

Part One: **LOSS**

Chapter 1

A plane taking off always gets me sexually aroused. The huge body rising up over a big city, higher and higher. I'm always surprised each time it happens to me; the heavy breathing, the moaning, even now, after eleven years of marriage, when sex has become the boring gymnastics that Uri and I perform on the orthopedic mattress his parents bought us as a wedding gift. We always do it on Friday afternoons, when Tamar goes to her Girl Scouts meeting, and I always think about other things or other men. Funny, considering I decided to marry Uri mostly because I couldn't keep my hands off him. Basically, I wanted more opportunities to have sex with him, besides quickies in my tiny Beetle, the steering wheel leaving bruises all over my body.

Two years later, when Tamar was born, Uri came to the hospital with a huge bouquet of wildflowers. I cried happy tears. Four years later, when my mother died, I cried for the last time. Since then I haven't been able to cry at all, and all the tears accumulated inside me, forming a little lake. But I still find some small comfort in those sweet little orgasms in our double bed, and I really love that Uri likes to kiss me even without my makeup on, with black circles under my eyes, and even before I brush my teeth. I like to masturbate lying next to him while fantasizing about orgies with black men. He'll ask, "Did you come?" I'll say, "Yes," and he'll hug me and fall asleep like a baby after breast feeding.

There's a long line for boarding. In front of me stands an elderly couple. She has stringy, orange-tinted hair and a small mean face. Her beauty went to hell ages ago. She spits out her words when she talks to her husband. Her face twists and gets even uglier; she looks like she swallowed something bitter and can't get the taste out of her mouth. Her little husband gazes at her with puppy dog eyes, trying to appease her, and he already knows he hasn't got a chance. Both of them have that look of disappointment that I often see on the faces of old people. She is disappointed in him, he is disappointed in himself, the children, their friends. Will I have that same expression on my face twenty or thirty years from now?

Backpackers, two clear-skinned, slightly built Buddhist monks in saffron colored robes, three young men and a barefoot girl in a purple T-shirt. My gaze lands on a miniature woman, bald with Asian features. Usually Asian women grow their shiny hair long, and I can't recall ever seeing a Thai woman with short hair, certainly not with a shaven head. I stare at her. Wide-open, eyebrow-less eyes, sickly yellow skin-tone. Clearly, her baldness is the result of chemotherapy. I am well acquainted with the symptoms from the time I spent on the oncology ward with my mother, when I still believed there was a chance that treatment might save her. She holds the hand of her fair-haired daughter, a pale little girl with terrified eyes, about Tamar's age. The girl holds on to her tiny mother with her own tiny hand, like someone trying to lean on a

matchstick to keep from falling into an abyss. She doesn't know yet what it's like to keep walking the face of the earth, when something inside you has died. A wave of compassion floods me. I want to hug her, and I suddenly miss Tamar, feeling sorry I didn't wake her before I left.

My eyes meet those of the flight attendant. She's standing at the entrance to the airplane, smiling at me.

"Hello." I return her smile and walk past her to my seat. And then I see him: a sad-looking, middle-aged man.

Chapter 2

At first, all I see are his fingers moving across the keyboard of the laptop balanced on his knees. Strong, yet delicate fingers, awkwardly try to navigate the too-narrow keyboard. A wedding band. He's in the aisle seat. When I stop beside him, he lifts his sad, honey-brown eyes. His eyes ask, "Do you want to get in?" I nod and push my too-big carry-on into the overhead bin above his head. I try to cram it in and shut the bin, but it refuses to lock. Another push, but no luck.

I'm leaning over him and struggling with my case. My stomach rubs against his shoulder. "Sorry," I mumble in English and glance at him. His sad, honey-brown eyes lift up from the screen, and his lips curl into a curious and mischievous grin. The contrast between the vulnerability in his eyes and the boldness of his lips surprises me, and once again, I shove my bag, shrug my shoulders and my smile says, "See how helpless I am." He sets his laptop on the window seat beside him, releases his seatbelt, unfolds himself from his seat, his body leaning toward me, and he stands before me in the narrow aisle.

He's a head taller than me, and my face almost touches his chest. He smells like aftershave and airport espresso. I look up at him. His face is so close that I can see his slightly chipped front tooth. I step back to give him access to my unwieldy blue bag, and his fingers gently, yet forcefully, take care of it, finally closing the bin with a click.

"Thank you," I blurt out, without looking at him, and start to maneuver myself into the window seat.

He bends over and takes his laptop from my seat. Our faces are close, almost touching.

"Sorry," I say. He sits beside me and goes back to his computer. His fingers, nimble and strong, go back to typing.

I peek at him from the corner of my eye. Forty-something. Maybe the start of a little paunch, black leather jacket trying to project the remains of coolness and a bad-boy youth, expensive shoes, a little scuffed. I can almost feel his thighs through his jeans, still pretty solid. Does he work out in a state-of-the-art gym where middle-aged men who fear the betrayal of their bodies invest in the self-disciplined regimen of bodybuilding to fight the battle against impending collapse? I glance at his computer screen. Not English... maybe Chinese? Maybe Thai.

