

Prologue

Harper guided her mother gently along the sun-dappled paths of the Northwestern University campus. It was a bright day, a warm day, tinged with the first hint of summer to come. Her parents had been in the city for a week while her mom underwent an experimental treatment at RUSH Medical Center. It was the first morning that Harper had seen any color in her mother's cheeks, and she seized the opportunity to bundle Helen up against the breeze off the lake and head toward campus and the mile-long trail along the water.

For a long while, they meandered in silence, taking in the sunshine and the technicolor landscape of brightly painted boulders studding the shoreline and sparkling with mist from the relentless pounding of the waves. As they reached the far end of the point, however, Helen stopped.

"So," she hung on the vowel as she had started so many conversations before. Her tone was casual, as if there was nothing unusual about the circumstances. "Where are you at with law school?"

"Mom," Harper protested.

"What?" Helen insisted. "I'm not allowed to ask about school? We can only talk about cancer?" She sighed. "You're still going to be a lawyer when I die."

Harper flinched. "I know. I just..." Her voice caught. "Can't we just enjoy the walk? The sunshine?"

They took a few paces in silence.

"All things being equal," Helen continued, "my vote would be Minnesota, and not just because it's closest to home—though it would be nice for your dad to have the support around. The man hasn't cooked himself a meal since the day we got married."

"Mom," Harper tried again.

"Of course, there's Northwestern." Helen pressed on despite the interruption. She spun in a slow circle, taking in the lakeshore campus. "I can see why you'd stay. And you know, George R. R. Martin is a notable alum. Your father loves 'Game of Thrones.'"

"Have you been Googling?"

"As for Cornell..."

Harper sighed. "I'm wait-listed at Cornell."

"I like the Ruth Bader Ginsberg connection," Helen persisted. "It's got a nice, feminist, liberal thing going for it."

"Feminist, liberal thing?" Harper asked, an unexpected chuckle escaping between the words. She rolled her eyes. "Mom? Are you ok?"

Helen stopped, peering at Harper from under the Northwestern baseball cap she had taken to wearing since surgical scarring and chemotherapy had claimed most of her hair. "No, I'm decidedly not," she said plainly. "I'm dying of brain cancer."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Her mom. The woman who had bandaged scraped knees and caught fireflies in jars, who taught her how to hem pants and make a perfect Manhattan, who took her to get her ears pierced and to her first R-rated movie, both at inappropriately young ages, was wasting away in front of her. They had known it for months. She had watched it for months. But in that moment, the blunt absurdity of it came bursting out as hysterical laughter.

They stood in the middle of the path, sunshine on their faces, bicyclists and joggers swerving and dodging around their maniacal display, heads tipped back, tears streaming down

their cheeks, laughing at how much was wrong with life but how much was right in that moment. Only after they recomposed themselves, and the raucous guffaws turned to reserved chuckles, and they settled on a bench for Helen to catch her breath before walking back to the apartment, did Harper dare to turn the conversation back toward the decision she had felt on the precipice of making for days.

"About law school," she began slowly.

Helen tipped her face toward the sun, her eyes closed. "Hmmm," she hummed contentedly. "Flip a coin,"

"What?" Harper asked, brow furrowed.

"A coin," her mother repeated. "Heads U of M, tails Northwestern." She opened her eyes and looked at Harper. "Unless you've already decided?"

"Not exactly," Harper admitted.

"Okay then," Helen insisted, digging into her purse. She held out a quarter. "Flip."

Harper stared at it. "Why?"

Helen shrugged. "Why not? What's it going to take to make up your mind?" She reached for Harper's hand, turned it over, and tipped the coin into her palm.

Harper shook her head. This was exactly the type of random, slightly bizarre idea her mother was infamous for running with. "I won't leave my law school decision up to the flip of a coin," she insisted.

"Oh, Harper," Helen chuckled. "Take a breath. You're always so serious. Besides, it doesn't matter which way the coin lands. What matters is how you feel about the result when you know it's coming. Now, do your dying mother a favor and flip the quarter."

