

## Late to the Laughter

Angela  
Are we going together?

Angela  
To the gala?

Angela  
Xavier

Angela  
Hello?

### ANGELA

The hotel suite was empty when I got back, and Xavier wasn't answering my texts. I got ready in my bedroom, alone, thinking that by the time I was done, Xavier would be back from wherever he was.

I knew he had friends in Paris, that he had business to do, but I hadn't expected him to completely abandon me the second we got here.

*Come on*, Angela, I chided myself. Of course Xavier Knight abandoned you.

The dress was on now, and I stared at myself in the mirror. Even after the hot shower I'd taken, I still didn't feel like the fabric deserved to be draped over me.

I closed my eyes and tried to re-feel what I'd felt the first time I saw myself wearing the gown in the mirror. In the store, in the massive dressing room, with the chic saleslady gasping in approval.

I'd felt worthy then.

I pulled my hair in front of my shoulders, taking in the way my naturally soft waves fell to just below the neckline of the dress. I applied a few swipes of mascara and put some lip balm on my lips to add a little moisture.

They'd been dry since the flight. Then I checked the clock.

I was running out of time to wait for Xavier to come back to the suite. The gala was just downstairs, in the ballroom, but I had to make up my mind.

I could either wait for him to come back, and possibly get chastised by Brad for being late, or I could go downstairs on time and get chastised by Xavier for not waiting for him.

Even I knew that husbands and wives, including ones that weren't exactly in love, were supposed to enter galas together.

I weighed my options. I'd been chastised by Xavier almost every day since we'd gotten married. While it wasn't the most pleasant thing to endure, often ending with me in tears, I didn't think it would be quite as painful as Brad's disappointment.

Brad had always been kind to me, like he believed in me, and I didn't want that to disappear. I wanted him to continue having pride in me as his daughter-in-law.

So I grabbed my purse, straightened my wedding ring, and walked out of the hotel suite at 7:26 p.m. I took the elevator down to the third floor, where both ballrooms were.

As soon as the doors opened, I saw a man wearing a suit and an earpiece motioning to me to walk through the set of doors to my right. I turned my head, managing to make out three more suit-clad men with earpieces, one in front of each of the elevators.

This is going to be quite the spectacle, I thought.

"Mademoiselle?" the man assigned to my elevator said impatiently. His hand kept pointing to the doors behind him.

"Sorry," I said, walking as fast as I could in the four-inch heels the saleslady had given me. My feet were already feeling pinched, but I made it to the doors in one piece. And then I pushed them open.

Inside it looked like a royal wedding. The ballroom was massive. I tried to make out where it ended, but it felt like the horizon. Every time I thought I understood where I was in relation to it, the end seemed to get farther away.

Everywhere I looked was gold—gold chandeliers, gold centerpieces, gold jewelry.

There was a gold carpet to my immediate left and a cluster of beautiful people in unimaginably beautiful garments waiting their turn to walk down it.

In front of the carpet, there was a row of photographers, their cameras flashing with the haste of bulls charging toward a matador.

I was being waved into the cluster by another earpieced man. I looked around frantically. The idea of being photographed by myself, with all the eyes and lenses of the photographers on me, was terrifying.

And then I saw him.

Straight ahead, talking to a gaggle of impossibly skinny women. He was using his hands to make large gestures, looking as animated as ever. I could see the smile on his face from here. I couldn't believe it.

He had come to the gala without me.

The man in the earpiece before me turned around to see what I was staring at, and he must've had no problem realizing it was Xavier.

"Do you want me to fetch your husband so you can take le picture together, Madame Knight?" he asked, French accent thick.

"Uh...that'd be ...great," I said, feeling my cheeks turn red under the gaze of those around me. So the man sprinted off to bring Xavier over to me, and I awaited the fiery words I knew he'd say when he arrived.

*Hold it together*, I instructed myself. It was only one night. And it was for Brad.

I saw the man had reached Xavier and was pointing at me. I averted my eyes as they started walking toward me and unintentionally locked eyes with a middle-aged man, short and stocky, wearing a black turtleneck under his double-breasted suit.

I felt the hairs on my arms stand up for a reason I couldn't quite put my finger on. Maybe it was the intensity with which he looked back at me.

I turned back to the front of the room, just in time to see Xavier take the last few steps over to me.

"Hi, darling," he said, loud enough for those around me to hear. He kissed both of my cheeks. "You look gorgeous."

"Thanks," I said. Even though part of me knew it was just for show, the words coming out of his mouth helped bring my confidence up a notch. It was almost our turn to walk the carpet, and the lady in charge of organizing everyone greeted Xavier by name.

"Welcome back, monsieur," she said, ignoring me completely. They exchanged a few words, and then she directed him to the center of the carpet. He looked back at me, holding his hand out expectantly.

I'd never been so glad to take my husband's hand. He looked right at the cameras and gave his go-to face: a half smirk with a set jaw, eyes slightly squinted.