Seven thirty a.m. The aircraft takes off, and two flight attendants, one who swings her hips, the other with smiling purple lips and doe eyes, walk past the seats checking that seatbelts are fastened. I look out the window and think of Uri, who is probably sending Tamar off to school with chocolate spread sandwiches in her backpack. Then he'll shave and go to the clinic, and only Waffle, our scrappy dog, and Shushu the anorexic cat, will be at home in

my empty and beautiful house, chewing on my shoes and tearing up what's left of the new rug that Uri and I bought on our last trip to Nepal.

I'm glad I wore my black wrap dress and not jeans. I take out my laptop, open the folder 'Screenplays for the Israel Film Fund,' and the file 'One Second of Bliss – version six.' I stare at the screen. Every morning for months, I've sat staring at this damned screenplay, which is supposed to deliver me from writing endless drafts for inane television series, finally opening the door to true filmmaking. But I can't write even one intelligible scene. The two-dimensional characters recite the silly words I've put in their mouths, and the screenplay, which I've been working on for five straight months, and had seemed so brilliant at first, encouraging me to postpone so many other things, suddenly seems so banal.

Chapter 3

This trip to Thailand was Uri's idea. One night, when I was sitting in the kitchen, depressed, he asked, "What's up with you?"

"I don't know, I feel stuck."

"As usual."

"I'm so miserable, I just want to die."

"You're always feeling miserable. You're never out of ideas on how to make yourself unhappy."

"You and your dumbass diagnoses! Don't you get it? Don't you realize, that after writing so many ridiculous screenplays for television, my mind is screwed up, and I can't write anything good? All that comes out is crap!"

"Alright, okay... poor you. But come on, enough with the pity party! Pull yourself together!"

"I can't control it."

"You can't control it; of course you can't control it, if you enjoy feeling like shit so much."

"That isn't true! You really piss me off! How come every time I feel miserable you have to get on my case and make me feel even worse?"

"You know what? Let me do something to make you happy. Why don't you go? Just take off somewhere. Go to Thailand, to Ko Phi Phi, you always say that village gives you inspiration. As far as I'm concerned, you can leave your cell phone at home. Cut yourself off completely. I'll even make all the arrangements."

The next morning Uri made some calls and booked me on the flight to Bangkok, and I made reservations for myself at the Sunshine Hotel for the first night.

Chapter 4

We're at cruising altitude now. I catch the honey-brown gaze checking out my bare thighs and peering at the screen filled with boring lines of dialog in Hebrew.

The doe-eyed flight attendant robotically performs the hand signals and gestures describing standard emergency procedures; how to jump from the aircraft in case we crash and how to position the oxygen mask. Then she distributes headphones.

We eat breakfast. Drink coffee. The flight attendants remove our trays, and screens light up with Tom Cruise. He wanders around the streets of New York at night, looking lost; a street thug calls him a faggot and pushes him onto a car. CUT.

I put on the headphones.

INTERIOR - BEDROOM - NIGHT - Nicole Kidman tells Tom Cruise that she saw a man in the elevator, their eyes meet for a split second, and since then she hasn't stopped dreaming about him. She cries, Cruise listens and looks like he's been lobotomized without anesthesia.

I think about Uri. Does he also feel like he's dead, like his body is just going through the motions, day in, day out, coffee-to-go, work, the supermarket, his mother? I try to concentrate on the movie, but the testosterone-charged presence beside me slowly shifts my movie watching into a blank stare. Then his hand touches my arm, and he turns his laptop toward me, where he's typed:

"Can I offer you a drink?"

I smile and type: "Ok."

He replies: "What would you like? Wine? Whiskey? Gin?"

"Gin is good."

"Gordon's with ice?"

I nod with a smile, surprised that, unlike most men I know, this stranger isn't offering to ruin my gin with tonic. Finally, a man who knows what I like.

I close my eyes and think about Tamar. To her, I'm a smart, passionless mom, who nags her to eat less candy and more vegetables. I think about Uri, who has been suffering my psychotic mood swings in silence for years.

The flight attendant brings our drinks. I glance at the lips with the chipped tooth. He sips his gin, our eyes meet. He smiles at me, pushes his hands self-consciously through his hair, shifts his gaze to the blanket of cotton candy clouds. He closes his eyes. His face is pale.

My little family seems so unreal right now, as if the only real thing in the world right now is the intense emptiness in the pit of my stomach, and the desire to touch this man. I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to kiss him. I close my eyes and imagine his fingers creeping into my panties, feeling their way to the pounding pulse of lust I feel.

The gin is hammering away at my head. I slip my hand under my dress and release my bra.

I try to sleep, to make up the hours lost from a night of hasty packing. I try to think calming thoughts, something to make me sleepy, but the only things that come to mind irritate me, frustrate me, or stress me out.

I look at him. One hand loosely hangs over his groin, the other over his thigh, palm up like a beggar. Eyelashes demurely curled. At the corner of his eye, an indented crease that makes him look tired. Behind his closed eyelids, I can see his pupils fluttering. His lips are parted; the lower lip pouty, the upper lip firm. Again, that desire to kiss him. My chest rises and falls heavily. I bite my finger, Suck it. I release my seatbelt, stand, hold in my stomach and press it against the seat in front of me, swing my leg over, move out to the aisle. Blindly, I walk to the lavatory. Wash my face. I say to the mirror, "Maya, I love you, I love you, I love you." I pull a tissue out from the wall, moisten it, rub the smudged mascara from under my eyes, wet my hair, and shake my head. A final "I love you" to the mirror. Return to my seat. Sit down next to him. His eyes are still closed, but now his hands are folded across his lap, as if he's trying to hug himself. I feel like shoving my wet hair into those arms. Pressing into them. Submerging and disappearing. I lean over, and lay my head on the armrest between our seats. I try to sleep, but I see his steady golden gaze on me. He stops at my lips. Smiles awkwardly. I burst out laughing. So does he, for a moment, and suddenly stops. The sad look returns to his eyes. His sadness devastates me.