"Fine," placated Harper, laying the coin heads up on the knuckle of her thumb.

"Heads U of M, tails Northwestern," Helen reminded.

"Sure," Harper sighed in agreement.

"One, two, three!"

Harper flicked the quarter into the air.

Heads. Tails. Heads. Tails.

She reached out with her right hand, caught it as it fell, and turned it over onto the back of her left hand, keeping it covered.

"What do you hope it is?" Helen leaned in.

"Mom," Harper started.

Helen gave a playful huff. "C'mon Harper, indulge me. What do you hope it is?" She pushed herself up straighter on the bench, and it broke Harper's heart to see her, even now in the clutches of a fatal disease, working to muster the excitement she felt the moment deserved. It made the words stick in Harper's throat.

"Neither," said Harper quietly. Her voice cracked as tears traced damp streaks down her cheeks.

Helen's eyes grew wide. "Oh, sweetheart." She slid down the bench and put a fragile arm around Harper's shoulders. "That's okay. We wait for Cornell then."

"That's not what I mean," said Harper, shaking her head. She set the coin on the bench and reached for Helen's hand. "I'm going to defer." It came out as a hoarse whisper.

"Defer!?"

One glance at the look on her mother's crestfallen face, and Harper had to swallow hard around the growing lump in her throat. "For a year," she confirmed, forcing certainty back into

her tone. *"And then I'll reassess what makes the most sense. The admissions offices were very supportive of the decision..." She hesitated. "Given the circumstances."*

"The circumstances?" Helen's shoulders fell. "You're going to wait to go to school until after I die?"

Though she was not wrong, Harper felt her mother's words like a punch in the gut. "Please don't say it like that," she whispered, voice cracking again. "We're going to make as many memories as we can with as much time as we have."

"And then?" The fatigue in her mother's voice was undeniable.

"And then," Harper said, steadying her tone, "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

Helen tipped back her head and closed her eyes again. She was silent for so long that Harper wondered if she had dozed off. The seagulls screamed overhead, diving at the white capped swells. A fishing boat idled past. A dog off leash came up the shoreline, treading bravely out onto the rocks, sniffing at the piles of seaweed washed ashore by the incessant waves.

"Just promise me one thing, Harper," Helen said, stronger than before. She pushed herself back up on the bench and looked hard at Harper, intensity and determination darkening her gaze. "Promise me you'll go."

"Go where?"

Helen waved a hand. "You know what I mean," she pressed. "Promise me that after the time we spend and the memories we make, when I'm gone, you'll go to school. You've made up your mind for now, and that's fine. Selfishly, I can live with being the reason you wait. But once I'm gone..."

Harper grabbed her mother's hand and squeezed. "I get it Mom," she assured her. "I promise. I'll go."

They looked out over the lake, the Chicago skyline cutting into the vast expanse of blue to their right, endless water and sky ahead, campus to their left.

"It's tails," Helen said placidly, looking down at the coin between them.

"What?"

"The quarter," Helen nodded. "Tails. Stay here. Northwestern."

Harper shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

Helen picked up the coin, turning it slowly to look at both sides, then laid it in Harper's lap. "Keep it," she murmured. "It will someday."

Part 1

Anything You Want to Be

12 Years Later

Chapter 1

At the tender age of six years old, Harper Andrews was told she could be anything she wanted to be, and like all children to whom the world has yet to reveal its hardships and heartache, she assumed that did, in fact, mean anything. She had no reason to believe otherwise. As a child, it's impossible to imagine the choices that will be made, the dreams that will be deferred, and the priorities that will change on the road to adulthood. Only much later would she learn that not only did opportunity and desire fail to exist in equal and abundant measure, but also that the great curse of growing up is having to fill a variety of roles that are as much an expectation as a desire.

