



The Twins

Author: *Mirrah McGee*

Category: Romance, Adult

Description: Tevye

My life with the Kosher Nostra is chaos...but it's a chaos that I thrive in. Money, violence, women, and sarcasm. About a year and a half ago, the consequences of my lifestyle caught up with me, dropping a sickly 5 month old baby boy on my doorstep. His mother is gone, and I'm left trying to navigate a world filled with doctor's appointments, constant monitoring, and stress. I have a son, but I'm not meant to be a father. My twin sister and I are not like other people. We are detached, cold, calculating. We make the difficult decisions that the softer members of our family cannot. And I've lived that way for almost 30 years, but my father's disappointment and my mother's constant nagging drive me to a support group for help. And it changes my life irrevocably and completely. Dammit, I hate it when my mom is right.

Tovah

My twin Tevye has always operated under the assumption that he and I do not feel. We don't emote. Our souls are black and our hearts are made of ice. I know differently. Always have. But I ain't telling him...he'll figure it out on his own, the schmuck. In the meantime, I'm living life on my terms, not a single regret...until I purposefully put myself in the line of fire and get a nifty new hole in my upper chest as a result. While I'm out cold, my secrets come to light. And it changes my life irrevocably and completely. Dammit, it turns out I do have one regret...not coming clean earlier.

Author's Note: The Twins is the fifth book in the Covenant of Ascent; Kosher Nostra series and features two couples. It includes coarse language, sexual content, crude humor, sarcasm, an abuse survivors account, and a child with a chronic illness This is not a standalone. Series must be read in order to understand continuing story line, even though each book focuses on a separate couple with a guaranteed HEA or HFN.

Total Pages (Source): 48

Page 1

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Tevye Frenkel 1.

This is bullshit. Absolute fucking bullshit. I shouldn't be here. I don't NEED to be here. I'm fine. Good. Better than good, I'm great. And now I'm Tony the Fucking Tiger. I release a heavy sigh, close my eyes, and send up a prayer that I make it through this evening without killing someone.

Scanning the meeting room of the hospital, I barely contain my sneer at the sad faces of its occupants. I don't belong here. Dammit. My mother and meddling aunts need to mind their own business. I was hoping coming here today would appease them enough to leave it the fuck alone.

I have a son. One I didn't know anything about until he was dropped at the gate of my family compound with a note from his mother. A woman I had a one weekend stand with and promptly forgot.

At least until the consequences of that weekend showed up.

And if having a child wasn't bad enough, he's sick. A lifelong illness that requires constant monitoring, specialized care, and diet, and carries the potential for developmental disabilities, seizures, liver damage and more.

I can admit, though never out loud, that if not for my parents, and my twin sister Tovah, Arlo and I would be in a world of trouble. There were moments...fuck, I hate even thinking it, but there were moments during those first few weeks amongst doctor visits, tests, and dreadful prognosis, I thought about giving him up. His own mother couldn't handle everything he needs, how was I supposed to?

Then my father kicked my ass...literally. Man packs a wallop in his punches. I disgusted him, and for all my confidence and swagger, I cannot live knowing my old man felt that way. Tov and I knew early on that we weren't normal. We didn't come from a normal family, but she and I are...different. Unfeeling. Detached. Soulless, as a few romantic partners over the years have referred to us.

We know our parents, aunts, and uncles are the pinnacle. And Tov and I have accepted that we will always fall short, given our lack of compassion and empathy. But to disappoint the man I look up to...well, let's just say I iced my face, took some pain pills, and started researching everything there is to know about MSUD. And honestly, there ain't much, other than our Ashkenazi Jewish heritage made it more likely for me to pass on and diet is very important.

However, I've still put off coming here. Mom insisted, and Aunt Esther badgered me. It wasn't until Ezra met Dorothy and brought the Goldman Girls into our lives that some things began to click. Months ago, Dorothy's sister Blanche traveled to Florida to bring their half-brothers to live with us in North Carolina. Those boys were fathered by a fucking bastard who gave zero shits about them or their well-being, simply what they could do for him. They had no one in Florida to help them, advocate for them, protect them. Now, they have their big sisters, Ezra's parents, and the rest of the Kosher Nostra at their backs.

And I realized Arlo would have no one, too. Sort of.

So, here I am. Reluctantly.

"Excuse me?" I tilt my head to the side, my gaze landing on a beautiful woman sporting a hesitant smile. My eyes run down the length of her body, my cock perking up and taking notice. "The meeting you're looking for is tomorrow evening."

That can't be right. I've stared at the damn flyers, all thirty of them that my family

posted everywhere so I didn't miss them or their subtle hints, and memorized the date, time, and location.

"I thought tonight was the—"

"Overeaters Anonymous is tomorrow." My eyes widen in shock; I snort and then a loud laugh bubbles up my chest. She frowns, confused by my reaction.

"Did you...did you just fat shame me?" I ask, my entire body shaking as I let loose. The people milling about stare in our direction.

She splutters, shaking her head wildly, "What? No, I would never—"

"I'm here for the Chronic Illness Parent and Caregiver Support Group."

Her face is a dangerous shade of red, she sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, her almond shaped dark eyes practically bugging out. "Oh my gosh, I totally just fat shamed you! And you aren't even fat, you're just so...big, I assumed—and made an ass out of me and, nope, just me."

Fuckin' hell. My head rolls back, eyes close, and I howl. Tears start falling and my stomach hurts. She's right, I'm a big guy. 6 ½ feet tall, wide shoulders and chest. But I am not fat. It's all solid muscle I've earned to keep up with Yakov. He's a fucking beast and I am determined to beat him at least once before I die.

I manage to say, "Thank you." Wiping under my eyes, the last bit of laughter finally dies out. "I needed that."

She shrugs self-deprecatingly and it's...fuck me, it's adorable. That's not a word I've ever used. She shifts, her long dark hair covers some of her face and I want to push it back, or better yet, wrap it around my fist and take her mouth. Not the time or the

place.

“I’m glad my entire foot in my mouth could provide a moment of levity. If you’re here, I can guess those aren’t a frequent occurrence in your life right now.”

Well, that sobers me up immediately. My smile dips and my chest tightens. “No, they aren’t.” Chaos surrounds me and usually it’s entertaining chaos. Being a member of the Kosher Nostra and running a security company certainly keeps me mired in violence, but my family isn’t any different than most Jewish families; we find humor in any situation, if only so we don’t succumb to the darkness.

She sticks out her hand, small and delicate. It’s engulfed as I take it, her softness a stark contrast to my calloused skin. “Vandy Gibbs, welcome to the Chronic Illness Parent and Caregiver Support Group, NOT Overeaters Anonymous. Grab a refreshment or snack, no judgement,” she winks, “and find a seat, we’ll get started shortly.”

I nod, finally releasing her hand when she tugs on it. “Thanks.” She walks over to a small group, they greet her with familiarity, so they must be regulars. I pass the refreshments table, grab an empty seat in the circle and sit down. I feel like a fucking giant in this small chair. I shift uncomfortably, pull out my phone and send my sister a message.

Tev:So, just got told I’m at the wrong meeting. Overeaters Anonymous is tomorrow night.

Tov:bwahahahahahaha

Tov:You’re fat.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Tev:Just my dick.

Tov:Mine too.

Grimacing, I concede. Tovah practically invented Big Dick Energy, and she's got a set of unrivaled fucking brass balls. I'm man enough to admit, I'm a scary fucking dude, but Tovah makes the monsters that go bump in the night run home terrified.

Tov:Now, put the phone down, fucker, and pay attention. Feel the support, sing Kumbaya, hold hands, and find a way to be better. For Arlo.

Tev:I should have eaten you in the womb.

Tov:Fuck, can you imagine if we shared the same body? The world would shudder at our feet. Dammit, now I wish you had...the power!

She sends a He-Man meme, and I pocket my phone with a chuckle. I glance up and find Vandy staring at me with an expression I don't understand. Her eyes meet mine and she smiles quickly, dropping her head and subtly shaking it back and forth a couple times.

"Everyone, please take your seats. Let's get started." Her voice carries despite how small she is. Reminds me a little of Dorothy's sister Sophia. Innocent. Sweet. Pure. I don't know what to do with someone like that.

And since I'm not here to fuck, I guess it doesn't matter.

“Welcome. Chronic illness can be devastating. Not just to the one diagnosed, but those that love and care for that person. Parents and caregivers suffer right alongside them, often in silence. This group allows you to voice your fears, concerns, anger, sadness, joy, and more. You may share or simply listen. The journey is yours to steer. I always begin with a little bit about myself for any newcomers. My name is Vandy Gibbs, and I am a Registered Nurse, specializing in pediatrics, and dabbling in home health care for children with chronic illnesses.” Bullshit, she looks like she’s barely in her twenties. “I’ve been working in this field for over 10 years. I’ve been told by professors and other nurses and doctors, never become attached to your patients. I say, ‘screw that’. How can we care for another human being and not feel? I am blessed to have met so many wonderful children over the years, and I’m grateful their caregivers invited me into their homes, giving me the opportunity to improve their quality of life. Chronic illness isn’t a prison sentence. It doesn’t mean that parents or family members have to give up their lives to tend to their loved ones that are sick. It’s about finding a balance.”

The door opens, interrupting Vandy’s speech. I glance over my shoulder and am shocked to find Seril ducking in with a wave. “Sorry, I’m late. Sorry.” She finds me in the circle and heads straight to me. “Tev, make room.” The woman next to me smiles at Seril and scoots down to offer Seril her seat.

I lean in close once Seril’s settled and thanked the woman, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for support.”

“Seril—”

“That is Sarai Ima to you,” she replies sternly. She giggles a second later as I roll my eyes. She never pulls rank, though she could. Being the wife of the Avraham Avinu, the head of the Jewish mafia, has its perks. Seril is not one to abuse such power. And

that's why she's perfect for Moshe and the Kosher Nostra. "You remember my mother has a TBI?" I nod, feeling like an ass. "Now, shut up, you're disrupting the meeting."

I chuckle but sit up straight in my seat and cross my right leg over my left. Vandy's dark eyes dart between Seril and I and if I'm not mistaken her shoulders stiffen ever so slightly. Interesting.

"Alright, enough about me. Who would like to begin tonight?" No one rushes to raise their hands. After a few silent seconds, Seril wiggles her fingers in the air. "Wonderful. When you're ready."

Seril takes a deep breath, then unloads quite a lot. While I'm familiar with her history, it's still surprising to hear everything she's gone through with her mother. By the time she's done, I find myself uncharacteristically verklempt. She's a strong fucking woman. Moshe and his mom have worked hard to give Seril the chance to just be a daughter, rather than a caregiver. Several people nod, and a few ask questions about the nursing options. Pretty soon, Seril has taken over the meeting.

I twist to the side to find Vandy. I expect her to be mad, jealous that someone has stolen her thunder. Instead, she's grinning from ear to ear, engaged and encouraging, even asking some questions of her own. She's using Seril's story as inspiration.

Who the hell is this woman?

Vandy Gibbs 2.

"These are so good!" Someone gushes over the cookies I baked for tonight. I smile as I continue setting up chairs in a circle in the center of the large room we use for the chronic illness support group. My eyes dart back to the doors every few seconds. A strange hum buzzes through my body in anticipation. I'm hoping he'll be back tonight.

And I shouldn't. It's unethical, compounded by the fact that I can't determine if he's taken. He wasn't wearing a ring, but that doesn't mean much in this day and age. Lots of men don't wear wedding bands, doesn't mean they aren't married.

Seril is a wonderful woman. Open and honest and captivating with a confidence I can only hope to achieve someday. They appeared close last week, but the nature of their relationship was ambiguous. He's hot...like very, very hot. And I've had to remind myself that being attracted to someone isn't a crime, but acting on it in any way is ill-advised.

Doesn't stop my heart from beating wildly when he hunches slightly to enter the room, Seril at his side. How is he more handsome? He's at least 6 ½ feet tall. Swept back dark blond hair, a chiseled face hidden behind a darker beard, piercing gray-blue eyes, broad shoulders, trim waist, all accentuated by the clean lines of his tailored blue suit. A white dress shirt unbuttoned enough to show off tanned skin with a hint of chest hair. I swallow hard as I run my eyes up and down...and up and down again, before meeting his hard stare. I can't look away. I need to, but I don't want to.

"Vandy!" Seril greets me enthusiastically, opening her arms and banding them around me in a hug. She rocks us back and forth a couple times, before stepping back with a chuckle. "Sorry, I'm a hugger." She elbows the giant next to her, "Isn't that right, Tev?" He grunts, his eyes drifting to Seril momentarily before coming back to mine.

"Welcome back," I rasp, clear my throat, and try again. "Glad you could come back. I hope last week was helpful for you both."

"Very!" Seril gushes. "It was therapeutic to get it all out about my mom. I apologize if I stepped on your toes, I didn't mean to take over the meeting."

I wave off her concern. "Not at all. I think it was good for the others to hear about

someone else's experience. I'm on one side of the situation, but still separate as a nurse, but you were able to give them invaluable real-life lessons. And I think the clear line between relative and caregiver resonated with several of them."

She sighs in relief. "I'm so relieved. I wanted to talk to you more about that." She looks over my shoulder at the clock on the wall and winces. "Since we're about to begin, would I be able to steal you for a few minutes after?"

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Absolutely.” I’m not sure what she wants to discuss but I’m happy to listen. I feel even worse when she grins and squeezes my shoulder in passing, her other arm looped through Tev’s. He escorts her to a seat and takes the empty one next to her. I shake my head and flex my fingers. He might be the hottest man I’ve ever seen in real life, and one of the biggest, but his maybe-wife is such an amazing creature. It didn’t take long last week to figure that out. And I refuse to lust after a married man. I’m better than that.

“Hello, everyone!” I start the meeting once everyone else has found a seat. A few share their personal experiences with caring for someone with chronic illness. Seril listens and nods along, reaching out to the woman next to her to hold her hand while she recounts a difficult day with her son who has Epilepsy. Tev rolls his eyes and slouches in his seat with a huff at Seril’s actions and anger burns in my gut. What’s his problem? Seril is comforting another human being in pain, and he’s irritated?

In an instant my fascination with him evaporates as if it never existed. Some people are pretty on the outside but the ugliness inside has a way of making its way out eventually.

When the woman finishes, there is a moment of silence. Seril smacks Tev on the thigh, then motions to the room. He shakes his head with a growl. A growl. “Oh hush, tell them about Arlo. It’ll be good to get it out.”

“Seril.” The stern tone of his voice sends a shiver down my spine. I don’t know if it’s fear for her safety or residual attraction.

“She just poured her heart out about her boy. That’s the whole point of these

meetings, connecting with others that can understand what you're going through, relate to your pain, and impotence. Now, it's your turn."

"Seril, if he doesn't want to—" I start but my teeth clack together when he glares at me, strong brows pronounced, lips pursed. I swallow hard and try a different tactic. "How old is your son?" I'm a little confused why she wants him to share, but perhaps he's having a hard time accepting their child's health conditions. Her journey with her mother was compelling enough, but to have a child with special needs too—

"19 months." "9 months." My head cocks to the side as I stare at them in confusion.

Seril laughs, patting Tev on the thigh again, "Sorry. Habit. My son is 9 months. Tevye's son is 19 months."

"You each brought a child with special needs to your marriage?" One of the other women sympathetically voices one of the questions rattling around my brain. Tev growls again while Seril laughs harder.

"Tev is my...brother-in-law. Oh God!" She wipes at a few tears under her eyes, her smile blinding. "Moshe is gonna love this!" She points back and forth between her and Tevye. "They think we're married! To each other!"

"Yes. Yes. My imminent demise is hilarious." He is anything but amused, but his expression softens slightly when he looks at me. "Not married. Fucked—uh, had a one-night stand with a woman. Then she drops a sick 5-month-old boy on my doorstep and vanishes."

"That must have been a jarring experience." He dips his chin once, his eyes moving over my shoulder. He's uncomfortable and I fight everything inside me not to throw myself into his big, burly arms and soothe him.

“He has MSUD. His mother didn’t know how to help him, nor did she have the means. I do. And I’m taking care of it.” He turns his head slowly to glare at Seril, his upper lip curling in a sneer. “I don’t need to talk about it. It is what it is and that’s it.”

I’d like to say this reaction is rare, but it’s not. Some parents, male or female, detach emotionally, if not physically, when their child becomes ill. And chronic illness isn’t for the faint of heart. It’s constant vigilance, long nights, failed treatments, pain, suffering...and for many, it’s inconvenient. I wish it were different, and that’s why I hold these support meetings. It’s why I travel to people’s homes and work tirelessly to give them a better quality of life.

All that compounded by the fact that it doesn’t sound like Tevye wanted a child with this woman, or at all, and now he’s bound by societal and familial obligation to care for a helpless human being that requires lifelong assistance, I can understand his bad attitude. Doesn’t mean I like it, but it isn’t my place to tell him how to feel.

One of my regulars, Jodie, clears her throat and leans forward in her chair, her eyes pinned on Tevye. “I don’t know you. I don’t know what you’ve been through. Or what your life is like. However, may I ask you a question?” Tev breathes in so deeply his nostrils flare, but he nods curtly to encourage her. “If Seril’s husband, your brother if I understand correctly, comes to you and tells you he has just been diagnosed with MS or cancer...would it be his fault?”

“No,” Tev grits out immediately.

“Would you treat him differently? Withdraw emotionally? Leave him to fend for himself?”

“Fuck no.” I hide my smile behind my hand, Seril does no such thing. She’s practically vibrating in her chair with excitement at this line of questioning. “He’s my...brother.”

“Doesn’t your son deserve the same loyalty? Maybe even more so since he is so vulnerable at his age?” Tev doesn’t respond, in fact, I don’t even know if he’s breathing. “Like I said, I don’t know you. I don’t know what it’s like to have a child with MSUD...since I don’t know what that is.” A few of us chuckle with her. “But I know my kids. I know I am their shield. The only thing that stands defiant between them and the world. But their bodies,” she snuffles, squares her shoulders and continues, “their bodies fight against them, and my only weapons are advocacy, diligence, and love. They aren’t just people, they are an extension of myself, my husband. They are the best of both of us, and I will wield whatever weapons are at my disposal to fight back when they can’t. Because I’m their mother. It isn’t my duty...it’s my privilege.”

“Damn,” Seril mutters, her awed expression mirroring everyone else’s. The sound of a chair scraping against the floor startles most of us. I jump in my seat, watching Tevye stand abruptly and march across the meeting room. His large hand slaps the door to open it, slamming it against the wall and nearly off its hinges.

I rub my sweaty palms along my thighs, then curl my fingers into my jeans and thighs, forcing myself to stay in my seat. Every molecule in my body yearns to follow him. I can’t even tell you why, because I don’t know. I don’t understand this...compulsion where that man is concerned. It’s unsettling. Emotional whiplash.

At least he’s not married.

“Well said, Jodie.” We share a small smile, her eyes darting toward the door. “Our time is up for today, but I hope that each of you can find moments of peace this week. And I look forward to hearing all about them at our next meeting. Thank you for coming.”

The air as we break apart is heavy. Thick with emotion. Several attendees help me clean up, stack chairs, and take a few snacks for the road with a wave.

“Vandy?” I spin around to find Seril leaning against the empty refreshments table, her arms crossed. “He’ll be ok.”

“I’m sure he will.”

“Liar,” she jokes, standing up straight and approaching me. She pulls a card from her back pocket and hands it over. I accept it without looking at it. “Are you free Friday for lunch?”

I mentally run through my calendar, “Yeah, I think so.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“I’d like to discuss a few things. Text me your address, I’ll have a driver pick you up.”

“A driver?” I snort. “I have a car; I can drive myself. What did you need to discuss?”

She smirks, pulls her purse strap over her head so it lays across her chest, “An offer you can’t refuse.”

A bark of laughter escapes me, “You sound like the Godfather.”

She walks to the door, glancing at me over her shoulder, “Nah, just the gefilte-mother.” She points to the card in my hand, “Don’t forget to text, Vandy, see you Friday!”

Gefilte-mother? What just happened? Who are these people?

Tevye 3.

“I’m a fuck you up.” Yakov grits out, his body coiled for a fight. “Don’t give a fuck what your problem is, but I know it ain’t mine.” He steps toe to toe with me in my office at Makabim Security. Out of everyone in the Kosher Nostra, Yakov is the only one who can best me in a fight...besides Tovah, but my twin doesn’t fight fair.

I’d deserve the beat-down his tone promises. I’ve been a fucking asshole for days. I left that support group, stomped to my SUV and stewed in anger until Seril joined me. She didn’t say a word the entire drive home, and I was grateful. As the Sarai Ima, she’d have every right to put me in my place, but that woman in the meeting already

did and Seril knew that. She gave me time to process without adding fuel to the dumpster fire.

And I was a raging inferno by the time we pulled into the family compound. Consumed with fury...at myself. Logically, I understand and can agree with the harsh truth that woman gave me. I provide Arlo with everything he needs; medical care, food, shelter, clothing. He is a defenseless child. He didn't ask to be born. He didn't ask to be sick. He isn't at fault...

Something shifts in Yakov's eyes, and it makes me uneasy. Fucker is wicked observant, which works well in business, but I don't like being on the receiving end. "Arlo's sick. It ain't your fault. It ain't his. Man up. You and Tovahbub are the product of satanic intervention, but you were raised by empathetic, compassionate parents. Mimic them until it's second nature. Arlo is going to grow up and while you can't change his DNA, your actions and words now will determine the kind of man he becomes." He pulls his right arm back and lodges his fist into my stomach, punching the breath from my lungs and leaving me gasping. "Don't ever fucking come at me again like you've been doing, like a fucking bear with a thorn in his paw. Next time, I put you down like the rabid animal you are and mount your taxidermied head on my wall like a trophy."

"That's fair," I manage to wheeze out. He nods curtly, then leaves my office. Sitting behind my desk, I stare at the blank computer screen for who the fuck knows how long. Yak's right. So was that woman the other night. But I'll be honest, the disappointment in Vandy's expression as I spoke hit so much harder than Yakov's fist moments ago. It hit like my father's. I grew up in the Kosher Nostra. I've known this life and nothing else for almost 30 years. And everyone knows Tovah and I, they accepted long ago that we aren't wired like everyone else. And I realize now, I've grown...complacent.

For a second, I saw myself through her eyes, and I didn't like what stared back. I

could give a fuck what others think of me, but Arlo...he deserves better.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” I grab my desk phone and hurl it across the room. It crashes into the wall and breaks apart. Elbows on my desk, my chest heaves as I lay my head in my hands.

They were right. The support group is helpful. I’m acknowledging, processing, and feeling. Ugh. Mom, Seril, and Aunt Esther are never going to let me live this down.

I slip my cell phone from the inner pocket of my suit jacket. With a heavy sigh, I find the contact I need, my thumb hovering over the call button for a few seconds, before I find my balls and tap the screen. It rings three times before the sweet voice of the heart of the Kosher Nostra answers.

“Tevye?”

“Ruthie...I need your help.”

“Ooh!” She’s excited and confused, and a small smile tugs at my lips. “Is it time again for Tovah’s rabies booster?” I laugh, shaking my head.

“No. Next year.”

“Hmm. Ok. What can I help you with?”

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and just say it, “I need you to teach me how to emote.” There’s a long, pregnant pause, then a thud. “Ruth? Ruthie!” I’m on my feet, rushing out of my office.

“What the hell?” Zilv picks up the phone, “Who is this and why did my sister pass out?”

“Zilv?” Ruthie groans in the background. “I had a horrible dream. Tevye wanted to get in touch with his feelings. Wait. Why am I on the floor?”

“For fuck’s sake!” I bark, turning around to go back into my office. “Never mind. I’ll just download an app.”

Vandy 4.

I fiddle with the seatbelt across my chest in the back of the SUV. My head turns on a swivel as I take in the expansive grounds of Seril’s...home? Estate? Monstrosity?

Not for the first time, I wonder who the heck she is. I forced myself not to Google. I wanted to learn who she is from the woman herself. We aren’t the sum of other’s opinions. And what I know of Seril so far inspires enough comfort to allow a stranger to drive me to some unknown location...shoot, I might be an idiot.

The vehicle comes to a soft stop. My hand is on the handle when someone opens it for me from the outside. An older woman with a no-nonsense attitude greets me with a small smile. “Welcome, Miss Gibbs, if you’ll follow me.” I step down from the SUV and do as I’m told. “My name is Devorah, and I am the house manager. Should you require anything, please do not hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” I respond casually, like this kind of thing happens to me every day. Meanwhile, my eyes are wide as saucers, my fingers going numb from gripping my purse. Through gigantic double doors, Devorah leads me through an opulent grand foyer, past a large sitting room, and into an elegant dining room that holds the largest table I’ve ever seen. However, it’s the women who occupy the fabric seats surrounding it that have my heartrate accelerating quickly.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Seril stands with a grin, “Vandy! I’m so glad you could make it. Any trouble on the ride over?”

“Uh...no?” I shake her hand, squeaking when she pulls me into a hug.

She uses the hug to whisper, “Don’t be nervous. Give them a chance and I guarantee you’ll love them by the time you leave.”

“I do get to leave, though, right?”

She pulls back with a mischievous smile, “I don’t know, I kind of like you. Maybe we’ll just keep you.” She places a hand on the small of my back and ushers me further into the room. “Vandy Gibbs, please meet the women of the Mishpocheh Consortium.” Don’t know what that means, but I nod along anyway. “My mother-in-law, and the matriarch of the Holofcener family, Esther. My sister-in-law Ruthie. We have aunts and cousins, Sarah, Sophie, Harper, Judith, Gertie, Tovah, Dottie and Dottie’s sisters,” everyone snickers, and I’m still lost, “Becks, Cora, Bailey, and my mom, Suzie.”

“Estrogen Emporium,” I believe Gertie jokes.

“Pussy Partnership.”

“Vagina Ventures.”

“The Snatch Syndicate.”

Seril claps, glaring with her lips twitching at several of the women. “That’s enough of that. Let’s get down to business.” She motions to an empty chair next to her near the head of the table. I sit, unsure where to put my hands, so I sit on them. “Dev, you may begin serving, thank you.”

“With pleasure, Sarai Ima.”

“While our lunch is brought out, Vandy, can you tell everyone about your job?”

I meet Seril’s earnest eyes, and nod. “I’ve been a Registered Nurse for over 10 years now. I have worked in several medical settings and departments; however, my passion is children. About 4 years ago, I had a patient in the PICU, suffering from severe asthma. She was a frequent flyer. After talking with her mom and dad at length, I realized they didn’t know how to help her at home. Not because they were unwilling, just uneducated. Her doctors weren’t forthcoming with assistance, so I offered to come to their home and help them customize it for their daughter and her special needs. Word spread and I would spend my days off helping other families. I was asked about a year and a half ago to head a support group for parents and caregivers of chronically ill children. It’s been a successful and fulfilling endeavor.”

Esther stares at me, a manicured finger tapping on the table. “Are you paid for your services?”

“Sort of.” I hedge, grabbing my glass of ice water and taking a long sip. “I take what people are able and willing to give. Sometimes it’s money, sometimes it’s home cooked meals. I’ve also received a crocheted blanket, a couple homemade pieces of jewelry, and a whole lot of artwork...that decorates my fridge.”

Sarah offers me a smile, “I bet those are your favorite forms of payment.”

“They are,” I agree easily. I don’t do this to get rich, I do it because...I can.

“You are a registered nurse, so obviously you stay up to date with your credentials. Do you have any additional certifications or training?”

Shrugging, I lean back to give the staff room to place my plate in front of me. My mouth waters at the rich scents. “I completed some courses online and familiarized myself with ADA compliance, FMLA, and government assistance.”

“You look at the big picture, they are more than their diagnosis.” Suzie comments softly. I nod emphatically in agreement, happy that she understands. “My Seril does that too.” So much pride in Suzie’s expression as she glances at her daughter, it overwhelms me.

“Vandy.” Seril shifts in her seat, spreading her napkin across her lap. “I have some money, it’s a long story, but I—”

“Your mom had a seizure, had a car accident, TBI, your brother stole all your money, your husband and the Kosher Nostra insisted he pay it all back...with interest.”

Seril glares at Tovah for several long seconds, “So not that long of a story. Tovah, that’s the synopsis, but you left out so much—”

Tovah waves her off with a flick of her hand, “Emotional bullshit, unnecessary to the story.”

Gertie sighs, “Yes, emotions often get in the way of a good story.”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Tovah skips her utensils and grabs the chicken with her hand, taking a big bite of it. I use my napkin to hide my shock and amusement.

“We have a proposition for you, Vandy. Expand your services and clientele, assisting those with chronic illnesses modify their lifestyles, homes, vehicles, etc. to improve

the quality of their lives on a sliding pay scale to keep the doors open, so to speak, but our foundation will fund the majority of expenses.” Seril’s intense eye contact is broken when she sets her sights on the shy girl at the other end of the table. “Bailey will oversee day-to-day operations, securing equipment, planning travel, compliance, whatever needs done, so that you may focus on the patients and their families. Esther, Sarah, Gertie, and Judi will handle fundraising and awareness. And Esther will use her connections at the hospitals to reach out to potential clients who might typically fall through the cracks.”

“Seril. What...why...how...why would you put me in charge?!?” Bailey screeches, her face red, the whites of her eyes visible, her eyebrows practically in her hairline.

“Because I want it handled right.”

“Then why would you want me to do it?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Seril rolls her eyes and clicks her tongue, “Someone smack her—Tovah, not you!”

Tovah’s hand stops mid-air, poised to carry out Seril’s wishes. “Why do you insist on denying me joy?”

Seril ignores her. “Any questions?” She holds her hand up without breaking eye contact with me. “Accept it, Bailey, move on. Vandy?”

“Uh, yeah, lots of questions, but my brain is rebooting at the moment.” Seril slides a packet to me.

“Review that. Write down your questions, concerns, hard limits, and we’ll talk again in a week.” And business is concluded for the time being. I sit, eat, and listen. They are a close-knit group. They joke around, they debate, at one point Sophie throws a fork at Tovah, but they love and respect one another. It’s unbelievable, unless you witness it for yourself. Toward the end of the meal, Bailey catches my eye and grins with a shrug. I return the gesture, my mind in constant motion going over everything Seril has presented.

