

Grief's Aggression

Danny shoot

Danny held up at the restaurant

Danny sorry

Angela
I'm almost there

ANGELA

I was a block away from the hospital when I got Danny's messages, and even though I knew how hard he and Lucas had been working the past few months, even though I knew I couldn't be mad at him for prioritizing the restaurant, a part of me was upset.

It was always hard to see our dad in the hospital, but it was even harder when I had to see him all alone.

After fixing Xavier's car last night, I'd made myself pasta and watched some TV in the living room, but I hadn't seen him in the penthouse at all. He was either holed up in his bedroom or out for the night, because I still hadn't seen him by the time I left for the train that morning.

Sure, I could have secured myself a chauffeured ride to the hospital with the black card Brad had given me, but there was something relaxing about the train ride into Jersey. Besides, spending money so frivolously still made me uncomfortable.

Now it was early afternoon, and I walked through the revolving doors, instantly hit with that distinct hospital smell—a mix between antiseptic and sorrow. I got into the elevator with two nurses dressed in pink and purple scrubs. They looked to be around my age, and were joking around with each other.

I nodded at the nurses, wishing I could be as carefree as they seemed as I headed out of the elevator, my heart heavy in my chest. I wasn't sure what I was about to see, and was mentally preparing myself for the worst.

I followed the signs in the hallway down a corridor, through another set of doors, and into a waiting room. I approached the reception desk.

"Hello," I said, hoping my tone sounded cheery. Optimistic. Maybe if I was optimistic enough, it would rub off on reality. "I'm here to visit my dad, Ken Carson."

"Ah, Ken. What a sweetheart. He's in 820. Follow this hallway down," the nurse said, pointing behind her, "all the way until you can turn right. And then he's the first door on the right."

"Thank you," I said, and I started for the hallway.

"He's doing great," the nurse called after me. "He's a fighter."

I smiled at that, then continued toward his room.

I pushed the door open a crack and peeked my head in. I could feel the color drain from my face almost immediately.

He looked even more pale, even more frail, than the last time I'd seen him in the hospital. His eyes were closed, and he was connected to so many different wires and tubes that I couldn't make sense of what was what. I took a step inside.

"Dad?"

His eyes fluttered for a second before opening. He turned his head—slowly and not by much, but enough to see me in the corner—and the faintest smile appeared on his face.

"There's my girl," he said, and his voice was as coarse as an elderly chain-smoker's.

"Hi," I said, willing my tears not to come as I hurried over to the bed. I wrapped my arms around him as gingerly as I could. "How're you doing?"

"Me? I'm dandy," he rasped out. "Tell me about you. But before you do, can you fetch me a drink? Somethin' strong?"

"Dad," I said, looking down at him. I had to smile. Somehow, even through all the illness, all the weakness, his eyes still managed to hold on to their mischief.

I squeezed his hand and then reached for the glass of water on the bedside table. I brought the straw to his lips, and he took a few sips gratefully.

"How was the wedding?" Dad tried to sound casual, but his voice was thick with emotion. I could tell how much it tore him up that he wasn't able to be there for it.

"It was a dull thing, really," I said, trying to keep my tone light. "Too stuffy for your taste. You would've been just aching to get out of there."

"Angie ..."

"We'll talk about it more next time," I assured him. "For now, focus on getting better. The nurse says you're a fighter."

"It was one time," he said. "And Gerard started it."

I laughed. Felt that same wave of safety—the one where I knew if he was still cracking jokes, he'd be okay.

"But seriously, Angie, about your husband—"

There was a knock at the door. I breathed a silent sigh of relief. I didn't want to have that conversation right then.

Not when Dad looked so frail.

A handsome middle-aged man carrying a case file in one hand and a coffee in the other walked inside, a smile on his face.

"Dr. Kaller," my dad said, his words warm.

"Hey, big guy," the doctor said. "You got the ladies visiting you already?"

"Only my daughter."

"Hi." I offered my hand to him. "I'm Angela."

The doctor put his case file on the table and shook my hand. "Marc Kaller. I've been on your dad's case since he turned back up here," he explained.

"Your dad's an icon around these halls, Angela. He has this superpower where he can rile up just about anyone, *and* he always gets his ice chips the minute he asks for them."

"Sounds like him." I smiled.

Dr. Kaller bent down to check his vitals, took his temperature, and then picked up his case file again and waved at my dad.

"Can I talk to you in the hall for a second, Angela?" he asked me.

"Oh, of course," I responded. "Be back in a minute," I said, bending down to kiss my dad on the cheek.

"She's my daughter! No touching!" Dad rasped out from his bed as we retreated into the hallway.

I felt my cheeks burning, but I couldn't help but laugh. At least Dad was still being Dad.

As soon as Dr. Kaller closed the door to Dad's room and walked me a few steps farther down the hallway, I could tell something was up. His face changed, no longer offering the carefree, easygoing expression he'd worn inside. Something darker clouded his eyes.

"Angela, I just want to make sure you're up to date on everything with your father. Your brothers were here last night, but there've been a few more changes."

"Okay,"

"You know we took him out of the coma yesterday, and he's been responding well. But he's not eating by himself yet, and his ALS ...it's progressing.