Which was why, walking between the velvet ropes strung outside of Indie Lime, she considered what her best friend, Maggie Evans, was doing tonight that much more incredible. Since they were kids growing up down the street from each other, Maggie had dreamed of opening her own restaurant. But unlike the vast majority of their friends and classmates who had taken drastically different paths than they once imaged, at age 33, after a relentless pursuit of mentors and investors, Maggie was on the precipice of doing exactly what she naively set her sights on decades earlier.

Harper looked up at the twisted green and yellow neon above the front door, bold in the falling autumn twilight. She chuckled—equal parts pride and disbelief.

“Name?” The host consulted the guest list with an air of authority. He wore a navy suit with a skinny, lime green tie that Harper knew Maggie had agonized over for a week.

Harper couldn't wipe the grin off her face as she responded, “Harper Andrews,” fishing the invitation from her bag. The host reached for it, but Harper pulled away, holding it just beyond his grasp.

He raised an eyebrow. “Ma'am?”

“I'm sorry,” Harper laughed. She looked at the card. “It's just...I was going to keep it.” She fixed the man at the podium with an assured gaze. “It's not every day your best friend launches a restaurant in the heart of Chicago, you know?”

A corner of the man's mouth tugged upward. “Of course, Ms. Andrews,” he nodded. “The rest of your party is already here. I'll show you to your table.” He stepped from behind the podium and opened the front door with a dramatic flourish. “Welcome to Indie Lime,” he proclaimed, motioning Harper into the dining room.

Despite knowing the gesture was designed for maximum impact, and having seen the space through various phases of design and remodel, Harper was not immune to the effect of walking into the restaurant full of diners for the first time.

A long bar stretched out in front of her, glowing under hundreds of small pendant lights with glass shades in every hue of green suspended at various lengths from the copper-plated ceiling above. The black-tiled wall beyond sparkled with liquor bottles and cut crystal tumblers, interrupted by a pair of swinging doors and a long, horizontal window that looked into a gleaming stainless-steel kitchen. Thin strips of teak, behind which warm backlighting glowed, accented the opposite walls, and tropical plants spaced along the front windows added a homey, comfortable vitality. Positioned thoughtfully around the space, two dozen round, white-clothed tables of various sizes, surrounded by chairs upholstered in supple, tan, calfskin—a custom choice over which, Harper knew, Maggie had also agonized—accommodated Indie Lime's opening night guests. The room vibrated with energy.

Harper swallowed hard, tears of pride pricking at the corners of her eyes.

“This way, please,” the host indicated, moving Harper toward a four top table in the corner nearest the kitchen doors. The two men already seated looked up and pushed their chairs back, standing in unison as she approached.

“Thank you,” Harper said to the host, who stepped away when he realized Harper had no immediate intention to sit.

“You made it!” exclaimed Seth Evans over the hum of the room. His sandy hair was swept neatly to the side, and his blue eyes sparkled with nervous excitement. Harper stepped around the table to meet his embrace, and as he opened his arms, she saw he had paired his black suit with an appropriately themed lime green tie.

“Cute,” she said, nodding toward it as she stepped into the hug. “Congratulations. This is incredible.”

“I know,” Seth grinned widely.

Harper turned to the other man. “Hi,” she said, a hint of flirtation making its way into the single syllable. She leaned in to press a kiss to her husband’s darkly stubbled cheek.

Bryan Andrews slipped an arm around her waist. “Hi,” he replied with a smile, turning to kiss her properly.

“Can you believe this?” She pulled back to take in the entire space. “It’s actually happening.”

“It’s happening,” Bryan agreed, pulling out her chair.

As Harper slid into her seat, her attention shifted to the long window through which she could watch the commotion of the kitchen. She waited anxiously to see a flash of Maggie’s familiar, dark, curly ponytail bobbing among the bustling white chef’s coats.

Their waiter arrived at the table. “Good evening.” He filled Harper’s water glass. “On behalf of Head Chef Maggie Evans and the entire team, welcome to Indie Lime.” Harper felt her heart swell at hearing her best friend’s name announced so officially. “In honor of the opening, Chef is presenting a prix fixe menu focusing on her Caribbean roots and signature fusion flavors. Appetizers will arrive shortly. In the meantime, can I start anyone with a cocktail?” Harper glanced to the bar where three bartenders in dark denim aprons mixed drinks with precise and fluid movements.

