Chapter One

The clock radio alarm clicks on. ". . . at first, you know, I just heard a wailing . . ." A man's deep, lilting voice booms into the stillness of Hannah and Jake's bedroom. ". . . and when I passed through the platform gate," the voice continues, "I noticed a white Seagram's liquor box sitting in a corner and there, inside it, was a baby, all swaddled up in nothing but yesterday's Newsday. God knows for how many hours the poor creature had been there, its face beet-red from hollering its tiny head off."

What a way to come into this life, Hannah thinks, as she turns toward Jake, taps him on the shoulder, and whispers, "Ten more minutes?" She feels him reach out for the snooze button and, thankful for the sudden silence, closes her eyes against the shards of sunlight beginning to sneak in through the narrow gaps in the blinds. Then, what seems like only seconds later, the radio announcer drifts back into her consciousness. "It's going to be a hot one on this twenty eighth day of July . . ."

And now completely out of the fog of a short sleep, she hears, "Temps are expected to reach the upper eighties by this afternoon, with a potential threat of a thunder shower or two."

She can only groan now as her sleepy, rambling thoughts become suddenly fixed on the contents of the FedEx envelope that had arrived unexpectedly late yesterday afternoon: A poisonous missile from Artie's lawyer's office to Jake and Hannah's. Seeing their full names printed in such an officious manner made the whole situation feel unreal but daunting at the same time, as if the packet of legal papers – the Answer to the Counterclaims – were pieces of muddled fiction she had to read over and over, just to make some sense of it all.

The United States District Court, Eastern District of New York Playful Promotions and Arthur Grossman

Plaintiffs,

-against-

Bloom & Co., and Hannah Bloom and Jacob Bloom

Defendants.

"There's been a crash," she hears, and at once envisions a pile-up of cars, trucks, and SUVs. "So, it's best to avoid the Cross Bronx Expressway if you're heading into Manhattan."

And that's exactly what she'll be doing on this blistering, sultry morning; heading into Manhattan for her mother's seventy-fifth birthday

. . . .

The westbound train rattles into the Stamford station. Hannah steps into the first car, finds a row of vacant seats and, after settling into the one by the window, retrieves her battered copy of Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem from the bottom of her straw Kenya bag. As she flips through the book to find her place, the photograph of her two young daughters, taken at sleep-away camp, slips out from between the pages – a souvenir for parents on visiting day. She studies their faces. Sighs. And opening her hand, she presses it up against her belly, where her third, barely the size of a peanut, is steadily growing inside her.

Now she frets. Jake insisted he will manage simply fine without her today when he talks to their attorneys about the claims in the lawsuit. Besides, he said, he can always call her if he needs to ask her something.

Trying to redirect her focus back to Arendt's book – her Bic pen poised to write notes to herself as well as to underline strings of words she feels compelled to come back to – she becomes sidetracked again when she hears one of the two young girls in the seat behind her, chatting too loudly about her boyfriend and their breakup. Half amused and very thankful those days are over for her, Hannah turns to look at the all-too-familiar scenery outside her window. First come the winding, leafy side streets, the manicured backyards, and the masses of blossoming pink and blue hydrangeas that barely hide the in-ground swimming pools and wooden swing sets. Then strings of small shops and a little farther on down the line – and here she is still unable to pull herself away from the view rushing by – a park of corporate headquarters housed in all-glass,

high-rise office buildings. Luckily for her younger self, she thinks, stifling a small smile of satisfaction, she never had to work in corporate America. Looking back at the younger person she once was, she is positive she would never have made it.

The train conductor is suddenly at her side. She fumbles in her wallet for her ticket, hands it over and turns back to the window. But now she barely pays any attention to what is outside. Memories from her youth have their insistent way. They barge in on her like too chatty, uninvited guests.

Determined to ignore all those old, unwished-for memories, she props up an elbow on the narrow window ledge, rests her chin on her clenched fist, and looks back down at the page she has been trying to read. As she struggles to concentrate on the words, a sudden glint of sunshine crosses her face and, once again, she is brought back to the window. Through the murky glass, she gazes out at the fleeting view of Long Island Sound, a picture of watery crystals, bobbing up and down in the sunlight and sees herself not all that differently – sometimes in the light, other times out of it – but always bobbing up and down.

