

## NO MORE GAMES

Angel was excited over the proposal Olivia had shared with her, and while she did not want to get carried away, she did share the news with her mother.

“So how long do you think it will be before you get started on that new position?” Eden was sitting at the dinner table with Angel and TJ.

“Well, they’re still in the construction stages at this point. But I will start in a couple of weeks working with her again.”

“You’re going back to that shop?” Eden did not want to see her daughter hurt again over the mess that she and her husband had allowed to become their lives.

“Well not initially, Mom. I will be working as her assistant as she hires a salon director for BeJeweled and on getting everything together for the new shop. She’ll need someone to help set up and interview the new team before the opening day, set up catering and all the other minute details for the grand opening; someone to purchase and order inventory and so much more. After the shop’s opening I will be the salon director once she trains me on everything that comes with it. Mom, I’m so excited! Ms. O has all these plans about what she wants to do with her salons and if it all works out, I could actually be running one of them. It’ll almost be like having my own shop, Mom.”

“Mommy, I want more,” TJ requested, pointing a finger at the bowl of macaroni sitting in the middle of the table. Angel scooped another serving spoonful of macaroni onto TJ’s plate.

“Sounds wonderful, Angel. I just don’t want you to lose sight of yourself in all of this. It might be like having your own shop, but at the end of the day you still have to answer to someone else.”

“I know that, Mom, it’s just that this is a wonderful opportunity. I will still be styling hair, too.”

“Baby, that’s all fine. Just stay focused on your dreams, save your money for what you want to do one day. And while you’re living here, you can be stashing your money away and clearing up your credit. Take advantage of this time to build a solid future for you and my grandson, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Angel knew her mother was only looking out for her best interest but all of her excitement deflated with her mother’s stated concerns.

“Now, Angel. Don’t sound so glum, baby. I’m happy for you, too, probably more than you are yourself. I just want you to stay grounded and don’t lose focus this time. You’ve gone through so much and learned a lot through your experience. I want you to take what you’ve learned and all the hurt and pain and grow from it. Apply all of that to your future decisions and you’ll be better off for it. I’m gon’ always be Mama and all I want to do is protect my baby. I just want the best for you and my grandbaby and whatever it takes to get that for you, I’m all in.”

“I know, Mama. Sometimes it’s just a struggle for me to stay positive and not get overwhelmed with negative thoughts. I mean, I start questioning where I’m gonna get the money from to start my own salon, and how will I be able to save when it’s me and my little man struggling alone. All that stuff.”

“Angel, baby do you think you the first woman in the world to have to go through this? Do you think you’re the first single mother that had to struggle, scrimp and save for a dream? Well, baby, let me tell you that you aren’t. When I moved down here you remember that apartment we were living in all crowded up together? Now it didn’t take me long because I already had a lot of money saved up for a rainy day. My nest egg brought us through, but those first couple of years was hard. All I did was save and you and the twins had to do without for a while. Then I was able to buy this house and gradually things got better. Do you think Ms. Olivia did all this on her own?”

“But Mama, Ms. O got her shop from her mom and Ms. O only has herself to take care of. It’s harder when you have kids.”

“Angel, her mama had to do the same thing and somehow she made it work. Now look at where that shop has grown to. Olivia took what her mother built and took it to another level. Now she might not have kids, but she’s sacrificed to grow the business the way she has. From what you always told me, she didn’t have a life outside that shop. She always seemed like a modest woman to me. So whatever she did or didn’t do, I believe it took a lot of hard work and sacrifice. And that’s the same thing you have to do, but you also got to believe in your vision. If God gave you a vision, you better believe He’s gonna equip you with every resource you need to accomplish that vision, girl. Now you hold your head up and start acting like you know whose you are. You are a child of the Most High God and when you’re His daughter, there is no weapon...I mean no weapon at all that is formed against you can prosper. You hear me. Angel Na’Shae Franklin?”

“Yes *Mooommm*, I hear you.” Angel laughed at her mother but she knew she meant serious business and she felt stronger because of it.

“Alright, I love you. Now go ahead and get ready for your date with Alex, he’ll be here in less than half an hour to pick you up.” Angel noticed the gleam in her mother’s eyes, her mother was rooting for some love story between her and Alex and Angel knew it wasn’t happening.

“It’s not a date, Mom; we’re two friends going out for drinks to have a relaxing evening.”

“Angel. Let me ask you something.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Angel said.