"My beautiful Maya, I love you," I recite to myself. "Now, yes, right now, I love you..." and then I manage to send a long and bold look into his eyes. He's surprised for a moment, shuts his eyes and bites his lower lip, opens his eyes and gives me a long solemn look in return. My chest rises and falls. I close my eyes as well, bite my lower lip, and stare back at him.

My hands gravitate in his direction, as if the space between us is a vacuum that needs to be filled immediately. My entire body is drawn to him, as if his body holds the earth's gravity. I pin myself to the seat.

The flight attendants pass out blankets and small pillows. He takes our blankets and pillows, unfolds a blanket, spreads it over my bare knees, pulls it up over my shoulders and tucks me in. As if I were his baby. I see the hesitant smile tipping the corners of his mouth. He covers his knees and stomach with the other small airplane blanket. Now he reclines my seat, lifts my head and places the pillow underneath. The cabin lights dim. I close my eyes.

He takes my hand and strokes it gently... lifts it to his lips, kisses it. His face comes closer. We kiss. His tongue tastes good, fills my mouth. His hand creeps under the blanket to my thigh, gently pushes under my dress and

climbs upward. He caresses my breasts, spreads my legs, and his hand is on me. I'm so wet. His fingers gently circle over the black lace panties that Uri bought me. The blanket rises and falls with my breath, his fingers keep moving in slow circles, until I come.

I lay my head on his lap under the blanket, kissing, pressing my lips down, sliding them back and forth, back and forth.

I keep my head there, lying in the stickiness, enveloped in his scent.

For hours.

Chapter 5

Someone turned on the lights. My cheek is still stuck to his stomach. He lifts me gently. The flight attendants pass out hot towels. We adjust our clothes under the blankets. I rub my cheek with the towel, trying to erase the traces. I peek at him and once more feel the intense urge to kiss him. But the lights are on, and it's clear to both of us that what happened in the dark under the blanket cannot be repeated.

Dinner is served. The flight attendants walk along the aisle with silver pots.

"Coffee or tea?" he asks me in English, soft and whispery. This is the first time I hear his voice, choked and hoarse. I look at him from the corner of my eye and see that his eyes are brimming with tears. They roll down his face and disappear into the stubble. Embarrassed, he wipes them, and smiles at me.

"Coffee", I reply, struggling with my arms, which clamor to rise up, longing to embrace him.

His tears are for both of us, I think to myself. He's probably crying with the sense of missed opportunity, for what cannot be between us, the yearning to feel that intensity of desire and gentleness. I haven't had the courage to cry for years, because if I started, I would never be able to stop, and my tears would flood the entire planet.

The attendants collect the cups and the plane prepares for landing. My shoulder rubs against his arm, as we both look out the window, down at the big whore – Bangkok – splayed out beneath us, with its dark alleys, expectantly waiting for the big metal body hovering above her. I'm breathing heavily, fighting my desire to touch him.

The thought that I will never see him again, will never feel his body, hits me like a steel punch in the gut. Frantically I fish through my purse, pull out the red brochure for the Sunshine Hotel and my business card, and press both into his hands.

The plane lands. He studies my card with the crazy bird drawing, and stuffs it, together with the ugly brochure, into his shirt pocket, gets up, bestows a final sad smile on me, turns and disappears along the aisle.

Good thing I listened to Uri and agreed to also get my card printed in English. Otherwise, how would he find me... if he wanted to?

This whole idea that, 'This is just what you need, especially because you feel like you're in a professional slump, and so insecure - you need a fancy business card,' was his, and I tagged along after him and climbed the stairs to the graphic artist's office.

My psychologist husband said, "If you're going to do it, do it right," as we sat in the office decorated in black and white, across from the graphic artist dressed in black and white, and designed my stationery, which according to Uri, was supposed to convince people that I'm a sought-after screenwriter in the film industry, well-known and successful, and gloss over the fact that, for months, I hadn't been able to write even one page without deleting it immediately, and the only thing I was good at in life was frying breaded chicken cutlets with sesame seeds.

"But it's so pretentious to write my name in English," I protested. "It's disgusting! You'd think that producers from around the world are calling me every day and Scorsese keeps badgering me for my amazing screenplays."

And Uri replied, "As usual, yeah, right. Tell me, why do you always have to put yourself down?"

I got upset at him and yelled, "You don't understand anything!"

Uri started to lose his patience, "What the hell don't I understand? What's there to understand? How do you expect professionals to take you seriously if you trash-talk yourself and give people your phone number on used coffee shop napkins?"

