The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

Crossed Lines

ANGELA

I woke up with a big smile on my face. That was maybe the first time, in my big fluffy bed in my big fluffy penthouse, that that had ever happened.

The art show was amazing. Not only was Dustin’s work incredibly well received, but everyone I’d spoken to had been so ...nice.

After all of the business associates and family friends I’d met through the Knights, at the wedding and elsewhere, I’d been under the impression that I would never really get along with anyone in their circle.

But last night I felt something different. I felt appreciated and ...I don’t know, seen.

Maybe it was because they were part of a different subset. Sure, the people there last night had been important and successful in their own right. But they weren’t corporate businessmen who considered a trip to St. Barts a decent weekend.

No, they were art lovers. Cultured and stylish and open-minded; they looked highly upon difference, rather than down at it.

Maybe I’d found my group.

I was overcome with the urge to share my night with everyone I knew. I had plans to go to Jersey and see Dad today, which was perfect. I knew he’d be so happy for me that I’d helped to organize a successful art show.

That I’d helped my friend get the recognition he deserved. And after I saw Dad, I thought I’d stop by Em’s and spill the beans to her.

We still hadn’t talked about her and Lucas, but now my good mood was helping me with that, too.

It felt like the right time to discuss everything.

As soon as I thought about her and Lucas, I realized that it’d probably be a good idea to let him know I was going to the hospital. I still hadn’t responded to his messages either, so I took out my phone and, taking a deep breath, texted him.

Angela
Hi Lucas

Lucas
oh now you respond

Angela
I’m sorry

Angela
I didn’t know what to say

Lucas
im sorry too

Lucas
didnt know how to tell you

Angela
It’s... okay

Angela
I love you both

Lucas
your really ok with it?

Angela
I don’t know

Lucas
well thats a good start anyway

Angela
I’m going to the hospital now

Angela
Do you wanna come?

Lucas
wish i could

Lucas
stuck at the restaurant

I sighed. It felt good to have sort of cleared the air with him, but I really wished he’d come see Dad with me. It was always hard going to see him alone, and Lucas had a way of cutting through the tension.

Even when we were surrounded by illness and bad news, he managed to get me to smile. But today, I’d have to go alone.

I showered, got dressed, and then began my commute.

By the time I got to the hospital it was the afternoon, and the place was bustling with activity. I saw more smiles in the lobby than I’d ever seen there before, and that made me smile.

Maybe I wouldn’t need Lucas’s moral support after all. I had a good feeling. About the day, about Dad, about myself. I didn’t think anything could bring me down.

When I got up to Dad’s room, I saw his door was closed.

I knocked and then opened it, seeing a big bundle of blankets on top of the hospital bed.

“Dad?” There was a silent moment where I wasn’t sure where to look. He was still in a wheelchair, so he wouldn’t be in the bathroom without a nurse nearby to help.

Maybe he was out of the room?

But then there was a grunt from under the pile of blankets, and a frail hand emerged. It lifted the blankets off a face—a face that belonged to Dad.

His eyes had sunken even further into his face. His skin was pale enough that I could see the blue of the veins on his arms. He’d always been half bald, but now he looked even balder.

I tried not to react, tried not to show him my surprise or worry, but I didn’t do a good job.

“Pea, c’mere,” he said, holding a shaky hand out to me. “It’s still me.”

I willed my tears to run along and bother someone else. *Don’t fall. Not today.*

I moved to Dad and bent down to give him a hug, kissing him on the cheek. “It’s so good to see you, Dad.”

“It’s always good to see you, little pea.”

“How’re you holding up?”

“It’s makin’ me slow, the pill popping. I don’t know what to tell ya.” He’d started the trial last weekend, and we all thought he’d get better after it began. But he looked ...worse.

“Do you feel better at all?”

“Not yet, but Doc says it’s normal. Gotta get worse before it gets better.” I gave his skinny fingers a squeeze.

“That’s the spirit,” I said. I felt bad that it had taken me so long to come back.

I should’ve come by earlier.

I should’ve been there.

There was a knock on the door. We both turned to find Dr. Kaller poking his head in the room. “Safe to come in?”

“Hi, Dr. Kaller,” I said, relieved to have someone else in the room. Especially someone that was trained to know what to say in situations like this.

“How are you, Angela?”

“I’m good, I’m okay. How are you?”

“Well, thanks. Hey, when you’re done visiting with the champ, can you swing by my office? It’s just down the hall.”

“Of course,” I said, trying to not think about what that meant. It felt like a call to the principal’s office, only it wouldn’t be me in trouble. It’d be Dad.

Dr. Kaller nodded at us and then headed back into the hallway, and I turned back to Dad. I tried to exude the feeling I had earlier today, thinking that it might be contagious. I wanted Dad to feel the endorphins.

“Dad, guess what.”

“What am I, a toddler?” he asked, but he smiled and gave my hand a squeeze back.

“Listen,” I started. “My friend, Dustin, he’s an artist. But he’d never had his work seen by anyone before. So I helped him plan an art show at this hip gallery downtown in the city. It was last night! Everyone loved it, Dad. Everyone loved it.”