I shake hands, receive a few hugs, and walk out of the family compound on shaky legs. Tovah escorts me outside, opening the door to the SUV for me. She leans against the vehicle with a smirk. She’s beautiful and dangerous.

“I’m not a jealous person, Vandy, but I gotta say. I’m pissed my brother got to you first.”

“Your brother?” I shake my head trying to figure out what she’s talking about.

“Tevye.” I gasp in surprise. “We’re twins.” She chuckles at my slack-jawed reaction. Twins? I run my gaze up and down Tovah and it snaps into place. Once you know to look for it, it’s easy to see they are identical. Two sides of a coin. When I look at her face, I’m stunned at the heat in her eyes, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. “Been a while since I’ve eaten Filipino.” I gulp, my face heating. She isn’t talking about our cuisine. My God, she’s hitting on me! “Yeah, real shame he found you first.”

“We’ve met twice...did he talk about me?” I lean in close, my voice just above a whisper. My inconvenient hopes are dashed when she shakes her head in the negative.

“Fuck no. Fucker doesn’t talk. Call it a twin thing, or a special ability gifted to me by the dark prince.” Closing the distance between us, she leans into the backseat of the SUV and ghosts her lips across my cheek to whisper in my ear, “Or Seril has a big fucking mouth. See you soon, Vandy.”

She shuts the door and smacks her hand on the top. I scramble to buckle as the SUV begins moving away from the estate. I watch it fade from the back window, then turn around and face forward. I open my mouth to ask the driver except he’s loyal to them and won’t give me any useful information. So, I pull out my phone. I can’t wait to learn about Seril and the others organically, I need to know who I’m dealing with now.

My stomach flips as my fingers fly across my screen. Life is about to change, good or bad, I don’t know. Will I be the same once it’s all said and done?

“THE MOB?!?”

Tevye 5.

“We’re gonna get you a snack, then we’ll head to the doctor.” Arlo grunts in my

arms, and my lips twitch with amusement. He sounds like me sometimes and while at the beginning it would freak me out, now...let's just say that Ruthie is a good teacher. I'm just a shitty student. But we're trying and she assures me that's the most important thing.

Zeppo finds our "lessons" endlessly entertaining, but he's kept his mouth shut and I'm grateful. I'm pretty sure sweet Ruth threatened to cut him off if he did. I'm already getting enough side-eye from my parents and Tovah, I'm not ready for the rest of the family to harass me as I navigate fatherhood and emotions. Emoting is exhausting.

And so are children. I took Arlo to a park earlier this week. By myself. It was an exercise in patience, but I think Arlo had a good time. I chased after him all over the playground, pushed him in the swing, and held him up as he "hung" from the monkey bars. A few mothers or nannies, I don't know which, were bold with their interest. Don't know what it is about single fathers that get them wet and ready, but any other time in my life, I might have taken them up on their explicit offers. Instead, I continued to play with Arlo, listening to him laugh, then took him home without collecting any numbers.

Tovah nearly had a stroke when I told her. She said and I quote, "Crotch goblin or not, easy pussy is easy pussy." We nearly had a fist fight when she tried to pull the waistband of my joggers from my body to check I still owned a dick. Once we retreated to our respective corners, she told me, "It's about damn time. If I don't have to babysit you and Arlo, I can get my dick wet. Which park were you at? I'm in the mood for a little Mommy and me time."

My parents were more subtle with their surprise. I think they're afraid to call attention to my increased involvement with my own son. And that's fair. Their doubt is warranted. I've been half-assing it since he landed on our doorstep. I'm not sure how to explain it to them, or even myself, but I want to whole-ass parenting Arlo.

If only never to see the disappointment in my father's...or Vandy's eyes.

I skipped group this week. I just couldn't face her. Not yet. I felt vulnerable, exposed, cornered like a wild animal. Despite the progress Ruthie claims I'm making, Seril is channeling her inner Shakespeare, her eyes demanding a plague upon my house. Every meal, even passing in the hall...the Sarai Ima is displeased with me. Tough shit. She's married to Moshe; she'll have to get used to being displeased.

Arlo wraps a skinny arm around my neck; he places his other hand on my cheek and turns my face toward his. Our eyes meet and my feet stop. Middle of the hallway, I'm frozen. We have the same gray-blue eyes. He leans forward and presses his nose to mine with a giggle. Fucking hell.

I hate feelings. I'm willing to learn and dive a little deeper into them, but it doesn't mean I like them or how the sound of his laughter is like carbonation in my veins.

I force my feet to start moving again, stomping my way through the compound. Passing by Aunt Esther's office, which is now Seril's as the current Sarai Ima of the Kosher Nostra, the sounds of conversation slow my movements, a laugh that has a similar effect to Arlo's diverting us to the closed door.

I knock twice, then open the door before Seril can acknowledge me. She glares at me, but I ignore her, my attention caught by a surprised Vandy. I smirk when her light brown skin, indicative of her mixed heritage, slowly blushes. Our eyes hold for several beats before Seril clears her throat and totally ruins the moment. The moment is over, and Vandy's attention switches to the squirming toddler in my arms making his presence known. I return Seril's glare with one of my own. Vandy, however, ignores both of us and stands with a broad grin aimed at my son.

"Is this Arlo?" I grunt in the affirmative. "What a handsome little guy." She steps closer to us, her fingers crooked in front of her. "Hello, Arlo, I'm Vandy. Are you

ticklish?” He gives her a slobbery smile, throwing his head back with a howl when she starts tickling his stomach and under his arms. I’m barely able to keep a hold of him as he squirms to avoid her hands and lean into them at the same time. When she stops, running a hand down his back, he holds his arms out to her, grunting. “Like father, like son,” she murmurs, finally meeting my eyes again. She silently asks permission to hold him, I’m irritatingly powerless to refuse her anything, including holding Arlo. He cuddles right into her, laying his head on her shoulder, twirling a chunk of her long reddish-brown hair.

I think I’m jealous of my son.

I make the mistake of glancing at Seril, a scowl furrowing my brow at the smug smirk she flashes my way.

“I’m sorry. I probably should have asked before taking him—”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I shake my head, “You’re fine.” I shift on my feet, more aware of my height and size than ever standing next to her short slender frame. “Why are you here?” Fuck, I tried to ask that nicely, but I definitely fell short.

“Dammit, Tev.” I raise my arm on instinct, deflecting the stapler Seril throws at me. “Don’t scare her away before she’s signed the contract!”

“What contract?” I look between the two of them, reaching out for Arlo to keep my hands busy.

“Our offer of employment for Vandy Gibbs. Under Bailey’s supervision, Vandy is going to head up our new outreach program, assisting families and caregivers modify their homes, vehicles, and lives to accommodate children with chronic illnesses. Basically, what she does now, but on a grander scale and with monetary compensation.”

I grind my teeth instead of squeezing Arlo. I’m gonna kick Yakov’s ass. Seril is altruistic and philanthropic and all, but she ain’t stupid. She would never offer employment to someone, let alone invite them into our family’s sanctuary without a thorough background check.

My watch beeps reminding me of Arlo’s appointment. One last look at Vandy, I sigh in resignation. “Arlo has a doctor’s appointment. We were on our way to the kitchen for a snack before we head out. I’ll leave you to it.”

Seril claps excitedly and my stomach drops. She’s scheming. A calculated gleam in her eyes, she innocently suggests, “Tev, why don’t you take Vandy with you. If

you're free that is. Sign here, and Tev and Arlo can be your first official clients. It's perfect!" I'm sure it is, you meddling mensch. "Vandy can consult with Arlo's doctor, assess his setup here, and help you help Arlo."

"You're about as subtle as an infomercial actress."

Seril's face lights up as she throws up jazz hands, "But wait! There's more!" Vandy and I stare at Seril waiting for her. Her shoulders deflate a second later. "There isn't. More, I mean. Just need a signature." She pushes a small stack of papers across the desk. Vandy glances at them, then me, then with a sigh, turns back to Seril.

"I knowwhatyou are..." Vandy begins. My entire body locks up in anticipation. "And I don't really care, so long as you are honest. Tell me this isn't a front for illegal dealings. Tell me I'm allowed to leave as per the contract terms with my life intact. Tell me this isn't a mistake."

Seril's posture loosens, a kind and patient smile blooming across her face. "You might know what we are, but you do not knowhowe are. But you will, Vandy, in time. And I can guarantee that no matter what happens," Seril's eyes dart to me, her smile growing, "you will never regret becoming a part of the Mishpocheh Consortium."

Vandy releases a heavy sigh, picks up the fancy pen on the desk and signs her name. "You mean the Pussy Portfolio?" I rear back; unsure I heard her right. Seril tosses her head back and laughs.

"I love it! I'm adding it to the list!" She comes around her desk, and when Vandy stretches out a hand to shake, Seril ignores it and draws her into a hug. "Told you I'm a hugger. Welcome, Vandy." She meets my eyes over Vandy's shoulder. "We're so happy to have you with us."

Meddling mensch.

Vandy 6.

“Where did you come up with the name Arlo?” I ask an open-ended question, hoping to elicit more than a grunt or one word response from the giant sitting next to me. We’ve just left Arlo’s appointment, and I’d say it went well. Though, it was clear Tevye is still unsure about so much of Arlo’s condition and requirements. Don’t get me wrong, he’s done his research, but based on the doctor’s response to Tevye’s presence, I’m gonna hazard a guess that Tevye hasn’t been very involved in Arlo’s life. Despite being his sole parent, Tev has allowed his parents and sister to handle so much of Arlo’s needs. He’s trying and I am in no position to judge him; I barely know him or what he’s been through.

All I know is that Arlo is the sweetest little boy and with a few tweaks here and there, he should live a long and fulfilling life. And a large part of me really wants to be there to see it.

I receive holiday cards and updates from previous clients, and I love seeing little glimpses of their lives now that they have found their footing. But Arlo...and Tevye, dammit if I don’t want more than just a glimpse. I want a front row seat for the whole epic movie.

The growly grunting giant is growing on me. And I’m not sure how I feel about it.

“Didn’t,” he says, shifting in the driver’s seat of the SUV. “She’d already named him.”

“Did...” I can’t believe I’m about to ask this, but I want to know more. “Did you love her?” I don’t expect him to laugh so hard tears form under his ridiculously long eyelashes. My face heats in embarrassment at his reaction...and maybe a little anger.

“Ok, so that’s a no.” I mutter, turning in my seat to face out the passenger window.

“That’s a fuck no. Never loved anybody, woman.”

Well, now that’s interesting. “You love your sister and your parents, right? Seril’s husband?”

He shrugs; his eyes laser-focused on the road. “One doesn’t ‘love’ Tovah...you resign yourself to a lifetime of forced proximity with the devil’s representative on earth.”

“She can’t be that bad.” He laughs again, not quite as hard.

“Right. Give it time.” He chews on the inside of his cheek. Reluctantly, he shares, “I don’t want any of them to hurt. Or die.”

“Sounds like love to me,” I joke, chuckling at the frown he aims briefly my way.

“How about you? You ever love anyone? Some pissant in high school who rocked your world with 3 inches for 3 seconds in the backseat of his mom’s car?”

I clear my throat awkwardly, my hands suddenly quite fascinating in my lap. “I wasn’t in love, but I really liked him...for a while. And I think it was more than 3 inches.”

“If you aren’t sure...it probably wasn’t.” He smirks. “Did you at least cum?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Tevye! That is very personal.”

“So?” He shakes his head with a light chuckle. “Never mind, your reaction is a no.”

“Not every woman is capable of...uh...achieving climax during penetrative intercourse.”

“Fuck,” he groans, eyeing me a few times. “Didn’t know I had a nurse kink. You got one of them white hats?”

“Yeah, and a rectal thermometer!”

“I’ve had a few fingers, a couple toys, and a Persian cucumber. Never a thermometer.” I nearly choke on my spit. I can’t believe he just put it all out there like that. “Ha! Your face is so red!”

I sniff haughtily, smoothing out my wrinkleless pants. “This conversation has gotten off track—What’s a Persian cucumber?”

His toothy smile fills his eyes with mirth and it’s a sight to behold. He’s so damn handsome. “Persian cucumbers are typically skinnier and shorter than the cucumbers you normally find in our grocery stores.”

I smile to myself as a retort sticks to my tongue. Oh, what the hell, this is kind of fun. “So, you went with the Persian because the American is too much for even a big guy like you?”

We pull into the long driveway of the family compound and I'm sad to realize our time together is almost over. He parks in the roundabout in the front of the estate. "Why don't you try my American cucumber and tell me if you prefer Pissant Pete's Persian cucumber instead." Tev is inches from my face, his unique eye color mesmerizing up close. The heat of his body surrounds me despite the SUV console between us.

I whisper, "His name was Logan." Tev's grin becomes predatory. My self-preservation finally kicks in and I snap back, fumbling with my seatbelt and the door. Fresh air fills the interior, washing over my face and grounding me. His laughter follows me, and I hate how much I like the sound. He opens the back door and pulls Arlo out of his car seat. The little guy is conked out. I don't blame him; he had blood and urine tests performed plus a full physical exam.

I force myself to be an adult, walking to the front of the SUV as Tev comes around from the other side. "Thank you for today."

His brow wrinkles, "What?"

"I enjoyed spending time with Arlo...and you." I rub Arlo's back, smiling when he sighs in his sleep. "Speaking to his doctor gave me a better insight into what he requires. I'll have a plan put together for you shortly." He frowns for just a second before his lips straighten and his posture stiffens. I don't know what I did or said but something upset him.

"Of course. See you soon, Nurse Gibbs."

He stomps off and I stare at him with my jaw dropped, unsure what just happened. He doesn't look at me again, just pushes through the front door and disappears down the hall. Devorah stares after him, shakes her head, and looks at me with a slow smile. She waves cheerily, then slowly closes the front door.

My car is parked off to the side. I get in, start the engine, fiddle with my radio until my favorite playlist on my phone is blasting through the speakers, then I...sit. I can't bring myself to shift and drive away. Something flashed in his eyes just before he walked away. Irritation? Disappointment? I don't know. And I'm afraid it is going to haunt me until I can make heads or tails of it.

Tevye 7.

I come up behind Yakov in the hallway outside the war room of the family compound. Silent and quick, I plant my hand on the back of his head and slam it into the wall. He turns just in time, so only the side of his face makes impact. Damn, I was hoping to break the fucker's nose.

Close to his ear, I hiss, "Couldn't have given me a heads up, dickwad?"

I roll my eyes when he replies innocently, "My, whatever do you mean?"

"Vandy Gibbs."

He chuckles, "Ah, yes, the pretty little nurse." Those words, his tone...I don't like it in reference to Vandy. And the bitch of it is, I'm not sure why. I'm attracted to her, she's fucking hot. But there's more, something else, and that's what I'm uncertain about. Outside, she said she enjoyed the day, and I foolishly thought she meant spending it with me and Arlo. Apparently while I was thinking that I wouldn't mind doing this more often with her, maybe sometimes sans clothes and child, she was just thinking about her job. Her duty. And anger and frustration welled up inside me. There might have been some disappointment. Possibly some hurt? I'll have to ask Ruthie. She'll just show me the emotion emoji chart and make me point at which one looks how I feel.

"I'll fuck you up."

Yak snorts, “You’ll try.” Then he shifts his feet, sweeps his leg out and around and I’m on the ground with him kneeling on my throat. I glare up at him and his smug triumphant expression. “Told you before, I’ll mount your fucking head on my wall. Lucky for you, watching you learn feelings like a preschooler is entertaining, as is watching you flounder your way through romance.”

“No romance.”

“So, you don’t like the pretty little nurse?”

“I wanna fuck her.”

“Of course. But you want to do more than that. And you don’t like it.”

“I don’t like you.” Yak laughs at my childish retort, stands up and dusts his clothes off from our tussle.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Ok.” He leaves me lying on the floor of the hallway, entering the large conference room. Everyone’s eyes are on me from inside the room, as I roll to my side and then stand up. Deciding to push aside Vandy and the unwelcome feelings she invokes, I stride confidently into the room and take my seat.

Moshe smirks, “You good, buddy?”

“Start the fucking meeting.” I mutter; my eyes trained on the opposite wall.

“Yak, you called us in here. Go ahead.”

From next to me, Yak taps the tablet in his hand, activating the touch screen hanging on the wall. Everyone is now able to see what he’s doing. He pulls up an email thread. I’m apparently slow today, because before I’ve had a chance to get far, Ezra is already on his feet, roaring.

“Sit down.” In the blink of an eye, Moshe goes from playful to serious, the Avraham Avinu taking over. Ezra is steaming, but he sits back down in his chair. Uncle Aaron, his father, puts a consoling hand on Ezra’s tense shoulder. I observe their interaction, then look at my own father. Steven Frenkel is an imposing man, a few inches shorter than me, but we’re built similar. Broad shoulders, torso of solid muscle, resting asshole face. However, the stark difference between us is compassion, empathy, and selflessness. It’s not that I wouldn’t put myself in front of a bullet for any of these men, not to mention the women and children, it’s just...Dad gives not just his body in the protection of others, he gives his wisdom, his heart, his time and patience. I swallow hard at the reminder that I am not my father and will always fall short of his example.

He meets my eyes from across the table, and the hard look of a moment ago slips briefly as his eyes soften, and he smiles at me knowingly. He points to his watch, and I know he's gonna make me talk to him. I don't want to, don't want to be vulnerable, even with my father. But I think I need more than Ruthie's help if I want to be a better man and father. A man worthy of someone like Vandy.

"She's mine!" Ezra is barely controlling himself.

Moshe dips his chin, "We know. And she's Kosher Nostra. We'll protect her, Ez."

Yak, undisturbed by Ezra and Moshe, spells it out for everyone else, "In Florida, our friend in the Cuban mafia, Diaz has heard some rumblings recently regarding Hiram Goldman's failed flesh market. His death has put a crimp in everyone's plans. However, it is the man who expected Dorothy to be delivered to him, that has put a renewed bounty on her. Currently, we are unable to determine who that man is. Everything Diaz sent me is word of mouth."

Moshe frowns, his eyes cold as he considers our next move. "Yak, Tev, track down who this fucker is, I want eyes and ears on him asap. Also, do your thing online to follow the bounty and neutralize anyone dumb enough to take the contract. Increase protection details for all the Goldman girls, I wouldn't put it past anyone to use the other sisters as leverage to get to Dorothy. Add another guard or two to each of the BABs."

Zilv groans, stupidly interrupting his brother, "Not you too! Fucking Tovah and herbadass bitches. Ridiculous!"

Uncle David leans forward to look at his son, "Membership application denied?"

Zilv lifts one shoulder, his eyes on the table. "Twice." Everyone laughs at Zilv, even Ezra.

The moment of levity passes, Ez takes a deep breath, his shoulders rising and falling with the effort. “I won’t lose her...I won’t survive.” That sentiment, the defeated tone of his voice hits me in the solar plexus. The devotion he feels for another human being, the way he truly believes their souls entwine...I’ve grown up listening to the older men of the family wax on poetically about their women and children. But to witness everything Moshe went through with Seril, Zeppo and Ruthie, Jonah and Harper, Ezra and Dorothy, it’s starting to click.

Perhaps Tov and I have missed out, unable or unwilling to trust our soft underbellies to someone else. I wouldn’t consider these men weak; in fact, if I look at it objectionably, they are stronger. They truly have something to live for. Would it be so bad?

Arlo. I must live for him. Like that woman said in the group, I am his protector, his advocate, his shield against the world. Vandy’s smile flashes through my mind, the way her face lit up when she held Arlo and played with him. I’m a big man, I can be her shield, too.

“The Kosher Nostra will stand in front of Dorothy.”

Ezra deflates slightly in his chair, “I know. But we can’t predict what this person will do, or how far his reach extends.”

Moshe nods in understanding, “Then we remain vigilant until we are able to eliminate the threat.”

We cover a little more business before Moshe dismisses us. My mom took Arlo when we got home to feed him, bathe him, and put him to bed for me. And after the day I’ve had, I’d like to pour myself some scotch and crawl into bed.

“You alright, son?” Dad asks once we’re out of earshot of everyone else. “Seems like

you got a lot on your mind?”

“Hard to breathe.” I rub my chest, keeping my face blank as my father looks at me with concern.

“Does your chest hurt?”

“No. You know Tovah visits the underworld every full moon. The scent of sulfur she brings back with her gets stronger every trip.”

“I’m always up for a good Tovah is the devil joke, but don’t deflect. It’s cowardly.” I toss a glare his direction as we walk side by side to my suite. He sighs, “Tevye, your mother and I love you and your sister. And joking aside, we are proud of you both. You two always felt this need to stand apart, distance yourselves from others, and your mom and I didn’t try to stop you, knowing you did what you felt you had to do. But...it’s alright to let people in. People move away, they fall out of touch, romance fizzles away, and everyone dies eventually. It’s the impact they have on our lives that remains. You may not believe yourself capable of love, however, your actions would indicate otherwise.”

Several thoughts float through my mind. “And...if...I put myself out there...and I’m not enough?” Fuckin’ hell. Where did that come from?

Dad’s eyes open wide, shock overtaking his features instantly. He blinks at me several times, then schools his face to appear normal again. “Then they aren’t enough for you. You don’t have to settle. You and Tovah deserve to be loved and treasured just like anyone else.”

“Even Zilv?” I can’t help but joke, not a fan of the crawling sensation under my skin from the heavy discussion.

Dad chuckles, “Even Zilv. I love you, Tev.” He puts his hand on my shoulder just outside my door. “And I’ve seen the effort you’re making with Arlo, and I’m so damn proud of you. Your situation isn’t ideal, it isn’t easy. Not to be a cliché, but it isn’t how many times we get knocked down, it’s how many times we get back up.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I unlock my door without responding, unsure of what to say, the words clogging in my throat. This is too much for one day. I'm fucking exhausted, mentally and physically.

I'm unprepared for the scene I walk in on. My dad bumps into me as I stop abruptly in my doorway. Mom sits on my couch, turned to rest her arm on the back of it. That's not what's confusing. It's that Vandy is walking the length of the room, talking with mom, while holding Arlo snug to her chest, her hand rubbing up and down his back. He's passed the fuck out. Wasted in her arms.

Why is she here? How is she here? I left her outside before I went to the meeting; she was supposed to be leaving. I am not a fan of the emotions that rise from my esophagus. My conversation with my dad echoes in my brain as I stare at her. Fear. Apprehension. Hope. Fuck, I've never felt any of this before. Makes me want to vomit, purge all these unwanted emotions from my body and be done with them.

But I can't look away. I can't focus on anything but her and my son.

"Tev! I was about to put Arlo down for the night when Vandy knocked on your door. She's so good with Arlo, he reached out for her and fell asleep immediately." Mom's words sound innocent, but they are laced with so much "knowing" that I'm never going to hear the end of it. She likes Vandy, that's obvious. She would never have given Vandy her grandchild to hold if she didn't. The women of the Kosher Nostra appear open and accepting, but they are a shrewd judge of character. Within seconds, they make their decision, and it is final. Mom has welcomed Vandy into the family, just as Seril has.

I grunt out, “Did you need something?” Last I saw her, she was reminding me that we are nothing more than business, a responsibility of her employment.

Vandy’s throat moves as she swallows, her grip tightening ever so slightly on my son. “I was hoping to walk through your suite and figure out if there was anything to be done to make life easier for both of you.”

Live here with us. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, I can’t believe I just thought that. What the fuck is wrong with me? I shake my head to rid myself of whatever the fuck that was, and motion for her to have a look around.

“Vandy?” Dad steps in from behind me. “Steven Frenkel. It’s a pleasure to meet you, young lady. Why don’t I take the little guy and Gert and I will put him to bed while you...look around.” Subtle. Not a word the Kosher Nostra understands.

“Nice to meet you, Steven.” Vandy gifts him a brilliant smile as she carefully hands over the limp body of Arlo. I’ve held that kid when he’s asleep, it is solid dead weight. Nothing weighs more than a sleeping child, as far as I’m concerned. Especially my child. Despite his illness, Arlo is above height and weight expectations at his age. He’s a big kid and will only get bigger.

Dad carries Arlo into his bedroom, Mom follows, spinning around once she’s behind Vandy and gives me a double thumbs up. I stifle a laugh at her antics, meeting Vandy’s eyes. She’s nervous in my presence. Biting her bottom lip and darting her eyes around the room but coming back to me every few seconds. The way the blush suffuses her skin draws me in and before I know it, I’m inches away, towering over her, my cock and I loving the size difference between us.

“You’re good with Arlo. He likes you.”

“He’s such a sweet boy. I have a list of things in my phone to check up on for his

condition. I'll get you an easy guide for dealing with MSUD; foods, activities, things to watch for. I can make copies for everyone that would be with him. It's best to get everyone on the same page. I'm sure your family would feel bad if they gave him something his body couldn't process. I caught a little of his bedtime routine with your mom. She's great. And she loves Arlo so much. And you. Obviously. She's your mom, of course she loves you. I don't know if I said it. But you're doing a good job with him. I wasn't so sure when you spoke of him in the group. It's clear that you're trying. And that's all any of us can do. Just try. Although Yoda said, 'do or do not, there is no try'."

She yelps when I bend low enough to fuse my mouth to hers. God help me, her rambling and terrible Yoda impression are endearing. Her words, though, the fact she's noticed my effort to connect with my son, and how much she already likes my boy, incite something inside me that can only be quenched with her lips. Her tongue hesitantly touches mine. Her whimpers when I band my arm around her back and lift her effortlessly, so I don't have to bend down so far. I drink from her mouth and it's everything I knew it would be. Only better. Her arms around my neck, she holds on tight, opening to me willingly, letting me plunder her mouth.

Dad clears his throat and ruins the fucking moment. Vandy gasps in my arms, then squirms like Arlo when he wants to get down. On her feet, she takes a giant step back, staring at me in horror. Not the reaction a man wants from a woman after kissing her.

"Oh God! What have I...we can't do that! This is so wrong. Seril's gonna fire me." Dad, Mom and I burst out laughing. Seril will do no such thing. Knowing the Sarai Ima, this was probably her plan all along. I'm not as mad as I should be about it, either. "I have to go!" She dodges my outstretched hand, running to the door, throwing it open and she's gone. I could go after her, I could tell the guards to detain her. But she's like a cornered animal right now, and I'm smart enough to know she needs space. And I need a cold shower.

“Your son is sound asleep. Go take care of that thing.” Mom points at my tented pants. “We’re leaving.” Mom grabs Dad’s hand and drags him from my suite. My cock dies a swift death when Dad winks at me, thrusting his hips slightly as he shuts the door behind him.

Fuck. That kiss...that’s too tame a word for what we just shared. If I was interested in her before, I think it’s safe to say I’m bordering on obsession now. She needs to process, and I’ll give her that time, but then I’m coming for her. Ready or not, she’s mine.

Great, now I sound like Ezra.

Vandy 8.

Avoidance is the name of the game. Distraction. Keep busy, keep moving, just keep swimming...so thoughts of the tallest, hottest man I’ve ever met and the way he masterfully claimed my mouth last week don’t have time to settle, fester, completely take over my every conscious thought. And some unconscious.

I never knew dreams could be so erotic. Except, when I get close to cumming, screaming out Tevye’s name as he drives into me, I wake up because I have to pee. Damn you, troublesome tiny bladder!

Since I’m successfully NOT thinking about a certain earth-bound Jewish god, I have managed to be quite productive over the last week. While he was gone during the day at work, I was granted entrance to his suite at the family compound. I compiled easy to follow lists of good foods and lists in bright red ink of the bad foods that can compromise Arlo’s system. His little body is unable to break down specific amino acids that are often found in high protein foods. This buildup can cause lethargy, irritability, decreased appetite and lead to developmental delays and metabolic crises. It’s taxing on the body, and though Arlo is very big for his age, thanks to his dad, his

body is still ill-equipped to handle it. The name of the disease, Maple Syrup Urine Disease comes from the tell-tale symptom of sweet-smelling urine, ear wax, and sweat. It can come on quite quickly, and a metabolic crisis can often turn deadly if not treated swiftly, as almost every organ system can be affected.

The good news is that it can be managed through strict diet, and vigilance. Constant monitoring can mean the difference between life and death. His immune system is sensitive, and, in some cases, a common cold can send him into a metabolic event. Arlo isn't there yet, as his symptoms are less severe than others I've read about, but eventually, he may require a liver transplant, since the liver is where many of the enzymes that break down amino acids are created.

I can't imagine having to sit by while my child suffered, waiting for someone else to die so they may live. My goal this week was to set Tev up with the tools he needed to make sure Arlo had a chance to thrive.

In addition to the dietary restrictions, I've left at-home urinary testing kits to quickly check Arlo's metabolic levels. I was assured by Tev's mom, Gertie, that Arlo is seeing the best specialists, receiving top notch care. Doing a bit of my own research, as I am not familiar with MSUD, I would have to agree with her. Money does not seem to be a problem when considering medical care for their loved ones. That is a rare situation, I know so many who would benefit from such freedom.

Considering the two families Esther set me up with for consultations this week, I guess Esther and Seril are looking to make it a more common occurrence. One family at a time.

And Bailey is wonderful to work with. Sweet, detail-oriented, and a chihuahua on the phone with recalcitrant suppliers. After my initial assessments, she didn't bat an eye at my requests for equipment, and I'm excited to go back in a few days after everything arrives.

Our official offices in the Mishpocheh Consortium building are tastefully decorated, spacious, and inviting. It's funny because both Bailey and I are unable to fully relax, waiting for the catch. Seems too good to be true, in all honesty. Didn't help that my parents were concerned when I spoke to them last night. My mother did commend me for not being stupid enough to quit my job at the hospital just in case.

I poke my head into Bailey's office and see her dopey smile aimed at her phone. "How's Ernie?" I ask, startling her. She blushes but her smile grows so big thinking about her man. I've met him twice now, and he's a very nice man, and so smitten with Bailey. It's adorable how cute they are together.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“He’s good. He’s coming to get me for lunch after he showers.”

“Oh, did he just get up?” I glance at my watch, smirking when I see its nearly noon. “Keep him up late, did you?”