“What does Chef recommend?” Harper asked. A tiny thrill coursed through her at the privilege of being able to refer to Maggie by her formal title.

The waiter smiled and referenced his notepad. “The classic mojito.”

Harper glanced between Bryan and Seth, nodding. “Three of those.”

“With your top-shelf rum,” added Bryan. Harper glanced at him in confusion. They already knew Maggie had curated one of the most extensive, and expensive, selections of Caribbean rums in Chicago.

The waiter offered an amused smile. “Sir, we have over 80 varieties of rum available, at least 74 of which are considered top shelf, six of which are over 100 dollars a pour, and one that, if it were available privately, would retail for over 10,000 dollars a bottle.”

Seth shrugged. “In that case, just make it Bacardi.”

“Very good.” The waiter nodded and set off toward the bar.

Harper smirked. “Now you’re testing the waitstaff?”

“Not at all,” Bryan insisted. “I just wanted to hear him say it. It’s impressive.”

“The whole thing is impressive,” agreed Harper, eyes sweeping the room and picking out recognizable faces in the gathering. Maggie’s parents were seated, separately, near the bar. Next to her mother, her Bahamian grandmother, wrapped in a stunning blue and yellow dress that

flowed around her like sun-drenched waves, held court with their waiter. A few tables over, seated with his new wife and stepson, Maggie's father scrolled on his phone while sipping, what Harper guessed to be, the most expensive rum and Coke he had ever ordered. There was a table of tittering young professionals that Harper knew to be friends of Maggie's from culinary school and a woman with an updo of intricately woven braids Harper recognized from photographs as the mentor who had offered Maggie her first sous chef position at a five-star restaurant. The woman watched the kitchen window intently, and Harper felt a sudden jolt of nerves along with excitement for her friend. The space was beautiful, and the atmosphere was exhilarating, but Maggie still had to cook.

The waiter returned with the tray of cocktails and a promise that their food would arrive presently.

"To an incredible night," Seth offered, holding up his glass. "One of many more to come at Indie Lime."

Bryan smiled. "To sharing it together."

"And to Maggie," Harper added, raising her glass to the other two.

"Cheers," Seth proclaimed. He closed his eyes as he took the first sip and sighed in satisfaction. "So, Bryan, how's tenured life?"

The conversation drifted to the inner workings of academia. At 36, Bryan had recently earned the distinction of being one of the youngest professors to earn tenure at Lancaster University's School of Environmental Sustainability. Seth worked as the dean of students in a STEM-driven charter high school downtown. Their friendship had formed easily over a shared passion for data, technology, and education. That their girlfriends, and eventual wives, also happened to be best friends would end up being just one of the many things they had in common.

Without Maggie among them tonight, however, Harper embraced her place as the third wheel and turned her attention back to the kitchen window. Her leg bounced anxiously under the table as she waited for the first plates to make their appearance. She wondered how Maggie felt, moments from sending her first dishes, months of preparation coming down to this moment. She hoped that, whatever the storm of emotions, Maggie would take a moment and savor it. Harper had once known the thrill of standing on the edge of achievement, of accomplishing the very thing she had worked hardest for. Hers slipped away, but even now, the dull ache of regret remained. She wanted so much more for her friend.

An excited murmur rippled through the dining room as a line of waitstaff trailed from the kitchen bearing trays of white ceramic plates.

"Tonight," their waiter laid the first plate in front of Harper, "we begin with a fried conch croquette, pickled pineapple tartar sauce and a lime infused chili oil." The dish was beautifully presented with tiny vesicles of lime arranged among artistic dots and swirls of oil on which the croquettes were staged. Harper glanced around the room, wondering if it would be distasteful to take pictures and seeking anyone who might have thought to do the same. "Enjoy," the waiter bowed slightly to the table as he departed.

