

Up in the Clouds

ANGELA

I was having one of those music moments. You know, the ones where you feel a certain way and you try to listen to music that'll make you feel something else. It was Tuesday morning, and I had to meet Xavier at the airport in an hour.

I was feeling a mix of emotions: scared, upset, frustrated.

Scared, because the idea of being in a foreign city alone with Xavier was one I'd never had to confront before.

Upset, because since Brad had come over on Sunday, Xavier hadn't so much as looked at me, let alone apologized. It was like he was actively avoiding me.

Even though he was the one that had screamed at me, that had scared me, it was like seeing me was too difficult for him.

And frustrated because I was still annoyed that my life had to go on hold whenever Brad or Xavier needed me and that Xavier never acknowledged it was hard for me, too.

But underneath all of those emotions, I couldn't help but remind myself that I was going to Paris. I was going to the one city that every little girl dreamed of visiting.

And I would get to go.

The music was actually kind of helping my excitement grow. I was folding blouses into a suitcase Lucille had brought over for me and even felt myself give a little shimmy at the chorus.

I'd told Dad about my trip on the phone last night, but I hadn't spoken to anyone else. Dad sounded raspy and weak, just like he had when I'd gone to visit him last week.

But he was still Dad, still cracking jokes about me eating frog legs.

"If I don't hear you ribbit when you get back, I'll be disappointed," he'd said.

I wanted to call Lucas and tell him, but things were still weird.

We had talked briefly about Dad, promising to schedule a time with Danny and Dr. Kaller to go over all the options, but Dr. Kaller had recommended keeping Dad on the trial until the end of the month. So we hadn't needed to see each other.

I decided I would call him the second I got back to New York. He was my best friend, my brother, and I missed him. As long as he was happy, I was happy.

Em, on the other hand, had been calling me a lot. We'd spoken a few times this week, but each conversation had been short. I didn't ask any pressing questions, and she didn't provide any detailed answers.

So we just pretended everything was normal and nothing had happened. But for some reason, even though we spoke Sunday night, I hadn't told her about Paris.

I realized I wanted someone besides my dad to be excited for me, to share my little freak-out. So I pulled my phone out and sent her a text.

Angela
I have news

Angela
Big news

Em
?????

Em
Spill

Angela
It starts with a 'P'...

Em
PREGNANT!?!?

Angela
OMG

Angela
NO

Angela
!!!!!!!

Em
Then I need a bigger hint

Angela
A... R... I... S...

Em
Paris?

Em
Oh my GOD

Em
PARIS!?!?!?

Angela
Yes!

Angela
I'm leaving in an hr

Em
Angie

Em
We used to dream about Paris

Angela
I know!

Angela
I'm excited

Em
How are things with X?

Angela
They're ... ok

Angela
Up and down

Em
At least you'll have Paris

I got to the airport and found Marco waiting for me by the doors of Terminal 3.

"Ready?" he asked, taking my rolling suitcase from me. I nodded, and we started walking to an elevator by the side wall.

The elevator was manned by a guard in a black suit, wearing sunglasses even though we were inside. The man just nodded at Marco and pushed the down button.

Marco and I rode the elevator down, and then the doors opened.

We walked through the hallway until we reached a pair of doors, and Marco held one open for me as we walked outside. We were on a runway, that much was clear.

I saw a Range Rover parked and, a few yards in front of it, a jet. I couldn't believe it. Nobody had told me we were taking a jet. Marco rolled ahead of me, and I raced to keep up.

"Is that ...is that just for us?"

He looked back at me and smiled. Xavier was already walking up the stairs to the jet by the time we reached it. I looked at Marco, and he motioned for me to follow him up. So I started climbing.

I was speechless. The inside of the jet was immaculate, like nothing I'd ever seen before. The last time I was on an airplane I had been seven years old.

My mom and dad had taken me, Lucas, and Danny to Florida to see our grandparents. Mom's parents lived there, and we'd spent a weekend with them.

I remember the flight being terrifying, with lots of turbulence. I hadn't been back on a plane since. But this, this didn't look like a plane. This looked like a futuristic palace, with caramel-colored leather seats and throw blankets on top.

Even the flight attendants looked like celebrities. I looked around and spotted Brad in a chair, an eye mask over his face.

"I'm not sleeping," he said, like he sensed me looking. He lifted a corner of the eye-mask off. "Hi, darling."

"Hi!" I said.

"Xavier went to the bedroom to get some sleep. You can join him if you'd like." I shuddered.

The idea of sharing a bed with Xavier in the middle of the sky ... I couldn't even think about it.

"That's okay, I'll stay out here with you."

"Pick any seat you'd like." I sat down next to a window and did my seatbelt up tight. I couldn't believe that, in a few hours, I'd be in Paris.

