

Tumble down the rabbit hole...

**IF YOU DARE.**

Alternate History | Young Adult | New Adult



**Tina Marie Engler**

# **ALICE X**

*The Awakening*

**Tina Marie Engler**

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## Prologue

My name is Alice X. I was born in the small, Southern community of Pocatalico, West Virginia. This is where my struggle began; this is where my struggle will end.

No matter the outcome of the revolution, my life mattered. How many people can say that and know in their heart that it's true? Rather than grieve for all I've lost, which is everybody who ever loved me, I will fight to the death to avenge their slaughter.

The black police state thought they would silence my kind by executing my family's bodies and assassinating their characters through media propaganda. It didn't work. Mamaw, Johnny, mom and dad, little Billy...they are remembered by the descendants of slaves not as victims, but as martyrs.

Now here I stand, on the frontlines of a war that could very well rip the United States into two nations. I'm prepared to die so that the next generation can live. I'm okay with dying; I've made peace with my unknown destiny.

As I glance around at my sisters and brothers in arms, young people of all colors united under the crimson banner of freedom and justice, I am reminded of my grandmother's final words to me: "We all bleed red, Alice."

Indeed, we do.

I just wish it hadn't come to this.

## Chapter One

### *Five Years Earlier*

"Alice Eve Jackson, do you have any idea how proud you've made us?" My mother's smile was contagious. "You're the first in our family to go to college." Her light blue eyes, so reminiscent of mine, misted up. "I love my baby girl so much. Just promise me you'll be careful."

I sighed on the inside. We had this conversation every time I left the house. I knew my parents had every reason to worry about an eighteen-year-old uncolored girl attending a primarily black university so I did my best to calm her fears. "I never get into trouble, mom. I'll be okay."

"Focus on your studies," my father warned with stern affection. "And don't get involved with no boys there. Not even the uncolored ones."

I didn't know whether I should feel exasperated or flattered. My daddy loved me so much that he actually believed boys would be interested in dating me. He saw me as beautiful in a society that told me every day, and in every conceivable way, that I was anything but. My skin was pale, my hair was blonde and straight, and my eyes were blue. I was the poster girl for whiteness—for ugliness. "Dad, look at me..."

"I'm looking. I see a pretty girl who looks just like her mother did at her age."

This time my sigh was audible. "Three-fourths of our men are in prison and the other fourth want black, trophy girlfriends. In case you haven't noticed, I'm so white I'm practically see-through."

My father snorted derisively. "They want to have sex with them to feel better about themselves. They don't want to marry them."

"Daddy, no offense, but it grosses me out just hearing you use the word *sex*."

My parents both chuckled. I knew I needed to steer the conversation away from all the uncolored guys trying to get black girlfriends because it was depressing me. Basically my father had confirmed what I already knew: white guys would marry white

girls—even ones as marshmallow as me—to appease their families, but it was the black girls they were most attracted to. That reality bothered me. A lot.

Many of my closest female friends did everything they could to look black, or to at least appear less white. They spent what little money they could dig up on tanning salons, brown contact lenses, and perming their hair into Euro-fros. I refuse to participate in those self-hating rituals. It's pointless anyway because my skin burns easily and my straight hair couldn't hold a perm to save itself. I look exactly as God made me—boring, plain, blue-eyed, pale, Alice Eve Jackson.

"Thanks for loading up the car for me." I hugged my parents. They had pinched every penny they could during my four years of high school to save up enough money to buy me transportation. My little clunker of a car wasn't much to look at, but it would get me from West Virginia to Florida and hopefully last through college. "I should go do one final check in my bedroom to make sure I have everything I need."

"Go on, baby," my mother said. "Daddy and I will wait here."

I nodded and walked up the steps of the doublewide. The closer I got to leaving home, the less I wanted to go. I wish I didn't have to leave Pocatalico at all, but a college degree is necessary these days for any uncolored person to obtain a decent job.

Pocatalico is a rural, close-knit community where everybody knows each other. That closeness has its drawbacks, gossip being my chief complaint, but for the most part that intimacy is filled with advantages I wouldn't trade for the world. We might have petty squabbles amongst ourselves in this predominantly white community, but when the chips are down we can always count on each other. I can't imagine ever leaving here so knowing that I have to has me feeling sadder than words can convey.

The problem with Pocatalico is the lack of educational and employment opportunities for uncoloreds—or mutes—as the blacks like to call us. Simply put, the town's economy is in the toilet, at least for people who look like me.

It wasn't always that way though. My great-grandparents moved to Pocatalico back when blue-collar jobs were plentiful thanks to a bustling industrial economy. As robots began replacing people on the factory lines, more and more uncolored people found

themselves jobless, broke, and desperate. The factories were quick to cut uncolored jobs, reserving what little employment was left for the blacks. Of course the people in charge always claimed it had nothing to do with skin color and everything to do with qualifications.

*Qualifications.* What a joke! Call me a dumb mute, but I fail to see how a black man or woman is more qualified to stand in an assembly line and push a button than I am.

“There’s no sense in whining about injustice, Alice,” my grandmother often told me. “You can stay mad all day long, but ain’t nothin’ gonna change unless you change it yourself.”

Great advice from a wise woman. The major problem being so much needs changed that it overwhelms me just trying to decide where and how to start. I’m not the only mute that feels that way; you’ll be hard-pressed to find one who doesn’t agree.

My mother gets furious when I refer to myself as a mute so I don’t use the word in her house. I tried explaining that the uncoloreds of my generation have taken that pejorative term back and refer to ourselves by it with pride, but she doesn’t want to hear that. To her generation and all the ones before it, “mute” is the ugliest, filthiest word to have ever entered the English lexicon. I get why she feels that way; I just wish she could understand why the uncoloreds—*uncs*—of my generation feel the way we do on the subject.

The first time I ever heard the word “mute” was, less than coincidentally, the first time I’d ever been around black people for more than an hour. It was in Miss Crenshaw’s third grade class. There were only two white students in a room of twenty-five children—me and Trisha Jones. Trish and I hadn’t wanted to attend Walker Elementary, which, like damn near every school in the country had been named for some dead, black, slave-holding president or another. Trish and I had wanted to stay at Pocatlico Elementary with all our friends, but the government decided to bus the kids on our street into black schools in order to give the illusion that we don’t live under Apartheid. But I’m digressing...

“Who can use the word ‘winner’ in a sentence?” Miss Crenshaw had asked.

I'd raised my hand, excited to show off how much I'd learned at Pocatalico Elementary.

"Yes, Alice," Miss Crenshaw said, smiling. "Please stand up and use 'winner' in a sentence."

I enthusiastically took to my feet, blonde ponytail bobbing. "When John won the race, everyone called him a winner." I smiled back at the pretty, black teacher, eager for her praise. I didn't get it.

The classroom burst into laughter. Confused, I looked over at Trish. The wideness of her green eyes and the shrug of her shoulders told me she was as mystified as I was.

"I'm afraid that's incorrect, Alice. Quiet!" Miss Crenshaw firmly warned the laughing black kids. "That'll do, DeAndre," she told the most popular boy in our class. "Now stand up and use 'winner' in a sentence."

DeAndre stood up as soon as he'd semi-curbed his laughing. "It's cold outside this winner." His mocking, brown gaze found my blue one. "Stupid mute."

I didn't know what a mute was, but I figured it was something else the black kids had learned that I hadn't. When the popular black girls started giggling, I also decided the word was probably one I didn't want to know the meaning of.

