

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 down, the light green of his eyes fading in a tight squint, 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. Enough to keep things right, in order. Too much and the Keepers would notice. Too much and next 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 not diminished by glasses. 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. A mother’s touch. It was like magic.

“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. Your father would be so proud.”

She pulled Agatha’s hair into a bushy ponytail, her slim neck and freckly face more pronounced. Agatha winced, both at the reflection and the mention of her father. “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. “Did 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 the 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 didn’t know. How could she? She might have seen Agatha in the theater the first time, but she wouldn’t have remembered it. Not after Agatha went back and changed things. After Agatha never went to the movies at all.

Agatha chanced a look. Judy smiled halfway down the aisle, arms gripped tight around her bundle of books and notebooks as if they might fly away, 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 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 screeching halt, 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 mom 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 to 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, slapping it on the desk in front of Justin and his stupid beautiful blue eyes and offering her grammatical edits to his “sentence”. 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, take her GPA 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 had 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 that evening 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 had said to her mother. 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 to her mother's great praise 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 changed everything.

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 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 keep things unrelated to her as they were. 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 above the thin frames of her glasses 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 Week style 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 just to provoke her.

"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!” For a moment, she considered looking for her mother. Surely she hadn’t actually *said* that.

“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, piecing together the best grin she could manage each time Judy tried to draw her into their conversation. When Karen, the pleasingly-quiet girl seated by the window reached her stop, Agatha let her by, then took her place. By the time the bus squealed to a stop in front of Judy’s house, they hadn’t spoken for fifteen minutes. She offered a half-hearted waive through the cloudy glass as the bus pulled away.

She really didn’t like being this mad at Judy.

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

Agatha stared into emptiness for the remainder of the ride. Locked in a battle of images of Justin and Judy at the movies and her yell-fest with Justin in the hall. Unaware of much else. It took the driver shouting her name before she realized the bus had arrived at her stop. Everyone stared at her.

"Oh! Sorry!" Agatha slung her pack over a shoulder in a hurry, face beet-red, 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, leaving her in a pungent haze. Her choppy cough echoed into Mrs. Jacobs' yard, stirring the attention of Blazer the howling hound, who barked his way along the white picket fence as if she were the incarnation of pure evil come to steal his rich assortment of precious treats.

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. Or maybe she wouldn't remember it at all. It was hard to say. 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 ever.

Besides, the risk and all. Just wasn't worth it.

With a great deal of effort she lifted her gaze from the sidewalk, her mother's cry that she work better on her posture ringing like a gun-shot in her mind. That's when she saw him.

He strode toward her, his gait steady but increasing, familiar pale face gleaming in the afternoon sun, black hair slicked back, dark pupils set forward. There was no smile below the long, crooked, nose. All business, just like the one before. He reached within the jacket of his suit, retrieving something that nestled far too nicely in the palm of his hand. Agatha wanted to run. She wanted to be far, far, away.

The Keepers had found her.

Chapter Five

The Keeper passed the cedar hedge that served as the boundary of her yard, seeming to take up the entirety of the sidewalk alone. She'd never get by him. Traffic through her neighborhood didn't build until the work day ended, so flagging a passing car down wasn't an option. Despite Blazer's continued tirade, the windows of nearby homes remained vacant.

What she wouldn't give for a nosy neighbor. Anyone.

The Keeper closed in, a few steps away, eyes set on her as if challenging her to run. To scream. To jump.

Could he follow her? How far would she have to go? What would he do to her if she did jump and he did catch her? What was he going to do to her if she didn't?

She swallowed hard. Considered the choice.

Agatha backed a step, pulling away from the thought of jumping, scanning the road behind her. The empty, empty road behind her. She had only once before stood so close to a Keeper, and had escaped only by way of stupid dumb luck. This time, she was sure, there would be no such moment. No such escape.

She steeled herself, biting into her lip until she could taste the blood, her forehead beaded in cold sweat. The thought she might pass out or vomit, perhaps even both at once, hit her as the Keeper loomed over her. He must have been a good foot and half taller.

"You are Agatha Blume, of 3702 Tradewinds Drive," said the Keeper, head tilted slightly.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." It might well have been the dumbest thing she had ever said, but it was all she could muster. All her brain could produce. She had never felt so ten-years old in her life.

“Of course,” replied the Keeper, eyes shifting momentarily as if listening to a whisper. “I am Agent Lowndes. An investigator, if you will.” He extended a hand. Agatha drew her hands tight to her side. He withdrew. “I’m looking for someone. A child.”