“No. I mean, yes. I did. But that’s not why, he had to dispose of—” She cuts herself off and my mood plummets. Her words serve as a stark and necessary reminder that Ernie and Tev are part of a deadly organization. Yes, my research into the Kosher Nostra exposed an extensive history of philanthropy, community outreach, and being some of the top employers in the state in several fields. But the quiet whisperings speak to a seedier side that scares me.

I can’t imagine what my mom would say...

“He just got some schmutz on his clothes.” Her heavy pause has me sitting up straighter in the seat I’ve taken across from her desk. “Are you close with your family?” Her question takes me by surprise.

“Uh...yeah. I’d say so.”

“Hmm. My parents and brothers aren’t bad people, but they aren’t warm and fuzzy either. I still see them for holidays and such. We just aren’t close. Big things happen in my life; they aren’t at the top of my list to tell.” I nod in understanding. “I knew we were different, but I didn’t realize how much until Seril started dating Moshe. The core family is a hodgepodge of personalities. They butt heads. They irritate and overstep and grate on each other’s nerves. And yet, I’ve never met a family, an extended family at that, that voluntarily spends so much time together. Dinners,

breakfasts, outings, heck, they all have other homes or condos or apartments, except for Esther and David, and Moshe and Seril, and they hardly ever use them, preferring to stay at the family compound. At first, I thought it was for safety, but honestly, the love they share is unlike anything I've ever seen. And if I hadn't felt its warm embrace, I wouldn't believe it was real." She blinks rapidly to stem the threat of tears that shine in her eyes.

"You don't regret...you don't fear being involved in a criminal organization?"

"Not once." She smirks, leaning forward like she's sharing a secret. "And the sex...I can only speak for Ernie, but the sounds I've heard and the sights I've seen, it is a shared family trait. Even Zeppo and Ezra, though they aren't related by blood. Now, Tovah and Tevye—" I hold up my hand to stop her. I don't want to think about him. He's occupied enough of my brain space already. Her laughter is unwelcome. After a few tense seconds, I sigh, close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Alright, what's Tevye like?"

"The twins are scary, intimidating, violent when necessary. Tevye isn't unfriendly but reserved around everyone. He and Tovah both keep their emotional distance." That wasn't so bad. Most of it I already gleaned based on our interactions. "Physically though, super friendly." I raise an eyebrow in question, and Bailey laughs again. "Sexually speaking." My brain takes too long to put the pieces together. "A whore. He enjoys female company outside of the family compound, he isn't shy about it, but it's obvious it doesn't mean anything. That's why he doesn't bring them home to meet the family." Her amusement disappears, her little brow furrowing as she meets my gaze head-on. "As I said, they are both scary and intimidating and possess more love for those around them than anyone could ever guess. They are loyal to those they deem worthy. Might not be poetic and you probably won't ever see a sweet gesture from either of them, but you will know when you are in their inner circle, blanketed by their love, despite the scowls they sport."

“Thank you. For your honesty.” I mean that. She could have sugarcoated it or withheld her insights. I wanted to think that maybe our kiss the other day meant something. We were in the family compound, but I wasn’t there in a romantic capacity, at least before he shoved his tongue down my throat. Maybe it was convenient. An itch he wanted to scratch and didn’t want to leave the compound.

“Seril said that Tevye is obviously interested in—”

“Seril should stick to what she’s good at...hoodwinking people into doing her bidding.” We share a laugh and I’m glad she didn’t take offense at my interruption or statement.

Bailey shrugs, “She’s the Sarai Ima for a reason.”

I’ve heard the term before, but I’m still not sure what it means. “What’s that?”

“Ooh, this is exciting! I get to teach someone else something Jewish!” She claps her hands excitedly and I can’t help but smile at her. “Mother of the Kosher Nostra.” That clicks.

“Oh, she called herself the gefilte-mother.”

“Her mom calls Moshe the gefilte-father.” Bailey giggles, “I love that one. In essence, they are the head of the Kosher Nostra, and the Mishpocheh Consortium. Moshe’s parents were the previous Avraham Avinu and Sarai Ima, before they stepped down several years ago for Moshe to take over.”

This is a lot to take in and process. My mouth is shut, but I’ve been told my face often has subtitles. My anxiety is noticeable.

“Vandy, if I can give you one piece of advice.” She pauses so I nod to encourage her

to continue. “Let them show you who they truly are; you’ll be surprised.”

Tevye 9.

“Right now, it’s a waiting game. Tricky to make a move when we don’t know who this guy might be in league with. The wrong people catch wind of what we’re doing, and we become the target of more than just Joseph Baird and his hired goons.”

I hate it, but Moshe’s right. Yak and I have put in a lot of time tracking this fucker down. Imagine our surprise when we figured out the man obsessed with owning Dottie, is a top tier exec from a popular railroad company out of Georgia. Yak’s got our programs working day and night to find his acquaintances, business partners, tracking his communication threads, and how many pots he’s got his filthy fucking fingers in.

Ezra’s reaction was more upsetting than when we first found out about the threat. Somehow, knowing the man’s name, sent him into a tailspin, and his dad and brother had to forcibly calm him down. The fact that I was even bothered by his reaction is something I’m not used to. I want to protect Dottie and the others because it’s the right thing to do, but also because I...care for them all.

Yes, that was physically painful to admit, even in my own head. And it’s irritating as hell, but they are my family. And I will rip this world apart, raze it to the ground for any one of them. I’m just going to bitch about the inconvenience while I do it.

I’m restless as I leave the war room. And I know I’m not the only one. Every partnered male is like a heat-seeking missile, intent on finding their female target. Zilv speed-walks toward the main entrance, probably going out to find some companionship of his own. An orgasm, at the least.

Arlo is with my mom, aunts, Shon, Uriel, and Irving. The Goldman boys are taking to

the Kosher Nostra like ducks to water. Ezra and Zeppo's parents took them in months ago, giving the Goldman girls a chance to be big sisters to Uri and Irv, without having to be their stand-in parents too.

Since I'm alone for the night, my intent is to get back to my suite and shower. As I reach the fork in the hallway, my body moves away from my room and toward the garage, waving off my security detail. I'm in my car, speeding down the driveway before I realize where I'm heading.

Vandy.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I've been focused on the matter at hand, finding and neutralizing the threat against one of our own. In the back of my mind, though, washer. The kiss. The taste of her mouth. The way her body fits against mine. The insatiable desire that threatened to drown me.

What feels like an eternity later, I'm in front of her apartment building. Her address was memorized days ago, feeding my obsession, and I took moments here and there to find out more about her. Including where she lives. It's what I do. As Yak says, our stalking saves lives.

The lies we tell ourselves.

Easy enough to jimmy open the door of her building, I take the stairs two at a time, my blood pumping in my veins, throbbing in my ears. Anticipation builds, desire boiling to the surface. I want her. A few more seconds and I'll have her.

I slam my fist on her apartment door three times. She opens it slightly, the chain still attached. When she registers it's me, her eyes widen and her jaw drops. "Tev?"

"Unchain the door, Vandy." She jumps at my harsh tone but complies immediately. The second the chain is gone, I burst through the door, pushing her with my body, my lips on hers, and hoist her into the air and against the nearest wall.

She freezes for half a second, before she kisses me back. Her hands scramble for purchase on my shoulders, her palms running down my chest, scraping against my nipples, then back up around my neck. Suddenly, it feels as if I'm free-falling, and it's exhilarating. I let the drugging taste of her wash away the frustration and anger

and fear I felt earlier in the war room.

I place her on unsteady feet just inside her kitchen, push her lounge pants down, along with her underwear, and set her on the kitchen counter. Kneeling, I'm level with the most exquisite pussy I've ever had the privilege to see, let alone touch, taste, inhale. She squeaks when I bury my face between her thighs, the dark lips of her pussy beckoning me like a siren song. Her hands tangle in my hair and when she tugs, for a moment I think she wants me to stop, but as I circle her clit with my tongue and then suck it hard into my mouth, her hands shove my face deeper. Her legs on my shoulders, her feet hooked around my neck to keep me in place.

I devour her like the gluttonous overeater she'd mistaken me for, gorging myself on her tangy juices, her cunt my new favorite meal. Sorry, Devorah, brisket is good, but Vandy is better. Much, much better. I rub her clit with my fingers, my tongue tracing her opening, before slipping inside. Her walls contract around my tongue and I know she's close. I hum, the vibrations spurring her on, her cries and whimpers fucking beautiful. During the chorus, her pussy floods my mouth and I drink it down greedily.

Aftershocks causing her to twitch, I stand, pick her up and carry her through the apartment to her bedroom. Next to the bed, I strip off her tank top and bra, then my own clothes. Her hands hesitate in front of my chest. I'm muscular, but I'm not chiseled like Moshe or the others. Yak and I are both solid. Our chests broad, our stomachs firm, our thighs thick. She glances up at me shyly from under her lashes and my lips stretch at the absurdity that she can still be shy after I just ate her pussy.

I wrap my hands around hers and bring them to my chest. I hold still, despite the throbbing of my cock between us, and let her explore. She trails featherlight touches across my chest, down my abdomen, around to my back and up to my shoulder.

"I can't believe you're here. Like this. Tevye, I don't understand—" I cut her off with my mouth, my hands wrapping around her waist. I growl into her when I realize she's

so small, my hands span her entire torso. I pick her up and gently lay her on her bed. I want to pound my chest, and roar like a savage, and fuck her until I can't move, let alone think. But she's Vandy. She deserves something more than an animal.

Her dark little nipples pebble when I climb over her, blanketing her entire body. My cock throbs between us, the sensitive underside gliding across her engorged clit. Our eyes meet and I can't look away. Her legs widen a little more, letting me notch into my rightful place. The heat of her threatens to unman me. The silky glide of her arousal. I wait, letting the anticipation build, it all feels momentous. Like one of the most important moments of my life, right here, right now. The Kosher Nostra, Arlo...Vandy.

She breaks the spell, reaching up to cup my cheeks, her eyes sad. "I know this isn't forever. It's just...fun."

The hell it is.

I snap my hips, driving into her hard and deep. Her body locks up, her back bowing, her voice strained as she is forced to accept my girth. Pissant Pete and the other fuckers she's been with could never prepare her for me. The way she stretches to accommodate me, how much I fill her, the depths of her body no one has ever touched before. I take her lips, her screams filling my mouth as our pelvises crash together.

Her nails dig into my skin, raking down my back. I rut, my hips pounding into her, giving her no chance to catch her breath. Her body sings for me. Thumb on her clit, my body contorted so I can lick and suck her pretty nipples, she cums again.

I sit up, dragging her legs over my hips, my hands encompassing her entire waist, I pull her on and off my dick, our eyes locked. "Not just fun. You bring out all these feelings and I hate it, but I like you more. I'm not a poetic guy, but I'll do my best to

show you what you mean to me.” Tears fall from her eyes, coating her cheeks. But she’s happy. She’s smiling at me, her thighs squeezing me, her hands gripping mine before sliding up her torso to cup her little titties. Planting my fists on either side of her head, I continue to thrust, her pussy snapping tight around me, and lean down until we’re face to face. Licking up her neck, I bite on her ear lobe, relishing the filthy moan that falls from her sinful mouth. “I know with certainty that I will die for the Kosher Nostra.” Thrust. Thrust. Thrust. My climax is close, but I want her to give me another one. “But I will live for you. And Arlo.”

She nudges my nose with her own, and grins. Her whispered, “Harder,” is my undoing. I snap my hips once more, and plant myself deep, as I cum with a growl. The orgasm starts in my soul and fights its way out of my dick and into her hungry cunt.

I collapse on top of her, laughing when she lets out an “oomph”. Instead of pushing me off her, she wraps her arms and legs around me and holds me tight. “This is real?” She queries and something sharp stabs me in the chest.

“Yes.”

She makes some sort of happy sound in her throat, forcing out a casual, “Cool. Cool.” I roll to the side, my head landing on a soft pillow. I bring her to my chest, kissing the top of her head before resting my cheek there. “Um, did you eat me out while humming ‘Gangsta’s Paradise’?”

I scoff, “No.” She relaxes slightly, grazing my neck with her nose, then her lips and tongue. “It was ‘Amish Paradise’.” She snorts, her entire body shaking with silent laughter. “I’m willing to be on my knees day and night, scoring points for the afterlife.”

“I’ll try not to be vain or whiny.”

“Let’s not be hasty.” I draw my hand down her soft spine until my palm covers her plump right ass cheek, my fingers digging into the meaty flesh. “I wouldn’t mind going medieval on your hiney.”

I’m almost certain as we tease one another, kiss, grope, and go for rounds two and three...this is the night I fell in love for the first time.

And I hope it’s the last.

Vandy 10.

I ignore Bailey’s giggles as I walk into my office and sit gingerly in my chair. I just got back from my morning appointment with one of our new clients. The mother wept, her husband holding her tight as he smiled at me over her head. I refitted their little girl’s bedroom and their bathroom to make life a little easier. Her right leg was amputated 6 months ago from an almost fatal skin and muscle infection. They’ve been managing, but with just a few well-placed additions, I think life will be a little easier for everyone moving forward. I grab a homemade cookie from the tin the mother shoved into my chest as I was leaving.

They’re pretty darn good.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Of course, the morning would have gone better if my entire southern hemisphere didn't feel like a giant bruise. Don't get me wrong, the pounding Tevye gave me was totally worth it, but I probably should have iced my nethers last night. Maybe I can get an ice pack before my next appointment.

Esther is keeping me busy; I have another consultation this afternoon. And with each one, I am loving this job more and more. I'm grateful Seril came into my support group. And if I'm honest with myself, I might be more appreciative of the hulking man that completely ruined me for all other men. Tevye was an animal, a beast, wild with just the right amount of roughness. I've never cum so hard in my life or so many times in one night.

I don't know what happened last night, I don't know why he sought me out, but I hope I helped him. I smirk to myself, thinking of the way he let loose, the growls and roar of completion that seemed to echo in my bedroom long after he'd gone home.

Bailey peeks around the entrance to my office, a wicked grin on her usually angelic face. "Don't worry, I used to walk funny too. Before my body got used to the...girthof the Kosher Nostra."

"Bailey!" I am a little shocked, but I shouldn't be by this point. Bailey has a mischievous side that she keeps under lock and key most of the time. I like to think that she's growing comfortable around me now that she's letting it out. My chest tightens a little at the idea that we're becoming good friends, not just co-workers.

The bell above our main door jingles. She winks at me, while welcoming whoever it is with her customer service voice, "Welcome to Suzie's Support Network, how can

I—” She cuts herself off once she’s down the hall and I immediately stand to see what’s going on. “Well, well, well. Mr. Frenkel. What a pleasant surprise.”

Stomach flipping, heart racing, I step into the hallway. My eyes catch Tevye’s as he stands in the main office, Arlo sitting on his hip.

“Bailey.” Tevye nods in greeting, his eyes moving quickly back to mine. “Vandy, I know you have an appointment this afternoon, but Arlo and I were hoping to take you to lunch first.” My lips stretch into what is no doubt an obnoxious smile. We had sex. Phenomenal, explosive, vagina-swelling sex. And I know what he said, and I believed him...but I am still pleasantly surprised to find him here in the light of day in front of witnesses. I shake my head to clear those ridiculous thoughts and step further down the hall. I know his reputation, but I shouldn’t judge him or doubt his sincerity until he’s given me a reason to.

“I would love that.” Taking a chance, I stop inches from him, rub my hand down Arlo’s back, and lean up on my tip toes. Tevye’s lips twitch, then he’s leaning down to meet me, our lips softly caressing until he pulls back with a grunt.

“Get out of my way, Tev,” Ernie states from behind the behemoth. “I’ve got my own smooching to do.” Bailey squeals like a teenage girl at a boy band concert, running the short distance to him and leaping into his arms. They kiss and I stare, unable to look away, waiting to see who successfully swallows the other’s face whole. Good God, that’s a lot of tongue. Ernie walks out of our offices and disappears with her still in his arms.

“They’re gonna go fuck somewhere.”

I glance at Arlo, who isn’t paying us any attention, and back at Tev. My eyebrow rising at his language. “Oh, really? Gee, I never would have guessed.”

Tev smirks, using his hand not holding Arlo, to pull me until our bodies are flush. I feel every hard inch of him and my breath hitches. He's warm and smells divine. "Watch it, woman. I'll fuck that sarcasm right out of you."

"Well doesn't that sound..." I begin in a sarcastic tone, but my body responds to his threat, and I don't have it in me to lie, "delightful. That sounds really nice. I'm sarcastic a lot, you know."

Tevye stands up straight and his laughter booms around the enclosed space. Arlo stares at his dad for a few seconds then joins him with high-pitched laughter of his own.

"Let me grab my purse and lock up." He nods, and I can feel his eyes on me as I move through the office, gathering what I need and making sure to secure everything before I leave. I know Bailey will be back, but she can use the fingerprint scanner to open the main door since Ernie whisked her away without taking her purse.

Tevye and I move down the corridor, trading glances as we walk. Outside the elevator, Arlo reaches for me, and I take him happily. I chuckle when Arlo gives me a sloppy kiss on my cheek and have to lean against the side of the elevator to hold myself up when Tevye starts gagging because of the slobber all over my face from his son.

"Wuss." Tev retrieves a handkerchief from his suit pants and hastily wipes me clean. Then he starts digging through my purse while it's still on my shoulder for hand-sanitizer.

Outside, I shift Arlo to my other hip. A few steps away from the Mishpocheh Consortium building, I nearly trip on my own feet when Tevye takes my free hand in his, curling his fingers to hold tight.

“Wh-where are we going?” I feel myself blush, but this is all so...wonderful. And unexpected.

“Lox, and Teiglach, and Blintzes...Oy Vey!”

“Uh...”

Tev chuckles at my confusion, “It’s a Jewish deli down the street.”

“Ah. I see.” I think it over and grin, “Is it a Mishpocheh Consortium business?”

“Now, Vandy, it’s not nice to assume.” I stare at him for a few seconds as we walk hand in hand down the busy sidewalk. “It is,” he finally admits, and it tickles me more than words can describe.

Since I’ve never been to a Jewish deli before, Tevye has a sampling of just about everything on the menu brought over to our table. I do most of the talking, but we both take turns helping Arlo eat the foods Tev selected for him based on his dietary restrictions.

“I wanted...I wanted to thank you.” He begins hesitantly. His entire demeanor changes in an instant, tense, uncomfortable. I bite the inside of my cheek, so I don’t laugh at him. He’s so cute, not a word I would have ever thought to describe him until this moment. “The food lists, the at-home testing kits, the air filter, vitamins...my family and I have read about MSUD, obviously, and we’ve listened to the specialists and adjusted where we could. But it was all so...stressful. It’s a lot to take in, the constant oversight. What you did—”

“I didn’t do much, Tev.”

He reaches across the table, grabbing my hand and forcing me to look at him. His

eyes, a turbulent sea of grey-blue, are captivating. My heart races again and I'm seriously going to have to see a heart specialist. My ticker might not survive Tevye Frenkel. "You simplified it. Concise. Clear. You made sense of the mess that's been living in my head since he was dropped off. I've been...so angry. At his mom. God. Myself. I felt like I had this noose around my neck, tightening ever so slightly with every episode, every tantrum, every medical test. I was failing him, and I couldn't see it because all I could focus on was that damn rope. But you..." He shifts in his chair, his considerable size causing it to creak. "It's looser. A little bit at a time, I feel like I can breathe again."

Tears swell in my eyes, and when I blink, they fall down my cheeks. He's so distressed by my display of emotion that he stands abruptly, taking a step toward me, then back, and to me again. "No." That's all he says, and I laugh as I cry.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Don’t tell me no. I can cry whenever I want.”

“I don’t like it.”

I wipe under my eyes, as I tell him, “Tough shit.” I motion to his chair and give Arlo another bite. “Thank you.” I whisper hoarsely. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. I want to be useful. I want to help people. I know that’s cliché, but it’s true. I want to make someone else’s life better just because.” He grunts and I give him time. I play with Arlo, tickling him as he shoves food in his mouth, slapping his hand on the table from his highchair.

“I’m not good with...people. Emotions. I’m trying.” I nod because I know he is. There is such a difference between the Tevye I met at group and the one that sits before me. So much growth in such a small amount of time. “A while ago, I...my father expressed his disappointment in me, how I was handling Arlo, and it felt like a knife to the gut. I tried harder, but I can admit it was still the bare fucking minimum. Then in group...that lady deservedly ripped me a new one. And I took it to heart, except it was your reaction to what I said that took that knife and gutted me with it. I do not want to see that look in your eyes or my dad’s or Arlo’s ever again.”

Sniffling, I slip out of my seat and crawl into Tevye’s lap right there in the middle of Lox, and Teiglach, and Blintzes...Oy Vey! and hug him with everything I’ve got. He pats me awkwardly at first, then he releases a sigh and wraps his arms around me tight.

Arlo squeals with delight, giving us a toothy food-filled grin. Tevye rests his chin on the top of my head and hums contentedly. Burying my face in his neck, I force myself

to be brave enough to ask an urgent question, “This feels coupley. Are we a couple?”

He shrugs, my body moving with him. “Don’t know. I’ve never done this before. Do you want to be a couple? Am I couple material?”

His insecurity, just like earlier, is cute and endearing. “I think you can be anything you want to be, Tevye.” He snorts at my parental response.

“I want to be the man who invites you over for dinner tonight.”

“Be all you can be.”

His laughter rumbles in his chest and vibrates in his throat against my nose. “That’s the Army.”

“To be or not to be, that is the question.”

“Don’t let Moshe hear you quote Shakespeare, he fucking hates that guy. Also, the question was dinner tonight.”

“No. Actually, there was no question.”

“Ugh.” He sounds like a petulant teenager, I love it! “Vandy, would you please join Arlo and I for dinner this evening at the compound?”

Arching my neck, I pull my hands from between us and squish his cheeks together. “Such a good boy, using his words.”

His eyes darken and narrow. “You are going to regret that later.”

A shiver runs up my spine. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Vandy 11.

This is ridiculous. I've been here before. The family compound, Tevye's suite...it isn't new. And yet it is. This is different. Things have changed. Everything has changed. And the riot of angry bees in my stomach isn't settling, despite Devorah's warm greeting.

She knocks on Tevye's door. "Dinner is on the table, Vandy. Have a wonderful evening...We're having challah French toast in the morning!" The door opens and she turns to walk back down the hallway.

"It's just dinner, Devorah! I'm not spending the night."

Tev grunts, "Yes, you are." I can hear Devorah's evil cackle as she disappears from view, and I'm dragged into Tev's living room. He pushes me up against the closed door and devours my mouth. With an embarrassing whimper, I stand on my toes and press my body to his, needing to be as close as possible to this man. It's only been a few hours since we saw each other, but somehow it feels like an eternity since I've felt his mouth.

He breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine. "You look gorgeous. Glad you could make it." I drop my head on his chest and chuckle, my shoulders shaking.

"Me too...Devorah's promised an excellent breakfast."

Tev laughs, stands up straight and leads me by the hand to the dining table. Arlo is already seated in his highchair, a smattering of food on his tray. He greets me with enthusiasm, slapping his hands together.

We sit at the table and for a second, I'm struck with déjà vu, thinking about our lunch earlier. Having dinner, the three of us, inside the family compound...feels important.

Momentous. Fizzy bubbles fill my veins as we talk and feed Arlo.

“Lunch has been on my mind...on a constant loop,” Tev admits after we’re done eating, not yet wanting to clean up. “Most fun I’ve had with a non-female relative and clothes on.”

“Are you psychic?” He shakes his head with a smirk. “I was thinking...I had a wonderful time at lunch. And now...I enjoy spending time with you, Tev. And Arlo.” I tickle the little guy’s belly, and he squeals.

“I’m trying to figure something out, though.” I smile at him and rest my head in my hand and wait for him to continue. “Why did you sign the contract with Suzie’s Support Network?” I sit back in my chair, the fingers of my right hand swirling my wine glass round and round.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“I went with my gut,” I answer honestly. “I trust Seril.”

“She’s good people,” he admits gruffly, and I snicker. “Good for Moshe, the family.”

“The rewards far outweigh the risks in my mind. Helping more children live more fulfilling lives, alleviating unnecessary stress for parents and caregivers. I’d be a fool to turn down the kind of funding and opportunity Seril offered.” He raises an eyebrow in question, obviously hearing the unsaid “but”. I take a deep breath and let it out. “But I am nervous. Scared. Concerned. I’m a lot of things all at once. I don’t want to be hurt, I’m not a masochist, but I’m more worried about the families Suzie’s Support Network assists. Can you promise that the dealings of the Kosher Nostra won’t blow back on them? On me?”

Tev doesn’t answer right away. He doesn’t offer platitudes or false promises. He meets my stare and doesn’t flinch away. “I can’t. I will never lie to you, Van, but there is so much that I can never tell you. Being a part of this family...it is a heavy burden to bear. You said the rewards outweigh the risks. And that is exactly what being a part of the Kosher Nostra is like. It’s a trade-off.” He curses under his breath, standing to retrieve a wet cloth from his small kitchen and wipe Arlo’s face off. “If you asked me, I’d tell you I’m not worth the risk. I’m a good fuck, but I don’t know anything about being a boyfriend, partner, husband. I’m barely getting by as a father. I’m a big man, a violent man, ruthless, cold, and calculating.”

“Tev—” He holds up his hand to stop me. His broad shoulders rise and fall with his deep breath.

“I told you that the noose is looser, a little bit every time I’m with you.” He drops the

cloth into the sink, leans against the doorway and crosses his arms and legs in a defensive pose. I want to comfort him. Reach out and touch him. Wrap him up in my arms and hold him tight. But he needs space right now and it kills me. “That was unfair to say. True, but unfair. That’s a huge responsibility to put on you. But, dammit, Vandy...you’re like oxygen. Clean, fresh, invigorating air I have been desperate for and didn’t know.” He shifts again, sitting in his chair, pulling it close to mine and turning me so his knees bracket my legs. “Knowing what you do...am I worth the risk? Am I worth potential pain, physical and mental? There’s always a chance I could be killed or imprisoned. We are very good at what we do, but nothing is ever guaranteed in this life. Can you live in this world without regret? Resentment?”

Nervous, my laugh is high-pitched and awkward. “Dude, I thought I was just coming over for dinner.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry. That was...ugh.” I close my eyes, breathe in and his scent envelops me. Opening my eyes, I look at Arlo, smiling softly as his bright eyes flick between me and his dad. Keeping my eyes on my lap, I press the palm of my hand over Tevye’s firm chest. His heartbeat is wild and fast. Chancing a glance up, his eyes are pinned to me, manic and intense. “Regret for not being strong enough to take what I want. Resenting myself for choosing the safe and easy path. Perpetual sadness missing out on watching this amazing little boy grow into a man.” I squeeze his flesh beneath his dress shirt and lean closer. “I’m afraid that we’ve reached the point where it isn’t your world and my world. This is our world. And I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

Tev’s body deflates, he exhales a heavy and relieved sigh. “You’re sure?” I nod, tears in my eyes. “Thank fuck.” He lifts me up from my chair and deposits me in his lap. His thick arms banding around me, burying his face in my neck.

“Tev?”

“Yeah?” He murmurs, his warm breath ghosting across my skin.

“In case you were wondering...I won’t ever give you a reason to regret or resent me either.”

He shrugs with a strained laugh. “Remind me of that after you and Tovah start spending time together.”

I help Tevye with Arlo’s bedtime routine. I think there is more water on the floor of the bathroom than in the tub, but Arlo has a great time. He snuggles against me in the recliner in his room while I read him a story. He conks out before I even make it halfway through, but I’m invested in why dragons love tacos so much, so I finish the book. Tev is right there to pick up a sleeping Arlo before I can even make a move to get up. He kisses me softly on my forehead, then places Arlo in his crib.

Tev turns off the light once I’m in the hallway. I follow him quietly to the living room. He sits on the couch, his long, long legs spread out. The top few buttons of his shirt undone. His sleeves rolled up. He looks so enticing. Taking what’s mine, I hike up the skirt of my dress and straddle him. His large hands go to my ass, his head tipped back, eyes heavy with arousal. Without a word, I work my hands between us, undo his belt and pants. He urges me up with his hands around my hips, giving me space to pull his pants down. His cock springs out, girthy and ruddy, with precum already beading at the tip. I swipe my thumb over the head, twisting my hand down the shaft and back up. His pleased growl burrows under my skin.

Our eyes meet and I hold his gaze as I position him at my soaked entrance. We both inhale sharply when he breaches me, moaning when I take him inside me inch after delicious inch. Arching my back and pumping my thighs, I ride him slow and steady. Something changes in his eyes; the arousal is still there but something else too. I don’t know what it is, but I think it might be forever. It looks like everything I’ve ever wanted.

He thrusts slightly to meet me every time I lower down his cock. His thick fingers

working the zipper at the back of my dress and pulling it down my arms for it to pool at my waist. He covers my chest with the palm of his hand like I did to him earlier, his eyes locked on where it rests with obvious reverence.

I reach behind to unhook my bra, letting it join my dress. Using both hands now, he rolls my nipples, caresses the soft flesh of my breasts, groaning around the sensitive tips when he takes them into his hot mouth. My back arches and my hips move a little faster with every draw, the sweet suction tortuous pleasure.

There's a shift in the heavy air around us, an urgent need driving us both faster, harder, deeper. His right hand spans my back, forcing me to grind against his length, the root of his thick cock teasing my clit. Our chests flush, our skin slippery with sweat, our hearts racing in sync. Tev's left hand slides up my neck and collars my throat. He drags my bottom lip into his mouth and bites down just hard enough to send me over the precipice. Head dropped back, eyes squeezed shut, I welcome the blissful oblivion. Tev's mouth parts, his teeth gnashing next to my ear, as he joins me with a low grunt. His seed warm and comforting. I'm on birth control, so I'm not worried about pregnancy and while STI's are a concern, I know that Tevye would never intentionally put me in harm's way.

The aftershocks taper off and leave me boneless on top of him. My head rests on his shoulder, his hands trailing up and down my spine. I giggle when his spent cock twitches inside me. We stay connected for several minutes, our harsh breathing slowly returning to normal. I have never felt so comfortable with anyone, let alone naked and post coitus.

