

3/1/14

**HIGHER**

**By Carey Perloff**

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### CHARACTERS

- Michael Friedman      A high-powered Jewish architect in his late forties. Divorced. Has a son, Isaac.
- Elena Constantine      An architect of Greek extraction, about to turn 40. Single.
- Valerie Rifkind      A recent widow in her sixties. Jewish. Elegant. Tough.
- Jacob Stein      An Israeli in his late twenties, son of the Agriculture Minister who was killed in the bus disaster
- Isaac Friedman      Michael's son. Gay, mid-twenties, a chef.

### TIME AND PLACE

The play takes place in the present, in a variety of locations including Valerie's penthouse in New York, Elena's apartment in New York, a hotel lobby in Israel, Michael's office, the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and an airport lounge at JFK. The transitions from one scene to another should be smooth and the action as continuous as possible.

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**Prologue**

SPOTLIGHT ON JACOB, ALONE, SAYING KADDISH FOR HIS FATHER.

JACOB

“Yit’ gadal v’yit kadash sh’mei raba  
b’al ma di v’ra khir’utei  
v’yam likh mal’khutei b’chayekhon uv’yomekhon...”

CROSSFADE TO:

**Scene 1**

MICHAEL’S OFFICE. MICHAEL, IN A SUIT AND SEXY DESIGNER GLASSES, IS AT HIS DESK. SITTING ACROSS FROM HIM IS AN ELEGANT WOMAN ON A MISSION: VALERIE.

VALERIE

Imagine! Imagine what it must have *looked* like—an explosion of that size! Six months later and it’s still a mud pit. But such a gorgeous setting. Right on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Where Jesus walked on the water! What a location. It’s every architect’s fantasy!

MICHAEL

To build beside a sea bed costs a *fortune*.

VALERIE

That’s okay. My husband owned most of Las Vegas. (BEAT) There’ll be a competition—blind entry—the works. You should consider it.

MICHAEL

Look, being Jewish isn’t my strong suit... I’ve never even *been* to Israel. Why do you want me?

VALERIE

I’m a fan. I adored that new profile of you in *Vanity Fair*—

MICHAEL

In which I said I was finished designing memorials.

VALERIE

Death never goes out of business, Mr. Friedman.

MICHAEL

I want to focus on the *living*—

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VALERIE

What's so interesting about the living?

MICHAEL

They keep you warm at night.

VALERIE

(FLIRTATIONOUSLY) I beg your pardon?

MICHAEL

Let's just say—they ask different questions—

VALERIE

Like—?

MICHAEL

Like... “what kind of building might momentarily seduce an oil sheik into opening a book?”

VALERIE

And the answer is—?

MICHAEL

I'm working on a new library in Dubai.

VALERIE

My condolences. (BEAT) Look, perhaps they didn't fill you in. My maiden name is *Friburg*.

MICHAEL

(STARTLED) Ah!

VALERIE

As in... the Friburg Aquarium. The Friburg Conservatory of Flowers. The Friburg...

MICHAEL

...School of Dentistry. Of course. (HE SMILES) I wondered why my assistant had made this appointment...

VALERIE

We've kept your firm very busy, Mr. Friedman. Fish, flowers, teeth...

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MICHAEL

I appreciate that.

VALERIE

I have always been faintly disgusted by my family's compulsive need to stick its *name* all over everything. But now it's my turn. He was my husband... so I get to choose the talent.

MICHAEL

(DEEP BREATH) Okay.

VALERIE

The *glasses* are the give-away, right? I mean, when did architects start wearing such fabulous eye-wear? And which comes first, I often wonder—the designer eye-wear or the desire to build a building? It must be a tough call if you're an architect with good vision, right? Do you go glasses-free and risk derision, or wear some sexy but irrelevant lenses to be part of the tribe? My husband Harold had no choice—he was blind as a bat. He insisted on buying those drugstore glasses for ten ninety-nine—always had a pair in his shirt pocket. (SHE STOPS). That's what I saw. When I got there. A broken pair of Rite Aid glasses, lying in the mud.

THERE IS A PAUSE WHILE VALERIE TAKES A BREATH.

MICHAEL

I'm so sorry for your loss Mrs. Rifkind...

VALERIE

*Valerie.*

MICHAEL

Valerie. But I've spent the past twenty years creating gorgeous monuments to grief. It's enough.

VALERIE

It's your gift! Your meal ticket!

MICHAEL

(STUNG) *Vanity Fair* said my new tennis complex in Bahrain would turn *amateurs* into Federer—

VALERIE

And that your library in Dubai would inspire *camels* to read. Yes. But your *memorials*—

MICHAEL

(INTERRUPTING) I want to swim in other waters...

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VALERIE

There are no waters more thrilling than these.