Agatha looked past the Keeper, the walkway beyond the cedar hedge taunting her just feet ahead. “That doesn’t make you any less of a stranger.”

Lowndes studied her, probing. In the midst of her panic, she found a sense of discomfort not too unlike what she felt in gym in those moments the boys would gather to watch the girls tumble.

“Indeed. I can do nothing to remedy that, but I must find this child. I believe you may know him.” He flipped his hand, revealing a small photo of a boy in a blue hat, amongst a group of people crossing a street. He wasn’t looking directly at the camera, but she didn’t need to study his features. It was the boy from the hall.

The panic subsided. Agatha did her best to remove all expression from her face. So, the Keeper wasn’t looking for her. She hadn’t drawn them. The boy had. Which meant the boy could move through time. Agatha felt a layer of excitement beneath the fear of facing off with a Keeper. She wasn’t the only one. That being the case, no way she was about to give him up. The Keeper could just keep looking on his own.

“Why should I know who that is?”

Agent Lowndes twisted the picture, offering a better angle. “Because he was seen outside your house last night.”

“Last night? He was ... look, I don’t know him, ok,” she said, quicker than she would have liked. It wasn’t a lie exactly, but she had never quite acquired the skill. Her mother always saw through any attempt and she found it far easier to remove the offense from time than to have to cover it up with lies.

Lowndes the Keeper pocketed the picture, brow furrowed. “Interesting. Are you certain?”

“Yes. Certain. Can I go home now?”

“Perhaps, then, you will know him soon.”

“What?”

Lowndes turned an inauthentic smile. “We will remain in the area for now. If you see him, call the authorities. Make no effort to engage with him. It would be dangerous to do so.”

Agatha considered the Keeper, wanting more than anything to be home, safe and away from his icy stare, but wanting even greater distance than that. She had to ensure he had no reason to watch her as well. No reason to return. “What do you mean? Is he violent or something?”

“No. Not violent.”

“Did he escape from juvie jail?”

Lowndes blinked in rapid succession. “He is a criminal. That is all you need to know. When you encounter him, do as instructed and all will be fine.”

“Yes, sir. Of course. Thank you.”

For a moment, Lowndes kept his steely gaze affixed on her. Then he nodded.

“May I go now?”

“You may.”

Agatha wasted no time, shooting past the Keeper before he could so much as shift. The yammering sound of Blazer gave her reason to believe the Keeper had headed off as well. She didn’t know for sure. She didn’t look back.

She reached the front door, keys jingling in a shaky hand, head down, jumped through the opening and locked the door behind her. A deep silence blanketed the house. Her mother wouldn’t be home for almost two hours. In a rush, she headed upstairs, silently cursing herself.

“So stupid. Stupid, Agatha.”

The Keeper might not have been looking for her this time, but if she kept making such reckless decisions they would eventually. It was just a test. So what if she had failed it? How could her mother’s wrath outweigh whatever the Keepers would do to her if she jumped too far?

She wouldn’t do it again. Ever. No jump was worth it.

Agatha tossed her books on her bed, closed the door to her room and locked it, then crept to the window. The curtain peeled back a couple inches, she peered out. The Keeper was nowhere to be seen.

Gone.

Off to look for the boy in the hat.

Agatha took a deep breath, let it free, felt her body relax.

If she saw the boy again, she would have to let him know.

If.

Chapter Six

The night fell in a rush, blurred conversation at the dinner table followed by a fog of television for which the litany of Betty Blume's complaints tumbled like a waterfall to the bitter rocks of I-Hate-Televisionitis. By the time the call of sleep came, Agatha couldn't recall if she had even responded.

Her bed felt cold, the air in her room stifling. The mattress welcomed her like a sheet of needles, her pillow like the suffocating arms of a predator. No position calmed her nerves, no amount of breathing reduced the thunderous beat in her chest every time she closed her eyes. Every time the probing face of the Keeper returned in her mind.

He hadn't been looking for her, she reminded herself.

He could have, her mind replied.

Eleven became twelve, twelve became one. The sliver of moonlight peeking through the slim opening of her tightly pulled curtains drifted from the far wall to the end of her bed.

Despite it all, the thought of jumping into the morning just to escape the madness of insomnia tapped on the glass of possibility.

Agatha shot upright, tossed the covers as if they were the primary offense, swore under her breath. Not for the first time, she found herself wondering why her ability existed at all. If she wasn't supposed to use it, then why did she have it? Knowing she was not the only one softened the sting, but not the greater implication. Were the Keepers created because the ability should have never come to be for anyone, and if so, then by whom? Where had they come from? What did they do to offenders? How many had there been?

