

The scene, in theory, was perfect. Aiden had booked a secluded table at Cygnus 27, the restaurant overlooking the cityscape and the Grand River, located at the top of the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. He made arrangements with the staff for wine and appetizers and had even planned for rare, beautiful flowers to adorn the table, all to make the point to Jenna that he was all-in on their relationship. Yet it was clear to Aiden as soon as he saw her arrive that things were far from ideal.

From his vantage point in the corner, he saw her come around the elevator bank with her phone in her hand, clearly engaged in a text-based conversation. She stood there, oblivious to him, for nearly a minute, grinning like a teenager passing notes to that cute boy from chem lab. Yet when she put the phone away, her obvious delight faded to cool pleasantness. He took note of her change in demeanor.

Aiden stood to greet her with an embrace as she approached; she deflected, turning instead as if she intended for him to take her jacket. Which he did, although he was aware of her redirection. She sat and smiled politely.

Folding the jacket over an empty chair, he also sat and said, "How was New York?"

"It was outstanding. Stephan's art was fairly well received by the local small press."

"That's great. Did you have fun?"

"Fun?" Jenna cocked her head. "It was a fulfilling professional experience, Aiden."

His face turned red. Their conversation hadn't even broken the twenty-word mark and she was already treating him like a world-weary cougar humoring a bumbling virgin man-child on an awkward first date.

"I'm glad you found it rewarding," he said, quietly. "By the way, that's a stunning dress."

"Thank you." She unconsciously ran her hand across her abdomen, stroking the fabric. She wore a crimson strapless cocktail dress with black fishnets and a small silk black-and-white checkered keffiyeh around her neck, but no jewelry whatsoever. Her relative formality was counterpointed by his semi-casual dark-gray slacks and tightly fitted pink shirt, accented by his silver tunnels and several silver rings on both fingers.

Trying to salvage the discussion, he said, "I'm sorry I got so angry at you last week, Jenna. I've been under a lot of stress lately, and it wasn't appropriate for me to take out my frustrations on you."

"Apology accepted." She replied in a nonchalant, almost disinterested way.

"Tell me more about the art exhibit. I don't recall having seen any of his photography, so I'm really curious to learn more about Stephan's body of work."

She shook her head gently. "I bought you a book of his street photography for Christmas last year," she said. "I guess you didn't flip through it."

Again, he blushed, but he didn't respond. They remained silent for a full minute, until the waiter appeared with the wine and appetizers he had requested. By prior arrangement, the service staff merely delivered the items, leaving Aiden to manage the table.

"A lovely Sangiovese, with assorted cheeses," Aiden said. "May I pour for you?"

"That's fine," Jenna said.

He half-filled each glass, slowly, then offered the cheese platter to Jenna. She removed several small pieces.

"Aiden," she said, "it's lovely that you're trying."

He flashed a wide grin of relief. "Thanks," he said.

"But."

His heart sank. "But what?" he asked.

"But I think we need to circle back to what happened the night of the party."

"Fair enough," he said, with a slight sigh. "There's probably a lot we

need to talk about."

She nodded. After a sip of her wine, she said, "Do you remember Sally? The girl from the gym who always wore those hideous velvet track suits?"

Aiden looked confused for a moment -- both about Sally and about the apparent change of subject -- then he remembered. "Yes! Sally! She was kinda funny, in a nerd-humor kind of way."

"That she was. She got married a few months ago, did you know that?"

Aiden shook his head. "Not a clue. I never really saw her outside the gym. Who did she marry?"

"That Kurt guy."

"The trainer?"

"That's the one."

"Wow. I wouldn't have expected that pairing."

"Why not?"

"Well," he said, "Sally was super sensitive about everything and seemed like a bit of a girl-power type. I made a joke once and couldn't tell if she was going to cry or punch me. And Kurt? I worked out with him a few times. Built like a tank but a first-class prick."

Jenna sipped more of her wine. "I ran into Sally a couple of days before you got out of jail. She was different. Subdued. She had some bruises. Long story short, Kurt's been beating the shit out of her."

Aiden frowned. "That fucker."

Jenna looked directly into Aiden's eyes with an unreadable face. "That's a disappointing understatement," she said.

"I know," he said, "but although I'm not surprised to hear Kurt beats her, I am surprised Sally walked into that mess. She seemed like a sharp cookie."

"She's very sharp. She was also self-conscious about fitting in, and being with Kurt gave her social status. I talked to her a while and learned a few things that I guess I didn't piece together before."

It dawned on Aiden where the conversation was turning -- why Jenna chose to bring up Sally. "What did you learn?" he asked, mildly, bluffing.

"Sally is a sweetheart, but she thinks that she deserved every beating she got because something she did made Kurt upset. In just the short time they've been together, she's transitioned from a quirky, shy girl too blunt for her own good, to a woman who makes excuses about everything. And now that she's pregnant -- did I forget to mention that? -- she believes she's locked in. Worse, she apparently is just fine with her situation."