"DeAndre, Lakeisha, and Shanay! Enough!" Miss Crenshaw chastised. "You will not use words like that in this classroom again or you'll be sent to the principal's office!" She'd cleared her throat and looked at me. I could tell she felt embarrassed for me, but I still didn't understand what I'd said wrong. I slunk down into my chair and waited to find out the answer.

"Alice, you're thinking of 'winna' instead of 'winner.'" She turned to the chalkboard and wrote both words out.

Winner. Winter.

"If I'd used the first word," Miss Crenshaw explained, "your answer would have been correct, but I used the second word and the 't' in it is silent."



I nodded as the other kids tried to control their snickering. I felt shame, humiliation, and anger at myself for not knowing how to speak proper English. “Yes ma’am,” I’d whispered.

Later that evening, when school was finished and the long bus ride back to Pocatalico was over, I remember asking my mother what a mute was. Her face had drained of color—or what little color a marshmallow face has in it to be drained of. “Where did you hear that word, Alice?”

“At school, mommy.”

She’d looked at my father who’d shook his head and walked away. My daddy was big and strong, but he couldn’t handle talking about a mute? I was more curious than ever. “What’s a mute, mommy?”

“Don’t ever use that word again, Alice!” she fumed.

“Okay, but what is it?”

“Never mind all that. It’s a bad word that ignorant black people use. Now go wash up for supper.”

I did as my mother instructed, but my curiosity had grown in leaps and bounds. That evening after prayers, when my grandmother—Mamaw we call her—came to my bedroom to read me a story, I put the same question to her.

She sighed. “I’ll tell you, but you best never bring the word up in front of your mother again. Deal?”

I nodded.

“Up until about a hundred and fifty years ago our people were slaves. Do you know what a slave is, Alice?”

“I think so.”

Mamaw went on to explain slavery and other concepts I couldn’t fully grasp yet, but they were realities I’d eventually grow up to understand far too well. Our ancestors, she told me, had been captured and imprisoned by other whites then sold to black plantation owners.

“In order for people to do horrible things to other humans they have to make themselves believe their victims deserve it because they were born inferior to their oppressor. What the black plantation owners used as justification for enslaving whites was the idea that we needed to be owned like pets because we were a mutation of the black race and therefore not as human as them. Anyways, a ‘mute’ is a shorthand way of saying a mutant.”

I didn’t understand most of Mamaw’s lecture, but I was absorbing the gist of it. DeAndre believed I was stupid. And what’s worse, I had proved him right by answering Miss Crenshaw’s question incorrectly.

“They call us mutants—mutes—because the human race began in Africa. After tens of thousands of years, maybe even hundreds of thousands of years, humans spread out from Africa and lived in different parts of the globe. Their children’s children developed whatever traits they needed to survive in the climate they lived in.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but Mamaw was in what we *uncs* call “the zone” so I didn’t interrupt.

“When people develop a new trait, the scientific term for it is a mutation. We have light eyes instead of dark eyes because our people come from Mother Europe.” There was unmistakable pride in her voice. “The sun doesn’t shine as brightly all year ‘round in Europe so the Africans that migrated there eventually begat children with light eyes.” When my nose wrinkled she explained, “Brown eyes protect your vision from the sun’s rays. If you live somewhere with less sunlight, you don’t need brown eyes.”

My grandmother had carried on about that Mother Europe place and how she’d always wanted to visit it for another fifteen minutes or so. I had fallen asleep dreaming about this magical land where uncolored people weren’t different from everybody else and where we were just as smart as the black DeAndres of the world.

And still, all these years later, I find myself dreaming about Mother Europe. I want to take Mamaw, my parents, and my brothers there to visit the land of our ancestors before my grandmother passes on. She’s getting up there in years so the clock is ticking.

I have to get a college education in order to obtain a job to finance Mamaw's dream...and going to college means saying goodbye to Pocatalico, to home.

I blinked away the memories of Mamaw lectures gone by and headed to my bedroom. I knew I was procrastinating, but I dreaded telling my family goodbye. It wasn't forever, but at age eighteen, four years feels like an eternity.

Twenty minutes later, my car packed and ready for the long road trip to Tampa, I turned to my family with wistful eyes. They had all gathered around to see me off and I was determined not to cry.

"I love you, Sissy," my brother Johnny grumbled. He was only two years younger than me and had been the bane of my existence growing up, but he was mine – a part of me – and I loved him fiercely. "Don't forget us. You better come back at Christmas."

I stuck my tongue out at him. He grinned. "I'll be back here working your last nerve before you know it." My golden eyebrows arched. "And I better hear from mom that you've been dating some *uncs* for a change."

"We'll see."

"Uh huh."

I hugged Johnny before turning to my youngest brother, Billy. He was only seven years old so still quite emotional. The tears in his eyes tugged at my heartstrings.

"Goodbye, Sissy." Billy's lower lip trembled. "I love you."

I picked Billy up and hugged him like a bear. "I'll be back home soon."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"On Mamaw's life?"

"Hey now!" my grandmother cut in. "Don't be putting nothin' on *my* damn life."

That made all of us laugh, Billy included. Mamaw was as feisty as women come. She was the matriarch of the Jackson family so no one dared gainsay her, but she was also good for comic relief. And right now I needed that. I carefully set Billy on his feet.

"I love you, Mamaw," I murmured, hugging her. "I'm going to miss our talks so much."

"I love you too, baby." She squeezed me tightly. "And we'll still be talking plenty. Remember that cell phone I done bought you."

The cell phone she couldn't afford on her pittance of a social security check. I'd felt guilty accepting the gift, but was grateful for the added assurance of being able to call home if the car broke down or whatnot. "Thanks again for the cell, Mamaw." I kissed her cheek before I stopped hugging her. "I'll call you as soon as I get to Tampa."

After saying goodbye to my parents, I got behind the wheel of my car. I turned the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life. I backed out of the dirt driveway, took a final, nostalgic look at my family and our rickety mobile home, then waved and honked the horn as the people I loved most waved back and shouted their goodbyes.

I wasn't certain how I was supposed to be feeling, but I expect it's the same way every eighteen-year-old girl does when she leaves home to start living as an adult: half frightened out of my mind for the safety I left behind and half excited by the new possibilities awaiting me.

## Chapter Two

The drive to Tampa was taking longer than I had financially planned for, but I hadn't known what to expect. This was the first time I'd been out of Kanawha County let alone the state of West Virginia, so I wasn't prepared for the unpredictable weather and traffic delays I kept encountering. I'd hoped to explore as many new sights as I could en route to my final destination in Tampa – The University of South Florida – but there hadn't been time to see anything beyond the endless stretch of highway. I'd put enough money aside to pay for one night in a motel, but by the time I reached Savannah, Georgia on the second night, I knew I'd fall asleep at the wheel if I didn't stop somewhere to rest.

I blinked my eyes in rapid succession, fighting the drowsiness, as I followed the signs off the Interstate and into Savannah proper. "Stay awake, Alice," I muttered to myself. "Just a little longer."

I had no idea where I was going, but when rain started pouring down in buckets from the sky I conceded it had been wise to look for something that could double as shelter. Unfortunately it was almost two o'clock in the morning so nearly everything was closed except for a convenience store here and there. I anxiously gnawed at my lip as I pulled into Savannah's Gas-N-Go. I had enough money to fill up the tank a final time and not much else.

I needed to work up the nerve to ask the gas station attendant if I could park my vehicle here for a few hours while I rested my eyes. In the meantime, I got out of the car and approached the black man who sat on duty behind steel bars and thick, bulletproof glass. I held up the last forty dollars I had to my name. "Thirty-five on pump two, please."

