

PROLOGUE

“Edi. Are you sleeping?”

I’m whispering, even though the point is to wake her up. Her eyelids look bruised, and her lips are pale and peeling, but still she’s so gorgeous I could bite her face. Her dark hair is growing back in. “Wake up, my little chickadee,” I whisper, but she doesn’t stir. I look at Jude, her husband, who shrugs, runs an open palm over his handsome, exhausted face.

“Edichka,” I say a little louder, Slavically. She opens her eyes, squinches them shut again, then snaps them back open, focuses on my face, and smiles. “Hey, sweetheart,” she says. “What’s up?”

I smile back. “Oh, nothing,” I say. *A lie!* “Jude and I were just making some plans for you.”

“Plans like banh mi from that good banh mi place?” she says. “I’m starving.” She rubs her stomach over her johnny. “No. Not starving. Not even hungry, actually. I just want to taste something tasty, I guess.” She tries to sit up a little and then remembers the remote, and the top of her bed rises with the mechanical whirring that would be on my Sloan Kettering soundtrack mixtape, if I made one. Also the didgeridoo groaning of the guy in the room next door. The sunny

lunch-tray person saying, “Just what the doctor ordered!” even when it’s weirdly unwholesome “clear liquids” like black coffee and sugar-free Jell-O.

“Banh mi can definitely be arranged,” I say. I’m stalling, and Jude sighs. He pulls a chair over by her head, sits in it.

“Awesome,” Edi says. She fishes a menu from the stack crammed into her bedside drawer. “Extra spicy mayo. No daikon.”

“Edi,” I say. “I have been madly in love with you for forty-two years. Am I going to suddenly forget your abiding hatred of radishes?”

She smiles dotingly at me, flutters her eyelashes.

“Wait,” I say. “*Extra* spicy mayo? Or extra-spicy *mayo*?”

She says, “What?” and Jude says, “Edi.” She hears it in his voice, turns to him and says, “What?” again, but I’m already starting to cry a little bit.

“Shit,” she says. “No, no. You guys.” She wrings her hands. “I’m not ready for this. Whatever this is. What is this?”

Here’s what this is: Out in the hallway, Jude had asked about Edi’s treatment. “Isn’t she supposed to get her infusion today?” he’d said, and the nurse had said cheerfully, “Nope! We’re all done with that.” And so, it seemed, we were. Nobody exactly talked to us about this decision. It was like it had already happened, in some other time and place. You order a burger and the kitchen makes an executive decision in the back. “We’re out of burgers,” your server says. “There’s just this plate of nothing with a side of morphine and grief.”

Ellen, the social worker, had taken Jude and me into her office to give us a *make the most of her remaining days* talk—while simultaneously clarifying that this most-making would need to happen *not there*. We were confused. “I’m confused,” I said, and Ellen had nodded slowly, crinkled her eyes into a pitying smile, and handed us a pamphlet called “Next Steps, Best Steps.” It was about palliative care.

Hospice. “But these are the *worst* steps,” I said, because apparently nothing is too obvious for me to mention, and Ellen passed me a box of tissues. “I feel like I’m mad at you, but also like this might not be your fault,” I said, truthfully, and she laughed and said, “I promise you I understand.” I liked her after that.

Ellen tried to help us figure out what to do. Edi and Jude’s son, Dashiell, is seven and has already spent three of those years living with his mom’s illness. Ellen wondered if bringing her home for hospice care might simply be too traumatizing, and suggested that inpatient care might be a better option, given the likelihood of a swift and harrowing end-of-life scenario. This seemed not unsensible. Dash’s last visit had been a disaster: when Edi bent to kiss him good-bye, blood had poured out of her nose and terrified him. It had just been a garden-variety nosebleed, it turned out, but Dash, already fragile, was stained. Literally stained. Figuratively scarred. “You might even have him say good-bye to her sooner than later,” Ellen offered. “So that he isn’t worrying about when it’s coming.”

“When what’s coming?” I said. The inevitability of Edi’s death was like a crumpled dollar bill my brain kept spitting back out. “Sorry,” I said a second later. “I understand.”

We called the recommended hospices from the hospital lobby, but they all had a wait list. “A wait list?” Jude had said. “Do they understand the premise of hospice?” We pictured an intake coordinator making endless calls, crossing name after name off her list. “Yes, yes. I see. Maybe next time!”

“Sloan says she’s got to be out by tomorrow midday,” Jude said, and passed me the cigarette we were splitting. We were not the only people huddled in our puffy jackets outside the famous cancer hospital, exhaling our stupidly robust good health away into the January cold, where clouds of smoke should have been gathering to form the words *We’re so fucked*.

“There’s a hospice up by us,” I said, and Jude looked at me unblinkingly for a few beats. I live in Western Massachusetts. He ground the butt under his heel, picked it up, and tossed it into a trash can. “It’s nice,” I said. “I’ve visited people there. It’s an actual house.”