Aiden let the table grow silent while he spread some cheese on a piece of bread, ate it, then washed it down with a slow sip wine. He said, "I feel for her, Jenna. Her story is an object lesson, I think, in becoming so isolated that a person loses the social circle that keeps them happy, healthy and safe."

Jenna's eyebrow rose; she didn't expect his rhetorical counter-attack. "Is that the lesson you see here?"

"It's a lesson, but not the only one. From what you describe, I think the kinds of mistakes Kurt is making, and Sally is tolerating, stems in part because Kurt doesn't have friends. He has bros, which is not the same thing. And Sally doesn't have anyone willing to help her, so she's confined to the prison she locked herself into. Without a network of people who love you, you are truly alone."

"That's true. But I think there are a few other lessons, too. I think the biggest take-away, for me, is that there's a tendency among women to let themselves sit in the passenger's seat and not complain no matter where or how the man drives. I loathe Kurt, but I pity Sally. She refuses to own her personhood, so Kurt owns it for her. It's Sally's unwillingness to assert herself, more than another part of that story, that enrages me."

"I'm not sure that's fair. Your view doesn't reflect the nuance of human relationships. Sometimes people balance power between them, but sometimes they revel in power imbalance. Although I agree that there's never an excuse for beating your wife, I think love is diverse. A person who's naturally dominant or naturally submissive isn't more or less of a

person. As long as there's consent, there's a basis for a relationship."

"Consent, Aiden? No offense, but that's not a concept you've always found simple to grasp."

He raised his chin. "Oh? Care to elaborate?" He tried very hard to keep his voice level and mostly succeeded.

"Let's take last week. Do you think I consented to sex in the bathroom?"

"I recall asking you, and I recall you never saying no."

She snorted. "There's more to consent than an explicit, verbalized agreement, Aiden."

"I agree. Last week, did you resist at all? Fight back? Decline? Do anything?"

"No. But you should have known better. You should have read my body language, my tone of voice."

"How, Jenna? You flirted before hand, raised no objection during, and we had breakfast afterward. As I recall, you even said you enjoyed it when I fuck you. It's not fair to retroactively suggest, in the absence of evidence at the time, that you were raped."

"I never said I was raped—"

"Sex without consent is *rape*, Jenna. So let's be clear. Are you accusing me of rape?"

She shook her head, flabbergasted at the turn of the conversation and irritated that she believed Aiden unwilling or unable to see the nuance of her position.

The waiter returned to take their order. Jenna contented herself with an arugula salad and carrot soup; Aiden ordered the monkfish. The waiter's intervention led to a few more minutes of silence.

Aiden's vantage point let him see the entire restaurant. The modern decor and upscale clientele matched well. With a few exceptions — including one bartender Aiden thought he recognized — the wait staff appeared a bit older and a bit more seasoned than in other restaurants. He noticed that there were far more service staff than the unusually modest number of diners warranted — a sign, he thought, that the restaurant expected an influx after some downtown cultural event, like a concert at Van Andel Arena or a show by Grand Rapids' ballet or symphony.

Jenna ate another piece of cheese. Her initial chilly demeanor had defrosted somewhat. She sighed for dramatic effect, then said: "Let me try this again."

"Please do." It was Aiden's turn to grow cold.

"I brought up Sally because my experience with her highlighted my frustration with the trajectory of our relationship. Do I think you'll beat me? No. I honestly don't. But I don't want to be the girl who sacrifices her dreams because she's conditioned into becoming a submissive cock slave. You are the perfect man for a woman who loves an adrenaline rush, Aiden. You are spontaneous. Aggressive. Fearless. Sex with you is usually intense, and more primal than sex with 99 percent of the rest of the men on the market."

"See?" he said, sarcastically. "I'm practically the archetype of a rapist. They better throw me back behind bars before I rape again."

She slammed her hand on the table, more forcefully than she intended; several servers took notice but kept their distance. "Knock it off, damn it," she growled. "You know what I meant."

"Do I?" He pushed her button again, but this time she resisted.

"Aiden," she said, with a deep breath, "You aren't Kurt. But I've dated you for a long time and I've never felt that I'm anything more to you than a hole to fuck. When things were new and exhilarating, and I was younger and more impressionable, that *rocked*. You were my own little addiction, like riding a mechanical bull after a round of tequila shots, and our juvenile desires complimented each other so perfectly that our relationship survived lies, infidelity and manipulation. But I'm launching a career now. I need a *partner*. I need someone I can talk to without being dismissed or trotted out like I'm Princess Leia to your Jabba the Hut."

He half-smiled at the *Star Wars* reference, but he wasn't amused at her argument. "You know something?" he said. "You never said that to me before. But it really sounds like you're not giving me a chance to try something different. Like you're giving up on us, before I have the chance to fix it with you." She didn't answer, instead taking a long, slow sip of her wine, then pouring more wine into her glass straight from the bottle. Growing weary of her stalling, he went for the jugular: "How much of this is really about you wanting a partner, and how much of this is because I'm damaged goods now, and it's time for you to replace me with someone who can maintain your social status?"