He looked at me, but said nothing, as a small drop box whizzed out of the semi-transparent wall. I dropped the forty dollars inside and watched it disappear. I could see the man hold up the bills under some kind of light to make sure they weren't

counterfeit. Apparently satisfied they were the real deal, he put five dollars in the drop box and slid it back to me.

"Thank you."

He ignored me and returned to the crossword puzzle he'd been working on.

I blew out a breath as I walked back to my car and began pumping the gasoline. How in the world could I ask this man to let me park at Gas-N-Go when he was about as friendly as a rabid dog? But the rain was coming down so hard...

My tank full, I placed the gas pump back in its resting place. Realizing I had no choice, I walked back up to the black man behind the barred window. My heart felt like it was beating straight out of my chest. "Excuse me, sir."

"What is it?" the older man asked without looking up from his crossword puzzle.

"Would it be all right if..." My tongue had never been so tied. I was already soaked because the rain was pouring so hard, yet I could still feel myself perspiring. "I was hoping I could..."

"Just spit it out, girl." His impatient, brown gaze flew from the crossword puzzle to me. "Would what be all right?"

"Can I park my car here a few hours so I can—"

"No."

My heart fell. "I'm so tired. Please. I just need a little—"

"What you need is to get out of here. I let one of you sleep here and next thing I know twenty more of you show up."

*Twenty more of you.* He talked about uncoloreds as if we were cockroaches. A humorless smile reached my lips.

"I'm the only mute in the car. There aren't twenty more of us in the backseat waiting to jump your black, bigot ass." I shook my head. "Thanks for the hospitality. Have a good night." I turned to walk back to my car.

"Now hold up, girl! I ain't a racist. I got no problems with uncoloreds at all."

I rolled my eyes and kept walking. Yeah right. And he probably had a “best friend” who was uncolored too.

How many times had I heard statements like that? Blacks didn’t want to be viewed as racists, but their actions were rarely in line with their words. All talk and no walk.

I got into my car, sank inside, and slammed the door for good measure. If nothing else had come of tonight, at least my unsubtle rage had me feeling wide-awake again. Too bad it hadn’t warmed my insides, though. My clothes were drenched, I had nowhere to change, and the heater in my car didn’t work. My teeth chattering, I turned around and fumbled in the backseat for the blanket Mamaw had packed.

A knock at the driver’s side window startled me. I yelped and turned to face the intruder.

Oh good, I thought sarcastically, frowning. The black bigot had more to say. When he motioned for me to roll the window down, I hesitated. What if he had a gun and just shot me outright? Unfortunately, such an occurrence was far from unheard of. Worse, all he’d have to tell the police was I tried to rob him and the bigot would never spend a day in jail for killing me. My thoughts raced to my family and how they’d take the news of my death. The rage I’d felt was quickly replaced with fear.

Another knock at the window. I sighed. If this black man was going to kill me, I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing my fear. I rolled the window down.

“Your plates say West Virginia.”

I shrugged. What could I say to His Obviousness about that?

“So why are you in Georgia?”

“I’m traveling to Tampa for college.” A black girl would never have to explain herself like this. “It started to rain and my eyes got tired.”

His puckered lips reminded me of someone who’d been sucking on a lemon—sour and unsure why they’d ate the thing to begin with. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, girl.”

I blinked. Now I really didn't know what to say. My teeth resumed chattering as I tried to make heads or tails of this man.

"You should start your car before you freeze to death. Turn the heater on high to dry out."

"It doesssn't w-work."

He grumbled something under his breath. "Get inside the store and warm up." He threw a key at me. "Lock the door behind you. Grab yourself a cup of coffee and sit in my chair while I see if I can get your heater working."

My blue eyes widened.

"Go on, girl."

I slowly nodded. "Thank you, sir."

Three minutes later, I had done everything the old man instructed. The warmth of the convenience store coupled with the heat of the coffee acted as an instant sedative. I sat in his chair and watched him work on my car under the shelter of the pump's awning as I desperately fought the need to sleep.

Why was he helping me? What had changed? Was he displaying that black guilt thing I'd heard about? I just didn't know. After Walker Elementary, Trisha and I had been allowed to finish junior high and high school in Pocatlico. In other words, my contact with blacks had been extremely, and thankfully, limited. A couple of very poor black kids had gone to school in Pocatlico, but they had adopted the speech, clothing, and mannerisms of uncs so they seemed more white than black.

I sighed. Too bad the whole country wasn't like that. It would make leaving Pocatlico a lot less frightening. And a whole lot less confusing.

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"Wake up, girl."

Startled, I gasped as my eyes flew open. I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep. I blinked and looked out the barred up window. It was nearly dawn.



A wrinkled black hand held out my car keys from over my shoulder. "You get enough sleep?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Your car's got heat now."

I was so stunned it took me a long moment to respond. "I—uhh—well..." I hesitantly looked up into his face as I accepted my car keys from him. I shouldn't have said anything, but I had a bad habit of speaking before thinking better of it. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

He was quiet for a moment. I wasn't sure he'd answer.

"Your eyes."

I stilled. "My...my eyes?"

"For all your bluster, I could see the hurt in them." He frowned. Well, more than he normally did. "I didn't like knowing I was the cause of that."

My heart wrenched. For the first time in eighteen years, I was rendered speechless. My mouth worked up and down, but nothing came out.

"Go on, girl. Get on the road and drive to Tampa. If you leave now you'll miss the morning traffic."

A quick restroom break later and I was ready to go. "Thank you," I said. I wasn't used to smiling at black people so it probably looked a little unsure at first. "For everything."

When I got inside my clunker and the engine roared to life, I craned my neck and prepared to wave goodbye. Before I was able to, my attention was snagged by what I saw in the passenger's seat. I stared at it for what felt like forever, but was probably thirty seconds.

The old black man had left me a care package. Food, snacks, sodas...and the thirty-five dollars I'd given him last night for gas.

Looking up from the seat, my gaze found his. My eyes welled with unshed tears. He was as much a product of his environment as I was of mine, but he'd done something most people of any color rarely do:

He'd tried. And I'd never forget it.

## Chapter Three

Tampa was as hot as Savannah was cold. It took four trips to and from my car, but with the much-appreciated help of my new roommate Melissa I finally got everything unloaded. I called home on the cell Mamaw had given me to let my family know I'd arrived. I knew they'd be worried—I was a day late after all—but I gave them a quick run-down about the rain and the gas station.

"Are you crazy?" my mother squeaked. "You're lucky he didn't call the police on you!"

"Mom, I'm fine."

"You swear it?"

"I swear it." I decided to change the subject. I wanted to tell her about the nice things the old black man had done for me, but I knew that would only lead to more worrying and questions. "It's a good thing daddy talked me into strapping my bicycle onto the roof of the car because it'll help me get around campus."

Five minutes and tons of promises to stay away from black people as much as possible later, I hung up the phone and took a deep breath. As much as I wanted to explore campus, I was too bone-weary to think about anything beyond a shower and some sleep.

"Your people giving you the third degree too, huh?"

My head shot up. I smiled at Melissa. She was an unc like me, which I was grateful for. I was too physically and emotionally drained to share a room with someone who would incessantly worry I'd steal from her. "Fourth degree."

She patted her red Euro-fro into place. "I get why our families are worried, but I've only been here twelve hours longer than you and already my mom has called me three times."

"You gonna phone her to say goodnight?" I teased.

"Mute, please."

We broke into a case of the giggles. I instantly knew Melissa and I would end up being good friends.

"I need to shower," I groaned. "I don't feel like moving let alone standing, but I feel so grungy from the road trip."