“What’s going on between you and that young man? You’re not getting yourself into something that you can’t handle, are you?” Eden’s wise eyes squinted as she looked at her daughter as if she could peer into her soul.

“No, ma’am. Alex and I are just friends. I tell you that all the time. I mean he’s cool and everything—  
”

“Do you have feelings for him?”

Angel looked up towards the ceiling searching for the right words to say to her mother.

“I thought so,” Eden confirmed, “I can tell he has feelings for you, just by the way he is towards you. Men don’t hang around women just to be their friends. He’s interested in something more. What that is I can’t say. He seems honorable and I really like him from the little I’ve got to know him, but I just want you to be careful. You’re still married, and you need to get your head together when the divorce is finalized. I mean have a good time, but don’t get too serious too quick. Make sure this is right for Angel.”

“Yes, ma’am. But Mom, aren’t you the one who was telling me that I would fall in love again?”

“I did. But at the same time, as women we are emotional beings. You’re already going through a lot and I need you to be careful. I don’t want you to get what you’re feeling confused with love. Long before we think about falling in love, we need to be aware of who we are as women, what we need, what we expect, and what we’re capable of giving back. I’m not sure you’re ready for that. I did talk to you about love when we spoke about me and Richard, but I didn’t insert that in this conversation. It sounds like you’re moving ahead of me,” Eden said. She lifted her eyebrows at her daughter, noting she had used the word love.

“Mom, I’m not in love with him or anything. And maybe I shouldn’t have used that term.” Angel knew what her mom was thinking, she saw it the moment her mother caught her use of the word love. “Honestly, I’m just confused about my feelings for Alex. I like him, but no I’m not trying to jump into anything yet. I want to move with caution, too, to make sure that what I’m feeling is real and to see what his honest intentions are.”

“Okay. That sounds like the smart daughter I raised.”

Angel laughed, “Yeah, something like that. I assure you, Alex and me are just friends, Mom, nothing more.”

“Mhmm,” Eden murmured and sat with her chin in her hand watching her daughter. Angel laughed and ran out the room to get ready.

Angel and Alex sat at the table at Club Blue, she sipping on an Amaretto Sour and he was nursing a Black Russian. The music was jumping and they had danced a few rounds during the last hour they were here.

“Come on, let’s hit the floor one last time, then we’re outta here,” Alex stood, reaching out his hand for her to take.

Angel followed him onto the dance floor holding his hand. Bodies pressed tightly together in the hot, crowded club jumped to the sound of the music. It seemed as if everywhere they turned someone was popping their booty to the music, while bodies were gyrating, and arms swaying. Air currents streamed from the vents positioned all around the club, but it was no match for the heat generated by all the pulsing bodies on this hot summer night.

Angel had dressed rather sexy tonight despite the fact that she was chilling with her now best friend. She needed to feel beautiful and sexy, not to grab Alex’s attention, but as women sometimes do she wanted to see that men still desired her, and she knew her outfit would grab attention when they walked through the club doors. She wore a gold lame bustier that showcased a slight flare at the waistline. Black tight jeans emphasized her small waist and clung to the curves of her plump behind. Her four inch black stilettos easily boosted her height to 5’5” bringing her closer to Alex’s height tonight. She wore black and gold accessories to match her gold purse. In recent weeks Angel had allowed all the color to grow out of her hair and she wore a long black weave parted in the middle, flowing down to the middle of her back.

Alex held on loosely to her waist with one hand as she wriggled her hips and shook her body from side to side. Her arms locked tightly around his neck and she gave him a flirtatious smile and winked her eye at him. Alex’s face did not crack a smile; she didn’t know what was on his mind, but she gathered he was enjoying himself despite the serious look he wore.

Angel turned around and with her back to him she continued to wiggle her hips back and forth. With a low growl emitting from deep within his throat, Alex pulled her closer to him almost crushing her in his arms. There was something possessive about his hold on her as his body swayed back and forth to the pulsating rhythm of T.I.'s "Ball." When he finally loosened his grip, Angel dropped down low and worked her way back up again, all the while making her butt jump to the rhythm of the beat, hair swinging back and forth. When she reached her full standing height Alex was standing behind her swaying to the beat.

"You've got moves for a white boy, if I didn't know any better I would've thought you were a brother," she teased.

"Alright, girl, I got your white boy. Maybe it's the Armenian blood running through my veins from my mom and dad," he winked at her.

