What good would it do to tell you something I shouldn’t need to tell you at all? You’re supposed to just know!”

At this, the flush returned to Justin’s face. “That makes no sense! What is with you girls anyway? First Judy, now you! You know what? Whatever. I’m done getting yelled at. I have to get to History.”

Without another word, he pushed past Agatha, blending quickly into the crowded hall. “What do you mean? What did Judy say?” When he didn’t respond, looking for anything to salvage the moment, Agatha wheeled back to the lockers. “And you—” she began, dropping to silence when she realized the boy in the hat was gone.

Well, that didn’t go well.

The reflex nibbled into her brain. Just enough time to start the conversation over. Enough time to get it right. Maybe find out what Judy had said. Maybe throw a book at the boy in the hat. She gave it consideration, but pushed it away. It was just a stupid conversation with Justin. She’d had a lot of stupid conversations with Justin. Granted that was due to Justin’s inability to understand the most obvious of things, like when a girl he’d known for practically ever really *liked him* liked him, but what did it matter. Eventually, he’d understand what she meant. He’d know. Then....

Well, *then* was another matter.

Agatha managed the bus ride home without further incident. In part because Judy and Christie sat in the row across the aisle, pitting any attempt at conversation against the rattle and hum of the engine and boisterous chatter of the other students, the remainder because Agatha didn’t give them much to work with. For the most part she just stared forward, forcing whatever grin she could piece together when they did speak to her, moving only once to allow the girl seated by the window the clearance to get by when they reached her stop. When the bus squealed to a stop in front of Judy’s house, Agatha granted her a polite waive, then went about staring at the back of the seat again.

In all likelihood, they’d be fine. Eventually. They always were, no matter the argument.

Agatha shifted to the window for the remainder of the ride, mind locked in a battle with images of Justin and Judy at the movies and her yell-fest with Justin in the hall. She was so locked in her thoughts, she didn’t realize the bus had reached her stop until the driver shouted her name.

“Oh! Sorry!” Agatha slung her pack over a shoulder, face beet-red, and quick-walked her way down the aisle. She avoided the driver’s glare, darting quickly onto the sidewalk.

The bus peeled away in a puff of black smoke, the haze giving her breath a start the same as always. Her choppy cough echoed into Mrs. Jacobs’ yard, stirring the attention of Blazer the

howling hound, who barked its way along the white picket fence as if she were the incarnation of pure evil as she hurried on.

Every day the same thing. All she would have to do is move ahead five minutes. Five stupid minutes. The bus would vanish, she wouldn't cough, Blazer could bark all he wanted and still she'd miss it all. Sure, it would happen, and on some level she would remember it, but she wouldn't have to *endure* it. Then again, maybe she wouldn't remember it at all. She'd had little experience with moving forward in time, owing to the belief that once she got used to it, she'd probably try to skip just about everything.

There was, of course, also the matter of...

It took her thoughts far less time to come to a screeching halt than it did for her feet to follow suit.

A man walked toward her, his gait steady but increasing, pale face gleaming in the afternoon sun, black hair slicked back, dark pupils set forward. He reached within the jacket of his suit, retrieving something. Agatha wanted to run. She wanted to be far, far, away.

The Keepers had found her.

Chapter Five