"I've gotta shower too." Melissa frowned. "I just wish we weren't stuck in the co-ed dorm."

I snorted at that. "In a million years I never thought USF would stick me in the Argos Complex much less Beta Hall. I'm here on a PBTS scholarship. I thought only non-PBTS students were housed in here."

"I'm here on a *Paid By The State* scholarship too. I have no idea how we ended up in Argos Beta."

"Don't tell anybody you're PBTS."

Melissa's forehead crinkled. "Why not?"

"Because they'll assume you're only here on account of the Equality in Education law recently passed."

She threw me a commiserating glance. "Like none of the blacks at USF have scholarships *Paid By The State*."

I shrugged. "You know how they think. If a black person qualifies for PBTS society applauds them for maintaining good enough grades to get into college despite their humble beginnings. If an unc qualifies for PBTS it's just an all-around handout to a lazy, underqualified mute."

"That pisses me off. My grades in high school were as good or better than any black here."

"Same. But you know how it goes."

Ten minutes later we were standing side by side in the female communal shower. Melissa kept her hair concealed in a shower cap so her Euro-fro didn't get wet and come undone. I could feel one of the many black girls in the large stall staring at me in a

hostile way. I mentally prepared myself to fight if she tried anything. I was a good fighter, always had been, but I doubted it'd come to that. Usually my whiteness alone was enough to cower black females. They just assumed white girls were scrappers. In my case, they happened to be correct. What can I say? I grew up with brothers and near a couple of trailer park bullies.

"She's just jealous," Melissa whispered. "Don't pay her any attention."

"J-jealous?" I nearly laughed. "Yeah right."

"Don't you watch much TV or go to the movies?"

"I never had the time or money. I was either at school, studying, or watching my brothers."

Melissa's grin was impish. "Blue eyes, big boobs, and pink nipples are the newest trend."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"I swear it. Ever since Ava Bradshaw became Hollywood's top star."

Ava Bradshaw. She was half black, half white, and entirely gorgeous. The movie starlet's appearance was more black than white, except for her blue eyes and large breasts capped off with pink nipples.

"So after a lifetime of being teased about my big breasts and blue eyes and loathing my pink nipples—"

"They are totally Afrique."

Afrique—English slang for trendy or fashionable. I couldn't help but smile.

I didn't know if Melissa was exaggerating about just how Afrique our shared attributes were, but I let myself bask in the moment. After all, I was eighteen years old and this was the first time in my life I'd ever felt pretty. Even for a moment.

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"I feel so much better." After covering my wet hair with a towel, I slid into the warm red robe and matching slippers my parents had bought me. I was glad the robe fell past my knees because Melissa and I still had to walk back to our room. "I totally needed that."

"You and me both. Now I'm hungry."

"I've got a bunch of junk food in my closet."

"Thank God! Because I'm also broke as a joke."

"Me too."

We shared a laugh as we padded into the hallway from the female communal shower. Some black jocks were standing a ways down, causing me to instinctively go into *please-don't-notice-me* mode. What little interaction I'd had with black boys as a child had never gone well. They had teased and I had cried.

"I told you we're totally Afrique," Melissa murmured. "You can see how turned on they are from here." She snorted derisively. "As if we'd give them the time of day. I only date mutes. Plus," she muttered under her breath, "my parents would kill me."

I was too busy feeling as far from Afrique as a European-American could to comment. I kept my head high, but didn't make eye contact—my way of telling them what they thought didn't matter to me in the least. I just wish that was true.

"Alice?"

I came to an immediate halt. How on earth did one of those black guys know my name? I looked up—way up—into the face of the boy who'd called out to me. My blue eyes widened. I did a double take.

"Alice, it's me, DeAndre Jones. We went to Walker together."

DeAndre Jones. The bane of my childhood existence. Like I'd ever forget. We'd gone to different schools after Walker, but I'd ran into him occasionally over the years. Quarterback of his junior high and high school football teams, our paths had crossed whenever he played against Pocatamico.

"DeAndre," I said, feigning a smile. "Yes, I remember."

And damn it if Mr. Popular wasn't better looking now than ever before. Dark-skinned, light brown eyes, muscular build, over six feet tall...

There wasn't much justice in the world, I thought morosely.

"Let's go, Alice," Melissa said. "We have a lot of unpacking to do still."

It was a lie, but I went with it. "Yes, well, it was good seeing you. Take care, DeAndre."

"I hope to see you around, Alice."

My heart thumped pleurably in my chest. Damned, traitorous organ. "You too."

Melissa tugged at my robe. I broke eye contact with DeAndre and let my roomie lead me away. I could feel his gaze on me as I walked down the hallway. It never once strayed until I was in my room and out of sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Don't even think about it."

"Huh?" I popped a chip into my mouth and crunched down.

"DeAndre." Melissa took off her shower cap before reaching into the bag I held out. "I saw how you were looking at him."

"I was not!"

"Yes you were."

"Muteayyy, I told you I was not!" I don't know why we sometimes add the *ayyy* sound onto the end of *mute*, but then I don't know why anyone speaks the way they do. Unc culture just is what it is.

She grinned. "Uh huh."

"I'm serious," I informed her between crunches. "Your parents aren't the only uncs who'd kill their daughter if she even looked sideways at a black guy. He could be totally unprejudiced and they'd still treat him like a Plantation owner or something."

Melissa's face scrunched up. "It's kinda not fair if you think about it though. I mean, my older brother dates nothing *but* black girls and they don't say shit."

"Preach. Same here except he's my younger brother."

My roomie harrumphed. "Maybe we should try it. DeAndre is totally interested in you and his cute friend kept giving me the look."

My face flushed. "DeAndre Jones is not interested in me. Besides, he was a jerk to me when I was a kid. The first time a whipper ever called me a mute? Yeah, it was totally him."

"Swear it?"

"I totally swear it."

Melissa gasped. Her eyes, almost as blue as mine, narrowed.

To swear something in unc culture was akin to placing your hand on the Bible. To *totally* swear it was like standing in the presence of God Himself with your hand still on that Bible.

"That makes it even better."

I blinked. "Umm...what?"

"Just think about it!" Crunch-crunch. "Get all prettied up, let him lust after you, then when he asks you out?" She splayed her hands in true mute style. "Remind him what he did and walk away." One red eyebrow shot up. "Then date his best friend."

I couldn't help but laugh. Melissa joined in.

"You want a snack cake?" I asked.

"Hell yes I do."

Later that night, as we lay on our separate beds in the dark dorm room, I could hear the faint sound of Melissa's snoring so I knew she'd been able to fall asleep. At least that made one of us, I thought, frowning. But I couldn't help it. My mind kept rewinding to the outrageous things Melissa had said tonight, which invariably led me to thinking about DeAndre.



Was there even a slight possibility my roomie was right? Did DeAndre Jones find something appealing about what I'd always considered my ordinary looks? I tugged at my bottom lip with my teeth as I contemplated the situation. It took several minutes, but I finally arrived at a conclusion.

It didn't matter what DeAndre thought about me because I would not be thinking about him ever again. Tomorrow I would buy makeup supplies for the first time in my life and then pay a visit to one of Tampa's many secondhand clothing stores.

To hell with DeAndre Jones and his whipper kind. I was going to start taking pride in my pale skin, love me as God made me, and find an unc to date who found me as pretty as I was starting to feel.

For the first time—well, *ever*—I considered the very real possibility that the mutes back home hadn't been interested in me for one simple reason: because I hadn't been interested in me either.