MICHAEL

That may be, but—

VALERIE

(TAKING HIS HANDS) Don't think about it as a memorial to the dead. Think about it as a favor to me. Valerie... *Friburg*.

MICHAEL

I have to catch a plane.

BLACKOUT.

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**Scene 2**

VALERIE'S OFFICE, SEVERAL DAYS LATER. ACROSS FROM HER IS ELENA, A STRIKING WOMAN IN BLACK. CHIC HAIRCUT. BOLD JEWELRY.

VALERIE

So, Miss Constantine. (CONSIDERING HER CAREFULLY) I googled you. When you were recommended for this competition. You're on some list of "people to watch"—

ELENA

Oh yes?

VALERIE

"100 Best Architects Under 40" ...

ELENA

(SMILING) Only for a few more weeks....

VALERIE

After a few more weeks you'll stop being the best?

ELENA

I'll stop being under 40.

VALERIE

Mazel tov. (BEAT) There's a lot to admire on your web site... apartment complexes... a rather unusual science building ...some very avant garde offices... but not a single memorial. Why apply?

ELENA

I'm Greek. We're obsessed with the dead.

VALERIE

You don't look Greek.

ELENA

My mother was a Jew from Oklahoma.

VALERIE

How unusual. (BRIGHTLY) Well, they're tough clients, the dead...

ELENA

But the client is the one who's *living*.

VALERIE

(BRIGHTLY) Ah! The living! I guess that's me.

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ELENA

I want to build something that *matters*. To the *living*.

VALERIE

So build a bank. Or a nail salon.

ELENA

(TOUGHING IT OUT) Money and nails are transient.

VALERIE

Indeed. (SURVEYING HER) So... the committee is led by me and an Israeli kid. Jacob Stein. His father was an Agriculture Minister killed in the bus bombing. We're looking for something *dramatic*, you understand?

ELENA

I can do dramatic.

VALERIE

Something that will be seen from the road—

ELENA

A good building can lure people *off* the road—

VALERIE

So can a falafel stand.

ELENA

I've studied the photos. It's a valley, the site. A depression. Think Omaha Beach—those ruined tanks half-buried in the sand on the coast of France—they force you to look, to remember, right?

VALERIE

I wouldn't know. Harold hated the French.

ELENA

(SOLDIERING FORWARD) This disaster site cries out for something so powerful that the spirit of the victims is immediately revealed.

VALERIE

(IMPRESSED IN SPITE OF HERSELF) Okay. (BEAT. CURIOUSLY) You sure you've never done a memorial?

ELENA

I've been thinking about it. For a long time. (BEAT) Would you tell me something about your husband?

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Why?  
VALERIE

That's... how it works.  
ELENA

Really? (BEAT) Harold was fat. Funny. Phobic...(ABRUPTLY) You ever been married?  
VALERIE

(TAKEN ABACK) Excuse me?  
ELENA

The world is divided into those who've been married and those who have not.  
VALERIE

You think so?  
ELENA

I know so! Harold never gave a damn what anyone thought. It drove my family crazy—he was so loud, so Las Vegas. He made all the choices—it was easier that way. What we ate. Who we knew. How we voted. Why we never had children. I ask myself what he would've chosen now. The only building he ever admired was his six-car garage.  
VALERIE

So now it's your turn.  
ELENA

For what?  
VALERIE

To choose! You could help heal the wound. Don't you see? The right memorial will keep your husband's spirit alive long after the rest of us are gone.  
ELENA

Funny. That's what he always said about his investments.  
VALERIE

BLACKOUT.

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**Scene 3**

ISRAEL. THE FOLLOWING WEEK, ON THE MUD OF THE SHORES OF THE SEA OF GALILEE. ELENA IS WITH A YOUNG ISRAELI MAN. IT IS JACOB STEIN. SHE LOOKS AROUND, OVERWHELMED BY THE PLACE. HE EYES HER WITH SUSPICION.

ELENA

Is this it?

JACOB

Can't you see? (PAUSE. POINTING AT GROUND) The ground is still burnt—

ELENA

What were they *doing* here—?

JACOB

They wanted to lay pipes—from the sea—up—into the fields—

ELENA

But we're way off the road—

JACOB

They were exploring... they must have been—how do you say—

ELENA

Ambushed?

JACOB

Blown up! One bomb and no more pipes! (ANGRY) Why you ask me to bring you here?

ELENA

You're the head of the committee—I wanted to know you—

JACOB

Why?

ELENA

(SHE SWALLOWS. SURVEYS THE LANDSCAPE) It's like... a cradle, isn't it?

JACOB

It's a *tomb*.

ELENA

Well yes-- that gash in the ground—it's horrible... but also, somehow, beautiful—