The graphic artist's fingers with the black nail polish and white tips traveled up her throat. Her eyes shot ice daggers at me. She smiled a plastic smile at me, and beamed a smile at Uri that said, "Wow! What a loser your hysterical wife is!" I wanted to strangle her. I'd had enough, I was fed up with the whole thing and said to Uri that maybe he was right. Now, thanks to him, I have a bilingual business card on high quality wood-free paper, which is now in the shirt pocket right over the heart of some guy, and I don't even know who he is.

At passport control there is a long line of bleary-eyed people, with wild hair and creased clothing, who have spent hours desperately trying to get some sleep in uncomfortable seated positions. I start to survey the line. I see him. From the back.

I stand behind him. My eyes fix on the crease along the back of his neck. He removes his jacket, and something falls out of his pocket. I bend down and pick up a pen with a tiny golden computer floating in blue liquid and a logo in Hebrew: 'Neuraton, Tel Aviv.' My fingers close around the silly memento he inadvertently left me.

Chapter 6

I exit the terminal. It's nighttime. The heavy tropical heat and sticky humidity only escalate my extreme surge of horniness. I catch an air-conditioned taxi with a heavysset woman driver who sings along with the radio. She sings with Madonna. She lifts one shoulder, then the other, bellowing *Like a Virgin* and smiles at me through the rear-view mirror.

In the back seat, in the dark, I touch myself. Shove my hands between my thighs, and press down hard. I need air. I open the window. Outside, people with Asian features are cooking on the sidewalks. A sharp gust of warm celery, soy sauce and fried onion smells wafts in. I feel like screaming, "Hello, hey, people! Can you hear me? I'm alive! I need to get laid!"

The cab stops at a traffic light. A little barefoot girl, with tired eyes and dirty hair comes up to the window. She carries a baby tied to her back, wrapped in rags. She stretches her hand out through the window, begging in Thai. I struggle quickly with the zipper of my blue bag, open it, search for my wallet, and just as I open it, the light changes and the taxi leaps forward.

I look through the rear window and see her chasing after the taxi, her thin hands waving in the air, the baby swinging on her back.

"Wait!" I yell to the driver. "Wait a minute!"

But my driver continues to shimmy her shoulders, sing with Madonna, and merrily maneuver through the filthy air between the crush of pickups and tuk-tuks, and doesn't even hear me.

I turn my head back to look for the little girl. There's a red truck behind us with a local driver and four blond young men. They smile at me. The driver waves. I no longer see the girl.

A wave of agony hits me when I think of how she feels right now, at the missed opportunity. Maybe she was run over when she dashed so desperately between the cars.

The driver-singer makes her way to Banglamphu district, and when we pass Khao San Road and my hotel, she's busy singing and dancing to Michael Jackson, and doesn't hear my cries of, "Stop! Stop! Please!" Finally, she stops at the end of the road, and I escape from the taxi into the heat and heavy humidity.

I put my carry-on bag on top of my trolley suitcase and pull it along the street, weaving between the street stalls selling clothes and fried egg rolls. I avoid the vendors peddling pineapple skewers, the four-year-old beggars, the puddles of sewage and the loud tuk-tuks expelling acrid exhaust fumes.

The sights and sounds of the street make me feel good. Calm me down. As if nothing had happened, as if I could continue my life from the moment before the flight. Nothing happened. Just a little flirt. Everything will

be fine. Proof: Khao San is living, breathing, smelly and disgusting, wonderful as ever.

At the entrance to my hotel, I'm surprised at the gloomy ugliness of the narrow front desk and the unwelcoming girl behind it.

"*Sa wàt dii*," she greets me impassively, without a glance, and throws the greasy key to my room on the counter.

I climb the dark stairs, asking myself how I could be such an idiot and return to the same crappy hotel, forgetting just how crappy it is each time. As if there aren't a million other hotels to choose from in Bangkok, just waiting for me to spend a night in one of their beds, with front desk clerks who would even give me flattering smiles. Well, it's only for one night, I calm myself down, as usual and, as usual, I know that I won't have the energy to look for another hotel, and anyway I'm leaving all this chaos behind, flying to Phuket, and from there straight to the tranquility of the white sands of Ko Phi Phi.

The curtains in the room look even more horrendous and dusty than ever. "Fuck this! Why do you put up with all these compromises in life, and when the hell did you become such a conformist?" I curse myself and switch on the creaky ceiling fan, kick my shoes off, flop down on the bed and call home. I hear myself on the voice mail greeting:

"Hi, you've reached 5224469. You can leave a message for Uri, Maya or Tamar." My voice sounds strange. The phony voice of someone trying to hide the fact that she's dead, and faking a cheerful calm voice. So that's how I sounded before his fingers were in my panties, and before his tears forced me to acknowledge the boredom of my previous life. I leave a message:

"Uri, hi, uh... I'm at the hotel, I... I'm here and I... well... okay. So, g'bye, and... um... talk to you later."

I hang up with a sense of relief. I'm glad they're not home. I don't have the energy to lie right now.

My little black dress is damp with sweat, and sticks to my body as if someone poured a bucket of water over me. I open my suitcase, and pull out a clean T-shirt and panties, go to the shower, undress, turn on the water, stand there naked waiting for the hot water, which takes its sweet time to come through, and gradually I become conscious of the sound of a phone ringing, blending with the sound of the water running. I run back to the room and grab the phone.

My heart starts hammering like a herd of wild horses stampeding.