XAVIER

We landed in Paris and got in the Mercedes G-Wagon that was waiting on the tarmac, then sped straight for the hotel. It was the middle of the night here, and I was ready to hit the town.

I didn't care that I was supposed to show face tomorrow morning. Paris didn't sleep, so neither did I. When we pulled up, I strode into the hotel without waiting for Angela.

Dad took a separate car to the hotel, so I didn't have to worry about his questions. Which was good because I couldn't stand another second of being in the same space as her.

After that night, that dream, I'd had two more dreams like it. It was like she wouldn't leave my subconscious alone. And I couldn't get away from her when I was awake, either.

I wanted her out of my head and out of my life. I knew I didn't like the girl. I knew she was a manipulative little gold digger who only cared about one thing—using what the Knights had to her advantage.

So I didn't know why some part of me was so viscerally captivated by her.

I shook those thoughts loose and took the room key from the front desk attendant. "Thanks," I said, and I turned and headed for the elevator. I walked into the suite and was putting my stuff into the master bedroom when the door opened.

It was Angela, looking as doe-eyed as ever.

"Oh. We're in the same room."

"Of course we are," I snapped. "Dad made the arrangements."

"Right," she said. "Sorry."

"This one's mine," I said, and then I slammed the door closed so I wouldn't have to see her anymore. I heard her poking her head into the other rooms, trying to find another bedroom.

I took off the clothes I'd worn on the flight and put on a different outfit then walked back into the main area of the suite.

"I'm going out. The gala's tomorrow at seven thirty."

Her door opened, and she peeked out. "Okay," she said softly.

We made eye contact for a moment, and then I pulled the front door open and walked down the hall.

ANGELA

I was in my bedroom in the hotel suite, looking out the window. It was the next morning, and I felt refreshed when I woke up. I hadn't even heard Xavier come home from partying. And now, I was looking at the city that lay before me.

Sure, it was sad that I was in the city of romance all by myself. But I didn't want to dwell on that.

Brad
I'm at your door.

Brad
Please open.

I tucked my wavy hair behind my ears and ran out of my bedroom to the front door of the suite. I opened it and there was Brad, looking very European in a blue blazer.

He kissed both of my cheeks then handed me an envelope.

"Darling, welcome to Paris!" he said, pronouncing Paris the French way.

"It's amazing," I gushed.

"The first time always is," He winked. "Take this. Go to the address on the card." I opened the envelope and found a black business card, with an address scribbled on the back.

"What is it?"

"A whole new world," he said, squeezing my arm. "Find yourself a gown. For tonight," he added then turned on his heel.

I watched him disappear down the hallway and couldn't help but feel excited. Brad always made me feel like a princess, even when his son made me feel like a toad.

I took one more look at Xavier's bedroom, wondering if he was inside.

And then I walked out into the hall, purse on my shoulder and business card in my hand. I was going to find a gown.

When I got to the address, I saw it was a specialty gown store. The most couture, intricate gowns I'd ever seen graced every hanger.

When I introduced myself to the chic lady behind the counter, the one with salt-and-pepper hair and bright red lipstick, she looked me up and down. Then she let a slow smile roll across her face.

"Bon," she said. She started pulling gowns down and putting them into the dressing room, which was more like a suite.

She brought me a flute of champagne to sip while she worked, and when she had the number of gowns she was happy with, she took the flute from my hands.

"You. Go," she said, pointing to the dressing room. She handed me the first gown: a pale yellow strapless masterpiece that was elegant and original at the same time.

She helped me put it on, and when we were looking at it in the mirror, she scrunched her nose and gave her head one shake. "Next."

And that was the process. She'd help me into a dress, scrunch her nose, shake her head, and back to the drawing board we went. Until I tried the black one. It was black velvet, which sounded weird, but seeing it ...wow.

It was spectacular. I hugged my body, but it was still comfortable. And when the lady saw it, her hand went to her heart and she gasped. I knew it was the one.

She packaged it up and carried it to the front. "I have Monsieur Knight's card on ze file," she said and gave me a pair of black stiletos in a separate bag. "You wear with these."

I nodded. "Okay. Thank you."

The lady was just printing the receipt when another, younger salesperson, with a sharp blonde bob and bright green eyes, came up to the register.

She said something to the lady in French, which I didn't understand. But then I heard the lady respond, with the word "Knight" in the sentence.

The girl with the bob shot her eyes back to me, looking me up and down in a way that made me feel violated. Then she laughed and turned back to the lady who'd helped me.

"Non." She laughed again, and the lady swatted her arm, and then the girl left. I didn't know what had just happened, but the endorphin rush had left my body as quickly as it had come.

I took the garment bag and the shoe bag from the lady.

"Thank you," I said, my eyes on the floor as I scurried out of the store. They were probably talking about how the gown shouldn't be worn by a person like me.

Like it wouldn't fool anybody ...at the gala, in Paris, anywhere. Everyone could see I didn't belong.