\* \* \* \* \*

My dreams that night weren't normal. Just like everyone else, I tend to dream about random, nonsensical stuff—a banana doing cartwheels, the preacher at church turning into a cat and only I notice—weird, trippy junk that makes little sense. But that night? I'm not even sure I can call the experience dreaming so much as having nocturnal recollections of days gone by. When I awoke the next morning there was one memory in particular that stood out from the others. It happened when I was nine years old and my mom had taken me with her into Sissonville to shop for a Christmas gift...

"Alice, look at me. Alice! Pay attention or we're going home!"

The store windows, all lit up with festive lights, Santas, and music, looked and felt like mini North Poles to a giddy nine-year-old so it was difficult to tear my eyes away from them long enough to pay attention to my mom. I knew I had to though because

uncolored mothers don't make idle threats. I definitely didn't want to go home yet so I stopped gaping at all the sparkling storefronts and looked up at my mom.

"Good girl," my mother praised. "Now listen, Alice," she said quietly as she fixed the stuck zipper on my coat, "When we go into the store, the same rules as always apply. You are not to put your hands in your coat pockets, you are not to run around or in any way create a scene, and you are not to touch anything. Understand?"

"Yes."

"You totally swear to mind my rules?"

"Yes. I totally swear it."

"Repeat the rules back to me."

I repeated the rules for her, directions I thought every child had to abide by. Later, I would understand the rules for black children weren't as stringent—they could walk around in stores with their hands in their pockets because nobody would assume they were stealing. My mother was just doing what she could to keep me safe, even if I didn't understand her motive yet. She knew the black shop owners would be watching us like hawks, guilty until we proved ourselves innocent.

The first store we walked into had Christmas decorations fancier than anything I'd ever before seen. Behaving like a nine-year-old adult was excruciating for an excited child whose natural instinct was to explore and play, but mom's rules were mom's rules. By the time we reached the toy aisles I felt like a bubble ready to burst.

I noticed one of the black employees follow us to the toy aisle. I couldn't understand why he pretended not to watch us when he kept giving us sideways glances. I figured it was just another one of those things black people did that uncoloreds didn't know about.

"I was hoping to find a Mee-Mee doll for your cousin Julie," my mom murmured. "There are a lot of dolls here, but..."

I might have been a kid, but even at nine I realized my mom's frustration without her finishing the sentence. I frowned thoughtfully as I tried to help her find a Mee-Mee

doll that looked even kinda-sorta like an uncolored. The few marshmallow faces looking blankly back at me from their boxes were knock-offs of the brand name. Mee-Mees were the latest craze so a Me-Me wasn't the same at all. Julie would want the real thing.

"That one is pretty," I said truthfully, pointing to a black Mee-Mee doll.

"Yes, she is," my mom said. She smiled and picked up the doll. My mother always made the best of every situation. "Do you think Julie will like her?"

"Oh yes!" I excitedly gushed. "She has pretty brown eyes and a beautiful Afro." I was too young to understand it's sometimes best to curb one's honesty. "And her skin color is the prettiest of all the Mee-Mees!"

"Why do you say that?"

Wasn't it obvious? "Because she's the darkest, mommy."

My mother's blue eyes looked sad, which made no sense to my child's brain. "I see." She painted on a smile. "I guess we'll get this Mee-Mee doll then. It says her name is Tanisha."

I was excited for Julie. I knew she'd love Tanisha. I grinned when my mom put her in the shopping cart.

My hands were starting to feel cold, but I knew I couldn't put them in my pockets. I had to ignore the bodily sensation demanding I disobey my mother so I did. I rubbed them together real quick, hoping that would be okay.

"I know, baby. I'm chilly too." My mom ruffled my hair. "One more aisle and we're done after we pay for our things."

As giddy as I had felt by the dazzling Christmas displays before entering the store, I was already eager to leave it just so I could get in the car to warm my hands. The black employee trailed us to the grocery aisle and pretended not to watch us again. I made a mental note to ask my mom if she knew about this game black people played when we got to the car. Maybe I was supposed to play back and didn't know it.

My mom picked out a few groceries and put them in our shopping cart. I frowned when she chose *Maple's Best* syrup for the pancakes she'd make tomorrow morning.

"Can't we buy *Miss Mary* syrup? All my friends get that kind."

My mother's back stiffened. "Your father doesn't like the taste."

I was disappointed, but didn't say so. I wistfully stared at the *Miss Mary* bottle as we walked by it. The syrup was see-through, kinda like some of the kids at school said I was, and *Miss Mary's* features resembled an uncolored woman's. She was always smiling, which I liked. She was dressed funny though, wearing a rag on her head and an ugly smock.

The checkout line had racks filled with candy, gum, and magazines on display. Black people were on the covers of everything from *Time*, *Forbes*, and *People* to *The National Inquirer* and *Star*. My mom only subscribed to one magazine — *Ivory* — but few stores carried it so the postman brought it to our doublewide once a month.

"We don't take food stamp cards here," the older, black cashier told my mother. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "You want to put back the groceries and just buy the doll in cash?"

"No." My mother's voice was the strongest and most severe tone I'd ever heard her use. Her nostrils were flaring. "I'm paying for everything in cash. I don't receive food money from the government."

By the time we got into the car, my mother looked ready to cry. I didn't really understand the totality of what had just happened, but I didn't like to see her sad. I also didn't like that she'd lied.

"Why did you tell the lady we don't get food money from the government, mommy? You always tell me to never lie."

"Because it's none of her business, Alice!" She put the key into the ignition and revved up the car. "She'll think I don't work if she knows that. Or act like it was irresponsible of me to have children because we're poor." She turned on the heater. It blasted out cold air before slowly warming. "She won't stop to think for even a second

that maybe I just don't get paid what a black woman, let alone a black man, gets paid for doing the same work. Nope. To people like her that's just 'excuses'."

She started to cry. My heart broke. I didn't understand why the lady would think all those things about my mom, but I became sad that my mom believed she would.

"I'm sorry, mommy. I know you work hard at both your jobs."

She swiped at her tears and forced a smile. "You're a good girl, Alice. I'm so sorry I get tense every time we have to shop in town. I wish we could buy everything we need at our neighborhood store."

"It's okay. That whipper was stupid anyhow."

"Where did you hear the word 'whipper'?" she half-laughed.

"Daddy." I shrugged. "He told me not to say it in front of black people."

"He's right about that. He shouldn't have taught you that though."

My mother's words said one thing, but her grin said another. "Your father." She shook her head as she backed the car out of the parking space. "He's a character."

We were silent for most of the ride home. I felt exhausted. From following the rules to watching my mom cry, I hoped I never had to go back into town. I wanted to stay home forever, the place where it was safe to breathe and be myself.

"Alice?"

I looked over at my mother. "Yes?"

"I love you, baby."

I smiled. Her words warmed my spirit because I knew she was okay again. "I love you too, mommy."

## Chapter Four

“Oh my Gawd, I love it! You look incredible!”

I blushed at Melissa’s praise. Judging by her dropped jaw and bulging eyes, I knew her reaction to my new look was genuine. With the forty dollars I had left (much thanks to the old black man at Gas-N-Go) I’d managed to buy makeup and five new outfits that could be mixed and matched to total roughly ten. Uncs were used to pinching pennies and shopping in thrift stores, but even I was proud of how much I’d managed to buy with so little cash. As a result I was officially broke as a joke until my part-time job on campus started, but thankfully that began today.