The misty trace of an old dream drifts by. Weightless. More like a feather tickling at the barriers of her consciousness. And while she can't stop listening to the break-up chatter from the girls behind her, she also can't stop her twenty-year-old self from hijacking her thoughts. Half a lifetime ago and it's almost, but not completely, impossible for her to recognize who she was then. Floundering? For sure. Scared of where her life was headed? Always. Worried she had screwed up so badly, her path back would be lost to her forever? Luckily and thankfully, it never was. And as crazy as it sounds, even to herself, she believes there has always been a strange force in her life – plain old lady luck, perhaps? – to keep her on track.

As she contemplates the hardships and heartaches of growing up, the train unexpectedly picks up speed and she's jerked forward in her seat, almost dropping her book. She catches it just before it slides off her lap. Her pen, though, clatters to the floor and rolls away beneath her seat.

Never mind, she tells herself, as she digs into her bag for another, then forces herself back to the text. Although the going is painfully slow, and for reasons she can't altogether grasp, she nonetheless feels compelled to incorporate Arendt's words into her own identity, her origins, and to

help her find and cement those jagged edges; that incomprehensible legacy passed down to her.

Her life. Ha! What legacy will she have to pass on to her own children? What has the world taught her?

Dropped from college for her failing grades at the end of her sophomore year, she went to work at the main branch of the New York Public Library, the one on the corner of Forty-Second Street and Fifth Avenue. Fortunately for her, the photocopying division – where she spent her days Xeroxing Russian chemical abstracts for American pharmaceutical companies – had proven to be a very forgiving place to work, filled as it was, with college dropouts like herself, all in varying stages of their education and all trying to find themselves among the books, the dust, and the bright green bars of light, faithfully rolling back and forth under the glass tops of the Xerox machines, as they spewed out those valued copies of the pages taken from the many different volumes, all crammed with the symbols of an indecipherable language.

She remembers the many days when, for no true reason at all, she would call in sick. Most often, it was after nine o'clock, after she was due at work, after she was already on the subway on her way into Manhattan from where she lived in Queens. Standing in the overcrowded car, barely able to hang onto the strap above her head, she would feel the summer heat wrap around her like a straitjacket. And with no room to move, there always seemed to be a strange man standing too close behind her, rubbing his front up against her backside, in time to the jerky movement of the subway. Or else she'd become overwhelmed and sickened at the stink of garlic, from the previous evening's dinner, blowing in her face. In either case, by the time the train screeched to a halt at the Roosevelt Avenue station, the last express stop in Queens, she'd feel so overheated, dizzy, and nauseated, all she could think to do was bolt from the subway car, march the few steps across the platform and wait for her homebound train; tremendous relief overriding her spineless guilt.

Squealing to a stop at 125th Street, the doors slide open and four or five people get off, briefcases in hand. As she watches them rush away, she likes to imagine what jobs await them. Then she thinks of her own at the company she shares with Jake. Is being a boss of this destiny of theirs, with all its irregularities, missed paychecks, long hours and uncertainty, worth it? Yes. Absolutely yes. At least that is what she believed the day before yesterday, the day before the FedEx envelope arrived at their door.

But not today, no, not now. Although, she must admit, right at this very moment – with her two children away at sleep-away camp in the Adirondacks, her third growing inside her, and the freedom that allows her this day-dreaming window seat on the 10:55 to Manhattan – all their hard work and her worry has made it worthwhile. But, like a sudden flip of the switch, a different reality shines its too-bright light in her head and an image of Artie stares at her; his dyed-dark hair slicked back off his forehead, the phone piece forever sticking out of his ear, and his all-too-ready tearing eyes. She looks out of the window again, the landscape industrial now. Concrete buildings house the small factories they pass. Their names and addresses, in desperate need of fresh coats of paint, are peeling off the whitewashed walls. She wonders how they deal with their problems.

The train enters the tunnel under Park Avenue and the girls' chatter behind her becomes even louder, as if the darkness outside the windows has impeded their hearing as well. Not so for Hannah's memory, though. Unimpeded now, it brings her away from the current problems with Artie and clicks back through her mind's eye, like a sped-up slide show. Of course, she knew all about those same, sad, unavoidable dramas as the one she is overhearing from the seat behind her. But oddly enough, it's not her own story that immediately comes to mind, but one from the new girlfriend of an ex-boyfriend of hers. She smiles at the memory. And looking up, is suddenly surprised by her own reflection in the blackness of the train's window. Eyes hollowed out and cheeks like dents in her face stare back at her, ghostlike. As her memory unfolds, she wonders if she ever knew why her ex's new girlfriend had come to see her in the first place. She can only remember the darkness of the evening enveloping the parked car they sat in, the passing headlights shining too brightly in her eyes, and this new girlfriend who, with tears welling up in her eyes and through a stuffy nose, told Hannah that she was pregnant. And Catholic, she'd added, as though news of the pregnancy itself wasn't bad enough. Hannah remembers feeling sorry for this new girlfriend and, at the same time, relieved for herself, as though she had just walked out into the wide-open air from the underside of a narrow escape. It could have been her sitting in the driver's seat, fists hitting the steering wheel, tears streaming down her face, nose running, and a future already made up for her before she was anywhere near ready to take it on.