Dad looked up at me, and I saw the tears pooling in his eyes. Like he couldn’t believe I’d become this person, this adult, who tried new things and succeeded.

He was looking at me the same way he had at my graduation ceremonies and my volleyball games, pride beaming off his face.

“Look at you,” he said, and he brought my hand to his lips. He kissed the top of it, and I couldn’t remember a time he’d been as openly soft.

“You’re a woman. You’re your own woman.” I bent down again, and this time I held him close.

***

Dr. Kaller looked up when I knocked on his half-open office door. “Angela, come in.”

I walked in and took a seat, and he clasped his hands together in his lap.

“The trial’s taking its toll on your dad. The medications are tough, but for some reason, he’s responding more seriously to the complications than the others are.”

“What ...what does that mean?”

“His symptoms are worse. And they’re affecting his quality of life quite intensely. It’s of course something to think about.”

My mind was spinning. His quality of life?

“So you’re saying ...”

“I’m not saying anything. Not definitively. It’s something you and your brothers should take into consideration, that’s all. If your dad keeps worsening, it might not be worthwhile to continue down this road.”

“But there’s no other road,” I said, my voice meek. “You think we should just ‘make him comfortable’?”

I repeated the words he'd said to me the last time we spoke. "He's a fighter," I said. And even though my volume was low, my tone was steady.

Dr. Kaller looked at me like I was teetering on the edge of a bridge that was about to collapse.

Angela
Call me

Angela
911

Angela
Lucas

Angela
Answer your phone!

Angela
I need you to ANSWER

Angela
Lucas!!!

Lucas
whoa

Lucas
im right here

Lucas
why are you freaking out i thought you said you were cool with it

Angela
JUST ANSWER YOUR PHONE

Lucas
i told you im at restaurant

Lucas
youre freaking out about nothing

Lucas
you said you love us both

Lucas
let us be happy

Angela
What are you even talking about?!!?

Lucas
youre going crazy for no reason

Lucas
i cant do this right now

Lucas
the restaurants busy

Angela
Omg

Angela
Lucas

Angela
It’s about dad

Angela
NOT your love life!!!

Lucas
oh

Lucas
shit

Lucas
???

Angela
He’s getting worse

Angela
Dr. said we have to think about next options

Lucas
what does that mean

Lucas
next options???

Angela
Just call me

Angela
When you’re not too busy

It was a long train ride back. All of the positive energy I’d had when I woke up this morning had evaporated. The endorphins were long gone.

Now it was just me and my thoughts. My fuming thoughts.

I couldn’t believe Lucas. He thought I was freaking about him and Em, even though I’d told him this morning I’d get over it! He called me crazy, said I was overreacting.

But he was the one who went behind my back, who started something with my best friend without even asking me first.

What were the rules for something like that? I didn’t know. I didn’t even know who would know. But I knew that I should’ve been consulted at some point. And I hadn’t been.

There goes me wanting to have the air all cleared, I thought. I was in no mood to talk about anything with Lucas or Em at all now, not about their lust for each other, not about the art show. Somehow, the betrayal felt fresh.

And then my thoughts turned to Dad. How weak he looked in that hospital bed, how desperate I was to help him.

It wasn’t fair that he was the one going through this. He didn’t deserve it.

I thought about Dr. Kaller and what he’d said. That we had two options: giving up or making him endure more pain for an uncertain reason.

I wasn’t sure which was worse.

I willed myself to stop thinking about it. It wouldn’t do me or Dad any good to have a panic attack on the train, that much I knew.

It felt like my insides were coiled so tightly they might implode, but even trying to shift my thoughts back to last night, to the art show, wasn’t helping. So I turned my head toward the window and tried to focus on the trees that passed by so quickly I could barely see them at all.

When I got back to the penthouse, I walked through the elevator and into the hall and then stopped in my tracks.

There was Xavier, his back to me, leaning over the kitchen counter.

I didn’t feel the usual hitch of breath, the fear that came with spotting him nearby. Maybe it was because I was so emotionally exhausted from the day or maybe it was because he was less threatening when his back was to me. I didn’t know.

He was shirtless, and his black jeans hung low on his hips. And then I was admiring his back muscles before I could stop myself, the way his wide shoulders contrasted with his tapered waist and hips.

He had some sort of scar trailing from his left hip up to his right shoulder that I’d never seen before.

Why would you have seen that? I chided myself.

Seeing him like that, bare and open, he looked almost vulnerable. I didn’t know how he hadn’t heard me come in, what with the ding of the elevator and all, but he hadn’t moved so much as a muscle in the minute I stood there.

I wondered what had gotten into me. Was I so desperate for those endorphins that I’d taken to ogling the man who’d been so consistently awful to me?

I shook my head and stepped into the hallway, trying to make my footsteps louder so he’d realize he wasn’t alone.

But as I walked closer and closer, he remained in the same position. I was almost at the kitchen when I saw the earbuds in his ears. *Ah.* He was listening to music.

Before he could spot me, I scurried right past him and into my bedroom.

The door closed quietly behind me, and I took a deep breath, then let it out. Unfortunately, the confusion from the day didn’t leave with it.