"Hello!" I answer, breathless.

"Maya? What are you doing over there? Did you go for a run?"

"Uri? Hi... uh, I was in the shower." I try to choke back the tone of disappointment that threatens its way into my voice.

"You're really out of breath... so what's up? Was the flight okay?"

"Uh... yeah..." a heavy rock lodges in my soul.

"Is everything alright? Are you sure? You sound strange."

"No... it's nothing. I'm exhausted from the flight."

"Well, it's one hell of a long flight."

"Yeah..."

"Listen, uh... don't let anything get you down, and be good to yourself. The most important thing is to come back energized, and if you do some writing that's great, and if not, that's cool, too. Just don't stress yourself out."

"Yeah, okay. Uri?"

"Mmm?"

"Um, is Tamar asleep?"

"She's sleeping over at a friend's house."

"How is she? Is her sore throat better?"

"Yeah, it is. It's great spending time with her. She had a friend over today, you know, Dina, from her class, the girl whose mother is ill. So we ordered pizza, then Tamar went to sleep over at her house and she's helping her catch up with schoolwork. Hey, you know, she's really incredible. So mature, so sensitive and..." Uri fell silent.

"And...?" I say, and pause.

Uri remains silent, too.

"Uri, uh... tell me, what about that patient of yours who tried to kill herself yesterday?" I try to change the subject.

"Hadas Tamir?"

"Yeah."

"She's fine, she had her stomach pumped and I'm seeing her tomorrow, that is, if she doesn't try to kill herself again before then... she's so needy for attention that woman - almost like you." Uri laughs.

I listen to him laugh, and the rock in my soul settles in, heavy as a boulder.

Uri continues: "She was the most popular girl in her class, the reigning queen, and now she's the queen of failed suicide attempts."

I listen to his voice and think of how cute, and good, and intelligent he is, and how I have no desire whatsoever to sleep with him.

"Maya? Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, sure," I reply quickly.

We both remain silent; then I hear the clinic doorbell ring on the other end, and Uri says he has to go because his patient has arrived.

"Ok, so, 'bye for now." He hangs up.

I stand naked in front of the mirror. Study myself as if I were a stranger. Womanly hips, lean thighs, soft stomach, with some stretch marks from when I was pregnant with Tamar, grayish pubic hairs that gently curl into a fuzzy triangle, full breasts, a little saggy but with cute, perky, pink nipples, and it's actually my shoulders that impress me. They appear so self-assured. I've never noticed that my shoulders convey such relaxed vigor. What a sham. An illusion. I check myself out in profile. "I need to start using these shoulders to project assertiveness, especially at meetings with producers," I say to myself, and laugh out loud.

"Too bad I don't have even one sleeveless top with me," I keep talking to myself in the mirror, palming my breasts and lifting them.

I think of him, his roaming fingers, his tongue. My eyes close, I stroke myself. I massage my breasts, suck my fingers, travel down past my stomach, between my legs, my fingers twisting, pressing, penetrating expertly, slick with my juices, out and back again, press and release.

I flop down on the bed, imagining him pulsing within me, filling me. Then I feel the strong spasms. Another and another, and I arch my back again and yet again, and in my head, the scent of espresso and after-shave swirl and blend with the feel of the rock-hard shaft driving into me again and again.

My body is sated and relaxed, sprawled on the bed like a rag doll. I turn off the light, curl up under the musty blanket with the dragon print, and smile to myself in the darkness. I think of his tears, the vulnerable golden gaze, and I writhe with the fire of need sparking in my belly, as if I've downed an entire bottle of hot sauce.

After hours of tossing and turning, I know that no matter how tired I am, I won't be able to fall asleep, and I break into hysterical laughter. I turn on my back, wave my legs up in the air, laughing like a psycho at the top of my lungs. I fall asleep for a few minutes and wake up suddenly freaked, as if something terrible had happened.

Morning winks at me from the window.

I go down to the street, and as soon as I exit the hotel, my eyes start searching for him.

A tiny woman kneels on the sidewalk – the eggroll vendor from the night before. She's cleaning out her wok; pouring boiling water into it from a huge aluminum pot. She scrubs the wok, scraping out all burnt dough and oil residue from the night, ready for another day of frying on the hot sidewalk. Her child sleeps on the sidewalk next to her, a seven- or eight-year-old boy, a year or two younger than Tamar. When I walk by her, she pours the soapy water

out on the sidewalk, raises her eyes to me and cackles merrily, with a wide smile showing a mouth full of crooked teeth. "Hallo." Her face beams as if someone lit a light bulb in her head, and her skin is so thin that the light shines through, creating a halo effect around her head.

"Hello," I reply, amazed once again at the incredible happiness you see on the faces of the people here.

I walk into a big bar open to the street and sit in front of the fan. The bar is empty. The waitresses haven't arrived yet.

The bartender, shaved, his hair wet, and smelling like mint, pours me a kiwi and strawberry cocktail in a tall, chilled glass with a little umbrella and a chocolate cookie on the side. His vigorous masculinity engulfs me with unexpected erotic sensations.

"*Sa wàt dii*," he says, with a little bow, his hands together in front of his face. He walks backwards away from me and gestures toward the chilled cocktail glass. I stare deep into his eyes, smile, and suck the frozen cocktail and the crushed ice from the bottom of the glass through the straw, but I can't seem to put out the fire inside me.