The last three days had been a whirlwind for Melissa and me, but we’d managed to accomplish everything we needed to get done. The shopping excursion aside, pretty much every waking minute of the past seventy-two hours had been devoted to prepping for our new lives at the University of South Florida. Since my roommate and I were both PBTS, ninety percent of our time had consisted of standing in various long lines at the campus center for the USA – *Uncolored Students Association*.

One of the lines had been for collecting our used, *Paid By The State* textbooks, which we had to turn in at each semester’s end. Another line had been for getting our three days’ worth of free meal vouchers. There was another line for dropping and adding classes. Another for PBTS parking passes. And yet another for finding out which PBTS campus job we’d been arbitrarily assigned. Basically if you were white and *Paid By The State*, you were standing in lines until you damn near collapsed from heat exhaustion and fatigue.

“I wonder if the whipper PBTSs have to stand in lines like this,” Melissa had grumbled at one point. “I doubt it.”

I also doubted it, but had answered her with a shrug. I had been too tired and too aggravated as it was without thinking about the injustices Mamaw had long insisted weren’t worth whining about. “*Do something about them or do nothing about them,*” my

grandmother would say. *"If you're doing something then there ain't no point in complaining and if you're doing nothing you got no right to anyhow."*

The final line Melissa and I had stood in on the third day of doing little else had been to sign up for and become members of the USA. That line had been worth the wait to us once we were given our membership identification cards. The process had worked like an assembly line at the DMV, but we'd felt giddy once we were official. Both of us planned to be extremely active members of the *Uncolored Students Association*. With chapters on nearly every university campus in the country, being a member of the USA was something of a bragging point back in the trailer parks. As soon as we were handed our IDs we'd happily strolled over to the post office on campus and made photocopies of them. Grinning at each other like loons, we then mailed the photocopies to our respective families.

I knew my entire family would gather around the telephone and call me once they received that particular piece of mail. Just knowing how thrilled they'd be put an oomph in my step for the rest of the day.

Now here I stood in my dorm, preparing to leave for my new work assignment. I was grateful the government had provided me with one because even PBTS scholarships don't pay for food, clothes, toiletries, and whatnot. Three days of meals and that was that.

"Muteaay, you look hot!"

I wasn't used to being praised for my looks so Melissa's repeated hoots of appreciation made me giggle. "I don't look *that* good!" I exclaimed, laughing.

"Yes, sister mute, you do." Her smile faded into a serious expression. "You really don't get how totally pretty and Afrique you are, do you?"

Silence ensued as we stared at each other. No words were needed. I knew she understood what my answer was. The same as I understood how sad that unspoken answer made her feel.

"Don't pity me," I said, glancing into the mirror we shared. I gave myself a final lookover. "Besides, I never tried to get a boyfriend back home. My whole life revolved

around learning to speak proper English in front of blacks and then studying my butt off to make sure I was one of the lucky ones who earned herself a scholarship."

"You – oh my Gawd – are you...?"

I sighed. "You have no boundaries at all, do you?"

"Not even one."

I shook my head and grinned. "Yes, I'm a virgin."

"So am I."

Now *that* surprised me. "No way."

"Yes way." Melissa shrugged. "I didn't want to end up like my mom, you know?" My inquisitive expression prompted her to elaborate. "Four babies by four daddies before she was old enough to legally drink."

Ahh. That I understood. A lot of my friends had grown up in similar situations.

"Don't be embarrassed of your mother, Lis. She gave you life and –"

"I'm not embarrassed!"

My sympathetic smile was soft. "Yes you are. There's no shame in feeling it. The shame comes from not fessing up to the emotion so you can change it."

Her gaze was cast toward the floor. "She's a walking, talking stereotype, but I love her with my whole heart." Her blue eyes lifted to meet mine. "I hate myself for the embarrassment I feel. No unc could ask for a more loving mother."

"Whippers are gonna stereotype your mother no matter what. Even if all four of you had the same daddy, they'd assume you didn't."

Melissa snorted at that. "Truth."

"It's almost noon." I glanced at my watch and sighed. "Let's finish this conversation later. I better start walking to work. I'm not even sure where on campus the Athletic Center is."

"Oh Gawd, that's a walk." She quickly gave me the directions. "If I was you, I'd ride your bike."



"What time do you work today?"

"I don't. I start tomorrow."

I teasingly stuck out my tongue.

"Don't be jealous," Melissa rejoined. "I'd much rather have your job assignment than mine!"

"The maintenance crew." I winced. "Sorry about that."

"Me too." Her grin was half halo and half horns. "One of us who isn't me gets to see all the fiiiine mute jocks with their sexy, sweaty muscles three days a week. What a rough job."

I feigned a longsuffering sigh. "Somebody's got to do it."

\* \* \* \* \*

I felt a bit skittish as I walked into USF's Athletic Center, but I tended to get nervous in any new situation so my physical reaction wasn't unexpected. I knew I'd be over it soon enough. I just wished my work uniform had a little more uniform and a lot less skin to it.

Walking into the air-conditioned complex from the hot, muggy outdoors made my nipples instantly harden. The fact I had on a bra apparently didn't help. Wearing only a thin, green and gold t-shirt with a matching green tennis skirt—the official USF colors—I realized by the looks the unc jocks were throwing my way that my nipples must have been poker-stiff.

"Hey, Snow White!" one unc called out to me. "You're a fine as hell marshmallow girl."

I couldn't help but smile. In eighteen years, no mute had ever called me Snow White. That was a label given only to the most beautiful of pale-skinned females.

"Aren't you gonna talk to me?" the unc continued. "I wanna see that smile again. I love your dimples."

I stopped long enough to glance his way—and damn he was good looking! Tall, well-muscled, blond hair and green eyes... *Yum*. I wet my lips.

The old Alice would have shriveled away from his attention, but the new Alice was rather enjoying it. “I have to go to work or I would.”

“This is your job assignment?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’ll be seeing you a lot.” He winked. “My name’s Mike.”

“I’m Alice.”

“Aliccccce,” he repeated in a low, sexy drawl. “You’ve got gorgeous eyes too, Snow White.”

I was suddenly glad I’d bought that makeup and spent three nights on YouTube learning how to apply it. The eyeliner and mascara accentuated the ocean blue color of my eyes, while the subtle lip-frost highlighted my pink lips. My blonde hair was piled atop my head in a disheveled bun—the latest trend amongst unc females.

“Thanks, Mike.” I smiled. “I’ll see you around.”

“You better.”

I resumed walking into the atrium and toward the information desk. Mere moments had ticked by when I caught a pair of brown eyes staring at me. I did a double take.

DeAndre.

The remaining vestige of the smile Mike had put on my face slowly faded as our gazes clashed. My one-time nemesis looked upset or angry—or both. My instinctive go-to reaction caused my back to stiffen as I prepared for him to call me an ugly name.

*Try it, I thought, my smile completely erased. I dare you to call me a mute when almost everyone in here but the quarterback is a mute too.*

“How are you, Alice?” DeAndre asked.

I blinked. This was our second run-in and he still hadn’t said anything disparaging. Surely that part was coming any moment.

"I'm good, DeAndre," I replied, hesitation in my voice. "How are you?"

His light brown gaze kept flicking back and forth from Mike to me. I didn't know what to make of that. Finally he gave me his full attention.

"I'm better now," he answered enigmatically. "You look – wow. You look beautiful, Alice."

My pulse picked up in a way it hadn't for Mike and I didn't like it. I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "Thank you." I forced myself to remember all the taunting I'd endured at his hands while at Walker Elementary. I didn't let go of the painful memories until I was good and pissed. "But I don't need black validation to like myself."

DeAndre's eyes widened. He opened his mouth to speak, but I held up a palm, forestalling him.