The ability to move through time could be such a wonderful gift. It could be used to help people, to make things right for those in need. It could be used to save people other people couldn't bear to lose. People like her father. But the Keepers seemed to think otherwise.

Why?

The thought of her father drew her to her feet, the cool slats of wooden floor offering little sense of comfort. She flicked on the lamp on her nightstand, exhaled as if purging the offending image. She allowed her eyes to drift to the silver-framed picture by the lamp—her mother and father holding their newborn daughter days after her birth. There weren't many pictures of him in the house. She had to put up a considerable fight just to get the one. Betty felt it best not to remind her of what she had lost. She had to move on.

Agatha had no memories to move on from. She was three when he died in Iraq. When some random bullet from some random person in some random town of some random country took her father from her forever. Much though she longed to feel something when she looked upon his face, she found it difficult. It was like looking at a stranger.

"Great, Agatha. Let's think about that too. Good job."

Now she was wide awake.

Hoping to salvage something of her night's sleep, Agatha tipped the photo over, stretched and made her way downstairs for a glass of water. Betty always insisted warm milk would do the trick, but gagging on something she couldn't stomach at a normal temperature wasn't much of a good idea in her book. Water did the trick.

Silence overwhelmed the house. Every step brought with it a creak of wood that shot through the house like a blast of cannon. Agatha took extreme care as she crossed the living room and passed into the dining room, sure that at any moment her mother would storm from her bedroom with a bat in hand, which would only result in a need to yell at Agatha for something or another. Nothing sent sleep running into the morning like a screaming wild woman wielding a bat.

Agatha fetched a glass from the cupboard, slid it gently into the water dispenser and waited. The cool rise of the water chilled her fingers and she quickly took a drink before setting the glass on the counter. Searching for her first true sense of calm since that afternoon, Agatha leaned against the fridge, took a deep breath and slid to the floor.

She only just settled in place when a brief flash of blue light drew her attention into the dining room. Darkness returned, then a pop of blue glittered above the table, tendrils of light

fanning out like a static charge globe. Then something emerged at an incredible speed, split the table into two, sending shrapnel of wood and glass in every direction as if a bomb had detonated.

Half of a splintered table leg shot across the kitchen floor in a blur, sharp point driving into Agatha's calf like a spear. She recoiled, the sensation of the prickly debris initiating numbing warmth throughout her body. Agatha pushed hard into a cabinet to her rear, the drinking glass above toppling a few feet to her left, shards splintering every which way, prodding into the skin of her arm and palm as she dropped to the floor in an effort to reach for her leg.

"Peyton! No, no, no!"

The voice was shrill, tinged in terror, fractured by an onset of sobbing. The words that followed were lost in another crash of glass.

Agatha strained through the pain, fingers trailing her calf until she found the jagged piece of wood. Her hand shook. She wanted to cry, to scream, but found her voice impossible to locate, her tears unwilling to come. The flow of blood didn't feel as bad as she had thought, the object not nearly as deep as she had feared. Despite her reluctance, she managed to pull the wooden dagger from her leg, drawing it into the dim light.

The splintered shard looked as if it had been dipped in red paint.

The shouts returned, this time the battle cry of her mother as she made her way toward the sobbing voice. Agatha shifted, leaning again into the fridge, able to see the travesty of the dining room, but unable to make out the form struggling at its center.

"Agatha!"

"In here—"

"Mom!"

"What's happened? Who is that?"

Agatha felt dizzy. Maybe something had hit her head. She could have sworn she heard—

"Mom," the voice repeated. A head bobbed into view, wavy brown hair pulled back tight, blood-streaked face pale, glasses askew, arms layered in deep bruises. "It's you. You're here." Tears streaked through the blood, falling from her cheek heavy.

"Agatha, what the hell is going on? My house. My china! What did you do?"

The worn and beaten version of Agatha scanned the room, eyes drifting to the kitchen. To Agatha. For a moment they looked at each other, neither finding comfort in it, neither willing to

break away. A boy was in her arms, unconscious, head and chest obscured, but clearly drenched in blood.

“Mom, you have to get her out of here. Both of you have to get out here. Now!”

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me, young lady! I demand you tell me what’s going on! My table! Everything is—is he bleeding? Oh my God, Agatha! He’s bleeding!”