In the tunnel outside her window the single bulbs, placed yards apart and barely illuminating the part of the walls they shine from, tell her

they are close to Grand Central. But she can't pull herself away from the blackness outside her window. In its darkness she imagines the Seagram's liquor box in a corner, the newborn wrapped up in the blanket of newsprint inside it, and even the sound of its wailing. But can she imagine the raw desperation its mother must have felt?

Curling around her like a wisp of smoke, that old memory, stealing into her consciousness, continues. She's standing next to a crib, oohing and aahing at the baby. Its mother, proud and happy, lifts the baby out of its crib. But the baby's father, hobbling from one foot to the next, darts poisonous dark looks at Hannah, as if she were somehow responsible for this new life and had purposefully arranged it for him. Had he forgotten that it was he who did the breaking up? He, who did the cheating, the hurting? He, who had found a new girlfriend? How strange and unnerving to be thinking of all this ancient history now.

Hannah's hands flatten again to the small mound of her stomach, a new habit she has acquired, she realizes. It's almost as if her hands spread wide on the outside can protect the growth of her unborn baby on the inside. When she delivered the news of her pregnancy to Jake, he was so stunned at first; he was speechless. "Aren't two children the absolute perfect number?" he'd asked, when his words finally came back to him. "One for each of our hands to hold on to. One for you and one for me. Yes, two is the perfect number. Besides," he'd continued on a roll now, "aren't you about to turn forty, for God's sake?" As if this was news to her. "And to top it all off," he concluded, as though she alone had created this little being, "how will you manage?" You. Not we. But the question suddenly became a moot point when three or four days later, she began to bleed. Every day a little more. And poor Jake worried he had jinxed her pregnancy by questioning whether he'd even wanted it.

Was it the uncertainty that had propelled and then instilled in her an even stronger urge for this child to live – to bring back that sensation of a new life growing within her and to feel that mysterious wateriness stirring inside her?

By the time the bleeding had stopped, Jake felt he had been granted a reprieve. Their baby would be born.

She shakes her head at the memory, looks down at the open book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and reads: *It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying*

banality of evil. Hannah reads the sentence again, and again, the words bobbing in her mind like the daggers of sunlight on the water. *The Banality of Evil.* Are those the words that had infuriated the world's Jewish community?

Although she feels guilty about the slow progress she's made, she refolds the corner of the page she's been trying to read, re-attaches her pen to the cover, puts the book back into her bag and gets up to wait by the door for the train to arrive at the station. Looking out into the darkness of the underground railway passage, she's brought back again to the abandoned baby. Hannah can't imagine going to term, giving birth, and afterward deserting her newborn. Yet can she guarantee to herself, right now, that there might never be a condition – lifesaving, perhaps – under which she would have to leave her baby to a chance upbringing?

As soon as the doors slide open and she steps onto the platform at Grand Central, a blanket of heat presses down on her and another thought takes hold in her mind. She has lived a protected and lucky life so far. And as that thought settles, another crashes into her. Nebulous and unformed, except for a sudden queasy sensation, it rises like jitters from the pit of her stomach, up through her chest and into her throat. *The banality of evil* is one thing to consider, but what about the banality of life? Is she guilty of that? Of accepting her own life, not for what she wants out of it, but rather as it comes to her, willy-nilly? Without direction? Of believing herself ordinary? Does the desire for this third child, by necessity, cause her to push away those answers to her questions, to let them slide back behind her conscious thought, as easily as shuffling the queen of hearts behind a knave of diamonds in a card game? Yes, her answer must be yes, at least for the near future. Because her life's priority is the well-being of her two children and now, with the third coming, she knows this will prolong the finding of her answers even further into her future. Her poetry will wait. It will gestate and grow inside her mind as surely as the baby will mature and grow inside her womb.

Out on the street, she hoists her Kenya bag onto her shoulder, reaches for the sunglasses propped on top of her head and brings them down to shade her eyes. As she hurries uptown on Lexington Avenue, dodging the lunchtime crowd, she keeps an eye out for a Korean grocery where she will buy her mother a bunch of fresh flowers for her birthday. Why, she wonders, is she always so useless at choosing presents?