When the song came to an end they were prepared to leave, but the DJ played Usher's "Love in This Club" remix and Alex pulled her back against him. She held onto his neck with one hand while the other hung at her right side. She could feel his large hands tightening around her small waist and those green eyes of his were making love to her right there on the dance floor.

When he licked his lips, Angel thought she was going to lose control and go right over the edge. There was an intense passion ignited in her that she didn't know existed before this moment, one she was not ready to take on. She had one leg between his and his manhood pressed itself against her thigh, growing and demanding attention. Alex's head lowered as he pressed a soft kiss against the back of her neck. He wanted her and there was no denying it, she held her head up and looked in his eyes again and that was her mistake. *Uh-oh*, she thought, *I think we just crossed the friends line.*

Alex took her bottom lip in between his teeth and bit it. As soon as she flicked her tongue out to soothe the bitten spot, he used his tongue to claim hers in a passionate dance of loving. The kiss was demanding, sensual and powerful at once. All thoughts flew from her head as Angel struggled to maintain

her composure. Things were moving too quickly for her and she wanted to regain control of the situation before it went too far.

*What did that kiss mean? Damn you, Alex! I'm not ready for this,* Angel thought.

She felt the sexual tension in the atmosphere like the heat from asphalt on a hot summer day after the rain. That thought sobered her.

“Hey, Alex. I think we need to sit down for a moment. I think these drinks are starting to get to us,” Angel laughed and began fanning herself.

“Why don't we get out of here?” Alex suggested.

That was a wonderful idea to Angel. She had known it wasn't a good idea to come to a club with him. When he proposed it she had gone against her better judgment and went anyway. They were supposed to be coming for drinks only and they'd had fun dancing before this last song. Now there was sexual tension flaring between them, and she wasn't prepared for it.

She hadn't wanted to become involved with Alex yet, her divorce wasn't even final and she needed time to get her head right. She had filed for divorce the Monday after she had told Black she wanted to end the marriage. Her mother had gladly offered to pay the cost of the divorce.

Angel followed Alex straight to the door, ready to escape the tension. They hopped in his 2013 Black Range Rover, and he cranked up the air conditioner to cool off. But she knew that the heat wasn't coming from the hot summer night. It was coming from what their bodies had ignited in the night club. Expecting him to say something about what had happened, she was surprised when he turned his CD player on instead; T.I.'s “I'm Back” was blaring from the speakers. Alex was staring out the windshield, driving in silence.

Angel got the sense he was uncomfortable or disappointed, but she couldn't quite put her finger on which one it was. When he jumped on 400 driving back towards Decatur she couldn't take it anymore. "Alex, talk to me, please, what's wrong?"

He punched the CD player off and glanced quickly at her silhouette in the darkened vehicle, with a fleeting smile dancing across his face. "Ain't nothing wrong, Angel."

"You're lying to me Alex. We've been cool for too long now for you to just play me like that. I know you better than that."

Alex remained quiet and Angel folded her arms across her breasts and leaned back in her seat, muttering a simple "Fine, then."

Two could play his game, if he didn't want to talk she wouldn't force him to, but she didn't have to talk either.

After a few more minutes of quiet, he finally spoke up. "Can we go back to my place to talk?"

"Why do we need to go back to your place?"

"Because I want us to go somewhere and chill in a relaxed environment. Not to mention, I've been to your place several times, now I want to invite you into my world. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Can you guarantee me that's the only reason we're going there, just to talk?"

"Yes, scout's honor," he replied, with a slight smile. Angel could tell that he definitely had something on his mind, the way he kept rubbing his eyebrows, with his finger. Ten minutes after pulling off the highway Alex pulled into a condominium complex and entered a security code on the keypad.

When they entered his condo, she was amazed at the talent he had for decorating. His living room was a tapestry of rich colors in the hues of mahogany, gold, and orange. Bamboo paper covered the walls, and matched the beautiful wood flooring at her feet. An 80" flat screen TV filled one wall with vertical

speakers mounted on either side of the TV. Glass cases on either side of those speakers were filled with exotic vases, plates, and knickknacks. Two mahogany wood, chocolate covered chairs sat in front of a low mahogany sofa table. A large matching couch sat in front of the TV, covered with gold and orange pillows. Orange and tan curtains hung at the balcony doors. Two large potted plants sat on either side of the door. The smell of vanilla and cherry scented candles hung in the air.