Agatha attempted to stand, her leg numb, unable to hold. She fell in a heap, shoulder and palm burning, the slippery warmth of her own blood on the tile making traction near impossible.

“Who is that? Who’s in there?”

“You don’t have time to figure things out! They’re coming! Take her and run.”

Betty took a few cautious steps toward the kitchen, her breath falling in deep gasps.

“Agatha?” She returned to the version of her daughter in the dining room. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to! Just go. I’m sorry, mom.”

For the first time, her mother’s usual stoic tone faltered. Between the words, Agatha could feel her fear. Truthfully, she shared it.

“Sorry? I don’t understand what’s happened. Agatha, who is—”

“Betty!” Agatha had never yelled so at her mother. Sure, she had yelled, especially during their war over her privacy, but never with such intent. Never as if she were not the child.

“Dammit. Agatha,” she said, her face tightening, tears waning. She didn’t make eye contact, settling instead on the cabinets above. “You have to hide. They know what you can do now. There’s nothing you can do about what happens here. Just ... just when he insists you jump, you have to say no, okay?”

Agatha stared at her, fighting the urge to question. If it was actually herself, she had to have come from another time. Why would she lie to herself? As much as she wanted to know what had happened, to understand what she would face that would have left her in such a state, to discover who the boy was and what had happened, she knew the opportunity would not arrive. Someone was coming for her and she didn’t need to ask who.

“Okay,” she forced, clawing her way toward the pantry, the nearest place out of sight she would be able to reach. In spite of the terror driving through her, she couldn’t suppress the sudden concern over the trail of blood she was leaving, worried what Betty would say.

“Agatha, please tell me what’s going on.” Betty’s voice had broken. Confusion had overruled emotion. Anger eluded her. Agatha couldn’t recall a time she had sounded so small.

Before Agatha could reach the pantry, a second explosion rocked the house, glass from every window blasted into every room at once. It felt as though the entire home had lifted from its foundation and dropped in a rattling crunch. She pried open the pantry door with a shaky hand, taking a final glance at her mother curled in a ball on the floor.

Fighting the urge to help, Agatha gripped the door, pulled herself into the deep recess of the pantry and slid as far back as she could go, cursing herself. The blood-streaked tile would lead the Keepers right to her. If they so much as glanced in the kitchen, she was caught. Muted light flittered through the wooden blinds of the door, shadows growing in the kitchen, her mother's voice rising.

"Agatha! What's happening to you?"

"I'm sorry, mom." The voice felt tiny, almost forgotten. A short sound, like air sealed in a chamber, filled the room. Then silence.

"Agatha? Agatha! Where—"

But her words were lost in two more brief whiffs of air. Glass crunched underfoot. A shadowy figure passed the pantry door, followed by a second. Betty stuttered, unable to find words, her breath choppy, uneven. She was beyond afraid. She was outright terrified. Agatha clutched a hand over her mouth, the urge to scream for her mother trying to bite free.

"Who are you?"

A clicking sound preceded a soft hum that grew and faded.

"They are gone."

"Yes. Gone."

Agatha didn't need to see the second speaker. Lowndes, the Keeper stood mere feet from the pantry, his monotone drawl hammering Agatha in a crashing wave of fear. She shifted, pain shooting through her leg, drew herself closer to the door. She spied a wall of canned vegetables nearby, latched onto one, palming it. It wasn't much, but if the door opened, maybe it would buy her enough time to jump ... somewhere.

"Who are you? Why are you in my house? What happened to my daughter?"

Agatha held tight, hoping her mother wouldn't give her away, that she would, just this once, have faith in her daughter. Both of them, as it happened.

"Betty June Blume, Age 39, born in Madison, Wisconsin April twenty-second, nineteen seventy-eight."

Lowndes passed into the dining room, his shadow finally drifting from the pantry door. “She is the girl’s mother.”

“Yes.”

“Who are you?” Hurricane Betty surfaced, the anger tight and focused. “I’ll call the police. I have my cell ... my cell ... here!”

“There is no trail. We will not be able to track them from here,” said Lowndes. “I grow tired of this. We must pursue another angle. Implement the erasure protocol.”

“Source?”

“This one. Interference probability is negligible.”

“Are you certain?”

“Testing was thorough. You have the data.”

Something clicked, a whirl of fingers on a pad followed. “Departure?”

Agatha was certain she could hear Lowndes smile. “Do it now.”

The second Keeper vanished, air closing behind.

“What’s happening? Where did he go? Where is my daughter? I don’t understand any of this.”