He is surprised at the daring intimacy that I'm communicating first thing in the morning, and retreats behind the bar with a flustered smile.

I move to a seat across from the entrance, observing the people walking by. I look for him, and I have the strange sensation that he's watching me.

"You are so paranoid," I smile to myself, pull out a mirror, lip liner and lipstick, and draw red lips.

I order a glass of wine, and the bartender, who suddenly looks like a little boy, comes up to me hesitantly. He sets the glass of wine on my table and hurries away, in case I attack him again with a cloud of my unsatisfied sexual lust.

A couple of tourists sit at the table next to me. They look to be around fifty; they order breakfast and eat in silence. She takes dainty, precise little bites of her basil-mushroom omelet, saws at a stalk of parsley with a knife and fork, chews carefully so she won't ruin her precious porcelain dental crowns, and he sips his freshly squeezed mango juice, dabbing his mouth immediately so that it won't dribble on his chin or his peach-colored Ralph Lauren shirt. He passes her the butter and she thanks him with a smile that is more like a grimace. The stagnation between them at the table floods me with rage. They look like two programmed zombies, the only thing keeping them together being the fear of living alone, or maybe their oh-so successful children. They probably ran out of things to talk about a long time ago, and probably have sex once a month, just to be courteous, and the motivation to fight for something, anything, even the will to argue, is long gone. Now, after twenty-something years together, they're on an exotic vacation, trying to hide the fact that they really can't stand one another.

I feel like springing on them and shoving their excellent breakfast off the table. I feel like screaming at them: "Enough! Start eating with your hands and licking your fingers! Get divorced already! You dumbasses, real life is now!"

I knock back my wine and think that I'm a dumbass too, because instead of sitting here enjoying my wine and watching the delightful, multicolored street come to life, I'm sitting here and burning with desire for some idiot that I don't even know, just because he deigned to give me his fingers for a few minutes. My eyes catch the back of a man with a blue denim shirt on the sidewalk; there's something about his walk, a slight hesitancy with each step.

My heartbeat speeds up, hammering in my chest as if it's about to burst out of my body and chase after that denim back that's about to disappear behind the pineapple stand.

But no. He's too short. I scold that pathetic heart of mine, so quick to flit across the sidewalk eagerly, like a ridiculous idiot, all flushed and throbbing, only because of a denim-blue collar. And why, of all places in Thailand, would my knight of mile-high orgasms be right here this very second, just to pass by me amid the crowded and noisy stench of Khao San Street? He's probably sleeping on a comfortable mattress with innerspring support, next to his dear wife, with his successful children in adjacent rooms, making up for the hours he missed on the flight.

I start to get pissed at him that he hasn't shown up to sit across from me, asking: What'll you have? Tea or coffee? Or maybe a Bloody Mary? Then I recall his tears, and suddenly my throat tightens, and my arms start to ache, longing to embrace him. I leave 200 baht on the table and dart frantically between the market stalls of brightly colored clothing and the fried rice carts, toward my room. Why the hell did I leave my cell phone at home?

My stupid heart races in the dark at the top of the steep stairwell. The room is scorching hot and quiet. The window is closed, and two large green flies with silver helmets and biker shades do a wild dance hovering near the ceiling fan. The exhausted fan creaks at every turn, the flies buzz, and the telephone is silent.

I call the front desk. No, no messages. No one asked for me.

I lay on the bed. On my back.

Stare at the revolving fan. Waiting.

After a while, I get up, make sure the phone is in place, and return to stare vacantly at the flies.

Later, I call Thai Airways to postpone my flight south from tomorrow night to the next day. Never mind if I arrive at Ko Phi Phi a day later than I had planned, because maybe he's still sleeping and he'll call soon, and if I leave the hotel tomorrow, how will he find me?

I turn on the TV, and the room fills with joyful shouts. A show host dressed with glittering sequins hands two children an iPad on a local game show, and the studio audience applauds wildly. I change channels. A melancholy female singer with a wide mouth whines into the microphone, "Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?" I watch her, entranced, and mutter the chorus repeatedly together with her, "Where are you baby?" A singer with Elvis hair and bell-bottoms sings an Italian song with a smirk on his face, against the backdrop of a sunset drawn by a set designer with two left hands.

I change the channel. A little boy runs down a dark alley, crying. "Mommy! Mommy!" he shouts, and it's not clear whether this is a war movie or a horror movie. The child keeps looking for his mother, and I feel a terrible fatigue come over me.

My eyelids droop heavily.

I see my mother. She's sitting barefoot, her robe partially open, on the stairs leading to our house, and rolling a joint.

"Mayu-sha, my Mayusha! I was just thinking about you! Good! How wonderful you're here!" she rejoices. Her emaciated face glows at the sight of me, and her thin fingers pass me the fat, crooked cigarette.

"When were you released from the hospital?" I take the joint, sit on the step below her, light up and take a drag.

"We got home ten minutes ago. Every day tests and more tests. I've only just sat down."

She starts to roll another one. Picks apart half a Marlboro, sprinkles some weed on it from a little tin box I bought her in Camden Town. Her fingers tremble a little. She mixes it together, rolls it up, seals it with her tongue, just like I taught her, lights up, and inhales deeply.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Good! Great! I'm done with that. No more chemo. The end.