She recoiled. "You're not damaged, Aiden—"

"The fuck I'm not!" He raised his voice, enough to make the point but not so much as to draw attention from other diners. "I have a record. I'm broke. You rode that bull all right — until the bull got castrated. Then you bail. You think you were just a hole to fuck? Maybe I think I was just a wallet and a warm bed to you." He shook his head. He couldn't contain the single, fat tear trickling down his left cheek. Nor did he try.

Jenna's own tears welled. She didn't even consider that he'd respond with anything other than anger. Rage, she could manage; she never expected sadness. Aiden looked her in the eye. "Jenna, I can't lose you," he said. "You are literally the only thing left keeping me together, the only person keeping me from being totally empty inside after everyone else, including my own family, has abandoned me. I love you and I need you and if I lose you I don't know what I'm going to do."

They both took a deep breath. A pair of waiters arrived to serve their entrees. After a moment of conversation and table-checking, the head waiter beat a polite but hasty retreat: He read the table's mood perfectly and erred on the side of discretion. Aiden and Jenna picked over their entree in silence. The head waiter checked in once and brought a second bottle of wine; otherwise, the conversation ground to a halt.

After both had finished eating, Aiden asked, "Why do you have to go?" His voice was quiet, with a plaintive, child-like tremor — a tone that left Jenna unsettled. She had seen a great range of emotions from Aiden, but the sort of dejected fear he projected was a novelty. His question reminded her of a small child posing the same query to a parent leaving for a trip or military deployment, instead of a question two adults would ask of each other.

She took a deep breath. She had prepared this speech over several weeks, but now that the moment arrived, she churned with a mix of anxiety, loss and hope. It occurred to her that her speech would have flowed easier if he were angry. She couldn't bear him being *hurt*. "Aiden, please be mad at me." Her eyes welled again.

"Say what you came to say," he replied, calmly. He wilted.

She took another deep breath. He was emotionally defeated, and she knew it, but she was committed to the course she had planned weeks before. "Okay," she said. She paused to drain the last of the wine from her glass. "Aiden, I need a soul mate who at least sometimes puts me first. But more than that, I need a partner who will be a good and loving father. I want a husband and children. You know that, but you won't buy me a ring and you already had a vasectomy, because keeping your options open was always more important to you than committing to me ever was. And the truth is, you have no goals in life. No sense of purpose, other than wrenching every last self-satisfying moment of enjoyment from the moment until that moment is gone. I'm not a wide-eyed kid anymore who can be seduced by a smile and a slap on the ass and a never-ending credit limit. I'm looking for a good man who will be a good father, and won't go looking for the next thrill as soon as life becomes routine. You're a world-class fuck, Aiden, but at this point in your life, you're not a good man and you will never be a father. And the fact that you are worried about losing me because of what it will do to you, instead of thinking what keeping me will do to me, speaks louder than my own tiny voice could ever overcome."

He folded his napkin and put it on his plate. "I understand, Jenna,"

he mumbled.

She blinked, expecting an argument or at least some dialog. Instead, all she saw was sorrow. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "I lost you," he said. "I get it. I'm sorry. I really am." His eyes welled again, so he looked down at the table.

"Aiden, I—"

"Who is he?"

"I don't know—"

"Please, Jenna. You can crush my heart but not my brain. Who is he?"

She paused, then said, "Steve Bremerton."

He nodded. "I heard about that. I assume he was the guy you were texting when you got off the elevator?"

"You have to understand—"

"Jenna, stop. I get it. Steve is a nice guy. He will be a devoted husband and father and he will be happy to have a minivan and a house in the suburbs and a dog, and take delight in coaching Little League and attending PTA conferences, and be with you as a loyal partner when you two move into a retirement home together. I'm not that man. I might never be that man. I'm just sorry I wasted so much of your life. You probably don't believe it, since you think I'm an ego-maniacal rapist, but I really do love you. So I'm going to let you go, so you can finally be happy. I guess I have no other way to prove how much you mean to me, than to step aside with grace."

She was stunned at his reaction; she froze, not sure what to say or do.

"Please go now," he said. His voice grew hard and his eyes were red. "I'm going to explode and I don't want you to see it. Please don't make me humiliate myself in front of you. *Please.*"

She stood and picked up her coat.

"Know this, Aiden. There's a part of me that loves you. There's a part of me that will always love you. But because you can't get your head right, I can't trust my future to you. You're just not a good choice for a mate."

He smiled at her, thinly. "I wish you the best. You deserve it. It was nice seeing you, one last time. Thanks for dinner."

She turned away and headed for the elevators, sending several short text messages between the table and the exit. She refused to look back. After she rounded the wall behind the elevator bank, she heard a deep, angry, primal roar followed by a loud crash and the sound of breaking glass.

She didn't need to peer around the corner; she knew what happened. Aiden had flipped the table.