Lowndes stepped out of Agatha’s sight, somewhere closer to her mother. “Fortunately for you, that will no longer matter.”

The dim light in the dining room shifted. It seemed darker. Quieter. Betty didn’t respond. A solitary light shone from above the kitchen sink, casting an odd shadow over the pantry door. Agatha leaned forward, looking for the source, fingers wedged between two of the door’s wooden blinds, but shot back into the shelving when a Keeper popped into place feet away.

“It is done,” he said

Lowndes closed in, something in his palm flickering, humming. He passed it through the air. “Erasure is complete. The timeline is clean.”

The second Keeper withdrew his own device, tapping away. “Probability, ninety-nine percent. No trace signature detected.”

Agatha craned her neck, trying to peer into the dining room. The blinds cut too sharp. The room was quiet, no sign of her mother’s voice. Where was she? Had Lowndes bound her somehow?

Lowndes scanned into the kitchen, passing by the door. Agatha flinched. Had he seen the trail? She readied the can, prepared to jump back to the glass of water. Maybe she could change things. Get her mother out of the house before the Keepers arrived.

“There is an anomaly.”

“Location?”

They moved toward her. Closer.

“Indeterminate.”

Agatha could feel her breath leaving in a rush, triggering a sharp pain in her chest. She backed away, concentrating on the moment she sat up in bed. She could see it, could feel the walls of time bending around her.

“The timelines are ... odd.” Lowndes paused, glittering lights of his device inches from the door. “Further investigation is required.”

Without a word passed between them, both Keepers pocketed their devices and vanished.

The silence of the house rang in Agatha’s ears. She pulled back from the jump, her nerves settling. Were they gone for good?

Quiet as she could, Agatha tried to stand, a hand rushing to her leg in support, realized only after she drew upright that it no longer hurt. Her fingers trailed the smooth skin of her calf, no sign of the wound to be found. She held her hands to the slim light peeling into the pantry. No blood.

“What the hell?”

Agatha cracked the door, peeping into the kitchen. Everything looked normal. Too normal, she realized. The dim light of the overhead spilled over the clean floor, her trail of blood nowhere to be seen, debris from the glass and table gone. Agatha dropped the can, took an easy step from the pantry, unsure, but clearly not at risk.

“Mom?” She allowed it just above a whisper. “Where are you?”

No reply. The silence seemed to absorb her voice.

“Mom?” Louder. Nothing.

Agatha gave in, hopeful the Keepers were indeed gone, finding her voice difficult to maintain. The light of the dining room flickered to life and Agatha stared in horror. The dining room table sat whole, yet different than she recalled. Longer. Darker finish, with two chairs more than before. She followed the room to the windows overlooking the front yard. Unbroken. In the

living room, she found more of the same. Everything looked in perfect order, windows still intact, but with different furniture. The television, a small flat screen that sat on a low-sitting entertainment center, now centered the wall, a much larger reflecting her image in the dark room.

It was as much as she could stand. She needed answers.

“Mom!”

It took two seconds for a response. Voices muttered from behind the closed door of her mother’s room, which swung open in a rush, two people bolting free, in robes, wild eyed, clearly fighting the solid sleep from which they had just been roused. Footfall scrambled from upstairs, three small bodies coming to a screeching halt at the top of the stairs.

“Who are you?”

Agatha realized almost instantly she had spoken at the same time as the man, his wife clutching his arm tight at his side.

“You should leave. Now. Before I call the cops.”

“Leave?” Agatha’s hands found her cheeks, cool fingers trembling against the warm skin. “But—”

“If you go now,” he said, moving ahead of his wife, “nobody has to know. Just leave and don’t come back.”

“I’m not—”

“Dad?”

“Back to your room, son. All of you.”

“Do as your father says.”

Agatha staggered, her head swimming, confusion overtaking her. “But my mom. She was...” Her voice trailed off, faded as the realization took hold. The Keeper had said *erasure*. He had left and when he came back, everything changed. Her wound, the blood, the house and the furniture.

Had he...

It couldn’t be. Impossible, even. If her mother had been ... if she was ... but then, she wouldn’t still be there.

“Go!”

The man’s booming voice kicked her into gear. She fled in reflex, fumbling with a lock on the front door that turned opposite what she had been accustomed to. She popped the deadbolt,

pried the door free, and stumbled into the yard in an uneven run. Feet from the road, she tumbled into the grass, fear tearing a hole through her emotional damn, tears raining from her cheeks.

What the hell was going on?