A startling revelation slams into the forefront of my consciousness. I sit upright like I've been struck with a cattle prod. He's instantly alarmed, his big body tensing for combat.

"Vandy? What's wrong?"

I swallow hard, forcing myself to look him in the eye. “You’re gonna have to meet my parents.” He’s adorably confused. “This is...” I motion between us, “we are permanent, aren’t we?”

He nods, still braced for battle. A second later, he groans long and low, dropping his head to the back of the couch. “Fuck. I gotta meet your parents.” He winces. “I’ve never met the parents before.”

“You’ll do fine.” I tell him automatically. He looks at me dubiously and I don’t blame him. “Just maybe...don’t bring up your preferred torture methods?”

Tevye 12.

“And don’t bring up Hispanics or their similarities to Filipinos. Mom is very sensitive.” What the fuck?

“Uh...ok?”

“And NEVER call her Asian, she’s Filipino. There’s a difference.”

“The Philippines are in Asia?” I state, my tone unsure because how could someone from the Philippines not be Asian? Am I remembering an old, outdated globe? Did its status change like Pluto?

“To everyone else, yes. To her, no.” Well, that cleared it up and in no way made me more nervous. I have killed and tortured and maimed and terrified a fuck of a lot of people in my lifetime. But this is new territory for me.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Vandy Gibbs is mine. And I'm not giving her up. However, it will be infinitely more difficult to keep her if her mother disapproves of me. Or Arlo.

It's strange. I've spent 30 years not giving a fuck, avoiding feelings like the plague. I tried so hard to remain detached with Arlo, because opening yourself up to people is unpleasant. Ezra once described it as gutting yourself from nips to tip and expecting someone else to hold your organs in place.

As I said, unpleasant.

I spent all this time actively avoiding them all the while I was acting on them anyway. I'm gonna get Dad back for this. It's all his fault. One censoring look, a flash of disappointment, and I'm laying my organs at Arlo and Vandy's feet.

And now I'm about to sit down to more unpleasantness with people I've never met, and I can't believe I'm doing this. Tovah nearly pissed herself laughing at me earlier when I told her. Don't get me started on my parents. Over the top, ridiculous, meddling yentehs.

As I step out of the car in front of a modest two-story well-maintained home in a small neighborhood, my phone pings. With a sigh of frustration, I pull it from my pocket and open the text thread with Tovah.

SatansSplooge: Remember, you want to make a good first impression...so don't be yourself.

Tevye: Fuck off.

SatansSplooge:About to.

Tevye:Please tell me you aren't texting me while someone is going down on you again?

SatansSplooge:They're Deaf and I was texting them to let them know they weren't doing it right and thought I'd check in with you.

Tevye:I'm truly touched.

SatansSplooge:Gotta go, I'm gonna touch them instead. Sometimes you have to lead by example. Also, don't fuck it up tonight or your one true love will leave you and you'll become a sad, lonely, bitter old man that smells like moth balls and will die alone.

Tevye:Great pep-talk.

I pocket my phone with a grunt.

"Your sister?"

"How could you tell?" I ask Vandy as she comes around the back of the SUV to help me get Arlo out of his car seat. I nod to my security detail, making our way up the sidewalk to her parent's front porch.

"You always get this look on your face like you're in desperate need of Pepto Bismol."

"You should tell her that, she would love it." I say sincerely, Vandy laughing as she shakes her head. She hasn't quite figured out my sister and me. I ain't worried, the way I see it, she's got a lifetime to work on it.

“Tev?” At the door, Vandy turns to me with a determined frown. “Words cannot express how proud I am of your personal growth. You are doing so well with Arlo, and you’ve been a great boyfriend so far.” I nod, my lips tipping up at the corner at her praise. “But I’m gonna need you to find your balls and remember who the fuck you are. That tiny woman in there will eat you alive and ask for seconds without batting an eye. When you’re with us at home, you can be affectionate and thoughtful, but here? Now? I need Tevye Frenkel, kapitan to the Avraham Avinu of the Kosher Nostra; deadly, ruthless, cold.”

I stand there, gaping like a fish at my woman. What the fuck? “She’s your mother. You love her,” I remind her and myself.

“I do, so much. But I love—uh, I love spending time with you. And I want that to continue without my mother’s judgement.”

“Are you sure she’s not Jewish? She sounds like every Jewish mother I’ve ever met.”

Vandy sighs, shaking her head softly, “Not Jewish and not Asian.” She wiggles next to us, causing Arlo to giggle and wiggle in my arms. “Alright, let’s get this over with.”

“Am I meeting your parents or walking to the fucking gallows?”

“We’ll have to see where the evening takes us.” Vandy’s eyes grow dangerously large, the color draining from her face. Slowly, I pan from Vandy to the open door and her less than 5-foot-tall replica. Vandy’s mother barely comes to my chest, but she manages to be imposing, her dark almond shaped eyes narrowed at me, darting up and down my person.

“Nanay! What a surprise!”

“To find me in my own home? At the specified date and time we agreed upon for dinner?” Wow. If she and Aunt Esther are ever in the same room, they will either become best friends or mortal enemies. And honestly, I’m down for either.

Vandy swallows hard. I glance at her once more, then at her mother. “Mrs. Gibbs.” I hold out my free hand to shake. She does not. “Tevye Frenkel. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes, the pleasure is all yours. Come in.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Vandy mouths, “I’m sorry!”, but I shrug it off. Her mother is oddly comforting, reminding me of most of the women in my family.

“Where’s my girl?” Vandy’s father is a red-headed pasty guy of obvious Scottish descent and only 5 ½ feet tall. He wraps his arms around Vandy and lifts her up in a bear hug. I smile at the two of them. I find the knowledge that Vandy has supportive and loving parents comforting.

We stand just inside their living room, and I feel like a giant ogre in their house. Her dad puts her down with a kiss to her forehead, then turns to me with a warm, welcoming grin and extended hand. “Theo Gibbs.” We shake and his grip is firm but not aggressive. “My wife, Dalisay.”

“Tevye Frenkel. Thank you for inviting me into your home.” See, I have manners.

“And who is this little guy?”

“My son Arlo. Arlo, can you say hello to Vandy’s mom and dad?” Arlo grins but still shoves his face into my neck to hide.

“Dinner is ready.”

“It smells wonderful.” I comment as we are led through their living room to their dining room. The table is set and loaded with food, and it does smell good.

“Of course it does.” Theo chuckles at his wife’s retort, while Vandy tries to vanish into her chair. I get Arlo situated in his portable booster seat between me and Vandy.

Conversation is stiff as we pass around the food and fill our plates.

“Where did...Is Vandy a family name? It is Filipino and NOT Asian?” I ask after a few tense seconds. Vandy releases a gust of breath and manages to sink lower into her chair.

Theo chuckles, “It is Filipino.” He shares a long look with his wife, and for a moment, so fast if I blinked, I would have missed it, Dalisay softens under the watchful eye of her husband. “But Dal and I met at Vanderbilt University. And Vandy is a common nickname for the school. Seemed fitting to name our daughter after such an important part of our lives.”

A weird sensation crawls up my spine, tugging at my lips. Dear God, it's sweet that they did that. I steal a look at Vandy and nearly choke on my tongue when I notice her eyes wide in alarm. She mouths, “Please meet our little girl, Support Group Frenkel.” I was thinking the same thing. It's oddly comforting that she and I are on the same wavelength. Look at us being all coupley, as she called it before.

“So,” Theo begins, “you're part of the mafia.” Well, let's just dive right in. The small talk portion of the evening is apparently over.

“DAD!” Vandy admonishes but he isn't put off. And here I thought Dalisay was the tough nut to crack.

“My daughter is dating a man involved in organized crime. His family has a deadly reputation and you're not only in business with them, but now you're in their bed.”

There isn't much I can say in defense of my family. He isn't wrong, exactly. “Do not speak to or about your daughter like that again.” I say in an even tone, my heavy stare on Theo at the head of the table. He doesn't cower like others do.

“Dad, regardless of what you have read or heard, the Holofcener family and their close relatives are building up our community. Medical assistance. Business start-ups—”

“Achieving orgasms.” Dalisay chimes in. I’ll have to tell Jonah Swingin’ Schlay Productions is well-known far and wide, he’ll be tickled.

Vandy glances sharply at her mother. “They have a wide variety of businesses under their umbrella, but they are one of the largest employers in the city and state, benefactors for hospitals, hospice, food banks, shelters.” I sit back and let Vandy handle her parents. She’s doing a phenomenal job of putting them in their place. I break up a few pieces of food and put it on Arlo’s tray. He happily smashes them between his fists and shoves the mush into his mouth.

“Tevye?” I look back up several minutes later. It’s best to tune them out or I wouldn’t just be talking about my favorite torture methods, I would be giving them an up close and personal demonstration.

“Yes?” Dalisay stares at me with open hostility. I’m used to it, and I can respect it. They don’t know me. They don’t know my family. They know rumors, supposition, fear mongering.

“You want my Vandy to be his nanny?” That was unexpected.

“No.”

“You want her to stop working to take care of you and your child?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

“After another helping of adobo?” Vandy spits her drink out, apparently surprised by my quip. “Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs, I want to spend time with your daughter. As much as she’ll allow and see where it goes from there. You raised an intelligent, compassionate, hardworking, competent woman. I know where I’d like it to go, but I’m in no rush. We’ll get where we’re going when we get there.”

Theo and Dalisay exchange a look, like earlier. My parents do it. Aunts and uncles. Hell, even Jonah and Harper do it. A sign of a good relationship I’m told is when you can communicate without saying a word.

Dalisay scoops some more adobo and fills my plate. She uses the serving spoon to point between Vandy and me. “No more children without a wedding.” I choke on the bite I just took. It’s delicious but not meant for the lungs. I’ll have to ask Vandy what they discussed while I focused on Arlo and how she brought them around.

“NANAY!”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

There is considerably less hostility as we finish our meal, and I inhale dessert. I'll give it to Dalisay, that woman can cook. Her parents warmed up to Arlo immediately. Theo even got on the floor of their living room to play with him while Vandy and her mom cleared the table. I offered but Dalisay shut me down. Doesn't hate me, but not welcome in her kitchen yet.

Vandy has Arlo in her arms as we say our goodbyes. "Thank you for dinner. I'd like to extend an invitation to you both to join my family for dinner on Sunday." They share another one of those looks and Theo nods with a slight smile.

"We'd like that, thank you." Dalisay follows Vandy out of the house to the car.

I inhale through my nose and exhale slowly out of my mouth. Then I turn to face Theo. "I excused your words earlier with the understanding that this is a new situation for us all. And out of respect for Vandy." I step toe to toe with the man, and to his credit he doesn't back down despite being a foot shorter than me. "But father or not, I will not tolerate disrespect toward Vandy or my family. You come at me again with a harsh tongue, and I'll cut it from your mouth and choke you with it. Do we understand one another?"

To my surprise, Theo visibly brightens at my threat. "You'll do just fine." He pats me on the shoulder and heads outside to join his wife and daughter. Huh. I think I just got his approval. How interesting.

A few minutes later, we're finally on the road back to the compound. A heavy silence fills the vehicle as I drive. I put my hand on her thigh, and she instantly relaxes.

“I’m so sorry, Tev. I can’t believe they—”

“Don’t be. They love you, Vandy. They just want the best for you.”

“That’s you.”

“I’d like to think that.”

“I know it.” Her words smooth a sharp edge in my chest.

“Well, I appreciate you being so nice and understanding.” I smirk, knowing she wouldn’t appreciate that I threatened her father. “After Arlo goes to bed, I’ll suck your cock as compensation.” Laughing, I press a little harder on the gas, my cock stirring in my dress pants. Her head back on the seat, eyes closed, that sweet, serene smile stretching her perfect lips...

“I love you.” She snaps up at my declaration, her eyes wide. She does that a lot, I’m afraid one of these days they are gonna pop right out of her head.

“Tev? You...I...what?”

“I love you.” And I know without a doubt; I mean it to the very depths of my black soul.

“I am gonna suck your dick so good,” she purrs, leaning over the console and kissing my shoulder. “I love you, too.”

I slam to a stop outside the front doors. Tossing my keys to the nearest guard, I grab a sleeping Arlo from the backseat, rush around to Vandy and grab her hand. Practically dragging her inside, I follow the sounds of my family to the entertainment room. Every ounce of determination I possess withers away when the screen catches my

attention.

“Turn this shit off!” I bark, squeezing my eyes shut to block it out.

“Come on, Tevye, it’s just a kid’s movie.” My cousins and sister laugh at me.

“What’s wrong with Toy Story?” Vandy asks innocently.

“This big motherfucker shakes in his size 18 shoes during the incinerator scene.”

Vandy sucks in a sharp breath. I won’t look at her though. I can’t. “That’s an emotional scene for anyone.” She steps closer to me, tugging on my shoulder until I lean down. “Let’s get Arlo in bed so I can suckle all those icky emotions right out of your body.”

“Tovahbub, think fast.” I carefully drop my son into my sister’s arms, spin around and toss Vandy over my shoulder.

“Hey! Where are you going?” she yells after me, my long legs eating up the floor.

“Fellatio Therapy!”

Tovah 13.

The only thing that stays the same is the constant change of seasons. The landscape of family dinners altered once again. And from one of the most unlikely sources...my brother.

Unlikely to anyone but me. I know Tev as well as I know myself. He believes we are incapable of love; I know it is that we possess too much. To embrace it all would be like suffocating. I enjoy kink as much as the next person, but I prefer my

asphyxiation erotic rather than emotional.

My chest tightens with joy watching Tevye awkwardly dote on Vandy, tend to his son, and interact with Vandy's parents. My brother is skilled at so many things, small talk ain't one of them. I'd rescue him, but it makes me so happy to see him flounder.

Mom, Aunt Esther, Aunt Sarah, and Aunt Judi talk about Suzie's Support Network with Vandy's mother, Dalisay while my dad and uncles engage in a spirited debate with her father, Theo, about which North Carolina college has the best sports program while Theo insists it's Vanderbilt in Tennessee. They're all wrong, it's UCONN, but I've grown tired of correcting my family over the years.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Neither conversation interests me, and my cousins that are in relationships are whispering and giggling with their partners, Sophie is texting someone furiously under the table, two of the Goldman Girls are talking with the Goldman Boys...and Blanche is tickling my clit with her foot from the other side of the table.

I do enjoy a woman who knows what she wants.

“Bailey,” Aunt Esther calls out to the other end of the table. Ernie’s girlfriend perks up in her chair, eager to answer like an excited puppy. “What was the problem with that supplier the other day?”

Bailey sits up, leaning over the table, “I wanted a complete bathroom refit for a little boy with Spina Bifida, and they were trying to charge me almost double because they caught wind of the Kosher Nostra’s affiliation.”

“Would you like me to speak to them?” The room quiets, everyone glancing between Dalisay and I with shocked expressions. I smirk at the older woman, and she returns one of her own. I suppose the fact that we spoke at the same time, with the same offer, in a detached voice would be creepy to most. For me, it gives me a little tingle...though the dexterity of Blanche’s toe might have something to do with that.

I have mad respect for the itty-bitty dictator of a woman. The fact that she’s giving Tevye a hard time is delightful. And now, her offer of “assistance” just endears her to me more.

My cousin Sophie, Jonah’s sister, points between us, “Did you two just become best friends?”

“Friends are overrated.” Ok, I’ll admit that was creepy.

“Tovah, watch Arlo, I’m gonna show Dalisay and Theo around.” Tev tosses his napkin on the table and stands, holding out his hand for Vandy. Poor girl has lost all her coloring as her eyes dart nervously from me to her mother. “If you’ll excuse us, we’ll meet you in the sitting room shortly.”

Conversation resumes, though stilted as I seem to be a creature of fascination to them. Eh. You get used to it. Instead, I focus on my nephew. He’s still “eating”. And I use that term loosely. There is food on his tray, but he’s smacking it around with increasing agitation. I gently dislodge Blanche’s foot, and swivel in my chair to face Arlo.

“Little man.” His eyes snap to mine and I know instantly there’s something wrong. His eyes are glassy, gaze unfocused. I pick up a fruit bite Devorah makes for him and hold it in front of his mouth. “Eat. Don’t play with your food.” He grunts and bats my hand away. Cheeks flushed, but otherwise pale, his movements are uncoordinated. Granted, he’s not quite 2 yet, but this isn’t normal for him.

I reach for him just as his eyes roll back and he slumps in his highchair. Scooping him up, I yell, “Someone get Tev! Yak, I need a vehicle!” Clutching him to my chest, I rush out of the dining room, down the hallway and into the foyer. Someone opens the front doors and I’m outside just as an SUV pulls up.

“TOVAH!” Tev runs, Vandy right behind him. I offer him Arlo’s limp body, but with a curt shake of his head, he opens the back door for me to get in. Vandy climbs in next to me, Tev in the front, and we’re off with Anton driving.

“Tovah.” Vandy speaks softly. My head swivels but my hands tighten on the little man in my arms. “Can you tell me what happened?” She doesn’t try to take him from me, just starts examining him while I hold him.

“Irritable. Not eating. Uncoordinated. Unconscious.”

“Good, thank you. I think he’s in metabolic crisis. He’s fevered, though, I think he’s coming down with something and that’s what triggered it. He hasn’t been quite himself all day.” She lays her hand on my upper arm, and I feel the warmth of it leaching through the sleeves of my dress. “The hospital will stabilize him, he’ll be alright, Tovah. Tev?” She stretches between the front seats and rests her other hand on Tevye’s. “He’s gonna be ok.”

My brother and I grunt in unison, making Vandy smile and shake her head.

Two and a half hours later, she’s proven right. He’s sleeping in a crib in a private hospital room. He has RSV and it compromised his immune system fast. It sent the rest of his body into a tailspin. Insulin, breathing treatments, steroids, IV. But he’s stable.

“I hate to leave you...I’m gonna call off—”

“Vandy. Go to work,” Tev gruffly cuts her off. Her jaw snaps shut and there’s a spark in her eyes, but she quickly breathes through it.

“Are you telling me to go to work because you don’t want me here?”

Tev’s eyes snap to hers, reluctantly tearing them off his son. “What? That’s bullshit. I want you here.”

“Use your words, fucker.” I smack him in the back of the head on my way out of the room to give them a minute alone.

A few minutes later, Vandy is flushed and breathing heavy, but gives me a smile in the hallway. I tell her, “I’m staying.”

“Thank you.” She swallows hard. “I don’t want to leave them, but there isn’t much I can do. I’ll be in and out to check on them. I just don’t want him to be alone. He’s been doing so well, I don’t want this episode with Arlo to set him back.”

I can’t help but laugh. Long and loud. Vandy patiently waits for me. “You know how when you’re shitting, and you’ve got to push and push, you ate a bunch of cheese or something and it’s gummed it all up, and you need to take a breath, but you’re afraid what you’ve managed to push out will be sucked back up into your body and you’ll have to start all over again?”

I laugh harder watching the emotional journey Vandy goes through as she processes my words. “YES! I don’t want him to experience emotional constipation!”

“He’s got you, Vandy. He ain’t interested in anything but moving forward with you and Arlo.” I’m surprised when she launches herself into my arms.

“He’s got you, too, Tovah. I know you both are allergic to feelings but tough shit. He needs you right now, so does Arlo. Thank you for being here with them when I can’t.”

I push her away, clear my throat, and give her a half grin. “I’ve been taking care of him since he decided he’d be better off as a separate cell.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I don't like the knowing expression that softens her face. "Whatever you say, Tov. I'll be back later."

In Arlo's hospital room, I sit next to Tev and watch Arlo's little chest rise and fall on its own. The room is silent except for the heart monitor beeping steadily. "Other than being my twin, Vandy and Arlo are the best things that have ever happened to you." He grunts in acknowledgement. "Lock her down. You won't get another chance at domestic bliss."

"I've asked Mom for the ring." A satisfied smile curls my lips. Our great-grandmother's ring is beautiful. Flawless. And one of a few things they were able to keep a hold of during World War II before they emigrated to the United States. It is perfect for Vandy. He inhales through his nose. "I never thought...I didn't know..."

"It ain't so bad trusting someone else with your heart." I feel his heavy gaze on mine, but I stay focused on my nephew.

"It's not," he finally concedes. "When are you gonna try it?"

I ignore his question and ask one of my own. "This can happen again." He sucks in a harsh breath at my words. "Or it could be you next time. What are you gonna do to ensure this family you're growing is protected?"

Tovah 14.

"Why am I here?" Moshe glares at me from across the conference table at the Goldman Girl's Realty offices.

“Witness.”

I smirk at Seril. “Honey, the Kosher Nostra ain’t keen on witnesses...for anything.” I lick my lips and look her up and down. “Though, I can’t say I mind being watched now and then.” Moshe growls angrily and it delights me, but not more than Seril’s blush.

“Fuckin’ hell, Tovah. Stop using your demonic x-ray vision to look at my wife’s tits...through my son’s body!” Moshe puts his hands over his wife and son. Seril gasps and clutches Shon tighter to her, admittedly, decent rack. They’ve grown with pregnancy and breast-feeding and I won’t lie and say they aren’t nice.

Rolling my eyes at my cousin, I glance at Blanche seated at the head of the table. My pussy clenches at the sight of her in a position of power. She’s fucking delicious like crème brûlée, but best in moderation. She winks at me as the doors open.

“Kinky kitten,” I greet Ruthie, smirking when her entire face blushes bright red. “How’s Zeppo treating you and your kitty?”

“Her kitty is none of your fucking business, Tovahbub.” I love riling up my cousins, especially Ezra and Zeppo. It’s my own punishment for Zeppo waiting too long to claim Ruthie. I fucked Dottie, Ezra’s woman and Blanche’s sister, before she and Ezra met. I’ve fucked Blanche too. Tried my hand at the other two sisters, but they weren’t interested. No hard feelings. Sex is sex. But sex with Ezra’s sisters-in-law would irritate him for years and that makes me all tingly.

“Why don’t we begin,” Blanche states calmly, drawing our attention. She opens one of the folders in front of her, retrieving several pieces of paper and passing them to Moshe. He and Seril quickly read them over, nod, and sign. Blanche then gives them to Ruth and Zeppo.

“What’s this?” Ruth looks at her brother and sister-in-law, then down at the papers. A few seconds later, she gasps dramatically, her hands coming to her mouth, tears instantly falling down her full cheeks. “Seril—”

Seril stops her with her free hand raised. “I would love to take credit for this, but it was Moshe’s idea. And I don’t think he’s ever had a better one.”

“Marrying you.” Moshe and Seril share a look. My stomach flips, like it usually does when the couples I’m surrounded by do romantic couple-like things. Seril cups his face, kisses him sweetly, then looks back at Ruth as she switches Shon to the other shoulder.

“Moshe,” Ruth begins in a quiet voice. “I’ve forgiven you. You don’t have to—”

“Ruth, this isn’t about that.”

“Can someone tell me what the fuck is going on that I’m supposed to be witnessing?”

Zeppo, overcome with emotion of his own, clears his throat and answers me. “Moshe and Seril have appointed Ruth and I guardians of Shon and any future children in the event of their deaths.”

“And you’re all verklempt because of it? Do you not want the crotch goblins?”

“TOVAH!” I think the windows actually rattled. I don’t know if that’s a record, but 5 people screeching my name at once is certainly up there. Even Blanche is staring at me in shock. I wink, like she did earlier.

“Of course, I’ll take care of Shon...and any others. I just don’t understand...why?” Sweet, naive Ruth. She has no idea who she is to all of us.

“Ruth, Zeppo, I can never atone for what I did, my actions, the events I set in motion. But that’s not what this is about.” Moshe rubs Shon’s back, then kisses the side of his head. “You will protect his heart, Ruth. You will nurture him, nourish his soul, teach him compassion, trust, and humility. And Zeppo will protect you both. He will stand between you and anyone who seeks to harm you.”

“With my life,” Zeppo vows.

“This seems like a no-brainer. If I ever had the misfortune to reproduce, you can bet I wouldn’t need to die...I’d just give them to Ruth as soon as my vag expelled the cock snot boogers.”

“Moving on.” Blanche shakes her head at me, sliding a pen in front of Ruth and Zeppo. “Do you consent to guardianship of the Holofcener minors in the event of Moshe and Seril’s untimely deaths?”

“I love you, Mosh.” Ruth wipes under her eyes, her lips stretching into a smile. “Seril. I’m so happy that he found you.” Ruth’s eyes fall on her sleeping nephew. I think of my little man. Arlo’s been home for almost a week. Tevye was a different man. I have never seen him so...emotionally involved. “I am,” she snuggles into Zeppo’s side, “weare honored. But...um...don’t die, ok? Like not for many, many decades.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“We’ll do our best.” Moshe promises solemnly. Give him credit, he’s not laughing at his sister’s absurd request. We’re part of the mafia...our average life expectancy ain’t exactly long.

Everyone signs, including me as witness. Business concluded, we stand, but Blanche stops us, “Ruth, Zeppo, and Tovah, stay seated.” My eyebrows crease in confusion, but I smooth them out and sit back down.

“Is there more to sign?” Ruth asks excitedly. “I love paperwork!”

I cough in my fist, “Nerd.”

“Subtle.” Zeppo glares.

“Oh, hush, Tov, I’ve seen you sniff new notebooks.”

I stare down Ruth, but she doesn’t cower. Good girl. “Touche.”

Moshe kisses the top of Ruth’s head in passing, Seril patting her shoulder, then the three of them are gone. Less than a minute later, my dear brother and Arlo come in. I snicker but otherwise remain quiet as Ruth peppers Tevye with questions.

“Are you done?” he asks impatiently, once she’s exhausted herself.

“I guess,” she shrugs; her lips pursed in a pout.

Blanche produces another folder, with similar papers.

“Really?” Ruth asks, “What about Tovah?” I appreciate her concern, but I’m good. I’ll do whatever it takes to give Arlo, Shon, or any other kids in the Kosher Nostra a happy, safe life. But I don’t want them full time. That sounds...loud, and gross, and a hindrance to loud spontaneous sex.

“Are you seriously wondering why I, of sound mind and body, would choose you, the heart of the Kosher Nostra, over the living embodiment of ‘your mama should have swallowed’?”

“You say the nicest things, ‘dad should have natted in a rag’.”

Ruth glances between my brother and I. “Right. Sorry. Stupid question.”

“Ruth.” Tevye swallows hard, avoids eye contact with anyone, and wrings his hands in his lap.

“Tevye. Are you nervous?” Ruth taps Zeppo’s thigh. “Where’s my emotion chart?”

“I don’t need it, Ruth.” Tevye reassures her. “I... am... grateful... to have you in my life.” Dropping my head, my shoulders shake, but for the benefit of my brother, I keep my laughter silent. “Should something happen to me and...my future wife,” Ruth squeals and claps her hands, “I will rest easier in Gehinnom knowing Arlo is with you and Zeppo.”

“Hey, uh, it’s nice that you and Moshe trust us with your offspring and all, but kids are expensive,” Zeppo points out. “And I’m trying my damndest to have some offspring of our own...day and night.”

“Fuck off,” Tevye replies with a chuckle.

“Tovah, both Moshe and Tevye have named you trustee. They felt that you were the

most qualified—”

“You ain’t afraid to tell anyone no. Or make people wait for what they want.”

I blink rapidly, overcome with emotion for a moment. “Thank you.” Tevye dips his chin in acknowledgement.

“Do you need the emotion emoji chart?”

I smile obnoxiously at Ruth. “No.”

Much like before, papers are signed, details explained, copies given out. The room empties, leaving Blanche and I. Sidling up next to her at the head of the table, I lean my hip against the table. My foot on her chair, I force it to turn until her legs are bracketed between mine. She looks up at me, fire and amusement. Trailing my hand across her jaw, I pinch her chin between my fingers. “Wanna seal the deal with a fuck?”

“I believe your signature already accomplished that.”

“True.” With my other hand, I grip the back of her head and force her to arch her neck. She hisses, her eyes dilating, lips parted. “But my way’s more fun.”

“My place?” I’m already shaking my head; she knows the score.

“Mine. I’ll meet you there in half an hour.” Releasing her head, my hands drop to her legs. Under her skirt, I brush my knuckle along her seam, smirking when I feel the moist heat of her pussy. Hooking my finger in the gusset, I pull her thong down and off her legs. “See you soon.” I open my purse, drop her panties inside and stroll on out of Goldman Girls Realty.

Tovah 15.

“God dammit, Tov,” Blanche hisses beneath me. I slap her naked tit, pumping my hips.

“You gonna cum, pretty girl?” Arching my back, I plant my fists beside her head and press my lips to her throat, then lick up the sweat on her skin.

“It’s...it’s...”

I laugh even as my own climax quickly approaches. I don’t want her to cum just yet though. “Do not cum.”

“The stim...”

“I know. Don’t cum.”

Blanche grits her teeth, her hands moving quick to pinch both my nipples hard. Does she not know who she’s dealing with? The strap-on she’s wearing has a clit stim attachment. The thick girth of the artificial dick is enough, but the vibration from the stim is pushing me closer and closer. I have plans for Blanche though, so, “DO NOT CUM!” Her body spasms, and I know I’ve run out of time.

I slide off and up her body. Planting my dripping pussy over her face. “Make me cum.” She whines, her hands circling my hips and bringing me closer to her mouth. She licks up my arousal. My clit between her teeth, she flicks it with her tongue. “Ain’t got all day,” I tease.

Blanche glares up at me from between my legs. She wets one of her fingers in my pussy, then circles my asshole, before pushing in. Twisting my nipple with my right, I card my left hand through her hair and grind down on her face and fingers. I glance over my shoulder at the mirror, my breathing choppy, and let the orgasm take over.

I have to pinch her cheek to get her to let my clit go. I kiss Blanche's lips, tasting myself on them and moan. Licking down her neck, around her nipples, across her stomach, I settle between her legs, my own ass up in the air. My cum leaks down my thighs as I spread my knees. I don't tease her; I don't ease her into it. I dive into her pussy and demand satisfaction.

"Tov! Tov!" Blanche tightens her fingers in my hair and pulls. Her taste bursts across my tongue. The long fingers of my right-hand pump furiously inside her. My left slides between my legs and traces my own pussy lips and rim.