"Spare me the black guilt because I'm not that little girl anymore." So why was I behaving as maturely as one? I was already feeling emotionally drained and I hadn't even made it to the reception desk. "Look, I don't need or want your apology. What's done is done. It's in the past." I sighed. He probably didn't even remember the incident, but I'd never forget it. "I've got to go before I'm late to work."

"Alice –"

I walked away and didn't look back. I hated my body for reacting to him on a physiological level before my brain could catch up on a mental one. My only solace was that he couldn't possibly have known as much.

I would never date a whipper, much less be attracted to one. DeAndre belonged in his world of black privilege and I belonged in a doublewide. He could never understand me, my people, or my culture... and I certainly couldn't comprehend his.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the first *Uncolored Students Association* meeting of the school year—and me and Melissa's first USA meeting ever!—so we dressed to impress. Walking into the

assembly hall was intimidating and awe-inspiring. So many uncolored students, teachers, and alumni had shown up for the presentation. Melissa and I sat in the first two empty seats we could find that were side-by-side and simply stared at our surroundings. It felt surreal, like a dream. I didn't feel worthy of being here, but was thankful I was.

"Everyone take their seats please." A well-dressed, older, uncolored woman spoke into the microphone at the podium. I loved her style already. She looked great in professional attire, but kept it real—no brown contact lenses or Euro-fro for her. She was pale and she was proud. She also felt familiar to me, but I couldn't pinpoint why. "Everyone take their seats."

The auditorium was U-shaped, like an Imax theater I'd once been to during a school fieldtrip back at Walker Elementary. The hundred or so people who'd gathered for tonight's assembly sat down and gave the speaker their full attention.

"Alice," someone whispered, surprising me.

I glanced around. At first I didn't see him because he was a row behind and an aisle over from me.

"Hi Mike," I whispered back, smiling.

"Are you staying for the social mixer after the assembly?"

"Totally."

He winked at me. "Cool."

I turned back to face the lectern. Why wasn't my heart thumping for Mike? He was undeniably fine. I frowned, deciding my heart probably thumped for DeAndre out of anxiety and fear—two things I didn't feel around the unc jock.

"You better tell me all about that hot mute when we leave," Melissa whispered.

I grinned, but said nothing.

"First, I would like to welcome all of our new Freshman members to the USA!" the female speaker began. "My name is Dr. Nancy Johnson. I'm the Chair of The European-American Studies Department here at the University of South Florida."

The entire room broke into enthusiastic applause. Melissa and I excitedly squealed at each other while we clapped. Nary a word had to be spoken – we both knew why the other was so animated.

Dr. Nancy Johnson was one of the most revered, if not *the* most revered, Euro-centric poet, novelist, and professor in the United States today. Just being in the same room as her would be major news back home! I had known Dr. Johnson was a tenured professor here and wanted to attend USF for that very reason, but I'd somehow never envisioned her as being...well...*mortal*.

The first woman *and* first uncolored person to recite a poem at a presidential inauguration, she was held in the highest of esteem by the European-American and black communities alike. Her words, passionate and eloquent, had caused me and so many other uncoloreds to feel true pride in our slave heritage. It wasn't that we – that I – felt ashamed of our ancestry; it was that Dr. Johnson's articulate and poignant wording instilled in me a genuine respect for how strong and enduring our people are.

Tears stung the backs of my eyes as I applauded the aging, wizened professor. Give me Dr. Nancy Johnson over a rock star any day of the week.

"Thank you very much," Dr. Johnson said humbly. She bowed her head in modesty and gratitude. "Thank you."

My hands felt raw by the time the applause ended. Melissa and I sat transfixed, listening to every word she uttered as though a goddess had spoken them. The next twenty minutes flew by quickly – too quickly in my opinion.

"Each and every one of you here tonight," the professor announced in a tone that was at once soothing, inspiring, and commanding, "are here because you earned this, you fought for this. I look into the sea of bright, determined, uncolored faces before me and know with every ounce of my person that because you fought to be here today, because you endured against all odds in a society that throws never-ending hurdles in your paths, the next generation will have to fight a little less hard."

Chills worked up and down my spine. One rogue tear tracked down my cheek.

“And this is why it is so vital that we never forget, never downplay or denigrate, those uncoloreds who fought before us. Indeed, their endurance in the face of adversities we cannot comprehend allow for the fight that brought you here to be a little less hard than theirs was.”

“Amen!” I heard someone shout.

“Praise Jesus!” another chimed in.

“You will never have your skin flayed from your bodies by the whip,” Dr. Johnson reminded us. “You will never have your children ripped from your arms and sold like cattle to the highest bidders. You will never be forced to drink from a separate water fountain or sit at the back of the bus. You will never, God willing, know the horror of watching your loved ones’ lifeless bodies sway in the wind from the tree branch they were lynched from.”

“Amen!”

“Praise God!”

I’d never felt emotional pain and emotional relief at the same time before. Her words were humbling but empowering, sad yet hopeful. Dr. Johnson embodied everything I wanted to be.

“You will never know such suffering,” she said softly, “because of those uncolored men and women who fought and died before you...who fought and died *for* you.” Her face was filled with respect and a sense of oneness. “Live your life in such a way that you never forget, that you never dishonor, that sacrifice.” Her smile was pious. “Your struggle didn’t start here at USF, but this is where your fight will find its meaning and your endurance its purpose. Welcome to USF and to the USA.”

Thundering applause and cheers accompanied the standing ovation we gave Dr. Johnson. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I clapped until my hands hurt. I glanced at Melissa and saw that she was crying too. We smiled at each other through the tears and clapped even harder.

I would never forget this moment in time. I would never forget Dr. Nancy Johnson. This was the night Alice Eve Jackson died and Alice X arose from her ashes.

I just didn't know it yet.

## Chapter Five

"That was only the single most incredible night of my life!" Melissa gushed as she fell onto her bed. "Can you believe we not only listened to Dr. Nancy Johnson speak live and in person, but we actually got to shake her hand and take pictures with her? I may faint! And if I don't my mother surely will when I call home!"

"Tonight was totally...wow!" I knew my Cliff Notes recap of the emotional evening was lacking, but I was simply overwhelmed. "Wow!"

Melissa and I broke into a fit of giggles. She threw a pillow at me, which I launched back at her.

"What should we do first?" Melissa peeped. "Call our people or shower?"

"Definitely shower. I'm so excited it's hard to say how long I'll be on the phone and the showers close at midnight."

"It's only ten o'clock."

"I know!"

We grinned at each other before jumping off our respective beds and grabbing our toiletries. Melissa and I practically danced to the female communal shower. We were young and excited...and the world held so many new possibilities for us. Usually we were careful not to get overly boisterous or speak white in front of black people—doing such only confirmed the stereotype that we were more primitive and animalistic than the whippers—but tonight we didn't care. Melissa and I were flying high as kites.

"Oops!" I came to a sudden halt so my best friend and roomie did too. "You forgot your shower cap," I reminded Melissa.

"No." She smiled. "I didn't."

My eyes widened as my perpetual grin faded into a serious expression. "You're giving up the Euro-fro?"

"Giving it up? No sister mute. I'm letting it go."

My heart was in my gaze. "Liss...I'm...*wow*."



Melissa's expression was hopeful if a little scared. I understood. Embracing the beauty of who you really are in a society that considers you *less than* is at once empowering and terrifying.

"Do you think my red hair will look pretty without the Euro-fro?" she whispered.

I slowly nodded. "Prettier," I murmured. "Much prettier."