“And?” he said.

I didn’t know. “I don’t know,” I said. “Would that be crazy? To bring her up there? I mean, they’re saying a week or two, maybe even less.”

“What would we do?” Jude said. “I really don’t want to take Dash out of school.”

“Yeah, no,” I said. “Don’t do that.”

“But I can’t leave him. Not now.”

“I know.” My hair was stuck in the zipper of my jacket, but I didn’t bother trying to get it out. My eyes were watering from smoke and cold and also from the crying I seemed to be doing.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Ash.”

“I know. I guess I’m not sure what I’m saying,” I said.

“Would Dash and I say good-bye to her *here*?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Could you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I mean, you were at our *wedding*, Ash. ‘Til death do us part. I can’t really imagine leaving her now—who I’d even be if I did that.”

“Jude.” I leaned forward to touch my forehead to his. “You wouldn’t be leaving her. You’d be sparing your child. Edi’s child. You’ve done ‘in sickness and health’ truly magnificently. We’d just be”—What? What would we be?—“seeing her off in stages. Tag-teaming it.”

“It’s kind of your dream,” Jude teased. “Getting her all to yourself.”

“I know!” I said. “I mean, finally!”

“You can be her knight in shining armor like you’ve always

wanted.” He laughed, not unkindly. Does he love me? Yes. Do I drive him crazy? Also yes. But it was true that I’d felt stuck away up in New England, happy enough in my life there but wishing I were still in New York with everybody I’d grown up with, guiltily wishing I were closer to Edi. Now my daughters were mostly grown, and also my husband seemed to have left me. I was in the perfect place in my life at the perfect time of Edi’s. Not perfect in the normal sense, obviously.

“You’ve always accused me of being an opportunist,” I said to Jude, and he said, “True.”

We cried a little more, our puffy arms wrapped around each other’s necks and heads. Then Jude retrieved a bottle of lavender hand sanitizer from his coat pocket, gestured at me to hold out my hands, sprayed them, sprayed his own, misted his hair for good measure. I shook a couple of Tic-Tacs into his palm and mine, and we went fragrantly back in through the revolving door to wake Edi up and ask her something we hadn’t even finished figuring out. The worst question in the whole entire world, as it turned out.

CHAPTER 1

At least I'm not sleeping with the hospice music therapist.

Cedar. He's twenty years old, twenty-five tops, and he has a voice like an angel who maybe swallowed a bag of gravel. His guitar case is covered in stickers: a smiley face, a skull, Drake, Joni Mitchell. "When you're famous, I'm going to say I knew you when!" I said once, and it was a mistake. He shook his head, his baby forehead suddenly crosshatched with distress. I'd gotten him so wrong. "No, no," he said. "This is it. I'm already doing the thing I want to do."

"Of course!" I said quickly. "It's such a perfect job for you." And he said, "Yeah, though sometimes I dream that somebody requests something, and I'm like, 'Hang on a sec, I don't know that one. Let me just look it up on my phone.' But while I'm googling 'Luck Be a Lady' or whatever, they die. And that's the last thing anyone ever said to them. 'Hang on a sec.'"

"Shit, Cedar," I said, and he said, "Right?"

Now he's sitting on the end of the bed, strumming the beginning of something. The Beatles, "Across the Universe." Edi's eyes are closed, but she smiles. She's awake in there somewhere. "Cedar," she says, and he says, "Hey, Edi," lays a palm on her shin, then returns

to his song, strumming some and singing, humming the parts he can't remember. My heart fills with, and releases, grief in time to my breathing.

We've been—*Edi's* been—at the Graceful Shepherd Hospice for three weeks now. Three weeks is a long time at hospice, but also, because of what hospice means, it kind of flies by. But it flies by crawlingly, like a funhouse time warp. Like life with a newborn: It's breakfast, all milk and sunshine, and then it's feeding and changing that recur forever, on a loop, like some weird *soiled nighties* circle of hell. And then somehow it's the next day again, and you're like, "Who's hungry for their breakfast?" Only *nobody* is hungry for their breakfast. Except Edi. "Oooh. Make me French toast?" she said this morning to Olga, the Ukrainian nurse we love, who responded, "Af *khorse*."

The hospice had estimated, when we checked her in, that Edi would be their *guest* for just a week or two. "We don't think of this as a place where people come to die," the gravely cheerful intake counselor had said to us. "We think of it as a place where people come to *live!*" "To live *dyingly*," Edi had whispered to me, and I'd laughed. We all refer to the hospice as Shapely—as in, "I'll meet you over at Shapely"—because Edi, only half-awake when we were first talking about it, thought it was called the Shapely Shepherd. "Like a milkmaid in one of those lace-up outfits?" she'd said, and I'd said, "Wait. What?" And then, when I pictured what she was picturing, "Yes. Exactly like that."