"Rapidly. We could try and fight each of the symptoms individually, but the efforts would be shallow rather than preventive. There's no way of stopping them from coming back, or worsening. So, the typical next step sure he's as comfortable as possible ..."

...it's to make

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I knew what that meant. That meant giving up. Dr. Kaller saw my expression and immediately continued.

"But there's something I want to bring up to you. It's a trial treatment. It's a combination of medication and daily rehabilitation practices, all of which could be done at the hospital. There isn't any precedence for this treatment, though, Angela. I want to make sure you understand there are risks. It's not even on the market yet."

"So, you're saying it's ...it's either the untested treatment or ...nothing?"

He looked down at me, eyes full of sympathy, or pity, or something else. He gave a quick but certain nod.

"It's a hard decision. I didn't mention it to your brothers last night because I wanted to see what the first twenty-four hours out of the coma would be like for him, so I'd recommend the three of you talk about it. Really flush it out, based on what you're comfortable with."

"Okay," I said, nodding to myself. My brothers. They'd help figure out the right move.

"Oh, and Angela?"

"Yes?"

"The trial treatment ...because it's so new, and so involved, it comes with a pretty big price tag."

"Oh."

"If it works, it's something your dad could be on for upward of a year," he continued. "And at the moment, because it doesn't qualify for insurance, the pill and the rehab are coming out to about \$1,000 a day."

The words stopped having meaning for me. *A thousand dollars a day?* What, was the pill wrapped in gold caviar? But then I thought of Brad and of Xavier and of my lonely penthouse. I -had- made the arrangement for a reason.

It was 3 a.m. by the time I got back home. I hadn't wanted to leave Dad right away, and the train had been delayed coming back to the city. I was exhausted, riding the elevator up to the penthouse when I heard the radio pulsating through the walls.

When the door opened, I had to cover my ears. The music was so loud I thought I'd never be able to hear anything spoken at a normal volume again.

I was walking to my room when, suddenly, the music stopped. I turned around, and there was Xavier. He was wearing dark jeans and a white button-down shirt, unbuttoned down to his navel. His face was covered in stubble, and his eyes were bloodshot.

He'd definitely been partying. I thought of the difference in days we must have had. Xavier had probably been drinking, having a good time, since the afternoon.

"There's my wife," he said. I watched him eye my Old Navy sweater, my scuffed-up Converse.

"Hi, Xavier," I said, trying to keep my distance. But then the doctor's words rang out through my head.

A trial treatment. A thousand dollars a day.

My exhausted mind was spinning. Maybe it'd be best if I asked Xavier first so he wouldn't get mad about me going behind his back to Brad. And he was clearly intoxicated, so maybe he'd react better. Maybe he'd have a heart for once. Yes, I thought. ~This is a good idea.~

Xavier was stumbling toward the kitchen. He was pouring himself a glass of wine when I followed him and stood across the island.

"Hey, there's something I wanted to ask you," I said, hoping my voice had at least a morsel of confidence.

"What?" he said, guzzling the wine.

"My dad ...he's—"

"Hey, wife. Too much of this." He cut me off and turned his hand into an alligator mouth chomping up and down. A signal for talking. *He's saying I'm talking too much.*

"If you just let me explain—"

"SHUT. UP. How much clearer do I have to be?" he said, and now he was swigging right from the bottle. "People are always talking to me. Always talking. I just want silence."

Forget it. I thought. I turned and headed for my room.

"Hey!" he called out. I kept walking. But then I heard him running after me and felt a hand on my elbow before I could do anything. He had me cornered against the wall. His grip around the wine bottle in his hands was so tight I was afraid it would shatter.

"Hey," he said, softer, like he was trying to flirt. Like I was another girl. "You are my wife, you know that?"

"I know, Xavier."

"So don't walk away from me." He was so close to me I could count his eyelashes.

"Okay," I said. I tried to wiggle from his grasp, but he held strong.

"You know, wives are supposed to do things for their husbands. To perform," he said, and the stench of alcohol flowed off him.

"I'm going to bed," I said firmly, and this time, I forced my way out of his grasp.

He smashed the wine bottle into the wall beside him. The sound made me jump, and when I turned around to face him again, he gave me the eeriest smile I'd ever seen.

"You're gonna learn to do what you're FUCKING TOLD," he said. "You live here. You live off me. You're gonna learn to make yourself useful."

And then he was stepping toward me, and his eyes were running all over my body. But this time, they weren't looking at the stains on my sweater, or the holes in my shoes. I knew they were imagining what lay underneath.

"Xavier, stop," I ordered, my voice pleading. But he kept stepping.

"You're a gold-digging slut," he said. "You should start acting like it." It felt like a knife was pushed into my gut. And then his hands were on my shoulders, running through my hair.

"You're drunk," I said, and my words stopped him cold. I didn't know why, but I knew it was my chance. I turned to find my room as fast as I could, and that was when I saw Lucille coming down the hallway.

We locked eyes—she could see the pain, the fear, in mine, and I could see the maternal instinct in hers—and she waved me into my room. As I passed her, she grabbed my hand and whispered, "I take care of it."

And then I was in my room, with the door locked and my lungs slowly refilling with air.

How have I gone from my old life to living in a home that feels like a war zone?

I lay in bed, my mind drifting from images of Dad to images of drunk Xavier. If anyone was worth dealing with drunk Xavier, it was Dad.