There was a moment of eager, nervous hesitancy as Harper, Bryan, and Seth exchanged glances before picking up their silverware and taking the first bites. A collective sigh of relief settled among them. As hoped, the food was indescribably good.

The meal continued, a stream of colorful, flavorful, beautiful dishes from which Harper was certain she could not choose a favorite. Mussels in a rich coconut curry sauce. Hearty white fish in a lime and potato broth. Roasted oxtail served in the style of osso bucco. A savory plantain lasagna. When the small, perfectly proportioned dish of Chantilly cream with a chilled,

tropical fruit reduction was placed before her, Harper realized Maggie had thoughtfully curated the meal to the last bite. She was neither uncomfortably full, nor lacking for any substance, flavor, texture or spice. She laid the tiny dessert spoon next to her empty dish and sighed with contentment.

“Wow,” she breathed.

Bryan squeezed her knee under the table. “She did it.”

“Yes, she did,” Seth agreed in a distracted voice, his attention on the kitchen window where Maggie was now clearly visible and speaking to the host.

Harper fought the urge to wave and call out to her friend. Then Maggie disappeared from the window, and the host moved to the center of the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he announced. The buzz of conversation quieted, and for the first time, the noises of the kitchen—the clanging of pots and the clattering of dishes—filled the space. Then, they too died away. The host smoothed a hand over his tie, holding the room in a suspended moment of anticipation. “May I introduce, Chef de Cuisine, Maggie Evans!” He gestured broadly to the kitchen doors as Maggie stepped out, white chef coat buttoned high on her shoulder, lime green apron tied at her waist, and tight black curls pulled back from her face where she wore a confident, yet humble smile. The dining room burst into applause, diners rising to their feet as Maggie nodded in gratitude and recognition.

Harper glanced at Seth and found him watching with tears in his eyes. Her own throat tightened. Maggie began a lap of the room, stopping at tables to make introductions and accept congratulations. Her father gave her a gentle, yet awkward, hug, while his wife merely nodded and patted Maggie’s hand where it rested on the back of her chair. Her grandmother overwhelmed her, holding Maggie’s olive face in her dark hands and booming praise and adulations in a thick accent for all the surrounding tables to overhear. Harper knew it meant the world to Maggie that her grandma had made the trip; she had been the first one to let her get near a stove when her family visited the islands each summer.

Maggie shook hands around the far side of the room, stopping briefly for selfies with her culinary school friends and a lingering hug with her restaurateur mentor. Then, she turned to the table in the corner nearest the kitchen doors and, with a smile that suddenly bordered on shy, walked into the waiting arms of her husband and best friends.

“Oh my God!” Harper exclaimed, pulling her in. “I’m so proud of you. You absolutely crushed it.”

“Outstanding,” confirmed Bryan. “Really Maggie, it’s beyond words.”

“How do you feel?” asked Seth, admiration glowing in his eyes.

Maggie took a slow breath, blowing it out dramatically as she looked around the room. “Unreal,” she said simply. “It’s been an incredible night.”

Seth draped an arm over her shoulders and pressed a kiss to her temple. “You’re going to have lots of incredible nights.”

Waitstaff circled the dining room with flutes of champagne, and Harper accepted the glass offered to her. The bubbles rose like flecks of glitter in the dim light, giving a magical, ethereal quality to the final act of the evening.

“Speech!” called an overzealous guest from the bar.

“Speech!” Scattered voices picked up the call across the dining room.

Maggie smiled reluctantly before stepping out from under Seth’s arm.

“First, tonight I want to thank my waitstaff and the team behind the bar. They are the face and the pulse of Indie Lime and are the finest at what they do.” A polite smattering of applause

punctuated the room. "Next, to my team in the kitchen," Maggie glanced at the long window where half a dozen chefs now lined up, champagne glasses in hand. "If the staff out here is the face, then my crew back there is the heart and soul. Thank you for making my passion your own." More enthusiastic applause as a few of the chefs at the window waved and nodded at Maggie's acknowledgement. "And finally," she continued, "to my family, who has supported this ambition longer than anyone. To my mentors and teachers, who have taken the time to honor me with their wisdom and advice. And to my husband, Seth, who is the best and only partner I can imagine on this journey." Seth wiped at his eyes, and Maggie smiled back at him as she raised her glass. "Thank you all for sharing at my table. Cheers!"