Her screams of completion are loud, but not loud enough to drown out the thumping from my front door. I slide back up her spent body, kiss her cheek and stand up. She snaps upright when someone bangs on my bedroom door.

"Tovah! Hurry up, Zilv and I are hungry."

I grab my robe and bring it around my shoulders, tying it as I open the door. Blanche makes an odd sound of distress. I watch her roll her eyes at me and my brother, then get off my bed, and take her time getting redressed.

"Blanche."

"Tevye." They greet each other with detached respect.

"This couldn't have waited?" I ask, leaning against the doorway.

“Normally lunch is eaten at lunch time. I meant to ask you before we left, but I figured I’d just find you at Exodus.” He mirrors my pose on the opposite side. “Imagine my surprise when I was informed you didn’t go into work today after our meeting at Goldmans.”

“Found a better way to spend my morning, than fixing Ezra’s fuckups.”

Zilv leans in close to my face, sniffing. “I can smell the pussy on your breath.”

Blanche pushes between us. “You two are fucked up.”

“Be that as it may, how about you let me get that pussy smell straight from the source.” Zilv is way out of his league. Yet, he’s stupid enough to try again and again and again. “Come on, Blanche, we’ll show your sister and Ezra how to properly fuck in an elevator.”

Blanche stops halfway down my hallway. “You got front row center tickets and backstage passes?”

“To what?”

“Any concert.”

Zilv is confused but Tev and I are highly amused. “No?”

“Then your cock is worthless to me.”

“What about Tovah’s pussy? Is it worthless?”

Blanche meets my gaze and smiles softly. “I’m not attached to Tovah. The sex is phenomenal, but I’m not interested in committing to myself. I’ll fuck myself,” she

points between us, “because I’m hot, but I ain’t gonna marry myself.” Blanche shivers in disgust. “I’m awful.” Blanche spins around on her heels and saunters out of my apartment.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Tev and Zilv stare at me. I shrug, completely in agreement with Blanche. Back in my room, I pick up my clothes to get ready. “I’m in the mood for seafood.”

Zilv perks up. “Me too.”

“We are fucked up.”

I pat Tev’s cheek as I pass him, now fully dressed. “Who the fuck cares?”

Tovah 16.

“Ez, you need to back the fuck off, before I put you down in front of your lady. You want Polka Dot to witness me best you...again?” I lean in close, his jaw clenching, his chest heaving. He’s so easy to rile up. “She already compares your tongue to mine, the touch of your hands to mine, the size of our dicks.” He growls and it makes me chuckle.

“Tovah, stop that.” Dottie sighs. I wink at her and step back, giving Ezra room so he can turn around and smother his woman.

“A little birdie told me things are in motion.” Ezra won’t confirm, but he’s pissier than usual at the office, and he’s adamant Dottie does not join the BABs for lunch.

“Yak and Tev need to keep their fucking mouths shut.” I hum noncommittally. It wasn’t either of them, but I’m no rat.

“Dottie and Dottie’s sisters are safe with me. Besides, we all have security details.

Also, and I hate that I even need to mention this, but we are Badass Bitches. It ain't just a nickname." I pretend to pop the color on my silk jade jumpsuit. "It's a way of life." The other women laugh at my antics, but Ezra remains unamused. I blank my expression and meet his hard stare with my own. "With my life."

He deflates, his arms wrapping around Dottie so tight she struggles to breathe for a moment. She's a good woman, not complaining or begging for air, giving her man time to come to terms with yet another loss.

Because I'm incapable of remaining serious for long, I sling my arm over Dottie's shoulders and drag her away from him. "Can't let anything happen to the sweetest pussy in existence." I elbow him as I move us toward the door. "Am I right?"

"I will end you."

"Love you too, smooches!" I wave above my head, casual and carefree as I oversee the women getting into the waiting SUVs. Today's excursion is happening for several reasons. One, I want to spend time with my brother's woman. She's important to him, and she impressed me with how she handled Arlo's episode. It's time to bring her into the fold of the BABs. Two, the threat against Dottie has everyone keyed up and the women, in particular, are going stir crazy.

And three, I've had e-fucking-nough. We're going out, and we're dragging the motherfucker out of the shadows. Some would say I'm using us as bait, I say to them, "fuck off". It is a tactical move. I'm not one to pussyfoot around. Not like the male pansies that are running the Kosher Nostra. Never send a man to do a woman's job.

My jumpsuit does well to conceal my weapons, and my purse is large enough to hide a few more. Before I enter the last SUV, I nod at the security details, tap my hip once, and get in.

I listen to conversation, the three SUVs linked by Bluetooth, so no one misses the tea. Seril, Ruth, Sophie, Bailey, Dottie, Rose, Sophia, and Harper chit-chat and bust each other's tits as we drive to our lunch time destination. Mom and the aunts are at the compound with the kids. Becks, Blanche, and I, each of us in a separate SUV, keep our heads on a swivel. The other two women are armed to the teeth, like me, and no one is the wiser to my plans. I'm gonna face hell when the men figure out what I've done, but I won't sit back and allow my family to live on tenterhooks until someone else decides to attack one of our own. I'm bringing the fight to them.

At the restaurant, we're taken to the back room for a secluded meal. A group this large and as rowdy as we get, it's best we're not in the main dining room. "Vandy...you good?" I ask her after we've ordered. Her smile is instantaneous.

"Work is good. The foundation is doing well. I'm at a meal with some of the best women I've ever met. And Tevye...Tev is really, really good." The others laugh, I smile and sit back in my chair.

"Look at you, excelling at adulthood and making friends." I pause for dramatic effect, Ruth and Sophie roll their eyes knowing something bad is about to come out of my mouth. And they'd be right. I lift my glass to her, "May my brother's cock be less disappointing than his personality!"

"TOVAH!" Ah, music to my ears.

"Your brother is quite talented...in more ways than one." Chuckling, I set my gaze on Dottie. She squirms in her seat. I briefly flick my eyes to Blanche and smile when she shakes her head.

"Dot, tell her how talented I am? You two can compare notes, see which Frenkel sibling is the better lover."

Dot scowls at me playfully, raises her hands in surrender, “I’m not getting in the middle of this. As far as I’m concerned, Ezra is the only person I’ve ever been with.”

“Fine.” Blanche slaps her hand on the table. “I’ll tell you. She does this thing when she’s between your thighs, hums some rap song from the 90’s—” Vandy gasps, her hands covering her mouth, eyes wide as she looks between Blanche and myself. The color draining from her face is a dead giveaway and I toss my head back and laugh so hard tears nearly run down my legs.

“Amish Paradise,” I manage to get out. I point at Vandy when she nods her head.

Harper waves her finger at me, “Twins of mass dysfunction.” I laugh harder, using my napkin to wipe under my eyes. I’m gonna piss myself.

I excuse myself to use the bathroom. On my way out, I notice a cluster of men standing around the bar. At first glance they appear innocuous, but closer inspection, it’s easy to see the bulges of holstered weapons. Their eyes track my movements in the mirror above the bottle display.

I’m disappointed; that was too easy. Fucking amateurs. I sit back down, and allow their conversations to draw me in. We’re leaving the restaurant almost an hour later. I maneuver to sit in the SUV with Dottie, telling the security detail to hang back. Manny, Ruth’s bodyguard, is intense as he stares me down.

“You’re sure?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I pat his shoulder, “I’m sure. Stay with us but give them room.” Reluctantly, he nods, and relays to the others.

Predictably, a block from the restaurant, we’re surrounded. I order our security to stand down, allow them to lead us where they want. I hate how easy it is to read people for me. There is a closed rail station four blocks away, and that is where they are taking us. Men are dumb. Of course, he uses the railway to transport his slaves. I type a quick text to Yak and let him know shit’s about to go down with the location. Tucking my phone away in my purse, I ignore the repeated buzzing. He’s gonna be pissed, and he can join the club.

“What’s happening?” Dot asks in a quiet voice. It enrages me, I detest how this man has broken such a strong woman. I grab the gun from my purse, check it’s loaded, cock it, and hand it to her.

“Don’t hesitate,” I tell her sternly. She nods once; a firm set to her jaw that brings a smile to my face. I hear Blanche cock her own weapon. Turning to Sophia, I unbuckle her seatbelt and point to the floor. “Get down. Do not get up until we tell you to.”

“He’s...he’s coming for her?”

“Yes. But he will not succeed.” Tears fill her eyes and fall over her lashes.

Blanche’s hard tone snaps me upright. “You knew? You planned this?”

“I will not allow us to cower. We are the Kosher Nostra, they will weep at our feet.”

“Ezra is going to be so mad.” Dottie whispers brokenly.

“Only if you die.” I meet Noah’s eyes in the rearview mirror, then look back at Dottie. “So, don’t die.”

“You are unhinged.” I shrug, she’s probably right. It is what it is. I am who I am. The SUV comes to a stop. Men surround the vehicle, barking orders for us to exit. Noah holds his hands up so they can see them through the front windshield. His weapon lays in his lap.

Our doors are pulled open, and Blanche and I start firing. I drop my first gun when the clip empties, and resume firing. Men jerk and drop all around us, the rest of our security blocking the rear. Fish in a barrel.

“STOP!”

“TOVAH!” My body locks up at the sheer terror in Dottie’s voice. Spinning on my heel, I step over two bodies, round the SUV and find Dottie with a gun to her temple. The man whose arm is looped tight around her throat, is a cornered animal.

“Put your fucking guns down!”

“I don’t think I will.”

“Tovah,” Blanche warns.

“She and I are getting out of here. You’re gonna stand down and let us pass, or I will put a fucking bullet in her head.”

“No, you won’t. Your boss wants her alive.”

“He doesn’t give a fuck about you.” In the blink of an eye, he aims at me and fires. An agonizing blaze rips through my upper chest.

“You made her mad,” Blanche remarks. No, I’m fucking furious. This was a \$1,000 limited release jumpsuit. And it’s ruined. Also, Dottie’s life and all that.

“Whip It.” The man’s weathered face twists in confusion. It takes a moment for Dottie to register my words, then she’s dead weight in the man’s hands and drops to the ground. I fire twice, one in the chest and one between the eyes.

“DOTTIE!” The empty railyard floods with men of the Kosher Nostra. Ezra runs to his woman, kneeling next to her and checking her all over.

“I’m ok. I’m ok.”

“Where is she? Sophia!” I’ve never heard Yak yell like that. Am I hallucinating? It’s getting dark around the edges of my vision. I stumble back a step. Blanche is right there to stop me from falling. Ezra’s eyes are dark and menacing, promising pain when he looks up at me.

“I told you; I will end you. You promised to protect her!”

“I did. She isn’t the one who got shot,” I snap back. My limbs tingly, my breathing shallow. I feel weak...ugh, I do not enjoy this.

“I’m gonna fuck you up, Tovah.”

“Get in line.”

Tevye 17.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Exhaling as the automatic doors of the hospital open, I walk through the lobby to the elevators. Tovah's been in surgery and I've been sifting through dead bodies.

I'm so fucking pissed at her. She put everyone in danger, including herself and Vandy. And the bitch of it is, her actions have yielded results. Those bodies have given us so much information regarding Joseph Baird's movements. The men who tried to take Dottie work for the railroad company Baird chairs. He might be smart enough to limit his digital trails; his hired goons are not. I left Yak at the office, his programs running through each man's phones and records.

We'll find something. But first...I'm gonna wring Tovah's neck.

Most of our family is in the hospital waiting room. Dottie is sitting on Ezra's lap, and one look tells me she's the only thing keeping him from finding Tovah and finishing what that guy who shot her started. He can't see it now, but she did the right thing. The thing we were all too nervous to do. We went on the defensive and we should have been thinking offensively.

"I fucking hate when Tovah is right." Moshe sighs as he comes to greet me. I smirk, my own anger simmering now that I'm with everyone. Vandy gets up and rushes into my arms. "Right or not, she's gonna have to pay for acting without permission."

"I'm sure she'll welcome your version of punishment."

"Damn masochist." Moshe shakes his head, pats Vandy on the shoulder and takes his seat next to Seril.

“Dad?” My mom and dad come over and fill me in.

“It was close,” Mom whispers. Vandy detaches from me and hugs my mom.

“The bullet bounced off her collarbone and travelled down. It was less than an inch from her heart when they opened her up. She’s stable. Still out from the anesthesia. They plan to keep her sedated overnight.”

“Can I see her?”

“Yeah, we’ll go down with you.” I follow Mom and Dad down the hall, Vandy’s hand clutched tightly in mine. My heart stops when I see Tovah. Tubes and wires, she’s larger than life but so small in that bed. Well, maybe not, her feet hang slightly off the bottom. That makes me laugh and I can’t stop. The steady beep of the heart monitors the only reason I don’t lose my shit right here.

At the side of her bed, I grab her hand, not liking how cold her fingers feel. “You couldn’t let me have this to myself?” The dam holding everything in weakens. “I’m finally getting feelings, and you steal my thunder by getting shot!” My voice rises, Vandy steps next to me, her hand on my back. “You selfish fucking cunt!”

An inhuman sound from the hallway is the only notice we get before a dark blur rushes through the hospital room. A hand on my throat, my back slammed to the wall, people shouting. I blink several times and stare up into the blazing eyes of The Pharaoh. He’s like 7 feet tall, always serious, silent, but never mad. Rage. Fury. Anguish. His eyes glisten with it all.

“What the fuck?” My voice is strained, his hand tightening around my throat.

“The Pharaoh! Stand down.” Moshe demands from the doorway. “Your services are not required here.” His voice lowers, “Why is he here?”

“I don’t know,” Zilv responds.

“Let me go.” His hand squeezes a little harder.

“Excuse me, Mr., uh, The Pharaoh.” I wave Vandy off, but she’s undeterred. “Can you please let him go? I’m rather fond of him. And he wasn’t being mean to Tovah, he’s still getting a handle on emotions and feelings and he was just expressing his fear. He could have lost his twin.”

The Pharaoh’s eyes flash, before he steps back, releasing me. I hunch forward catching my breath. Vandy positions herself in front of me and God help me, it’s adorable she wants to protect me. I find Yak leaning against the opposite wall, sporting a smirk, his arms crossed casually across his chest. Fuck. I glance between my sister’s unconscious body and the big fucker looming over her.

“Why are you here?” I ask hoarsely, my spidey senses tingling. “We’re her family.”

I watch his giant Adam’s apple bob in his throat as he swallows hard. He moves his jaw a few times and I realize he’s trying to talk. I can’t recall a single time I’ve heard his voice. But he had to have said something at some point, right?

Mom sucks in a harsh breath when The Pharaoh picks up Tovah’s hand I dropped when he came at me. Hesitant, unsure, with halting movements, he brushes a lock of her hair away from her face.

When he looks up, he stares my father down from across the bed. So quiet, if you weren’t paying attention, you’d miss it; The Pharaoh’s words have the effect of a nuclear bomb, “I’m her husband.”

The Pharaoh 18.

It's very loud. The small private hospital room filled with Tovah's family is too much. Too many people. But I can't leave. She's unconscious. Injured. She came so close to dying...

I will not live in a world where myomridoes not. I can't bear it. It's stifling, pressing down on me, stealing my breath...but Tovah makes it better. Just looking at her eases the pressure. Hearing her raspy voice is like basking in the sunshine after a long, dark winter.

And my entire life has been an interminable winter.

"We brought you here, saved your life! And this is how you repay us? Marrying my daughter in secret? How dare you treat her like she's something to be ashamed of!"

She is...everything. I am the one to be treated like a dirty secret, yet if I gave her permission, she would let everyone know that I am hers. She's proud of me, and I don't know why. She should be ashamed of me; I'm not even a real husband. Tongue tied, I can't say any of this to Steven or the others. The words get caught in my throat. It took everything I had just to tell them I was her husband.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Answer me!” Steven rounds the bed and gets in my face. He’s breathing hard, his face a mottled red, his shoulders hiked up and his body prepared for a fight he won’t get. “What did you do? How did you convince her—”

“Steven!” David pulls him back with a hand on his shoulder. Spinning him around, David holds Steven at arm’s length. “Stop. Wait until Tovah wakes up. She has never done anything in her life that she didn’t want to do. She’ll explain everything when she wakes up.”

“Fine,” Steven grits out through clenched teeth. He glares at me once more, then turns his ire on Yakov. Over Steven’s shoulder, I mouth “sorry” to Yak, he just shrugs. “You! You knew, you know everything that happens! You kept this from us! From your Avinus!”

Yakov’s calm as he responds, “Wasn’t mine to tell. Didn’t affect the Kosher Nostra or the family. Didn’t put anyone at risk.”

Steven shoulders sag. “Don’t be logical with me! I’m pissed!” There’s no fight in his voice though.

For the time being, an uneasy truce settles over the family. Tovah will explain when she wakes up. I stare down at her, even as Tevye slides a chair behind me to sit down. Myomri. She needs to wake up. I need to see her eyes. I need her.

Tovah 19.

One. Two. Three. Throw.

UGH! Why can't I get this right? Zeppo and Ezra make it look so easy. If they can do it, I can do it.

Deep breath. Calm. Steady.

One. Two. Three. Throw.

“GOD DAMMIT!”

Knife in hand, I spin around at the sound behind me, poised and ready to strike. Heart in my throat, I force my body to relax. It's Pharaoh. He makes my heart race for an entirely different reason.

Tev and I are 10 years old, but we're the tallest kids in our class and the two grades above us. Pharaoh is TALL. I mean, he's like 18 and a man, but he's super tall. I think Dad said he's 7 feet tall. He doesn't speak though. My cousins never shut up, my aunts and uncles are always talking, but Pharaoh...the glimpses I get of him, his mouth is always shut, his eyes...haunted. That's how Aunt Esther describes him. Uncle David, the Avraham Avinu, said “tragically, he's a skilled interrogator.” I don't know what that means exactly, being skilled at something sounds like a good thing.

He's handsome, too. The most handsome man I've ever seen. And he's here with me in the compound gym. We had instruction earlier, my cousins, brother and I. Our parents want us to be competent enough to escape a threat. Being children of the Jewish mafia makes us targets for the “unscrupulous”.

Pharaoh gently taps me on the shoulder with the tip of his finger. He points between us, and I realize he wants me to mimic his pose. I position my body like his and feel my cheeks heat when he smiles at me with a thumb's up.

For the next hour, he walks me through several defensive moves and a few offensive. He never utters a word and it's the most beautiful silence I've ever experienced.

"Come on, Masud. Show me what you got." I extend my hand, hold up my palm, and bend my fingers to beckon him. He smiles, toothy and broad, distracting me. 6 years we've been doing these lessons. And the man has only gotten hotter. It's ridiculous how much I think about him. His eyes, soulful and troubled, haunt me in my dreams. Natural tan skin courtesy of his Egyptian heritage, big broad shoulders, long lines, sinewy muscle, perfect control over his body.

He advances, using my momentary distraction to his advantage, faking to his left, using his right leg to sweep mine out from under me. I land on my back and use the momentum to roll to my knees, my knife drawn and aimed at his "delicate bits". He laughs, grabbing my wrist and twisting my arm around. I stand with the movement, spin on my heels, plant my ass in his midsection, and flip him over my back. He lands with a thud, arms sprawled, body shaking with quiet laughter.

At the edge of the mat, I grab a towel and wipe the sweat from my face and wrap it around the back of my neck. Tossing my head back, I squeeze my water bottle into my mouth and drink greedily.

"Happy Birthday." Startled, I drop my water bottle with a gasp. He spoke. To me. I've heard his voice a few times over the years we've been sparring. Always low, hoarse. But just now...clear and confident.

He hands me a long, gift-wrapped box. A bow on top. "You got me a birthday gift?" He smiles encouragingly, nodding at the box. "Thank you." I rip it open, the first of my sweet 16th birthday extravaganza. Tevye and I are twins, but we don't share a birthday. His was yesterday, we had a family dinner, then he went out with our dad

and uncles and male cousins. I don't know what they did, but I know I was pissed I wasn't invited. Penis or not, I'd wipe the floor with any of them. And they know it.

"Fuckin' hell." He makes a sound at my cursing, but I'm too excited to care. "Is this...is this aKhatoool Maccabee?" He nods with a softness to his expression I don't understand. I hold the tactical knife at my side, feeling it's weight. "Didyou give one to Tev?" His eyes widen briefly, then he laughs as he shakes his head. "Better not. This bitch is mine." I thrust it into the air, doing a few practice swings, loving how it feels in my hand...natural.

Without thinking, I launch myself into his body, my long arms around his neck. His reaction is instant. A strangled noise in his throat, his large hands in the center of my chest shoving me to the ground. He drops low, his body strung tight in a defensive position. Tears well in my eyes at the sight of this beautiful...broken man. I know not to touch him. Unless we're sparring or he's working for my uncle, no one touches Masud.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I wipe angrily at the tears, using my leggings to dry my hands. Masud's eyes are unfocused, teeth bared. "I'm sorry. I'll...shit. I'll leave, I'm sorry." I gather my gear and his present. "Thank you, Masud. This is the best birthday gift ever."

I leave him alone. Running through the halls of the family compound, rushing back to the safety of my own room. Slamming the door behind me, I lock it and slide down to the floor. I hold the knife in my hand, turning it over and over.

"Stop it. You sniveling, pathetic little girl." I close my eyes and will the tears to stop. I'm better than this. I'm stronger than my cousins and brother, faster, deadlier. Moshe won't choose me as akapitan, but that doesn't mean I can't protect the family.

And Masud. He serves the Kosher Nostra, but no one serves him. I will. I flip the

knife, catching it by the handle. I'll protect him too.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Omri—

I'll be honest. I've never written a letter. And I'm not sure how to write one now. But for you...I will try.

The beginning of my life was rooted in violence. Scars litter my body and my soul, a reminder of what I deserve. Your family rescued me and many others. I owe them my every breath and for that reason I do as they ask without question. My life forfeit. I have never sought material possessions, wealth, or status. I only ever craved peace. The elusive quietening of the madness that lives inside my head and my heart.

A mistake has been made. I have been bestowed a gift I do not deserve. I am not strong enough to return it. I gave my life to the Kosher Nostra, and yet, I feel as though you have given it back to me. The only peace I find is in your presence. Between your heartbeats. In the notes of your laughter.

I am in awe of the woman you have become. The strength of your character. The depths of your loyalty.

I was rescued years ago, but with you, I am saved.

Thank you for humoring a broken man and giving him a reason to continue.

I am most grateful for your birth. Not so much Tevye's. But definitely yours.

Masud

P.S. I have given into thine hand Jericho...protect the city and the king thereof, my mighty woman of valor.

The Jericho 941 sits in my lap, my hands shaking as I reread Masud's letter through unshed tears. That bastard! Making me feel. He's older than me by 8 years, though now that I'm legal, that hardly matters to me. He's all but admitted to being in love with me, but knowing him as I do, he'll fall on his sword and refuse me because of some misguided honor and self-loathing.

"AGHHHHHHH!" Well, we'll just see about that. I carefully place the gorgeous gun on my bed and storm from our suite. Stalking through the halls of the family compound, I wave to my bodyguard and driver Ari.

"I need to go to the consortium." He dips his chin, turns on his heel and opens the front door for me. I wait, stewing in my anger, while Ari retrieves a vehicle. The entire drive to the Mishpocheh Consortium, I vacillate between joy and anger, and excitement and concern.

No matter, Masud is mine. He's just gonna have to accept that. I am his omri, after all. "Oh, man up!" I snap at my chest. My heart goes pitter-patter over the nickname, and I want to vomit at my girliness. I'm just grateful no one is here to witness this.

At the consortium, I barge through the main doors and take the stairs down to the basement. Without knocking, I throw open the metal door to Masud's "office". He's alone, thank God.

"You son of a bitch." I bark. He stands up quickly, his eyes darting from left to right, his hands up in front of him. "You write me a letter like that and expect me to just...what? Date someone else? Fuck someone else?" He winces and it buoys me to know he doesn't like that idea. "Marry someone else?" I'm breathing fast, my chest heaving. "Well, I've got some bad news for you, buddy. I don't want anyone else. I

want you.” I stomp my foot, my hands fisted. “I’m gonna have you. And that’s final.”

“Tova—”

“No. You call me omri.” A ghost of a smile crosses his handsome face and then it’s gone, replaced with a frown. “We can’t.”

“We can.” He sighs, dropping back to his chair, resting his elbows on his thighs, avoiding eye contact.

“Your family will kill me if they ever find out about that letter, let alone how I...what I think about...” He shakes his head, cutting himself off and switching gears. “I cannot be with you. As a boyfriend or husband should. I can’t...it hurts...I can’t.”

“Masud.” I call his name sternly, waiting for him to meet my eyes. “I don’t give a fuck about what a partner or spouse ‘should’ do. I care about you and me and whatever we decide is best for us.”

“You deserve someone who can...touch you.”

I wave off his comment, “I can touch myself. I do, actually, a lot. Thinking of you.” He nearly swallows his tongue and dammit, it’s adorable. 7-foot tall, violent interrogator, tongue-tied over little ol’ me.

I’m tired of this. “Do you love me?” His Adam’s apple moves in his throat, then he nods once. “If you love me, you want me to be happy?” He nods again. “Good. I love you. I want you to be happy...with me. The rest is details. We’ll figure it out.”

“God help me.”

“Oh honey,” I purr, drawing a finger down my chest between my large perky tits.

“God can’t help you now.”

“Yak. Back the fuck up.”

“The Kosher Nostra can protect him against his family.”

I pound my chest, and hiss, “I am his family. And no one fucking touches him.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Tovah, I need to know, are you sure?” I glare at him unamused at his delay. “You and Masud...are unconventional. You may be happy now, but a prolonged relationship like yours may not be sustainable.”

“Wow. Do you carry a thesaurus with you now? I don’t remember you sounding this pompous before.”

“Tovah. I’m fucking serious.” I step until the toe of my high-heels touch Yakov’s boots. Our faces inches apart.

“Me too. That man,” I point into the judge’s chambers where my intended waits for me, “is my future. I have never towed the line, Yak, never cared much for the opinions of others, I ain’t gonna start now. I love that man without hesitation, without expectation, without limits. You love someone, you meet them where they’re comfortable. I am a strong fucking woman; I can carry his past and look damn good while doing it.” Discreetly, I pull the knife Masud gave me years ago from its sheath in the concealed pocket of my dress. Yak’s eyes drop to where it digs into his abdomen. “You wanna tattle to my family? Go ahead, let’s see how far you get with your entrails dragging behind you.”

“On second thought, I think you’ve got this.”

I tap the tip of the blade against his sternum. “Smart man. Don’t forget the additional paperwork.”

“I’ve got it.” There’s a long pause as I cross the hallway. “Tovah?” With a heavy sigh, I stop with my hand on the doors, my back to him. “You two...you two are what

love is all about. I'm privileged to witness your wedding, and I'm honored to help you and Masud in any way I can."

"Don't get mushy on me now, Yak." He did this on purpose. Throw me off my game, ninja attack me with emotions. I'll get him back. Right now, I gotta marry my best friend.

The ceremony is short and to the point. We say our "I do's", sign the wedding certificate and the other papers, and stand in front of one another pledging our lives to ensure the other's eternal happiness.

We were inevitable. I had no intention of ever letting this man go. His family in Iraq and Egypt...they just sped up the timeline. And added a few more signatures. I will do anything to keep him out of their hands. You wanna crawl out of the woodwork nearly 30 years later, I'll stomp you like the fucking cockroaches that you are.

The judge pronounces us man and wife and tells Masud he can kiss his bride. I already told him it wasn't necessary, or just a peck on the cheek, whatever he was comfortable with is fine with me. He surprises me, though, steals the breath from my lungs when he dips his head and softly presses his lips to mine. I can feel him trembling and know this has likely cost him a great deal. My hands itch to grab him; my arms feel heavy with wasted purpose that I cannot wrap them around his neck.

It's a couple of seconds, and a chaste kiss by even a nun's standards, but it's the best kiss of my entire life. My first kiss with my husband. I pray it won't be my last.

He stands straight; his eyes wild as they dart around the room looking for an exit. "Hey. Husband. Just you and me." It takes him a second, but he acknowledges me with a grunt. "You ready to celebrate, Mr. Frenkel?" If my family ever finds out, they probably won't be surprised that he took my last name. I just have that kind of personality. He wanted to, to forget his past, to hide from his family, to start over as

someone new. I don't care what his name is, so long as I can call him my husband.

"I am, Mrs. Frenkel."

Tovah 20.

Smile on my lips, I want to linger in my dreams, my memories of Masud and I, but as I stretch in bed, my shoulder and chest pull painfully. I hiss, my eyes snapping open. I'm in a hospital room, surrounded by my family...and husband. Oh, that's why they all look pissed off.

Well, they were bound to find out eventually. Though, I would have rather been the one to tell them...mostly to see their faces. And so Masud didn't have to stand alone.

I look up at him with a soft smile. Ignoring the surprised gasps around the room, I focus on my husband. "Are you alright?" I ask, my voice strained. He nods, extending his hand toward my face. I hold still and keep my smile in place as he explores the contours of my face with the tips of his fingers. After not nearly enough time, he snaps his hand back. My smile only grows, knowing he reached his limit.

"Tovah, you better fucking explain and do it fast," Dad growls from the end of my bed, a scowl contorting his face. Mom stands beside him, her hand on his tense back, Tevye on his other side. I wink at Vandy who mirrors my mother, and meet my father's eyes. It pains me more than I can say to see the disappointment and hurt in them.

Tevye starts before I open my mouth to respond. "Married? Fucking married? And you never told me? As much as you and I are capable of having best friends, you are mine. We were Wombmates for fuck's sake! We've joked that you were Satan's offspring, but I've never thought you were evil."

“Tevye—” Vandy tries but hospital bed or not, he won’t make me fucking feel bad for my actions.

“Oh, get off your fucking high horse! My relationship with Masud doesn’t concern you or anyone else. The details of our life together aren’t up for discussion or debate.”

“Who’s Masud?” I’m gonna fucking kill Zilv. I press the button to raise my bed, it’s slow and ruins my attempt at intimidation. Pretty much my entire family is in my private room. Thank God we don’t skimp with donations, or they wouldn’t fit.