"And you're taking the pain meds?"

"The morphine? Yes, yes, it goes great with these weeds you brought me."

"Weed," I correct her.

"Weed, shmeed."

I sit silently. We smoke. Her eyelids droop.

"Mayusha, my Mayusha." She gives me that look of hers, the way no one else has ever looked at me. None of the men in my life. Not Tamar. Not my girlfriends. Just her. With overwhelming love, because I am her special girl. Her miracle, and it doesn't matter what I say or do.

Tears well up in my eyes.

She scrutinizes me and her face lights up again. She lifts her gaze above the building across the street.

"Look at that sky!" she says. "Look, what a beautiful day! What a day! And now you're here. I'm so happy. This is true joy! This is it! And now I'll go make you some fresh-squeezed orange juice."

She takes another drag, looks at me again and plays with my hair.

"No, I don't want any."

"My beautiful girl, but look at you, you look sickly. Definitely a lack of vitamins." She stands up and totters on her legs, which have become like two thin sticks over the past year. She goes to the kitchen and returns with a bowl of grapes.

"Have some."

"No, Mom. I don't feel like it. Sit down."

"So you'll take some home? There's a ton of fruit, the refrigerator is full. Make Tamar lots of fresh juice. She's just like you. Doesn't eat a thing all day. Only snack foods."

"Okay, okay. How's Dad?"

She sits back down.

"He's just waiting for me to die. He has no patience left."

"He's afraid to be alone."

"And how will you be without a mother? It's you I'm worried about. You're too sensitive. Way too sensitive."

"I'll be fine."

"You have to learn to love yourself. Love yourself, you hear me? More than Tamar, more than Uri, more than a-ny-one! Get it? Don't be stupid, like me! Life is too short!"

Then she breaks into hysterical laughter.

"What?"

She's cracking up. I look at her and start to laugh too.

"What, Mom, what's up? You are so wasted!"

"No, I just thought about his face again." A new wave of laughter ripples through her.

"Whose face?" I laugh with her.

"Your father's."

"What are you talking about?"

"Moshe."

"So what about him?"

"He's dead."

"Moshe?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"A week ago."

"From what?"

"Cerebral hemorrhage." A manic grin tips the corners of her mouth, her lips twitch and within seconds she's gripped by another bout of hysterical laughter.

"So what's so funny?" I smile.

"I told your dad about Moshe."

"You're kidding!"

"Yes, I really did."

"How did he react?"

"You should have seen him." Another bout of laughter.

"Come on, spill! What did he do?"

"He did nothing. He just sat on the sofa and continued reading the newspaper. He didn't even look up at me. You see? He doesn't believe me!"

"What? You mean to tell me that you told Dad that Moshe was your lover?"

"Yes, on the way back from the funeral." She crumbles the rest of the tobacco.

"I stayed with him for forty years with no romance, no sex, no life, and now he doesn't believe me." She presses the tobacco and weed into the rolling paper.

"Why did you tell him now?"

"Because I hate him."

"So why didn't you divorce him?"

"I wasn't smart enough. Or brave enough. And you and Yael were so little. Especially you. You needed your mother." Her eyes filled with tears. "I hate him so much."

"But you always said that even if you'd left him, Moshe probably would have ended up boring you just like Dad."

"True. Love is bullshit. Everything has an end." The joint in her hands falls apart. She tries to seal it with her tongue, but the paper rips, and the tobacco spills out onto the steps. She throws the cigarette into the bougainvillea.

I hug her.

"At least you should have everything. You hear me?" She strokes my cheek, and tears start to gather again.

She wipes her face with the sleeve of her robe, struggles to her feet, staggers to the kitchen and calls out, "Mayusha, come here, I have some great meatballs. You have to taste them. They are fan-*tastic*! Fantastic!"

Chapter 7

I wake up under the ceiling fan. The room is dark. Looking out of the window, I see gray clouds with orange borders. There's a heavy weight on my soul. Over the past two years, I've tried to learn how to be my own mother. To love myself, because there is no time, just a split second and we're dead, life is short, and why the hell doesn't he call?

I get up. Turn on the light. Check the phone. There's a dial tone. I put the phone back. Make sure it's in place. Search through my suitcase, pull out *The God of Small Things* and lie down on the bed to read. 'Read' the first paragraph on page 63 for an hour. Get up. Dial the front desk. No, no messages. Lie back down.

I 'read' the first paragraph on page 63 for half an hour. Check the phone. Yes, there is a dial tone. Yes, the phone is in place. Lie down.

I stare at the biker flies. Maybe he's still sleeping? I get up.

I burrow through my suitcase. Grab the too-expensive anti-wrinkle cream I bought from the very convincing woman at the cosmetics counter. Shower. Face cream. 'Read' the first paragraph of page 63 for fifteen minutes.

Back to the bathroom to remove the cream. I paint my nails, fingers and toes with blue nail polish, then lie down and stare at the flies.

I shave my legs, armpits, and the curls of pubic hair that peek out of my panty line.

I try on all the clothes in my suitcase. Only the taupe dress looks sexy enough. I stare into space.

My stomach grumbles. I start to get pissed off. I'm not waiting anymore. The hell with him.