"Cheers!" The response rumbled around the room as glassware tinkled together. A small crowd surged forward to further inundate Maggie and Seth with praise and congratulations.

Harper took Bryan's hand, stepping back from the table to give their friends some breathing room.

"Some night, huh?" She turned to face him, looking up into familiar green eyes framed in dark-rimmed glasses.

"I'd say," Bryan smiled and leaned down to kiss the crease in between her eyebrows. "Did you always believe that she'd do it?"

"Always," Harper confirmed immediately. "It was never a question for her."

Bryan nodded slowly. "It shows." He watched over Harper's shoulder as their friends continued to greet the doting dinner guests. Then his eyes slid back to Harper, and he smiled affectionately. "I'll go pull the car around for you," he offered. "I'm sure you want to catch her for just another minute if you can."

Harper squeezed his hand as he stepped away. "Thank you," she said, turning around to face the crush of people still surrounding Maggie. While Harper didn't need a throng of people fawning over her best friend as confirmation, there was no denying Maggie was an absolute triumph. Tonight was the culmination of years of hard work, preparation, and sacrifice. Harper felt honored to be a part of it.

She caught Maggie's eye through a gap in the crowd, prompting Maggie to disentangle herself from two men in pinstripes and beg off another two conversations in passing as she moved toward Harper.

"Thanks for being here," she said, and for the first time, Harper heard the edge of exhaustion in her voice.

"Are you kidding?" Harper smiled. "We wouldn't have missed this for the world. Can you believe you did it?"

Maggie shrugged, noncommittal. "Yes, and no," she admitted. "I mean, of course I was going to do it, but it still feels like a dream."

"Enjoy every single second," Harper said, stepping forward for a hug. They held each other, years of history seeping into the embrace. When she pulled away, Harper noticed a sheen in Maggie's eyes that she knew matched her own. "Bryan's bringing the car around. Lunch Monday?"

Maggie started to protest, but Harper interrupted. "I know you don't open until five, and you need to eat regardless of everything else going on. Your team can run prep without you for an hour, can't they? At least let me buy you someone else's cooking."

"It won't be as good," Maggie smirked.

"It never has been," Harper smiled back. "Now the rest of Chicago knows, too."

"Maggie!" Seth called behind them. "*Bon Appétit* would like a word."

Maggie turned to Harper; her brown eyes stretched as wide as her grin. "I better go." She pulled Harper into a quick hug. "Monday. It's a date. Love you." She turned, immediately swallowed back into the waiting crowd.

The waitstaff scurried to clear tables as Harper worked her way around the edge of the dining room, stopping briefly to kiss Maggie's mom and grandmother on both cheeks. At the door, she looked back a final time. Maggie talked animatedly to a reporter taking notes. It was a glorious night, but that success needed to sustain, and Harper again felt the smallest pang of nerves for her friend.

Nerves...and something else. Harper looked away, thanking the host who held the door as she stepped out onto the sidewalk.

A deep chill had settled over the darkened streets, and as the door closed behind her, and the hum and bustle of the restaurant faded away, Harper felt like she stepped from a dream world back into a cold reality. The breeze cut easily through her satin blouse, and she wrapped her arms around her chest, hugging them to herself, trying hard not to focus on the feeling that needled her uncomfortably.

Bryan rolled up to the curb in their black Subaru, and Harper hurried toward the car, eager to leave the cold and her wandering thoughts behind. She was thrilled for Maggie. Proud of Maggie. Excited for Maggie. Anxious, yes, but only because she cared so much that her best friend succeed. So why, she wondered, as she slid into the passenger seat and took one last glance through the glowing front windows of Indie Lime, was the emotion now growing in her chest no longer one of adoration, but jealousy?