“I love you. All of you. I know you might not understand how I love, but there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for my family. And that includes Masud.” I glare at Zilv. “But that’s part of the fucking problem, isn’t it? We’ve been at the top so long we’ve forgotten the people who prop us up. The Pharaoh,” I point at Masud. “His name is Masud. You’d know that, you fucking dickless degenerate, if you took the time to get to know the people around you. No matter that he is flesh and bone, heart and brain, a wounded soul...as long as he tortures and maims and carries out bloody justice for the Mishpocheh, who cares what his name is? Right, Zilv?”

“Well, when you put it that way.”

“I’ll get off my high horse when you get off yours. How long have you been married?”

I stare at my brother, then gaze up at my husband. “7 years.”

“Moses, Miriam, and Aaron.” Dramatic much? I swear Aunt Esther nearly passes out.

“Why would you...why would you keep it from us? Why wouldn’t you...you married someone without us. I didn’t get to walk you down the aisle. Give you away.

You stole that from me, Tovah.”

“Dad—”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“You’ve been married 7 years?” Blanche cuts me off, her voice lethal and steady.

“Yes.”

“We just...what the fuck, Tov? You’ve been cheating on him!”

I shake my head. “No. I have not.”

“You can lie to him and yourself, but I won’t do that. I won’t be the ‘other’ woman! And my sister!” Blanche points at Dottie. Dottie grins knowingly at me. “You’ve been fucking your way through the female population of Charlotte and along the eastern seaboard.”

“That’s a gross exaggeration.”

“It’s just gross.” Moshe’s face scrunches up.

“Don’t be jelly,” I tease but this is not the right crowd. Masud steps closer to the head of the bed, a solid pillar of support next to me. I feel the underlying tension that thrums through his big body. I look up at him with a genuine smile. I won’t tell his story, his past, his childhood, they aren’t mine to share.

“Not jealous. You’re a cheater—” Motherfucker.

“Ezra, watch yourself.”

“Why? You’ve been having affair after affair while your husband has been none the

wiser—”

“Ez, stop.” Dottie tries and I love her for it. But Ezra is riding this sanctimonious horse all the way to the end.

“This whole time...every word out of your mouth—”

“HE WATCHES!” The room silences at Dottie’s exclamation. Sighing, I shrug and slide back down into bed, the entirety of my upper left chest and shoulder on fire.

Ezra stares at her like she’s grown a second head. “What? Was he...” Ez swallows hard, “Was he in the room with you when you...?”

“The mirror,” Blanche mumbles, Dottie points at her.

“Yes. The mirror. He’s on the other side, isn’t he?” Biting my bottom lip, I dip my chin in confirmation.

“So, you aren’t a lesbian?” Harper’s question comes out of nowhere and I start laughing. My cousins and brother join, but my aunts, uncles, and parents aren’t as amused.

“I’m bisexual.”

“I’ve only ever seen or heard of you with women.” I tap the side of my nose then point at Harper. The men of the Kosher Nostra have chosen intelligent partners.

“Out of respect for my husband and our marriage...with his consent.”

“Okay. This is none of our business.” Mom claps her hands to get everyone’s attention. “She’s just woken up from major surgery, this isn’t the time or the place.”

She approaches Masud and reaches out to put her hand on his arm.

“Don’t touch him,” I tell her as he recoils.

Hands in front of her, she’s instantly contrite. “I’m sorry, Masud.”

“Mom, Dad, can you give Masud and I a few minutes alone?” They exchange a look I’m familiar with, communicating telepathically, before they agree. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know, within reason, as soon as I speak to my husband.”

It takes a few minutes, the girls coming up to give me a quick hug, the guys waving as they leave, shaking their heads and whispering. “Do you need anything?” Ruthie asks and out of everything, her tenderness and concern for me bring tears to my eyes.

“No, you need to leave. I’m about to piss emotion.” She laughs, kisses my cheek, wiggles her fingers at Masud, and lets Zeppo lead her out.

Dad sighs pointing a menacing finger at Masud, “We’ll be having words.”

Tev chuckles, “We’ll be throwing fists.”

“Try it,” I dare both of them. Tev’s eyes flare, knowing he might try but I’ll succeed.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Sorry, kiddo, you can’t intimidate your way out of this one.” My heart clenches as I watch my dad hold out his elbow for Mom and leave my room, Tev and Vandy following behind.

The door closes and with it my eyes. That was a lot first thing after anesthesia. Masud’s a comforting presence at my side. “Baby, are you sure you’re alright?”

He makes a noise of disgust, “I was not the one who got shot. Are you alright?”

“I’m alive. You’re here. My family knows about us. I grossed a few of them out. All in all, I’m good.” Shifting closer to him without touching, I ask, “Did I get the bad guys?”

“Most. However, Baird was not among them.”

“Shame.”

He sighs, his hand resting on the hospital bed above my head, his long fingers playing with my hair. “You can tell them.” I hum, enjoying having him nearby. I just got shot and had major surgery, I can indulge a little. “Everything.”

“Not my story to tell.”

“They need to know, Tov. To understand. To accept.” I hear the scrape of a chair and open my eyes to find him sitting down with a pensive look. “Perhaps—”

“If you say we should consider a divorce, I will gut you, then reanimate your corpse a

laWeekend at Bernie's and keep you in my bedroom until I die."

He coughs a laugh. "Sounds more like Norman Bates. And not a divorce. Just time for things to settle."

"Do you love me?" I ask, smirking when I recall asking him that years ago when he tried to pull this shit.

"To the marrow of my bones."

"Then kindly shut up."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you sure, Masud? I don't have to tell them anything. Or you can tell them, maybe that might help? Getting some of it out." He thinks it over, his dark eyes trained over my head.

"I will try. For you."

"I love you, Masud. You know that, right?"

His entire expression softens, his eyes warm. "There are few certainties in life, omri, but your love is one of them."

Masud 21.

Steven and Gertie Frenkel stare at me over the prone body of their daughter. They wear their pain for all to see. Keeping our marriage from them has hurt them. It wasn't our intention, yet the pain remains the same. My omri is unique. Strong physically and mentally, confident, unflappable. It is hard to remember that no matter

her age she will always be their little girl.

“Makhasheyfe!” Tevye hisses at his twin. My body tenses, wanting to punch him, but I know this is how they communicate. They don’t “talk” things out usually, often resorting to violence to work through whatever is troubling the pair. Of course, Tovah is triumphant frequently. I am infinitely proud of her, proud to be her husband.

“Shedim!”

“Will you two stop it?” Gertie spits out. She glances at her son, “Although, kudos on using the word for witch. I haven’t heard that in a long time.” Her eyes turn to her husband, “At least since Bubbe Frenkel kicked the bucket.”

Tevye slowly turns his head to look at his sister. He’s sitting at the end of her bed on her feet since she tried kicking him a few minutes ago. “That’s where you get it from!” He starts laughing, “You’re just as fucking evil as thatpaskudnik.”

“You are speaking about my deceased mother,” Steven reminds his children, and wife. They don’t care.

“Yeah? You must get your cloven hooves and horns from her. Never knew a demon quite like our beloved Bubbe Frenkel.”

Steven lifts his eyes to mine. “She wasn’t that bad.”

Mother and children immediately reply, “Yes, she was!”

“Can we get back on track?”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Yes, let’s hear Tovah’s husband’s tragic backstory that justifies her marrying in secret, shtupping every female she meets, and lying to us all for 7 years.”

“It all started when I was born a poor Egyptian boy.” Tovah’s body shakes with laughter at my opening. Steven blinks rapidly several times.

“Did you...did you just quoteThe Jerk?” I nod, unsure how my joke will be received. Tovah has been busy during our marriage introducing me to every movie worth watching from the last century. Steve Martin is a particular favorite of mine. “I hate this,” he motions between Tov and I, “a little less.” I’ll take it.

“Masud? Do you want me—” I shake my head at my wife. I need to do this. For her. For me. For the future I so desperately want to have with her.

“I was born in Egypt. My father...he was a Muslim extremist. He murdered my mother in front of me when she tried to flee with me when I was 3 years old.” I swallow hard at the memory. At the age of 3, I probably shouldn’t remember anything, but the image of her lifeless body is ingrained in my DNA at this point. A nightmare I relive often. Gertie makes a strangled sound, her hand hovering over Tovah’s body like she’s reaching out to me. To comfort me. I don’t know what to do with that, so I move on.

“He moved us to Iraq in late 1990. He worked his way up the ladder and became a high-ranking member of a terrorist regime. My father took his anger out on me. I was used as an example to the others to stay focused on their goal.” I glance up at Steven. “By the time your people arrived after Desert Storm ended, I had nearly died four times. Beaten. Stabbed. Lit on fire.”

Steven whispers, “But...you were only 5 years old when we brought you here.”

“There wasn’t a single day of my life before the Kosher Nostra, where I didn’t experience agonizing pain. I owe the Kosher Nostra, David and Aaron especially, my life. I have lived the last 32 years in servitude to my saviors. I know pain...I am good at making others know it too.”

Gertie’s eyes dart between her daughter and I. Tovah rests her hand on the railing of her hospital bed, not touching me but close enough to know she’s with me. Tears pour down...my mother-in-law’s face. I have never referred to her as such, and I find I like how it sounds in my head. “The only touch you’ve ever known was excruciating.” I dip my chin in agreement. “Oh, Masud...I really wanna hug you right now. I won’t. But I want to.” She wipes her face. “If you can’t be touched, how are you two—”

“What kind of life can you have together?” Tevye asks. He reassures us, “I’m not trying to be a dick. I’m genuinely confused. You can’t touch her, so she’s what? Supposed to have lesbo sex for the rest of her life with no stability at home? It doesn’t make any sense.” He looks at his sister pleadingly, “Why would you want that?” Then he turns to me, “Why would you? For either of you.”

I don’t know what to say to that. It is an old “heated discussion” between Tovah and I. I want to give her the world, but I can barely live in it.

“If you, or Moshe, or Ez, or Dad...if your love is contingent on getting your dick wet, then you aren’t in love.”

“You’re getting your dick wet too!” Tev argues.

“When I’m with others...” her eyes ask permission, and I give it to her. In for a penny, in for a pound. “Masud is there. He isn’t seen, but I know he’s there. And I

feel close with him.”

“Like a sexual proxy? A switch-hitter? A designated-fucker!” Steven is very proud of himself. Gertie pats his arm without taking her eyes off her daughter.

“He experiences my pleasure in a way that is comfortable for him.” Tovah uses the panel on the railing to raise the bed again. “And in turn, experiences his own.”

“And you aren’t jealous?” I shrug, Tevye’s question fair.

“I want to be the one she’s with but being touched...this was a healthy solution.” They don’t need to know that watching Tovah in the throes of passion, her body glistening with sweat as she writhes in pleasure, her inner thigh muscles twitching when she explodes...I cum untouched. Every. Damn. Time.

There are moments, and they are happening more frequently, where I itch to reach out and feel her. The heat of her. The softness of her skin. The throbbing of her clit between my fingers. Her juices sluicing down my hand. But my heart starts to pound uncontrollably in my chest and my vision blackens at the edges when I try.

“Masud, we owe you an apology,” Gertie begins. My dark brows slant in confusion. “The Kosher Nostra took you in, fed you, clothed you, put a roof over your head...but we neglected to nourish your soul.”

“Devorah took me to therapy for a few years when I first came to live here.” All four of them inhale sharply.

“She did?” Tovah rolls to her side to fully face me. “She did that for you?”

“Devorah has been wonderful to me. Looking after me, reminding me that someone loved me, even when I didn’t love myself.”

“She was the other witness at our wedding...” Tovah starts laughing, “She always gives me extra cookies for you. I just thought she was being nice to me.”

Tev chuckles, “No, she was rewarding your husband for putting up with you.”

“I guess she’ll have to start baking cakes for Vandy!”

The siblings bicker while Steven and Gertie stare at me. “We will do better, son.” Something constricts in my chest at his words, the weight of his vow. I rub my knuckles over my sternum to soothe it away.

Gertie throws her hands in the air exasperatedly. “Tovah is winning at adulthood! This is fucking ridiculous. How is the grand-spawn of a demon witch a better wife than me?” She gasps dramatically, “She’s got a bigger heart than Ruthie!”

“You take that back!”

“Again, that’s my fucking super dead mother!”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Tev pats the bed near me to get my attention. “Your secret is out now,shvager.There’s no escaping themishegas.”

“I think I’ll be fine.” And I will. I’ve got Tovah, as unconventional as our marriage may be.

“Wait!” Gertie yells, silencing her husband and daughter. “You didn’t change your name.” Tovah smirks, quirks an eyebrow and looks at me.

I raise my hand slightly, “No. I did.”

“Why?”

“I had no use for the Mostafa name. And at the time we got married, Yak had discovered some rumblings from forgotten relatives looking for me and some of the other refugee children you rescued. They had ties to some hard-core extremist groups. If they found me, it would have been bad enough, but to learn that I had been living with Jews and converted to Judaism...I would have never survived. We talked about getting married; those rumblings moved up our timeline. And I took Tovah’s last name for further protection but also...it felt right.”

“They won’t be a problem anymore?”

Tovah and I laugh, “No, Dad. You remember the vacation Yakov and Monty took about 6 years ago?”

“The only vacation Yakov hasevertaken? Yes, I think I recall it.”

Tevye snaps his fingers. “They went hunting.”

Our eyes clash and Tovah smiles at me. “They sure did.” I can never repay Yakov for what he and his buddy Monty did for me. Though to hear him tell it, they owe me for as much fun as they had.

Tevye growls, crosses his arms over his chest, “Bastard didn’t take me with him! I love hunting wabbits.”

Tovah 22.

So, I’ve taken a few punches in my life. You don’t run around with a mouth like mine and not expect a little pushback. Trust me, the other guy always looked worse. I’ll give you one chance, you better make it count, then I’m coming for you.

However, first time I’ve been shot. Zero stars, do not recommend.

I figured, while I was down, might as well get everything out in the open. My family is capable of some unscrupulous things but hitting me while recovering from surgery isn’t one of them. Much to my surprise, they all seemed to handle the news of my marriage well. We had a few speedbumps, but all in all, it could have been worse.

My only regret is that Masud was alone when he told them. I want to protect him, especially his fleshy soft heart. And telling the mishpocheh that he’s been secretly married to a mafia princess for seven years put that heart in a vulnerable position. My family is human, they make mistakes. They aren’t always right, but they aren’t bad people. Just caught up in their own shit like most people. They don’t look down on the people in their periphery, but they don’t always pay much attention to them either.

That’s how Ruthie ended up in the situation she did last year. Based on my conversations with my parents over the last couple of days, and Aunt Esther and

Uncle David, I think they will try to be more mindful of everyone in our lives, not just our immediate family. The people of the Kosher Nostra are loyal to us and they deserve the same loyalty in return.

“Hey, Tov.” Opening my eyes, I glance at the doorway of my hospital room and see a hesitant Moshe staring back at me. Masud straightens in his chair, then stands as the Avinu enters. “Masud. How are you?” Moshe extends his hand to my husband and after Masud’s initial surprise, they shake.

“I’m well, Avinu. Thank you.”

“Gefilte-father. To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?”

Moshe sighs loud and long, then plops down in one of the empty chairs. Elbows on his thighs, head in his hands, Masud and I trade a look, I shrug, and we wait him out.

“Tovah...I have never known you a day in my life to hold back.” I smirk at his assessment. “You are one of the strongest women I know.” I scowl and he chuckles. “My wife has an inner strength, as does Ruthie.” I tilt my head back and forth in consideration and then concede his point. “But you...both of you...have I or my father ever given you the impression you could not trust us?”

“We didn’t tell you—”

“Not about the wedding. Although, we would have welcomed you far sooner into the family, Masud, had we known.”

“Thank you. I...I was not ready for that.” Moshe stares at Masud, then nods in understanding.

“What I mean is that...your life was in danger. We saved you once, what made you

think we wouldn't save you again? You are an integral part of the Kosher Nostra." He holds up his hands when I open my mouth. "Masud, you have provided a service for years that is unfathomable to most. The Pharaoh strikes fear in our enemies. We owe you a great debt. Why...why couldn't you come to us?"

Masud glances at me, then inhales deeply before replying to Moshe. "It is because your father and the men and women of the Kosher Nostra saved me as a child that I did not want to burden you with the issue. Tovah and I were able to work out a plan, and Yakov was more than happy to execute...it." I snicker but otherwise keep quiet, letting my husband explain. "I am nothing more than a foot soldier, Avinu, replaceable, expendable. My safety and family drama should be of little concern to you, when you are dealing with so much already."

"I respect that you and your...wifewanted to handle it on your own. But...I am only the Avinu because everyone within the organization wills it so. My power comes from the belief of every single member that I am the right person to lead. If no one follows, then I'm walking around in circles talking to myself. Moses was not infallible. And neither am I. As the Avinu, I am grateful that this incident has brought an important issue to the forefront. The family will be taking a greater interest in each of our members, ensuring that their sacrifices are not in vain. Our dinner table is only so big, but we want everyone loyal to us to feel welcome to sit at it with us."

Moshe stands, moves closer to my bed, and leans down. I jerk, my head rearing back, but he just chuckles and kisses my forehead. "As your cousin, I am relieved to learn that you do in fact possess a soul." He smiles down at me, "And I am immensely overjoyed to know that you have found someone who completes you as my Seril does for me. I do not know what your future holds, but I am sure that the love you share will always be the linchpin."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I'm not crying. My eyes are not overwhelmed with an abundance of moisture. I blink rapidly, watching as my cousin approaches my husband cautiously. "Welcome to the mishpocheh, Masud Frenkel. I understand your aversion to touch; however, I wonder if you might permit me a quick hug?" Masud swallows so hard I can hear it, but my brave husband nods and slowly lifts his arms. Moshe is true to his word, the hug is over in the blink of an eye, but he can have no idea how much it means to Masud...and me.

Moshe clears his throat, turns to face me once more, adjusting and rebuttoning his suit jacket. "Oh, what's that?" He points toward the entrance and a second later, I hear the shutter of his phone camera. "You're crying and soon everyone will know that you possess a working heart!"

I move too fast, hissing in pain when I try to jump out of bed. Masud chuckles quietly as he holds me down. I growl as my cousin, the leader of the Jewish mafia, runs like a scared little girl out of my hospital room.

"I WILL END YOU!"

"Gotta catch me first...Crybaby!"

The door barely closes, before a nurse is glancing down the hall and then at me as he enters. He smiles, "What was that about?"

"Last act of freedom before life as he knows it comes to an end."

He laughs, obviously misinterpreting my meaning. "Is he getting married?"

“No, preparing for a funeral.”

“Uh...sure. So, your doctor has finished signing off on your discharge. I need to go over the instructions.” We spend the next 20 minutes doing just that. He removes my IV, and Masud hands me my clothing as I slowly and carefully get dressed. Another 30 minutes after that, we’re in the car on the way to the family compound.

“Masud, I don’t want to people.” He shifts slightly in the back seat next to me, a dark eyebrow rising slightly in question. “I want to go home. Our home.” He nods, then instructs Ari to take us to our apartment.

Shortly after we married, two apartments in one of the Mishpocheh Consortium portfolio became available. Yak is actually who came up with the idea. We bought the apartments side by side, then did a small renovation so they could be connected. The mirror was installed in my bedroom, his bedroom on the other side. It allowed us to be together in a way that allowed Masud to be comfortable.

He opens the door to my side, walking a few steps behind me the whole way to my bedroom. “I have to shower.”

“The nurse sent some waterproof bandage coverings home with you.” He rummages through the bag as I strip my clothes off on the way to my en suite. I smirk with my back to him when he sucks in a sharp breath. I’m completely naked. His voice when he speaks again is octaves lower than usual and it sends a thrill down my spine.

I have always known that Masud is attracted to me. He finds me sexy, beautiful, desirable. Fear is what keeps my husband from claiming me physically. I accepted the nature of our relationship from the beginning. Like I said, meeting him in his comfort zone is easy. I love him, it’s as simple as that. However, I have hoped there might come a day when he was able to move beyond the pain of his past and embrace his future with me...by fucking me into the mattress with his monster cock until I

forget my own name and start speaking in tongues. I have prayed for the day when he would sink deep inside me and never leave. I have wished on a star or two that he would impale me and split me in two until I am unable to ever walk again.

If we never get to that day, being his wife will always be the most important thing I've ever done.

I shower as he hovers outside the glass enclosure. I gingerly pat myself dry, then stride naked and clean back into my bedroom. Masud pulls the comforter back and waits while I get situated, then tucks me in. He disappears, returning a couple minutes later with pain pills and juice. I'm already exhausted, so it doesn't take long for the pills to pull me under.

I wake up some time later, my room darker as the sun sets. I turn on my good side and find Masud asleep on the floor right next to my bed. I have never regretted my actions for one second. I would do anything, literally anything for this sweet, bruised man. Keeping our relationship from my family never truly bothered me because I was doing it for him. And yet, as I watch him sleep, his face soft, his broad chest rising and falling, I feel as if a weight has been lifted. I am free to love him in our own way in the open. My family knows and though I'm sure I will be fielding intrusive questions for the foreseeable future, I feel lighter.

Masud deserves to be loved out loud.

With a contented smile on my face, I fall back asleep.

"Omri, I need you to wake up to take your meds." I slowly come to, thinking I must still be dreaming when I feel the rough texture of his palm on my cheek. Our eyes meet and something shifts. Slowly, he lowers until his lips touch mine. I hold still, giving him time. His eyes drift shut as he slides his mouth side to side. In an instant, his body tenses and I act fast.

“Baby. Open your eyes. Look at me.” His eyes snap open and my chest tightens at the fear I see. “It’s just you and me, Masud.”

With a barely perceptible nod, eyes open, he brushes his lips against mine once more. Then without his usual quickness when touched, he pulls back slowly.

“I love you, Masud.”

Voice strained with emotion, he gives me a small smile, “I love you, too, Tovah.”

I am going to help him. He is going to find peace in healing the wounds of his youth. Closing the gaping holes left behind by the people who should have loved him and kept him safe.

One step at a time.

Masud 23.

I take a deep breath, then knock on the door.

“Enter.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

Yakov sits behind his desk, hand on the mouse of his computer. My steps stutter when I realize he has a visitor already.

“I can come back.”

“No, it’s alright. Come in.” He motions with his mouse hand to one of the chairs in front of his desk. His other hand runs up and down Sophia’s back as she sleeps in his lap. Yak is not as tall as me, but he is a big guy. And Sophia Goldman is not short like her sister Dot. Yet, curled up in his lap fast asleep, you’d think she was a child. And not in her mid-thirties.

“I do not wish to disturb her.”

Yakov glances down at the woman in his arms and smiles fondly. “Since the shooting...she hasn’t been sleeping well. For some reason, in my lap while I work is where she rests the best.”

Not forsomereason. He is the reason. I don’t mention that to him though. I don’t think he’s intentionally playing it off, but he’s an honorable man. He won’t touch her or act inappropriately when she’s vulnerable. And knowing him as I do, it probably hasn’t occurred to him that she’s liked him for quite a while. Or that he feels the same.

Security is his job. And he takes his job very seriously. The protection of the Kosher Nostra and its members is his top priority, often to the exclusion of his own wants and needs.

I’m familiar with that concept.

“I want to fuck my wife.” I blurt out, wincing when I realize how ridiculous that sounds out loud.

“Good for you,” he says chuckling. “Did you need instructions? You could ask Jonah...sex is kind of his business.”

I scowl at him and try to figure out what I want to say. “I do not wish to be broken. I know that I have given those that hurt me...too much power. They took my youth, but I have given them the rest of my life on a silver platter. And now, I want to jam that platter down their throats and rejoice with my cock in my wife.” I point a finger at his face. “Do not laugh at me.”

“I’m not, I promise. I’ve just been waiting for you to figure it out.”

“Sex?”

“No, you schmuck. That you are the captain of your own life. It isn’t what is done to us, it is how we react. No one’s journey is wrong, it’s theirs alone. Everyone reaches a point when they realize enough is enough.”

“Yes. I’ve had enough. I don’t want pain and grief and anxiety and dry dick. I want my wife, and I want my life back.”

“Then take it.”

“How?”

He smirks, pointing to his phone, “Are you sure you don’t need Jonah?”

“Yak—”

“She’s lucky,” he cuts me off. “Most of the BABs are. They’ve lived in this world relatively untouched for so long. And Tovah especially. With that mouth, it’s a wonder someone hasn’t tried to kill her before.” He waves off my growl. “Someone shot her. She was less than an inch away from certain death. She can be taken from you at any moment. And you would have let her because you are afraid to touch her.” I drop my head ashamed, knowing he’s right. “You’ve had enough.” I nod in agreement without lifting my head. “Excellent.”

I finally look up at him to see him smiling at me. He’s been my only friend besides Tovah for so long. I’ve cut myself off from everyone, not just my wife. I’m done hiding. I’m done letting fear keep me from living.

“Yak, I need help. I don’t know what to do.”

He kisses the top of Sophia’s head absently. “I have some ideas.”

Tovah 24.

“I don’t think it’s as good as the first one.”

“Tovah, stop pouting.” I glare at a smug Ruthie.

“I’m not pouting. I don’t pout. I’m a grown ass woman—”

“Who is fucking pouting.” I stomp my foot at Zeppo, but he isn’t scared. I think I might be losing my touch. Everyone knows I’m married and capable of love and now they think I’m a big ol’ softie.

“I need to maim someone.”

“No, you don’t. You need to congratulate us.” Dammit, I am a big ol’ softie. I draw

Ruthie into my arms and hug her tight.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Mrs. Zeppo Kraus. I guess all those scribbles in your notebooks weren’t for nothing.” She laughs, hugging me just as tight. “You make a fucking gorgeous bride, Ruth. Incredible woman.” She sniffles and I decide I’ve had enough of this emotion shit. “But it’s still not as good as your first wedding. This wedding planner doesn’t know—”

“Shut up, Tovah.” I gasp in outrage and surprise, pushing Ruthie away from me.

“I will stomp you like a little bug.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will!” Now, I’m mad. How dare she talk back to me. “Fear me! I am Tovah fucking Frenkel!” Suddenly, I’m airborne. It takes me a few seconds to realize that my husband has picked me up and is carrying me to our table. My cousins laugh their asses off, but I can’t work up a good mad. He’s touching me. Holding me. And it’s fucking amazing.

“Sit. Don’t move.” I nod, my mouth dry, my pussy very, very wet. He sits down next to me. A warm presence as Zeppo helps Ruth into her seat at the couple’s table. Uncle David stands near the table with a microphone in his hand. A hush falls over the 400-ish guests.

“Blessed are You, Adonai our God, King of the world, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.”

“Amen.”

“I have been spared many times by the hand of death. I have been grateful every time for the gift of every breath. To be welcomed home by the warm embrace of my beloved Esther. To watch my children grow. To witness my youngest son become a man I am proud to call my own. To stand aside and witness my eldest son embrace his birthright with an open mind and an open heart. To hold my first grandchild.” Uncle David sniffs hard and clears the strain from his voice. My eyes burn with the threat of tears. “But I am most grateful for the breath that watched my daughter fight back and live. The one that allowed me to walk her down the aisle to her future. The one that gave me the strength to threaten her husband-to-be’s life should he hurt her in any way.” The crowd chuckles even as they wipe away tears. “And this one because I am able to tell my daughter how much I love her. Admire her. That she is the best of me and her mother. That I am her biggest fan, staunchest supporter, and deadliest defender until I am spared by the hand of death no more. Ruth BaruchaKrausyou are not just the heart of our family, but you aremyheart. And I love you with its every beat. You and Zeppo will have a joyful, blessed, and fruitful life. And I am honored to bear witness.”

Ruth jumps from her seat and rushes into her father’s waiting arms. I glance across the dance floor and see my dad looking at me with a broad, watery grin. I point to my eye, then make a heart with my fingers, and point at him. He drops his gaze to his lap for a moment, and as a single tear falls down his cheek, he flips me off. Laughter bursts free, leaving me shaking with it.

“Your family is strange,” Masud whispers in my ear. I laugh harder, then glance over my shoulder to meet his stare.

“Ourfamily.” He grunts but his lips twitch.

“I know everyone is anxious to start eating and get out on the dance floor. However, I wish to say a few words, if you’ll permit me, my dear sister.”

“NO!” Zeppo barks.

Moshe smirks at his new brother-in-law, and replies, “I didn’t ask you.” Ruth’s brow furrows but she nods at her brother as she retakes her seat next to Zeppo. “Thank you.” He shifts subtly, a clear indication of his nerves, but the Avinu powers through. “The moment Zilv and I met you in the hospital...he bitched about not being the baby of the family anymore, but I vowed to protect you.” His voice quivers, “I failed you once, I will not allow it again.” He drops to one knee in front of Ruth and Zeppo and continues over the gasps and murmuring of the guests. “I promise to defend your union against all that desire it harm with word, deed, or force; from this day forward, as long as my life allows.” He stands, turning to face the rest of the ballroom. “Ruth and Zeppo’s love has endured. Roadblocks are a natural part of any relationship; however, they have navigated them together and come out stronger. They have a rock-solid foundation to build upon for many years to come. They are a shining example of how incomplete we are born, and it is only once we have found our person that we are whole. The Mishpocheh Consortium will always be at their backs, ready to fight, and I will always be leading the charge.” Seril hands him a champagne glass with shaky hands. He holds it high in the air, “To love, laughter, happily ever after. And to their parents who paid for the open bar!”

We mingle. We laugh. Others cry. I growl. Masud grunts. And I have never enjoyed a wedding more. My Ruth deserves every ounce of happiness this life has to offer.

My jaw drops for the second time tonight, when Masud grabs my hand and leads me to the dance floor. Sweat dots his forehead beneath his shaggy black hair. He’s smiling but it’s strained. It is taking everything inside him to do this, and I am humbled. He believes me worthy of such sacrifice. “Baby, we don’t have to—”

“I want to dance with my wife.” I snap my mouth shut and allow him to lead. One hand on my hip, his fingers digging into my flesh. The other holding mine aloft, his palm clammy, fingers cold. His heart beats so hard and fast I watch it pulse in his

neck. I place my other hand on his shoulder, not wanting to push him too far if I touched the bare skin of his neck above his dress shirt. As we spin around, I find my family staring at us with a mixture of disbelief and giddiness. He forces himself to stay through the entire song. I whisper repeatedly to focus on me.