Hospice is a complicated place to pass the time because you are kind of officially dying. "Am I, though?" Edi says sometimes, when dying comes up, as it is wont to come up in hospice, and I pull my eyebrows up and shrug, like *Who knows?* "If anything happens to me . . ." she likes to start some sentences—about Dash or Jude or her journals or her jewelry. And I say, "What on earth would happen

to you?” and she laughs and says, “I know, right? But just on the off chance.”

Sometimes the hospice physician comes through—the enormous, handsome man we call Dr. Soprano because he looks like James Gandolfini—and she says, “When do you think I can get out of here?” You can tell that he can’t tell if she’s kidding or not, probably because she’s not really kidding. “Good question,” he says, poker-faced, rummaging through her box of edibles and breaking off a tiny nibble of the chocolate kind he likes. “Do you mind?” he says, after the fact, and then, “If anyone’s getting out of here, Edi, it is definitely you.”

Which, to be honest, is not saying much. The average age of the other patients is a hundred and fifty. They’re so old, some of these folks, their bodies so worn down and used up, that sometimes when you peek into their rooms to say hi you can’t even tell if they’re there in their beds or not. They’re nearly completely flat, like paper dolls, with just a tiny fluff of cotton glued at the top for hair. You half expect to see a ghost climb up out of their body, like in a cartoon. One of them likes me to come in and hold her hand. She always offers me a lemon drop from her special tin and says, “Did you come straight off the school bus?” And I say, “I did, Ruth! I came right to you.” Forty-five-year-old me, fresh off the school bus with my under-eye bags and plantar fasciitis and boobs hanging down my torso like beige knee socks with no legs in them. There’s nothing like hospice to remind you that decrepitude is totally relative.

“I believe I may be mildly *demented*,” Ruth whispered once, apologetically, and I was like, “Oh, please. Same.”

Ruth has been here for over a year, which I know is a total inspiration to Edi, although she has never mentioned it. Ruth is also the person who watches *Fiddler on the Roof* every afternoon and also some nights. The volume is turned way up and, for hours every day,

it's the soundtrack of everybody's dying. You're helping someone into compression stockings or fresh briefs during "Matchmaker." Someone is weeping in your arms while Tevye yiddle-diddles "If I Were a Rich Man." It's "Sunrise, Sunset," only you're cry-laughing because there's a turd on the floor and you don't know if it's human or from one of the resident dogs.

Now we hear the overture starting up, Ruth clapping in delight, whooping from her room, and Cedar says, "That's my cue," and zips his guitar into its case. He kisses Edi's cheek, kisses mine, and closes the door gently on his way out.

"Oh my god, Ash," Edi says. Her eyes are still closed. "You're sleeping with Cedar."

"Edi! Jesus. I'm not a grave robber."

She laughs and says, "I think you mean *cradle* robber."

"Ugh," I say, and palm my forehead. "Yes, sorry." There are many hidden awkwardnesses in hospice, like when you say things like "This gelato is so good I'm dying," or "Oof, I ate too much gelato, kill me," and then remember that there's an actually dying person also eating the gelato, or a person who might genuinely wish you would kill them. "He's so cute, though," I add. "Timothée Chalamet would play him in the movie." She smiles, wags a finger at me in warning.

"Don't," she says, and I mean it when I say, "I would seriously never."

"Hey," she says, her eyes still closed. "Honey's coming over in a little. I hope that's cool with you. He's bringing me some stuff." Honey is my ex-husband. Or he would be, if we weren't too cheap and lazy to get an actual divorce. The *stuff* he brings Edi is from the dispensary in town, which he owns. Or, I guess, which *we* own, technically.

"Of course," I say. "He's practically living at the house again. I think he's coming by later, to see Jonah."

“Wait,” she says, “Jonah’s still here?”

“*Here* here?” I’m not always sure how much she’s following. “Like in the room? No,” I say.

“No,” she says, and opens her eyes. “I know that. Here in town.” Her brother comes up from New York on the weekends, and he’s usually gone by Monday. But he’s staying an extra couple of days this week, telecommuting from my house to squeeze in a few more visits at Shapely.

“Yeah,” I say. “He came by this morning. But maybe you were kind of out of it? From the meds.” She nods, shakes her head, pissed. She doesn’t remember.

“Fuuuuuck,” she says. “This suuuuucks.”

I picture her mind like a bar, her thoughts and memories nursing their last round. It’s closing time, and you don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here. I untangle her tubes and wires, hang them on the pole behind her, and climb into her bed. A few little tears drip out of her eyes, which are closed again. “It does,” I say, laying my head on her pillow. I touch a tear with my fingertip, touch my fingertip to my lips. “It totally sucks.”