Alex tossed his keys on a table near the front door and flopped down on the couch patting a seat next to him for her to take.

Angel carefully walked over to the couch and placed her purse on the table in front of her. Slowly sitting back on the sofa, she had a hard time relaxing being this close to him alone with no distractions. She had wanted to hear what he had to say but she wasn't expecting it to be this much of a challenge.

"Okay, where do I start?" Alex stood up and paced back and forth in front of his TV for a moment.

"Angel," he started as he sat back on the couch, "we've been under this guise of a friendship for the last several weeks. And after tonight we can't go on pretending and playing games with ourselves. It's no secret that I've been attracted to you, pretty much since I've known you. Tyrone always wanted to hook us up. He knew I was feeling you, but it was pretty much a physical attraction, although we had good conversation when we kicked it. I kept telling him to back off because I respected the fact that you were married. But these last few weeks we've been almost inseparable. I know you on a deeper level and that attraction has done nothing but grow. I've tried to convince myself that my feelings weren't real, or that they were just some crazy crush. I can't keep playing these games with my mind anymore. What I'm feeling for you is real. I'm laying it all on the table right now. I want us to be more than friends, Angel. I need to know where I stand in your life and how you feel about me now."

"Wow," Angel didn't know what else to say. His words had blown her out of the water. She had not known the attraction had gone on that long or that his feelings were that deep.

Alex began to turn red in the face under her continued silence.

“Alex, I don’t quite know what to say. Realistically, I’m feeling you like that, too. I’ve tried for the last few weeks to deny what I was feeling. I thought maybe it was because of what I was going through with Black. Then I thought maybe it was a result of you being the first man to pay attention to me other than my husband. Then I thought maybe it was just because you were there for me in my time of need. What I’ve come to realize is that it’s an amalgamation of all that, and more. I love how you make me laugh, how beautiful I feel with you. Alex, you make me feel my opinions and conversations matter. You always want to hear about my day. You haven’t forced yourself in my life or on my son, but he matters to you and I can tell. That means everything to me,” Angel shared.

“But?” Alex prodded. He had scooted closer on the couch to Angel and was holding her hand.

“But, I need to slow this up. I have to get my divorce finalized. I want to clear up my feelings and know for certain that what I’m feeling is real. I don’t want you to be a rebound lover. I don’t want to hurt you, Alex, and I don’t want to get hurt in the process. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, I got you.” He smiled that sexy grin of his that always got to her heart and soul.

“Another issue we need to discuss is TJ. Apparently he talked about you to his father, and as expected, Black had some very strong feelings about that. He feels it’s disrespectful for me to bring another man around his son, especially when he doesn’t know you.”

“So what’s he saying; he wants to meet me?”

“Umm, no.” Angel clenched her teeth and wrinkled up her eyebrows and nose making a sour face. “That’s not going to happen in this lifetime. At least not anytime soon. But it will be just you and me. He is adamant about that, and to be honest, he’s right. I brought you around as my friend and didn’t think about the impact it could or would have on my son. I was very adamant about Black not taking my son around another female, so much so that I stopped him from seeing TJ. So with that said, Alex I have to respect his wishes.”

Alex took a deep breath in; he respected what she was saying. “I understand, and I respect that. To be honest I was just playing with you, girl. I always worried about how that would play out, if we were out somewhere and were to run into him, knowing you won’t let him see his son. I can see that creating issues. As a man, I can definitely understand where he’s coming from and he’s right.”

“I’m glad you feel that way and to be honest I can now see just how wrong I was. On the subject of us I will say I am interested in exploring a relationship with you, after the divorce is finalized. But I want to take it real slow...maybe get to know each other on a deeper level. What we were feeling in the club was very sexual and sensual. I’m not ready for that route yet. And if we are going to start a relationship, I have to be clear on that and make sure that’s okay with you, too.”

“So sex is out?” he winked at her and wiggled his eyebrows with a teasing grin that she could not resist.

“Duhhh, men! You’re all just alike,” she giggled. “On the real, thank you for putting your cards on the table because I’ve been confused about where I stand with you, too. It’s forced me to deal with my own feelings about you. My divorce will be finalized in a couple of weeks, and maybe we can have like a celebration date or something.”

“That’s cool, my sweet Angel. We can take this at your pace. If you need patience, I’ll give you that. If you need strength, you can have all of mine. And if you need my love, you’ve already got that. Just say the word.” Alex leaned forward and gave Angel a soft kiss on the lips.