At the end of the song, he kisses me with a stuttering breath. “Do not bring anyone home. I want to watch you.” With that, he spins on his heel and each of his measured steps out of the ballroom has my pussy pulsing.

Well, hot damn!

Masud 25.

Heart hammering in my chest, I pace in front of the one-way mirror in my bedroom, waiting for my wife to return home. I knew she couldn’t leave the wedding early, no matter what’s between us, Ruth is her favorite cousin. She’s everyone’s favorite.

Ruth and Zeppo have been a long time coming, and I was overwhelmed with this odd sensation all day. Myomriis the only bright spot in my world. Devorah is a wonderful woman, and she has been like a mother to me for decades, but she doesn’t shine quite like Tovah. I am happy with her, something that after so long shouldn’t be such a novel idea. But I’ve always known that we were missing an important part. She has always told me that physical intimacy isn’t necessary in our marriage. She derives great pleasure simply from sharing space with me.

I want more for her. I want more for us. And I’m the only one who can fix it. Watching Ruthie and Zeppo today...there was a dynamic to their relationship that Tovah and I can never achieve unless I face my fears and overcome them.

And it starts tonight. Baby steps.

My breath hitches painfully when she finally enters her bedroom. She doesn't look directly at the mirror; however, she does keep it in mind as she moves about the room.

Tovah stands facing me as she runs her hands around her long, slender neck. Her fingers follow the line of the olive-green halter dress down the deep vee, and across her fucking amazing cleavage. My wife has spectacular tits and my mouth waters wanting to see them, but I'm enjoying the slow strip show. She toys with the bow at her side, the wrap dress seemingly held together at this one point. I hold my breath, enraptured as she tugs gently pulling it free. I had a difficult time all day playing peek-a-boo with her long, long, toned leg and the high slit up the side. Now I realize, as the dress falls open, that she is wearing high-cut lacy panties and a matching strapless bra.

I nearly swallow my tongue at the sight of her. Nearly flawless skin, high perky full tits, narrow waist, and flared hips. Her bullet wound only adds to her appeal. My wife is strong, brave, loyal, and fierce. And so fucking beautiful it hurts. My fingers twitch at my sides, my cock lurching in my dress pants.

She reaches behind her neck, her tits thrusting out as she arches her back slightly to reach the clasp. And then the fabric pools at her high-heeled feet. Fucking hell. Stepping over her dress, she pushes her high-back chair in the corner until it's centered in front of the mirror.

Tovah turns her back to me. Moses, Mirriam, and Aaron, she's wearing a thong. Her ass is glorious, and I have the strongest urge to bite into the fleshy cheeks, leave my mark on her skin. She shimmies out of the thong, turns around and smirks. She knows I'm watching, that I'm captivated, unable to look away from her. Her confidence always makes me rock hard.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I slap my hands on the glass when she straddles the arms of the chair and spreads herself impossibly wide to my view. Her pink pussy glistens, beckoning me. She works her nipples through the lacy fabric before pushing the cups down to expose them. Her right hand skims her body, wets her fingers between the fat lips of her pussy, then back up to tease the tight buds.

I'm fucking drooling as I watch her. She drives herself mad with need, going back and forth between her tits and her cunt. Pinching. Tugging. Pumping. Circling, again and again until she's writhing, panting, begging me for release.

My feet move without conscious thought. It isn't until I'm naked and standing inches from her that I realize what I've done. Her heavy-lidded eyes widen briefly, her fingers never stopping their sensual torture. I can smell her arousal. Can see with perfect clarity how it shines on the inside of her thighs, her pussy lips dripping with it.

"Masud. Baby. I want to cum." Her voice is so low, a rasp to it that I've never heard. The raw need in it pulling my balls up tight to my body. "Cum with me." I have to obey her, have to give her what she wants, what she needs. Nodding, I step in front of her, bend slightly and grab the top of her chair. Our bodies do not touch, yet I've never felt closer to her. She whines in the back of her throat, her fingers pump, pump, pumping faster. Her hips rocking to fuck herself deeper. She pinches her left nipple tight and twists as she tugs.

I grunt as volley after volley of cum erupt from my untouched cock, landing on her pussy and chest. She doesn't miss a beat, I stare with my mouth hanging open as I catch my breath, sliding her fingers through my release. She sucks on one hand while

the other plunges back into her cunt and she screams, her head tilting back, eyes closing. Hard, violent spasms wrack her body.

“Fucking magnificent,” I murmur.

“Masud. Please. I wouldn’t ask...but kiss me, please, kiss me.” To hear her beg is a double-edged sword. I love the sound of it, but I hate that she’s pleading for something I have been unable to give her.

No more.

I swiftly dip down and take her mouth. She is the only woman I have ever kissed. Fuck, I’ve never had sex, never masturbated. Holding her on the dance floor earlier is the most I’ve ever touched another human being. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I let instinct and Tovah guide me. In seconds, she becomes the aggressor, ravaging my mouth, stealing my breath and my sanity with her tongue.

The familiar apprehension and fear creep up, but I fight through it and keep my mouth fused to hers. “Masud,” she says my name against my lips, and it calms me slightly. It’s Tovah and me. My wife. She would never hurt me. Never. We kiss for several moments before I finally pull back. Mostly because I need oxygen.

She sighs with a small, serene smile, her eyes glittering in the low lighting of her bedroom. “I love you, Masud.”

I return her smile, then kiss her forehead and stand up. “I love you.”

Her eyes drop to my cock as it hangs semi-erect. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Min.”

“What did you just call him?”

Tovah leans in closer to my dick but doesn't touch it. She's close enough her breath as she speaks ghosts across the sensitive flesh and I've never felt anything so good. Except her lips on mine. "Min is the Egyptian god of masculinity and sexual pleasure."

I stare down at her in awe. "You know...why do you know that?" Gracefully, she slides her legs off the arm of the chair and sits in it properly, crossing one leg over the other. Her neck arches slightly, her eyes meet mine, her lips stretched into a knowing grin.

"You are Egyptian and my favorite subject, Masud. I'm dedicated to my studies."

"Thank you." I stumble back against the mirror. She's alarmed but stays seated. "You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I would...I would endure my childhood a thousand times if it meant finding you."

She doesn't handle emotion well, and I grin at the way she fidgets in her seat, feigning disinterest. "I will always find you, Masud. I've been trying to work out a deal for a redo of your childhood. God isn't returning my calls."

"So long as my present...my future...involves you, the past is less important every day."

She stands, slips off her high heels and pulls her bra off. Standing before me completely naked, her body still flushed from her orgasm, she strides to the en suite bathroom. "Didn't you read the fine print?" She glances at me over her bare shoulder; her entire expression screams mischief. "You're stuck with me for all eternity."

"Perhaps if God calls you back, we can see about extending our contract." My eyes drop to her perfect ass, "Eternity isn't long enough."

“No, but Min is!”

Tovah 26.

“And what are you reflecting on, my dear daughter?” Dad sits next to me on the bench. The Yom Kippur service is long over, yet many of my family are stationed in different areas all over the synagogue with various members including Rabbi Talushkin. The poor man cannot escape my family.

“On this, the day of atonement, I atone for...nothing.” Dad snorts with a slight shake of his head.

“You sound like Connor McGregor.” I shrug, then lay my head down on his shoulder. Tevye might be taller than our father, but Steven Frenkel is still larger than life to me. I always thought my dad was the biggest, strongest, best man in the world. And little has happened to change that opinion as I’ve gotten older. From our vantage point in the balcony, I can see my husband, towering over everyone in his vicinity, as he listens intently to Mr. and Mrs. Steinberg.

“I’m only human, Dad, there is always room for improvement.”

“That’s a difficult concept for some. We are all a work-in-progress. Life happens and we have only seconds to react but a lifetime to reflect. Things we could have done differently, moments we should have spoken up or kept our mouths shut. I believe this past year has been eye-opening for many of our family. I am not perfect, nor will I ever be. But I have always considered myself a mensch to those around us. It has recently come to my attention that we have been neglectful of those we depend on. Every single member of our organization is essential. And yet...we’ve let so many feel indebted to us, when we are the ones who can never hope to repay the loyalty and devotion they have shown us. But we can try.”

“And that is why I love you.” He sucks in a sharp breath at my admission. I don’t say it often. I’m more action oriented. “Based on your reaction, I will try to be less compartmentalized, and more open to letting people in.”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“But not your vagina. Because you’re married.”

“Yes, Dad, my vagina will not become Grand Central Station. I meant my heart. My thoughts.”

“In just a couple months, your mother and I have noticed such a difference in Masud.”

“Besides his name?” He pinches my side, and I laugh loud enough to draw Masud’s attention from below. A dark brow rises as his sinful lips stretch into a slow smile.

“You are good for him.”

“I am. He’s good for me too. And I think we were wrong to exclude you and mom and the others for so long. I knew Masud was having trouble with his past, but it wasn’t until everything came out that I realized he’s been drowning, and I’ve been his only lifebuoy. I thought I was protecting him...”

“We do the best we can with the information we have. You and Masud did the right thing for you at the time. A new year is upon us; we remember the past to prepare for the future.”

“G’mar chatima tovah, vater.”

“And to you, my precious girl.” Dad kisses the top of my head then points down below. “And if you want to ensure a happy future, you might want to rescue your husband from the Steinbergs. I think they’re trying to set him up with their daughter.”

I watch with a big grin as my husband squirms. “I shouldn’t enjoy this as much as I do.”

Dad shrugs, “Well, you are part demon.”

He follows me down the steps to the first level of the synagogue. Moshe stands with Seril and Shon off to the side. He nods at me, then lifts his hand in the air and whistles lowly as he twirls his pointer finger to get everyone moving.

Masud happily escapes the older couple and their homely 20-something daughter, standing as close to me as humanly possible without touching. The heat of him and his fresh scent send goosebumps across my body. My nipples tighten and my pussy throbs. I haven’t been with anyone else since before I got shot, and since the night of Ruthie’s wedding, I have put on almost nightly performances for my husband. It’s better than any sex I’ve ever had, watching him fight himself, his slips of control, the long shaft of his cock swelling until he bursts covering me in his seed. The way he cums untouched...didn’t know that could be so hot.

The evening heat of early October in North Carolina and the memories of my husband leave my skin tacky with sweat. Our guards materialize as the family steps outside to enter our vehicles. Normally, we don’t go out like this, all together, but Yom Kippur is a high holiday. The family who atones together, kills together...or something like that.

I look over my shoulder and smirk, finding my husband’s eyes trained on my ass. “Did you at least get her number?” It takes him a moment to realize I’ve spoken, then when my words register, he scowls something fierce. His mouth opens but I can’t hear anything as the ground shakes beneath me, dropping me to my knees on the concrete steps, a blistering heat forcing me to drop my face down and squeeze my eyes shut.

Chaos reigns when I look at my surroundings after the initial blast. Several of our vehicles are overturned and on fire. Masud covers me with his body, his arm jerking with each pull of his finger on the trigger of his gun. Quickly, I track the other vulnerable family members; Aunt Esther, Seril and Shon are hidden behind Moshe, Uncle David, their arms raised as they shoot across the street. Tevye and my dad cover Vandy and Arlo. My nephew screaming as his face floods with tears, Vandy's arms banding around him to keep him safe. Inside the safety of the synagogue, the Goldman Girls and Boys peek out, as Ezra, Yakov, and Jonah unload their own weapons. Harper and Sophie are huddled behind a short stone wall near the handicapped ramp.

It takes me seconds to assess the situation. Then I'm lifting Masud's pant leg and grabbing his gun from the ankle holster. In the streets, people are running around, sirens sound in the distance, but I focus on the dwindling group of men firing at us and take out a few myself.

A car revs its engine and its tires squeal and stall as it tries pulling onto the road. Smoothly, Moshe shifts his aim and shoots the two driver side tires, then the driver side window shatters and the car jumps the curb and crashes into another building. Moshe confidently strides down the steps, gun raised as the rest of us cover him. Ezra rushes out of synagogue and joins Moshe. I scan the area and drop my weapon to my side, as do the others when the coast is clear.

Masud forces me to my feet, his hands running all over my body frantically. My eyes stay trained on my cousins as they pull a man from the passenger side of the crashed car. Ezra grips the man's hands behind his back and shoves him face first into the building. A couple guards join them, zip tying the man's hands and hauling him down the street to one of our vehicles not blown up.

My vision blackens suddenly. My face pressed tightly to Masud's chest as his arms wrap around me so tight I can barely breathe. I don't complain though...this is the

first time he's ever held me like this. I revel in the feel of him beneath my cheek when I turn my head to take in some much needed oxygen.

Beside us, Tevye clutches Arlo, his face in the little boy's neck, his other arm around Vandy's back. His eyes meet mine over their heads and I swallow hard at the wealth of emotion in them. Around us, my cousins and aunts and uncles, my parents take comfort in their significant others.

It doesn't appear that anyone is hurt in our immediate family. But I believe a few guards are injured. I pray none are dead.

"Tovah!" Dad is at my side in a second, taking me from Masud's hold and into his own. "Are you alright?"

"Of course, I'm alright. Did you not see me take down a few of them?" My dad relaxes as I hug him back.

He moves to my side, one arm slung over my shoulders, as he surveys the damage. "What were we just talking about? Learning from history. You'd think someone would have warned them that attacking us on Yom Kippur never works out like they think it will." Several of us chuckle, grateful for the levity in the wake of so much destruction.

"ROYAL TENENBAUMS!" Moshe yells and everyone starts moving quickly. We have people who will clean this up, but Moshe and his kapitans will stay behind to handle the police and fire department, while the rest of us head to the compound for lockdown.

"I will take you to the compound and then head over to the consortium to prepare," Masud tells me, ushering me into our vehicle.

“I want to go with you.” Masud kisses me hard but quick, pulling back after he’s done buckling me in. When did that happen? Why did that happen?

“I know you do. My wife is so inventive when it comes to inflicting pain. But this...” he glances at Ezra helping Dottie and her sisters into another vehicle. “This isn’t meant for us.” I know he’s right. This man, Joseph Baird came after the whole family, yes, but his target has always been Dottie. This is Ezra’s kill.

“Can I at least cut off a finger or something on the next guy?” Masud kisses me again and shuts the door on a laugh. He sits up front, my mom, Vandy, and Arlo joining me in the back seat.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Van, you good?”

She nods absently, running her hand down Arlo’s back over and over again. “Yeah.”

“You sure?” She shakes her head slightly, then meets my stare.

“I’m not hurt. But...this is the second time something like this has happened—”

“It’s not as common as you think, but it does happen.”

She sighs dejectedly, leaning back against the seat and closing her eyes. “My mom is going to kill me.” She opens one eye to look at me. “Then she’s coming after the rest of you.”

I think about her words for a moment, “Is it worth it? Is Tevye...is he worth all this?”

“Yes,” she answers with a smile without hesitation. I nod, sitting back next to her, my hand resting on Arlo’s leg.

Masud turns around in his seat. We stare at one another for several long seconds. “You’re worth it too.”

Dammit, now I’m all verklempt.

Masud 27.

“Where are his nipples?” Moshe asks Ezra as I reenter the room. We’re in the

subbasement of the Mishpocheh Consortium. This is my domain. This is where I shine. This is my happy place.

And I'm aware that is all kinds of fucked up. But it is what it is. My therapy, if you will. However, my services may not be needed by the looks of things.

"It's a scavenger hunt," Ezra replies with a menacing grin, his eyes wild, his skin flushed. Ezra the man is no longer with us; this is Dottie's violent protector. "I've hidden them somewhere and he's got to find them."

The speaker in the room crackles, Yak's disembodied voice sounds from his office in the upper half of the building. He's our eyes and ears, everyone knows that. Only, based on what he's kept to himself regarding Tovah and I, I'd say he sees a lot more than any of us realize.

"They're in his ass. He shoved them in the man's rectum...with no lube." I snort, my head dropping to hide my reaction. Moshe stares at his kapitan with his mouth open in shock.

"You've only been in here like 5 minutes. What the fuck?"

Ezra shrugs casually, "I'm efficient." He turns to me, forces himself to take a deep breath and meets my eyes. "The Pharaoh...is it still The Pharaoh? Do you prefer Masud? Or just Pharaoh? The?" I offer the man a genuine smile, appreciating that he has taken the time to ask.

"Down here, Pharaoh will suffice."

"Pharaoh, then. I know this is your domain, however, given that this piece of dried excrement tried to take my woman...thrice!" He loses it, spinning around to carve X's in Joseph Baird's forehead. "One, two, THRICE!"

“Why can’t he just say three?” Zilv questions Moshe, but it appears our Avraham Avinu is at a loss.

“Ezra?” My deep voice echoes in the room over Baird’s screams. Ez’s body jerks and he glances at me over his shoulder, scalpel still digging into the last X. “You were saying?”

“Right.” He stands up straight, the bloody scalpel now at his side held limply in his hand. “I do not wish to infringe on your role, but I need to be a part of his interrogation.”

“Not a problem,” I concede immediately. “His men shot my wife...she is very put out about it. As am I.” I growl the last part while staring into Baird’s eyes. There is something so satisfying about watching a man lose all hope. Too bad the sweet release of death is still a ways off for him.

“Before you two start...” Moshe begins, waiting until he has our full attention. “I want the contents of his brain. Every name, location, history, I want it all. I mean to dismantle the entire slave network piece by piece. And his pieces are a great place to start.”

I nod succinctly at my Avinu. Walking to the nearby table, my metal tools shining in the light, I grab my favorite knife and the blow torch. I stop next to Ezra, staring down at the pathetic excuse for a man, sneering as he snivels and cries. “You took his nipples...let’s continue with the belly button.”

Ezra’s head slowly swivels toward me with a growing gleeful grin. “You and Tovah were made for one another.”

Yes, we were. And after Baird is dealt with and Moshe has the information he needs to get started, I’m going to claim her, once and for all.

Masud 28.

“This was your fucking idea!” Tev grunts and groans as I fight his hold. My body thrashes on instinct, years of muscle memory too strong for me...and him and Yakov.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Just another second!” Yak yells as he secures my right hand and arm to the bed frame.

I’m not making any sound, my tongue thick in my mouth as I fight them with everything I’ve got, even as I tell myself this is what needs to happen. I force myself to close my eyes, picturing Tovah’s face. Her long dark blonde hair. Upturned nose. Full bottom lip. Her eyes...they are mesmerizing; green or blue depending on the lighting and her mood. A long delicate neck sloping into slim but strong shoulders. She’s deceptively strong, physically and mentally. The strongest person I know. She’s mine. I want her. Ineedher.

But she needs me too. She needs me to put my past to rest and be the man I am meant to be. By her side.

“Fuckin’ finally.” Tev releases a heavy exhale. I open my eyes to find him glaring at my mostly naked form. And that quickly, my body relaxes even as it shakes from laughter. This is a ridiculous situation. Yak joins me. Tev does not. He’s very far from amused.

“Can’t believe I helped incapacitate you so my sister can fuck you.” He looks over at Yak. “It’s true. Wearefucked up.”

Yak grins and shrugs. “So what?”

“Masud?” My eyes snap to the doorway to her bedroom. She already had the restraints attached to her solid bed frame; Yak just reinforced them for me.

“In here,” Tevye calls out, scowls at me, and stomps out of the room. The twins whisper harshly in the hallway, Yak leans down closer to me.

“You good, brother?” I nod, swallowing what feels like a golf ball size lump of emotion.

I love her. I love her. I love her.

“Let her heal you, Mas. Let her take away the pain.” He walks out of the room before I can unstick my tongue to respond. Probably for the best, I would have told him to take his own advice.

Tovah rushes into the bedroom, her eyes wide as they alight on me. Her expression darkens for a second, her gaze running down the length of my body, clad only in boxer briefs. My Egyptian heritage gives my skin a natural bronze finish. I work out a lot to combat the frenzied energy that flows through my body...and I’ve increased my workouts since marrying Tovah. She’s the most beautiful, erotic, sensual creature I’ve ever laid eyes on, and it has been its own special kind of torture to deny myself for so long.

No more.

“Masud!” She shakes off her desire, closing the distance between us in three quick strides. Her fingers touch the restraints of my left hand.

“NO!” She snaps back, hands raised in the air, her brow creased. I take a calming breath. “Do not untie me.”

“I don’t understand, Masud. Why would you have them tie you up? What’s wrong? I’m gonna kick Tev’s fucking ass—”

“Omri. It is not his fault, he did as I asked. And I probably owe him a great deal, considering how hard I fought them.”

“I need you to explain, dear husband, and do it quickly.”

“The only touch I’ve ever known always led to the greatest pain. Having my father’s attention meant bleeding, broken bones, agony. When his friends were around, it was worse.” Her features soften as I speak. My fingers twitch, the urge to soothe her so strong. “Touch me with pleasure. Show my body there is more.”

“If you have to be restrained, perhaps you aren’t ready.”

“I am, my beloved wife. I am ready to be yours; I just need a little help.”

She’s skeptical, but there is no hiding the hope in her voice or eyes. “You’re sure?” I nod. In an instant, my concerned devoted wife disappears, and a gorgeous powerful dominatrix takes her place. My cock jerks behind the soft cotton, hardening, thickening, begging. “As you wish.”

Tovah strips slowly as she walks around the bed, eyeing me like a predator does its prey before a violent kill. A shiver wracks me from head to toes, precum building at the tip of my needy cock. He’s in the game. Always ready, it’s my mind that has always held him back.

I lick my lips with every inch of her flesh exposed. When she unhooks her bra and it falls to the floor along with her panties, it feels like my heart might beat right out of my chest. Her high tits, a generous size, tipped with pale pink nipples. The gentle indent of her waist to her firm, flared hips. I’ve always loved her legs. They go on for miles, her bare feet always capped by painted toes. My mouth dries at the sight. The junction of her thighs, framed by a neat blonde thatch of hair...knowing I’m going to finally feel it, I’m momentarily overwhelmed. My chest tightens and my vision dots.

“Masud,” Tovah barks authoritatively. My gaze snaps to hers and my heart calms. “You. Me. No one else. No past. No pain. Just us.” She’s perfection.

Starting with my toes, she kisses up my legs. Licking and sucking the skin, tickling behind my knees. Her breasts hang slightly, her nipples grazing my thighs when she crawls up my form. She stops, her face inches from my hungry cock hidden behind my boxers.

“Tsk. Tsk.” She shakes her head back and forth as if she’s disappointed by something. My nerves ratchet up a few notches, thinking I’ve upset her. She slides, gentle and slow, her fingers beneath my waistband, and pulls them down. I can’t move much, but she manages to push them down to my ankles without much help from me.

“My God,” she murmurs, rubbing her thumb over her bottom lip. “You are exquisite.” She chuckles as my flesh reddens under her praise. “Good to know,” she says cryptically, then resumes her trek, her lips and tongue making contact with just about every inch of the front of my body as she moves.

My back bows as her breath ghosts across the sensitive flesh of my cock, but she doesn’t touch it, instead moving up my torso. A groan builds in my throat, her pink tongue laving my nipples, beading them painfully. She licks a stripe up the side of my neck, then latches her mouth to mine. Her tongue demands entrance and the moment it touches mine I jolt, like being struck by electricity. She’s patient, showing me how to kiss her properly, drawing my tongue into her mouth. The wet warmth is incredible. And her taste...ambrosia.

She breaks the kiss too quickly, but I don’t complain as she feeds me each of her breasts. Tracing my lips with her pebbled nipples. I open hungrily, sucking her with little finesse, desperate to get some part of her inside me. I’m instantly addicted to the way her nipples harden under my tongue, how her skin breaks out when I push them

to the roof of my mouth and suckle.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

I stare up in awed amazement when she deftly turns around, planting her dripping pussy over my mouth. Her back arches, her hands in her hair and teasing her nipples. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I'm going to do my best. I explore her with my tongue, nibbling with my teeth on her hardened clit, massaging her delicate flesh with my lips. She mewls, whines, begs me with her body and moves to show me what to do.

I don't realize I'm trembling violently until she plants her hands on my chest, petting me softly. The nightmares of my youth persist, but I push them back, focusing on her pleasure, her taste, the comforting weight of her above me. My breath stalls in my chest when she bends forward suddenly.

The first touch of her soft hands on my cock draws a deep, long groan from the depths of my soul. My hips rise on instinct, chasing her grip. She chuckles darkly, then circles the head with her tongue.

“Ya lahwī!” Every second that passes, I think it can't possibly get better than the last and I'm proven wrong as she makes love to my dick. Root to tip. Her hips swivel and she pushes down, reminding me that I'm supposed to be pleasing her.

She withdraws, her hand lazily stroking up and down. “You love me, Masud?”

“YES!” I exclaim then dive back into her pussy.

“And you want me to be happy?”

“Deliriously happy.”

“Your cock makes me the happiest.” I hum in gratitude, licking around her entrance and spearing her with my tongue. “You won’t keep it from me again, will you?” I grunt in response. “Good boy.”

Her mouth...her scent...her sounds...the sheer heat of her...it pushes the nightmares back, forcing them to retreat. I feel freer with every passing second.

I don’t know how long I lose myself in her pussy, the rhythm of her hands and mouth. She grinds her pussy down, rotates her hips, then sits up with a shout as she floods my mouth. I guzzle her juices, a thirstier man than I does not exist.

I chase her with my mouth when she shifts, spinning around and sliding down my body. The underside of my cock kisses her pussy. She rubs it against her clit, staring down at me with so much...everything.Love. Devotion. Fear. Appreciation. Admiration. Concern.

I hide nothing from her and moments later she nods, then sinks down my length, taking me inside her for the first time. It’s like a padlock on the chest of memories, locking them away where they belong. They have no place here. They have tarnished what we have for too long. I’ve denied myself; I’ve denied her.

Her cunt breathes around my girth, her face contorted beautifully in rapture...I’ve punished us both long enough. She rocks back and forth, taking me deeper and deeper. Fully seated, she smirks, then slowly rolls her hips.

“Unstrap me!” Her smirk drops, her movements stop. Panic colors her expression.

“Masud?”

“Untie me,” I repeat through gritted teeth. She leans forward and to the right, quickly undoing the restraint. When she moves to the left, her thighs flex as she starts to lift

off my cock, but my right-hand slaps down on her hip, my mouth latching on to her closest nipple. She moans, but finishes untying me.

Both hands on her hips, I sit up slightly, bending my legs behind her for leverage despite the ankle restraints. I'm driven by instinct, by feel, by need. She moves with me, still confused. The hypnotic sway of her tits draws my mouth, and I suckle as she rides me.

Tovah fucking Frenkel begins to cry. Her hands desperately grip my face, her eyes darting back and forth between mine. Tears stream down her face, her lips stretched in a blinding smile. Pure joy and happiness and satisfaction shine from every pore. She has so much love for me, so much faith in me, in us. I should have never doubted her, she's always right.

As we push closer and closer to the edge, she drops her hands from my face, cups her titties, pulls and twists her nipples. I growl and snap my teeth, arousal threatening to drown me as my body heats. Arching back slightly, she uses one hand on my hard thigh to hold herself up, her other going straight to her plump clit. She circles it, over and over, the tight clutch of her pussy milking me so well. She drags my orgasm from my body, along with her own until we're both screaming our releases.

Sweaty, sticky, and sated, she collapses on top of me. Burying her face in my neck, her shoulders shake, new tears wetting my skin. I wrap my arms around her, bringing her with me as I lay back down.

We cry. We break apart. We glue each other back together. Stronger and better than before. It's catharsis. It's progress. It's love.

Arching her neck sometime later, she smiles softly, her hand coming up to gently caress my face. "Welcome home, husband."

Tevye 29.

My knee bounces and I can't stop it. I'm not normally a nervous person, but life with Vandy...well, let's just say I'm not the man I used to be. I'm better. I'm whole.

"Would anyone else like to share this evening?" she asks the support group. We've been here for about a half hour, and she's given me concerned glances every thirty seconds. It's warranted. I just gotta do it—

"ME!" I raise my hand and shout, startling several other members. "Sorry." I clear my throat and try again. "Sorry. Just eager to share, if no one else minds." Everyone encourages me to continue. "As many of you know, I came to my first group session months ago, determined to prove to my meddling mother and aunts that I didn't need a support group. I was fine. My son was fine. Everything was fucking fine." Many join me in a laugh. "That was a lie, obviously. Jodie, I owe you a debt I can never repay. You gave me a verbal kick in the ass, and I needed it. To be a better father. A better man. I was a dead man walking, tightening the noose around my neck more and more with every one of Arlo's doctor's appointments, outbursts, hospitalizations...I couldn't breathe. But I had grown so accustomed to the limited oxygen I hadn't realized how close to death I was. Until Vandy." I stand from my seat to kneel in front of hers. She gasps as I take her trembling hand in mine. Her fingers so cold, her right hand over her mouth as tears fill her eyes. "You are my oxygen. Ouroxygen. The Frenkel men are devoted to you. Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow." I whistle loudly, scaring her. "Sorry." The doors open and my entire mishpocheh floods the room excitedly. Arlo toddles over to us instantly, seeking Vandy and I out. I put my arm around his waist and look back up at my woman. "Will you marry us?"

"Mama." Arlo claps his hands together, then detaches from me and leaps into Vandy's arms. She holds him so tight, tears falling down her face. That little player. We didn't practice that, there was no preparation, he's a toddler for God's sake.

“Well, you gotta say yes now,” Jodie teases Vandy from across the circle.

“I love you,” she whispers over Arlo’s head. She extends her left hand, fingers straight. I slide my great-grandmother’s ring onto her finger, bringing it to my lips to kiss.

“I love you more.”

“Is this the normal dynamic for the support group?” A newcomer whispers loudly a few seats away.

Jodie snickers, leaning forward in her seat to answer them, “Nah, proposals aren’t common. But growth, peace, fellowship? That’s always the goal.”

Our families surround us with congratulations, very firm back slaps, and a death grip on my balls from her mother warning me not to fuck it up. Tovah stands to the side, giving everyone else a chance. After it’s died down a bit, she steps over to me, facing me head on. We stare at one another for several long seconds before we smirk at the same time.