Chapter 8

I go down to the street. Purple-red lights are flickering outside. Jewelry stands and the smell of fish fresh from the sea. I make my way through the hot, humid air, like navigating through sizzling hot soup.

I sit at a little sidewalk restaurant filled with tall, oscillating, pedestal fans and local diners. The smell of fried garlic aggravates my intense hunger. I survey the street... actually, only the forty-something year old men with Western features.

A young couple runs the restaurant with harmonious efficiency. The small woman cuts celery stalks, the equally small man fries noodles; she waits with a bowl. In the narrow space by the hot flame they brush against each other. Their faces are hot as they pass knives, carrots, and zucchini back and forth. Her arms are pale. Every so often she pulls a large handkerchief from her man's back pocket, wipes his sweaty face, and then her own.

She comes over to me. I order crab, salad, beef and pineapple skewers, rice, corn soup, steamed vegetables, rice cake, homemade noodles and diet Cola. She smiles at me:

"Will someone be joining you?"

I shake my head, and she raises her eyebrows in astonishment.

My table fills with colorful steaming bowls of food. I drink my diet Cola. My eyes are on the entrance, as if any minute now a man with magic fingers will walk in and sit across from me, and apologize for being late, because of the traffic.

Her husband brings me a pitcher of wine, fills a thick glass to the brim and leaves the pitcher on the table.

"Enjoy," he smiles at me, exposing the gap of a missing front tooth.

I sip my wine, and he hurries back to the soft arms waiting for him by the flame, leaving me alone with my huge feast. The little woman beams at him, and he squeezes against her butt on his way to the wok. He stir-fries bean sprouts, she stands waiting with a plate in her hand, and they are both waiting impatiently for everyone to leave, so they can finally be alone and all over each other.

Longing strikes, unannounced. A flash of sharp pain that cuts through my body, and embeds itself in the pit of my stomach, like a piece of broken glass. God, I need him so much.

I suddenly feel weak, and a headache starts to throb around my right eye. The crab carcasses wait on my plate, and I feel like puking. I take a bite of pineapple. The sudden sweetness ratchets up my nausea. "Eat," I urge myself, "you have to eat."

I visualize my mother and try to infuse myself with her image:

"Mayusha, my beautiful girl, eat. You love Thai food so much." I look at the beef skewers, and my gut is so irritable that it pushes upward, as if trying to leap out through my throat.

What if he doesn't call?

A one-eyed terrier with bangs sits by my leg. I pet him, and he pets me back the best he can with his front paw, leaving little white scratches on my thigh. I feed him from the skewer. He happily gobbles it up. I continue with the wine, although I'm already woozy. I pick up the terrier, hug and pet him, and kiss his nose. He's surprised at how quickly our relationship has heated up, transitioning from perfect strangers to hugs and kisses. I give him another skewer, and he rewards me with another lick. Two barefoot children and a cross-eyed girl surround us, giving me hopeful looks.

I weave unsteadily back to my room in the 37° C heat and 100 percent humidity, yet I'm freezing. I have heartburn from the wine, and I wonder if those skinny children I left behind unsupervised would be able to cope with my giant meal, or would they die of overeating, like starved Holocaust survivors did after the war.

But what difference does all that make now, when I know he hasn't called all day, and that he probably never will? That's it. Nothing is important anymore. It's all over. From this moment on, all I have to do is to get through the ten or twenty thousand days left of my paltry existence in which, day after day, I will wait for his call that never comes, day after day I will stare vacantly at stupid scripts, and burn in a variation of hell; a cruel combination of longing for the fingers of someone who couldn't care less about me, and boring sex with someone I don't want.

The one-eyed terrier follows me adoringly to my hotel. I enter the lobby. A new man at the front desk, who has already adapted the requisite style of hospitality here, turns to me with a sour face and grudgingly hands me the key and a slip of paper. He turns back to the television, yawning, and my heart takes exactly one second to leap in my chest and turn somersaults. I glance at the note. It says in English: "Fone massage for Miss Maya Lev- Kalistro room 204. Joe Thatcher call. Fone office 6-247197, ext. 2." I pounce on the front desk clerk and hug him enthusiastically; he looks at me, horrified, and backs away from the alcohol fumes coming off me.

I race upstairs and blow kisses to celebrate the new close relationship I have with the misanthropic clerk.

"Calm down, Maya," I order myself, and carefully dial the number, digit after digit, clutching the slip of paper with the gold logo, *Sunshine Hotel*, like a drowning person clinging to a lifeboat.

Ring. Then music, a girl band croons into my ear, *U-ni-ver-sal always at your service*, and a woman's voice informs me in English:

"Hello. Our offices are closed right now. Business hours are from nine a.m. to seven p.m. We'll be happy to be at your service tomorrow..." Then the message in Thai. I look at my watch: almost midnight. I dial again. Listen to the voice as if it's a fascinating lecture. "We'll be happy to be at your service tomorrow..." Yes. Tomorrow he will be happy to service me, ready and willing with his fingers and his chipped tooth and a new trail of tears through his stubble. I gently set the phone back in place, mewls of pleasure coming from my throat. Yes, my love, tomorrow! I jump on the bed, and moan and sing with passion, that wonderful tune, *U-ni-ver-sal always at your service! U-ni-ver-sal...!*