After a second of watching what he was doing, I tried to smile the best I could. I didn't want to overdo it, but I also didn't want to look like I wasn't enjoying myself. So I smiled genuinely, with my mouth closed.

After what felt like a lifetime, Xavier pulled me off the carpet. Before I could say anything, an older couple stopped us, kissing both of us.

"Xavier! She's lovely!" the lady exclaimed, sizing me up.

"Thank you," I said, eyes on the floor. I felt like I was going to overdose on attention.

"You did well, son," the man said, hitting Xavier on the shoulder.

"I try, Grant. You know that." The couple laughed.

"We thought you'd be at our table?" the woman asked.

"I thought so too, but father had some last-minute reorganization. Wanted all the kids at the kids' table, it seems."

"In that case, you'd better save me a dance, Xavier," the woman said as she pulled her husband away.

"I'll save you three," he responded, winking. He was in his element.

"Let's go to the table," he said to me, taking off in the direction of the round tables that covered most of the space.

As we approached the one where many of the girls I'd seen him speaking to earlier were seated, I felt the palms of my hands go sweaty. These girls looked like models, like the type of women who chain-smoked and went to Pilates and dated celebrities.

The type of women who wouldn't be out of place standing beside Xavier on a gold carpet.

They all turned when we got to the table, and Xavier actually took the time to introduce me.

"Ladies," he started, "this is Angela. My wife."

The women looked from Xavier to me. I held my breath—their eyes covered every inch of me as I waited—and then finally, the one seated closest to where we were standing started to clap.

Slowly. And then the other women, they all joined in.

Until all four of them, with their floor-length gowns and their tousled up-dos, were applauding. I was confused.

Were they approving of me? Or making fun of me?

Was this some weird customary greeting in France?

But then the ringleader spoke. "She's belle," she scoffed, even though I thought I knew that belle was a good thing. Like beautiful. Xavier smirked, like he was in on the joke, and pulled a chair out to sit.

I looked at him for some sort of explanation, but when he felt my gaze, he just turned to me and said, "Come on, sit." So I pulled out the seat next to him and sat.

The women had all started talking amongst themselves again. The one closest to Xavier pulled him into the conversation, and I again was left on the outside. A server came up behind me and said something in French that I didn't understand.

I didn't want to be the subject of any more attention, so I just nodded at him. He repeated the same words again, and I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"She'll have the Grigio," the woman beside Xavier called to the server.

I was humiliated, kicking myself for not having just asked for him to speak English. Everyone speaks English. The server nodded and walked over to the ice bucket that held two bottles, bringing one over and pouring me a glass.

I took a gulp, my nerves fluttering.

"Easy, lady," the ringleader said loudly from across the table. "This one gets feisty when his woman gets drunk." She winked, looking at Xavier.

I felt my cheeks burn for what felt like the millionth time. Was she insinuating she and Xavier had ...?

"Don't be bad, Darla," Xavier responded, kicking one leg over the other and leaning back in his chair.

"Why? That's how you like me, no?" She winked again. The women all laughed. I couldn't believe her, or them. I was sitting right here. He was my husband.

"Excuse me," I said quietly, pushing my chair back and leaving the table. I needed some space to breathe.

There was a bar by the wall, and it was mostly empty. I walked over and ordered a glass of sparkling water. The bartender brought it almost immediately, but before I could thank him, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"That's not a strong enough drink for such a beautiful lady," the man from earlier, the one in the turtleneck, said with a thick French accent.

I looked at his hand, still resting on top of my bare shoulder.

"That's okay," I replied. I grabbed my drink to walk away, but his hand tightened its grasp.

"I can't convince you to have, eh, one drink with me?"

"Maybe later," I said, shrugging out of his grip. I didn't want to be rude, but there was something about him that made my senses stand on guard. I took my glass and walked around the circumference of the ballroom, taking in all the details that had been arranged throughout.

By the time I got back to the table, there were baskets of bread and butter. I took my seat, the women and Xavier still deep in conversation.

Let them talk. I'd have a piece of bread. I reached for the basket.

As I dropped a fresh bun onto my plate and spread some butter on it, I was so preoccupied with how good it smelled that I didn't realize the conversation around me had stopped.

I brought a big piece of the bread to my mouth and bit down—it was delicious—but then I heard the woman closest to Xavier say, "She eats bread?"

I swallowed, looking at the women who looked back at me with disgust. None of them were eating. Not even Xavier was.

"Your wife," the ringleader started, looking right at my husband, "she'll be fat before you know it."

"Fat is better than gauche," another chimed in.

"At least when you're gauche, you're not stealing another's money."

My ears started ringing. Blood rushed to my face. They were talking about me.

And so openly, with no shame at all. The insults kept coming, each worse than the last, and Xavier just sat there, a smirk on his face.

I always thought my husband would be a man who defended me, who protected me, and who made sure I was kept out of harm's way.

But instead, my husband just took another sip of his chilled wine and laughed along with the women who didn't eat bread.