“Impending matrimony looks good on you, brother.”

“Domestic bliss looks good on you.” We move in unison, our arms banding around the other in a tight hug. For all the shit we give each other, Tovah is my other half in so many ways. When you’ve shared a womb, a strong bond is formed, sure, but our relationship goes so much deeper than that. Until Vandy, I didn’t think there was anyone on the planet that understood me as well as Tov. Our parents do the best they can, but Tov and I are just wired differently. I will always stand between Arlo, Vandy and the big bad world. But I do not fear the future, I do not fear death, because I know that Tovah will take care of my family, competently and completely.

We clear our throat as the tender moment stretches awkwardly. Taking a giant step backward, we put space between us. I glance at my side, noticing our parents and

Vandy watching us with sappy grins.

Tovah rolls her eyes with a grunt. “My dick is still bigger than yours.” My head tips back and I laugh hard. I wipe away the gathered moisture from my eyes with a shit-eating smirk.

“I know.”

“Well, good,” she begins. “As long as you know. Good day, sir.” She speed-walks across the meeting room and right into her husband’s open arms. He and I exchange a chin nod. Masud is a good man. I’m still pissed Yakov didn’t tell me, but I also know with absolute certainty that if Masud was a schmuck, Yak wouldn’t have let him anywhere near my sister, let alone marry her. I don’t know what’s in store for them, but I pray they enjoy a long and happy life together, just like me and Vandy.

I hold out my hand for her and she happily skips over to me to take it. I love how my hand dwarfs hers. How my body hides her when I bring her into my chest for me to hold. How my heart beats fast and furious whenever she’s nearby.

I’d never tell her, but Tovah’s assessment isn’t entirely correct. It isn’t impending matrimony that looks good on me. I always thought loving someone meant losing a part of yourself, changing who you are to please them. Vandy loves me exactly as I am. And there isn’t a damn thing I would change about my woman. There is a certain freedom that comes from true, unconditional love. It is that devotion that changes you. Urges you to grow into who you are meant to be.

“Thank you.” I whisper into the top of her head. She hums, snuggling closer somehow.

“You don’t have to thank me.” She responds, knowing exactly what I’m thankful for without having to tell her. She gets me. “Loving you is like the autonomic nervous

system. No conscious thought, it just happens because it's supposed to. Loving you takes no effort, Tev, it just happens because it's supposed to."

I growl playfully, digging my fingertips into her sides. "I love it when you talk nurse to me."

She rears back, surprising me. Her eyes alight with something dirty. I'm intrigued. She presses the back of her hand to my forehead. "Oh, my. I think you might have a fever. We should stop at the store on the way home...I'm gonna need an English cucumber to check it properly."

I'm not even going to question how my sister heard her from 20 feet away. "Better get the American cucumber for an accurate reading!"

Vandy 30.

I twist my hand this way and that, admiring the giant ring on my finger. After group, we came back to the family compound to celebrate. Devorah outdid herself with dinner tonight. That woman is a miracle worker.

The best part was her forcing Tovah into the kitchen to help. She said she could finally claim Tovah as her daughter-in-law openly, she can start teaching her all the ways to please her man...gastronomically speaking. Masud blushed so hard and slapped his hand over Tovah's mouth before she could respond to the lovely older house manager. I had no idea how close Devorah and Masud were, but I'm glad that he had her in his life. It must have been so hard to live such a harrowing childhood, then relocate across the world with people he didn't know. My soon to be sister-in-law is lethally scary, but she's got a soft, squishy middle...that I will never point out to her because I do not wish to die.

Especially now that I'm engaged to Tevye. It's amazing how you're moving along in

life, thinking you're happy and content and then BAM! A big behemoth of a grouch walks into your life with a giggly little boy and it hits you that you never knew true happiness until them.

And now I get to experience it every day for the rest of my life.

"It's weird having The Pharaoh at the family dinner table," Jonah states too loudly not to be heard by the entire dining room.

His sister Sophie smacks him in the back of the head, while his wife Harper holds his hands down so he can't retaliate. "What's weird is you still calling him 'The Pharaoh'. Masud. It ain't hard, dude."

"Whatever," Jonah says, rolling his eyes. "All I'm saying is, you watch a guy utterly and completely decimate an enemy or two, passing him the salt and pepper at the dinner table is weird."

Tovah snorts, "You think that's weird? Let me describe in detail how he decimated my pussy—" The aunts and uncles and my in-laws throw food at her while Masud kisses her to shut her up. Meanwhile, I'm giggling as the dinner table devolves into chaos.

Tevye lifts an empty plate and uses it to block us from getting pelted with food. He steals a quick kiss. "Let's elope. And move. Far, far away. I heard Finland is like the happiest place on earth."

"I thought that was Disneyland?"

"Too expensive. And you have to wear those fucking ears. Ain't my scene."

"But Finland is?"

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Sure, why not. It’s got the Northern Lights.”

“A wonderful basis for completely uprooting our lives and moving to a foreign country.” He scowls at my sarcasm, drops the plate just in time for me to get pelted with a slice of prime rib. He bites his lips to keep from laughing while I use my cloth napkin to clean up as best I can. “Finland it is. But I won’t fly anything but first-class. I’m to be a mafia wife, I expect luxury.”

He smiles and it transforms his face. Softens him, he looks years younger. Light. Unburdened. “You marry me, I’ll give you anything you want.”

“Just you.” I lean in and kiss him softly, moaning into his mouth when he deepens the kiss.

“We’ll probably have to bring my parents. They’re attached to Arlo.”

I groan and drop back into my seat with a frown. “Just our dads. My mom is crazy, and your mom might try to take me to a séance.” The room silences at our exchange.

Gertie stares at me with narrowed eyes. “One time.”

“I heard that’s all it took to bring evil into your womb.” Steven throws his hand up for a high-five which I return.

My future mother-in-law points her finger at me, “You, that was good. You’ll do nicely in this family. But you...” she turns to her husband, who looks a lot less giddy than he was a moment ago, “Kill. Bill.” Steven swallows hard, as an uneasy hush

falls over the dining room.

“Gert. Baby—”

“I will roar. I will rampage. And I will get bloody satisfaction.”

“Now I see the family resemblance.” Harper comments, her eyes flashing between Gertie and Tovah.

Blanche stands up from her seat and saunters, that’s the only word to describe the motion of her hips as she floats to Gertie’s chair on the other side of the table. She runs her hand along Gertie’s back. “Enchantee.” Blanche practically purrs at Gertie’s ear. “You can call me Bloody Satisfaction.”

“Get away from my wife!” Steven yells, throwing his napkin down, pulling his wife from her seat and away from a laughing Blanche, and carrying her over his shoulder out of the room. She gives us all a thumb’s up.

“Our parents are gonna bone,” Tovah tells her twin unnecessarily.

“Yes, thank you for that,” he replies drily.

“I think Masud and I are gonna bone too.”

“Hey, Vandy?” I glance up and smile at Ruthie. “Can Zeppo and I come to Finland with you? We promise not to make it awkward.”

Masud 31.

I love sex. A whole lot. It is completely understandable why people allow this seemingly simple act to rule over their entire existence. I bet it’s not as good as

having sex with Tovah. She's...limber. And inventive.

Alas, we cannot fornicate every second of the day. Which is why we are now walking hand in hand into the entertainment room. Tovah's cousins are spread out over various pieces of furniture.

Seeing everyone gathered shouldn't be a big deal, but my chest still tightens. My anxiety is a work in progress, as Tovah puts it. Her hand in mine as she leads me to an open corner of a couch, is enough to keep me anchored though. She urges me to sit down, then she plops down in my lap, curling into me with a light press of her lips to my throat.

We settle in, talking with an exuberant Seril and Moshe sans Shon. They are obviously exhausted but happy to be childless for the night. I use the bathroom after a while. I'm surprised to find Blanche in the hallway waiting for me.

"You were watching?" I swallow hard, but nod. "Every time?" I grunt in affirmation. "Did it hurt watching your woman with someone else?" I shake my head. It wasn't ideal, but it worked for us at the time. "She's been protecting you," Blanche continues. "I know her well enough to know she wasn't hiding you out of shame. She's a tough bitch, earned the MOABAB title." She closes the distance between us, her entire body coiling tight. "Now it's your turn to protect her. Give her the freedom to relax, turn it all off. She doesn't need to be ON all the time. I know she thinks everyone will fall apart without her supervision...but we all want her to be happy. To be loved like she deserves. Be that for her...or I will give you reason to wish for your past once again, as I will make that pain seem like a minor inconvenience."

I refuse to smile at her threat. I know she means it to the depths of her soul, but it makes me happy to know that my wife inspires such loyalty from others. "Understood."

“Good.” Blanche’s body posture softens slightly as she smirks, cocking a hip to the side. “Did you like what you saw?” She turns around, looking at me over her shoulder, “I do a lot of exercises to keep this ass high and tight.”

“You fucked my wife like a champ. Whatever you’re doing at the gym is working.” She spins back, lit up from my praise. “Besides my wife, your ass is easily top 10 I’ve seen.”

She frowns with a sound of outrage. “Top 10?!?”

“Yeah. Well, there was this one guy that tried to fuck over the mishpocheh. A real shame, he had an exceptional set of glutes. I legit bounced a quarter off his cheeks...before shoving a metal pipe between them and hooking it up to 400 amps of electricity.”

Blanche’s expression doesn’t change, but for a small tick at the corner of her eye. “I imagine he found that experience...shocking.”

Page 43

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

We're laughing as we reenter the entertainment room. I find Tovah on the arm of the couch. She plops back into my lap once I sit back down. Having her with me like this...magical.

Couples shift, conversations drift and at some point Tovah and I notice Bailey and Ernie sitting together on the opposite couch.

"Ernest Marx," Tovah calls out. "When you gonna make an honest woman out of Bailey?"

"You're all married up and now you think everyone else should be too?" Ernie jokes.

"Here man, try this." Zeppo hands Ernie a perfectly rolled blunt. "New strain we're trying out at the Burning Bush. You're gonna need it."

Ernie happily accepts, places the joint in his mouth and leans forward when Zeppo flips open a Zippo. Ha! Zeppo has a Zippo. I close my eyes, lean my head back, and laugh. Tovah taps my chin and when I open my eyes, I notice the room is a little hazy with smoke now that I look around. Shit, am I high?

"Not that I'm complaining, but why do I need it?"

"Because Tovah's about to rip you a new one." Zeppo knows my wife well.

Ernie, so innocent, looks at Tovah with puppy-dog eyes and a pout. "You are? Why?"

Tovah sighs. She mutters, "It's like smacking a dog with a newspaper." She slides off

my lap and I do not like it. I clumsily grab at her and drag her back into my lap, wrapping my arms around her middle, refusing to let her go again. She pats my arms and explains to Ernie, “You and Bailey started dating around the time that Moshe and Seril got together.” Ernie bobs his head up and down, taking another long drag of his joint. “And since then, they’ve gotten married and had a child. Also, four other couples started within that time period, and two of them are already married.” She addresses Bailey, “Do you want to marry Ernie?”

“Yes,” Bailey answers instantly and confidently.

“Then why are you letting him take his sweet ol’ time getting you down the aisle?”

Bailey shrugs, “Because I have him. I don’t need a piece of paper or a ring of metal on my finger to know he loves me with his whole heart.”

“Hey!” Ernie sits up, dislodging Bailey from his lap, “Tovah, mind ya business! You were married for like seven eleventy billion years in secret.”

Surprisingly, Tovah does not rip his throat out with her teeth or bare hands. Instead, she shifts in my lap to face me. “I made a mistake. I thought we were doing the right thing, but all it did was give your pain room to grow. I should have known...should have trusted that my mishpocheh would fight for you, just as I do. It took us years to get to this moment, and I don’t want any of you,” she looks at Ernie, Bailey, and the others, “the people I care about and love the most in this world to wait when your happily ever after is right in front of you.”

“I take it back,” Jonah breaks the charged silence after Tovah’s confession. “Eating dinner with The Pharaoh is weird, but Tovah emoting is weirder.”

Sophie smacks him again; her reflexes lightning fast. He smacks her back and within seconds they resemble the human equivalent of two windmills. Harper sighs, leaning

far away from the siblings.

“My God, Jonah,” Harper deadpans. Jonah drops his hands, takes one more hit to the face, and focuses on his wife. “I have never been so attracted to you. My loins...they are aflame with lust. I must have you.”

“Fuck yeah.” Jonah reaches for Harper, but she smacks his hands away and stands up. “Come on, baby, let me use my hose to douse your inflamed loins!”

Ignoring Jonah, who from the sounds of it is being smacked by multiple people, I cup Tovah’s jaw, drawing her forehead to mine. “Don’t worry, we are right on time,omri.”

Epilogue

Ernest Marx 1.

“I love them. A lot. Aren’t they great? My whole family. Just swell. The lot of them.”

“I know, Ernie. They are.” Bailey drags my arm over her slender shoulders, steadying me on my feet in front of our little cottage on the family compound I was gifted a few years ago. I moved Bailey in right away, not wanting to be apart from her. From the beginning, we just clicked.

“And you.” I kiss her temple. “I love you so much. More than any of them. But don’t tell them. It’ll hurt their feelings. They are a sensitive bunch.”

“Yes, dear.”

Inside the cottage, I start stripping off my clothes on the way to our bedroom. By the time we cross the threshold, I’m naked and burning up and hard as fuck. Bailey is

beautiful. The most beautiful creature I've ever seen. And she's mine.

"Come here, baby." I loop my arms around the small of her back, bringing her close. She arches her neck automatically, meeting my lips with hers. We kiss, our tongues duel, our hands roam. Blessedly naked against me, I play with her little tits and squeeze her tiny ass. She's small everywhere, like a delicious little treat. Pushing her back on the bed, I part her legs and dive between them. Her back arches, her mouth opens on a silent scream, and I feast.

"You taste so good." I murmur into her pussy, rubbing my face all over, getting her juices everywhere. I suck on her clit, nibbling it with my teeth and reach up her body to her nipples. Overstimulated, she cums with a high-pitched keen, my cock jerking at the sound like Pavlov's Bell.

Standing, I plant my fists on either side of her head and thrust into her to the hilt. "Fuckin' A." She's always so warm and wet and receptive. The way her body welcomes me, clutches tight to my shaft, begs me with every undulation...making love to my woman is unlike anything I've ever experienced. And I pray the day never arrives that we lose this between us.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Ernie! Cum.” I roll my hips faster, push deeper, until the tip of my cock tickles her cervix. Thumb on her clit, I lean down and suck a pretty, pink nipple into my mouth and she cums. Her pussy constricts so tight I can barely withdraw, so instead I grind, rocking back and forth until I’m spent. Slowly, we catch our breath, and I slip out of her. “Goober.” She calls me with a chuckle when I drop down to my knees and watch my seed drip out of her.

“We should have a baby.”

“We should,” she agrees easily. “Let’s get married first.”

“Ok.” I’m suddenly very tired. The day catching up with me. I crawl into bed, and I’m out as soon as my head hits the pillow.

Ernie 2.

Checking my rearview mirror, I merge onto the highway. Moshe types on his phone in the backseat. “Avinu?” I call out to him before I’ve thought it all through.

“Yes, Ernie?”

“When you proposed to Seril...?” I trail off, unsure how to ask what’s on my mind.

“Ernie? What’s up?”

“Sorry, boss. Uh. So. I want to marry Bailey. I’ve known since the moment I met her. It’s just...there’s been so much going on with the mishpocheh, and it’s never been the

right time—”

Moshe snorts loudly, my jaw snapping shut. I meet his eyes in the mirror, my mouth turning down into a frown at his expression. “The right time? Seriously? Is that why you haven’t popped the question? You’ve been waiting for the right time?”

“Could you not say it like that?”

“It’s justified. Also, fuck you, because I seem to recall you doing a lot of reenacting when Seril and I were getting started.”

I tilt my head side to side. “Fair.”

“Ernie. Bailey is end game, right?”

“Yes.”

“A piece of paper isn’t important to a lot of people, but in our line of work...that piece of paper means the difference between life and death, security and poverty. If you love her, marry her. You can’t wait for the perfect time. It doesn’t fucking exist.”

“But I live in a cottage on your property—”

“You live in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom home that you didn’t have to pay for, on property you are not required to maintain, so that you are close to your family and work. Besides, from what I hear, Bailey loves that house.”

“She does?”

“You’re a fucking idiot. She loves the house. She loves you. She wants to fill it with Ernie-babies and be a part of a loving, caring family.” Moshe sighs, shifts in his seat

so he's leaning between the two front seats to stare at me with disapproval. "It is our job as their men to guarantee they have everything they could ever want, but more importantly everything they need. She needs you, Ern. Make sure she's got you."

"Thanks." I swallow hard, focusing on the road while Moshe sits back in his seat and resumes typing on his phone. A little later, I pull into the family compound. I'm opening the door for Moshe when I hear a loud whistling sound. Looking up, I have just enough time to shove Moshe back in the car and slam the door shut before something crashes into the house and explodes.

I blink several times, trying to clear the fog from my vision. My ears feel funny. I can't hear anything. It's hot. So hot. My vision clears slightly, and I start frantically crawling toward the fountain. It's obliterated, but there is still water. I drop my lower half into the water and my right arm. I am on fire! Was. I WAS ON FIRE!

"MOSHE!" Shit, I forgot about the Avinu. Extinguished, I leap from the remains of the fountain and fight through the nauseating pain to get to the SUV that is now on its side with flames 10 feet high at the front end.

I manage to climb on it, using every ounce of strength I have left to open the passenger door. "MOSHE!" I'm screaming, but I can't really hear anything besides a high-pitch ringing, so I don't know if he can hear me. The door finally gives; I push it up and open and nearly puke all over my cousin. Moshe is pinned in the backseat, his right leg at an unnatural angle and split open. He's unconscious. And I'm momentarily glad for small favors.

"HELP! HELP THE AVINU!" I'm screaming, knowing I can't get him out by myself. Something touches my back, and I slip backward off the vehicle. I stare up in shock at Yak as he cradles me in his arms. I start laughing, rather hysterically, and he puts me down on the ground away from the vehicle and debris.

I watch in stunned silence as our men start pouring in. They right the SUV and are successful in getting Moshe out. He's whisked off somewhere, then Yak is back in front of me, kneeling on the ground. His mouth is moving but I can't make out what he's saying. I bat at his hand when he pinches my nose shut, but he's hella strong. He mimics blowing out through my nose and I get the idea. Something pops in my eardrums and though the ringing is still there, other sounds start filtering in.

"Ernie." I stare up at him and wait. "More ambulances are on the way. We had to prioritize injuries, but you'll be taken to the hospital soon."

"I'm fine." I push to stand up, but Yak's hand on my shoulders keeps me planted on the ground. "Where's Bailey? BAILEY!"

"Calm down. ERNIE! CHILL THE FUCK OUT!" Yak yells in my face. "Bailey is alive, but she's injured. Everyone is...injured. She's going to the hospital too, just not yet."

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Yak, you can’t wait. If she’s hurt—”

“Ernie.” No. No. I don’t like his tone. What it implies.

“Who...who’s dead?”

“The bomb hit the center of the compound. Esther, David, Suzie are...they’re gone.”

“No.” Tears falls from my eyes unbidden. I can’t stop them.

“I’m sorry, Ernie. The others...are in serious condition. Luckily, Seril is out with Shon, Ruthie, Zeppo, Harper and the Goldman boys. Arlo is with Vandy’s parents. Sophie is at the Mishpocheh Consortium.” Good. We’d just left there for the day. “And Jonah—” He cuts himself off when his phone rings. “Yeah?” The color drains from Yak’s face, his eyes close, his body tenses as he stands up and starts pacing. “What do you mean—are you sure? Who did this? Well, what the FUCK do you know? I’ll speak to you however I fucking want. Half of our fucking family is DEAD! I want to know who’s responsible!” He presses a button on his phone and shoves it into his pocket.

“Yak?”

“The Consortium...it’s been leveled.”

Saliva fills my mouth as my vision blackens. “The entire building—”

“Rubble.”

“And the people in it?”

“Under the fucking rubble, Ernie.”

“Moses, Miriam, and Aaron.” I mutter, my eyes drifting to the burning remnants of the Kosher Nostra compound. A numbness descends over me, pins and needles and despair.

“Swinging Schlay?”

“Still standing.” But for how long?

“Yak. Someone...someone is trying to eliminate the Kosher Nostra.”

“Yup.”

“Are they gonna succeed?”

Yak stares out into the distance, jaw clenched, his hands curled into impotent fists at his side. “Not sure.”

“Well, that’s not the answer I was looking for.”

Ernie 3.

“Ernie, please lay back down. You have burns on like 30% of your body. You need rest. And time.”

Glaring at Tovah, I grimace as I swing my legs over the side of the hospital bed. Burns or not, there is shit to be done. We are down...seriously down. So many people...I’m needed.

“Boy, I will knock you the fuck out if you don’t lay back down.”

“Ernie?” Bailey’s raspy voice breaks my glare-off with Tovah. “Please? I can’t...I was so scared, if you had still been in the SUV with Moshe...God, please just lay down. For me?”

Her tears are my undoing. I can’t fight against them. With great effort, I get back into bed and lay down. “How’s Moshe?”

Tovah sighs, leaning her hip against my bed. “He’s in a coma. They had to amputate his right leg above the knee. He has some bleeding in his brain. It’s...it’s not looking good for our dear Avinu.”

“Ernie.” Bailey cries and when she hands me tissues, I realize I’m crying too. Moshe...fuck. “I’m so sorry.” I hold out my arm and draw her into bed with me. Tovah helps us get situated.

“I have to go make the rounds.”

“Tovah...I’m so sorry about your parents.” She looks at me and I watch her shutter her emotions.

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“Death does not wait for you to be ready. Death is not considerate or fair.”Tov stands up straight, smooths her dress and strides confidently on her high heels toward the door to my room. “Death is a fucking miserable cunt.”

Bailey and I lay together for who knows how long. Grief is loud. All-encompassing. It swallows you whole and it’s up to you if the bloody crawl back out is worth it. Half my family is dead. I will never hear their voices, their laughter, share their joys and shoulder their pain. How do we move on from this? Rebuild? Do we want to?

“How’s your arm?” Bailey sniffles, rubbing her cheek on my chest.

“I’m fine, Ern.”

“You shattered your arm, Bailey. Are you in pain?”

“Physically, no. Mentally, emotionally...my heart hurts, Ernie. So much I can’t breathe.”

“I just keep thinking...and I want to kick my own ass...but I’m fucking thankful that you are alive. That we are both still here. I can’t imagine life without you, Bailey. I don’t want to. I love you.”

“Oh, Ernie...I know it feels wrong, but we are allowed to rejoice. I have thanked God a million times in the last few days that you were spared. Selfish or not. I love you.”

“We’re getting married.”

She smiles up at me. “Ok.”

“I mean it, Bails. As soon as I’m discharged, we’re going to the courthouse and getting hitched.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I’m not waiting a minute longer than I have to.” I seal my vow with a kiss, taking her mouth roughly, desperate to feel her. Everything has changed. But she’s here with me and I ain’t letting her go.

Ernie 4.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” I hug my older brother and sister. They flew in from New York to surprise me. They’ve also come to pay their respects for the family we’ve lost. I still can’t wrap my head around it. But having my big brother Evan here makes me feel better.

“Our baby brother is getting married. You think we’d miss this?”

“It’s just a courthouse wedding. I told Bailey...once things calm down, we’ll do it right. Big ceremony, big reception.”

Emaline fixes the lapels of my suit jacket, her eyes glistening as she glances up at me. “You are doing it right. It’s right for you and Bailey. You are marrying your best friend; the rest is details.”

“Thank you.” I hug Emaline again and she chuckles before stepping back and wiping carefully under her eyes.

“We love you, Ern. We’re here for you. No matter what.”

My brother and sister follow me into the judge's chambers. My foot taps impatiently, waiting for Bailey to arrive. There's a knock on the door and it opens to reveal my beautiful Bailey. She's wearing a short summer dress in a very pale pink. Her legs and arms bare. Her painted toes peeking through short, heeled sandals. Her long blonde hair is pinned in some elaborate updo, showing off her long, slim neck. My lips stretch as I take her in...it drops when I spot the gun held against her side. The man behind her using her as a shield to enter the room.

We're in the courthouse; I don't have my personal weapon on me as it's not permitted. Apparently, bad guys don't play by the rules. I don't recognize him at first. They step further into the room, and he kicks the door shut behind him. The light of the room hits him just right and my breath hitches when recognition slams into me.

"Hans Gruber?" I can't believe my own eyes. "But...you're dead. Alan Rickman is dead."

"Alan was weak. And so is the Kosher Nostra."

"But why?" I don't understand.

"Why?" He smirks, moving around the room with Bailey positioned in front of him. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice my brother shifting his stance, his hand sliding slowly behind him. He's reaching for his piece. At least he was smart enough to come to my wedding armed. "Because the Kosher Nostra threw me out of a fucking window."

"WHAT?" I shake my head, my hands itching to reach out and grab Bailey. "No, we didn't. That was Bruce Willis."

"Who the fuck is Bruce Willis?"

“Hans, Bruce is the guy who played McClane.”

“Lies!” He waves the gun around, his hold on Bailey tightening. “It was you! Moshe! SHON killed me!”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“He’s less than a year old!” I argue. How could a baby possibly have killed a fictional movie character?

“You all must die! Starting with your precious bride-to-be!” Hans points his gun at Bailey’s side again. I jump to stop him. The gun goes off as I land on him and knock him to the ground. I scramble for it, grabbing it seconds before Hans, put the gun against his forehead and fire.

“Ernie.” Bailey’s voice is weak. Broken. My God, no, not her. Spinning on my knees, I find her lying on the floor, the side of her dress covered in bright red flowers. Her flowers are soaking my pants. “ERNIE!” She screams but I’m right here.

“Bailey. Bailey, no. Baby. No.” I pick the flowers one by one, but the pile never gets smaller. Why is she bleeding so many flowers? “Don’t go. Don’t leave me.”

“I’m going home, Ernie.”

“No. Your home is with me!” Cupping her face, I fuse my mouth to hers.

“ERNIE!” She yells again...while I’m kissing her. “Ernie. That’s not me. You’re kissing Manny.” I pull back, confusion making it difficult to think. I jerk, startled to find myself staring into the pissed off eyes of Ruthie’s bodyguard Manny.

“Bailey?”

“I’m right here.” I slowly turn my head to the right and find my woman glaring at me.

“Manny was kind enough to help me get you home.”

“But you were shot! You were bleeding flowers.”

“Oh, this is wonderful.” I ignore Tovah, pleading with Bailey to make this make sense.

“I’ve never been shot.” Bailey tells me.

“I have. Not fun.” Again, I ignore Tovah.

“But you were. Hans Gruber shot you because Shon threw him out a window. And he was so mad at the Kosher Nostra that he blew up the family compound and the consortium. Everyone was mangled or dead. Moshe—” My eyes dart around the room of expectant faces until I land on the Avinu. “Moshe, your leg was amputated, and your brain was bleeding.”

“Flowers?” He asks.

“NO!” That’s a stupid question. “Only Bailey bleeds flowers. And...and...and...Oh My GOD! I’m Bruce Willis!” I roll out of the recliner I don’t remember sitting in and crouch low to the ground. “I see dead people!”

“Ernie.” My head snaps up and I find Bailey softly smiling down at me. “You aren’t Bruce Willis.”

“Dude—” Zeppo is inches away from me when he speaks. Bailey...good God, I’ve never seen her so angry. Ever.

“YOU!” She points a finger at Zep menacingly. My dick likes it when she’s angry. Now is not the time! I might be dead. Or...the people here are dead? I don’t know what’s happening. “What the fuck is in that weed?”

Zeppo shrinks away. “Uh...weed?”

“Well, you better put a warning on it. My boyfriend has been tripping balls for the last 10 minutes, thinking Hans Gruber has come to avenge his own death against an 11-month-old!”

Sophie steps between Bailey and I, patting me on the head. “Zeppo, we can call it Nakatomi Plaza.” She claps her hands and bounces on her feet. “Fuck, we are gonna sell the shit out of this strain!”

“Ernie, you said Hans Gruber claimed Shon killed him?” I nod at Moshe, wrapping my arms around Bailey and burying my face in her stomach. I feel...unsettled. “Did you hear that, Ser? Our baby boy is already a criminal mastermind!”

Bailey threads her fingers through my hair over and over. It’s calming. Soothing. I purr, squeezing her tighter. “Ern, you, ok?”

“I am. I am the most ok I’ve ever been. We’re getting married.”

“We are?” She chuckles, tilting my head back with her thumb under my chin. Her face is lit up, eyes glittering with amusement.

“Yes. As fast as possible.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because...I love you. And I want the rest of our lives to begin right now. I don’t want to wait for “right” conditions. Marrying you, under any circumstances, is the best day of my life.”

“So, you’ll give up the silly notion that you should put your own life on hold for

everyone else, or you don't have enough money, or the right home, or education—”

Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:45 am

“You are really fucking dumb.” Ezra smacks my shoulder.

Bailey growls, “He is NOT. Ernie is amazing. And selfless. And giving. And he penises exceptionally well.” I feel my entire body heat from her praise.

Zilv smacks his hand off the coffee table. “Yes, yes, we are a family of exceptional penises...penisers?”

I stand up on shaky legs, that weed is potent, and grab Bailey’s hand. Dragging her behind me, I move us toward the hallway to leave the entertainment room. “Uh, Ernie? Where are we going?”

“To get married. Right now.”

“Well,” She tugs on my hand and pulls me to an abrupt stop. “it’s like 10 o’clock at night and also, you pissed your pants again.” I glance down and find the front of my pants wet.

“Yes, it appears I have.” I resume pulling her, “Change of plans, we’ll go home, I’ll shower, fuck you with my exceptional penis until we fall asleep, then we’ll go to the courthouse tomorrow and you’re gonna marry me. Someone call my brother and sister and tell them to get here right away.”

Bailey giggles girlishly as we make our way through the family compound. “I love it when you take charge.” She clears her throat a moment later, “But you should probably see the doctor about how often you piss yourself under the influence.”