We both got misty-eyed. I knew it was time to get in the shower before a black student walked by and saw what they viewed us as already — *overly emotional* uncolored women; primal female animals of baser instinct and intellect.

Twenty minutes later, Melissa and I had already showered and returned to our dorm room. She was animatedly recapping the night's events for her mom on the phone so I picked up my cell and did the same.

"You're on speaker now, honey," my mom informed me. "Say that again for Mamaw, daddy, and your brothers!"

I knew I was talking a mile a minute, but my tongue couldn't keep up with my thoughts. "Then after the assembly during the social mixer? I got to shake her hand and take pictures with her!"

"No way." This from my brother Johnny.

"Way!" I enthused.

"Sissy, that is totally cool!"

"I know, right?!"

I could hear my father's proud chuckle before he even spoke. "Who took the pictures, baby? Can we get a copy?"

"My roommate Lissa took the picture on the cell phone Mamaw gave me. I'm not sure how to send it unless you buy a cell to keep at the house that I can send it to."

"You hear that, boy?" Mamaw said to my father, her son. "I done told you we need to get one for the house! That way whoever's driving the family clunker can take the cell with them to call home if it breaks down." I could hear her thump my dad on the

head. I grinned. "Listen when your mama speaks, Joe Jackson. I wanna see the photos of my baby girl standing next to Dr. Johnson."

"Ouch! And fine. I'll buy one tomorrow, mama."

I talked to my family another ten minutes or so, most of which was spent listening to little Billy tell me about a girl in his kindergarten class who'd tried to kiss him. I laughed when he informed me that because she's a girl she's got cooties so the kiss wasn't welcomed. I reassured him one day he'd change his mind about girls.

Not even twenty seconds passed by from ending the phone call to hearing a knock on our dorm room's door. Melissa was still chatting away with her mom so I got up to answer it. I had on a pair of cute pajamas my mom had bought me from a thrift store. The bottom resembled pink yoga pants that tied together just below my navel; the top was a pink baby doll shirt with the word "Afrique" imprinted on it that fell to just above my midriff. I didn't mind that my belly button was showing, but I wished I had time to put on a bra and dry my hair, which was currently wrapped in a towel.

I don't know who I was expecting to find standing on the other side of the door when I opened it, but DeAndre Jones was pretty far down on the list of possibilities. My pulse instantly picked up, my blue eyes widening as I gazed up at him.

"Alice, can I talk to you?" DeAndre quietly asked. "Please?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I could see his gaze linger overly long at my belly and breasts before he found his black politesse and resumed eye contact.

"Please, Alice."

I turned around and saw Melissa staring at me quizzically. She was still on the phone, but would hang it up in a heartbeat if I gave her the *help-a-sister-mute-out* look. I took a deep breath and told her with my eyes I was fine. I turned back around to face DeAndre, closing the door behind me.

"Okay," I said. "I'm listening."

"Can we sit over there?" He threw a hand toward one of several empty tables where students who lived in the Argos Complex of Beta Hall could study, eat, or just talk quietly with each other at any time of the day or night. "It'll be more comfortable."

I briefly hesitated. "Let me grab my flip-flops," I said. "I'll meet you over there."

"Thank you."

I nodded before returning to my room. Melissa's eyes widened when she saw me slide into a pair of thong sandals. Still on the phone, she mouthed the words *what the hell are you doing?*

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I whispered. "He wants to talk. We're just sitting at the tables near the rec room."

She mouthed an okay. I left the room again, my heart thumping like crazy.

My encounter with DeAndre earlier in the day hadn't exactly qualified as pleasant so I had no idea what he could possibly wish to discuss. I could see his light brown gaze watching me as I ambled toward the table he'd claimed. Neither of us spoke a word as I took the seat across from him. The table was on the small side so we were closer to each other than we'd ever been before. My traitorous pulse picked up again, leaving me uncertain if it was because of his nearness or the anxiety I felt around black people in general.

He didn't speak for a long moment, a pause that felt like an eternity to my already frazzled nerves. His gaze was cast toward the table, his expression serious.

"DeAndre, I don't—"

"I'm sorry." His head came up and his gaze clashed with mine. "I am so damn sorry for that day in Miss Crenshaw's class, Alice."

I stilled. My pulse raced faster.

"I've been wanting to say I'm sorry since the moment I called you...well you know."

It had never once occurred to me that he would even remember what he'd said much less regret it. Most bullies don't. I didn't know what to think. I wasn't even sure

how I was supposed to feel. This was an uncomfortable conversation for both of us. I had every right to be dismissive, to bitchily state “too little too late” or a simple “whatever” and walk away, but I didn’t.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“I know there aren’t enough apologies in the world to make up for the name I called you, but I hope one day you can forgive me.”

I felt tears stinging the backs of my eyes. I wanted to chalk them up to a night overwrought with emotional extremes, but I knew better. The wound I told myself had long ago healed never truly had. It was as raw in this moment as it had been that morning so many years past.

“Why did you call me a ‘stupid mute’?” I whispered. I knew by this point the tears in my eyes were visible, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to hear his answer.

“I was a kid, Alice.” DeAndre shrugged, but I could see the guilt and pain he was experiencing from witnessing the tears he saw threatening to spill. “I grew up hearing people talk like that. I grew up being told blacks and whites should never mix.”

“People actually said those words to you?”

“They didn’t have to.”

My teeth sank into my lower lip. I understood what he meant. My parents had never actually flat-out forbade me to date black guys, yet the unspoken implication existed nevertheless.

“I’ve thought about that day a lot over the years.” DeAndre sighed. “It took me until high school to understand why I had purposely called you such a hurtful word.”

My forehead crinkled. “Why?” I murmured.

He stilled. “You don’t understand why after everything I just said?”

I frowned. “Well call me a stupid mute,” I said defensively, “but no.” I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said quietly as I opened them back up.

“I guess I deserved that.” DeAndre smiled.

I smiled back. “I guess you did.”

His expression grew serious. “Maybe I’m not expressing myself right. What I’m saying is it took me until high school to admit to myself that I had been crushing on a white girl I had no business crushing on.” He shook his head a bit. “My third-grade way of dealing with it was to insult you and deliberately push you away.”

My entire body stilled. A chill worked up and down my spine. Of all the explanations he could have given, *that* hadn’t even crossed my radar as a remote possibility.

DeAndre Jones. The most popular and handsome boy in school...

“You had —” My mind couldn’t wrap itself around his admission. “You *what?*”

“You really didn’t know?”

“I definitely didn’t know.” My whiteness came out as I splayed my hands. “I totally swear it.”

He grinned a bit, as if enjoying hearing me talk white. This day held no end to its surprises.

“You didn’t feel it the last time we saw each other during high school, when my school played against Pocatalico?” His gaze seared into mine. “You were sitting high up in the bleachers—last row. You looked down to where the players were walking out to take the field and our eyes locked.”

There went my pulse again. And something that felt like ice cracking in the vicinity of my heart.

Of course I remembered. I just hadn’t known he’d felt anything but ambivalence or even repulsion toward me. Maybe that evening in the bleachers I’d been too preoccupied with hating myself for feeling any attraction to him at all to notice it wasn’t one-sided.

“DeAndre...” This was too much to take in at one sitting. “I...”

“Don’t say anything, Alice.”

He looked vulnerable, mortal. Two words I never would have used to describe him before now.

"The only thing I am asking of you is to accept my apology." His smile was pained. "And if I'm lucky maybe one day forgive me."

"I already forgive you."

His surprised expression matched mine. But it was the truth. I genuinely did forgive DeAndre.

"Apologizing to me took courage," I said honestly. "If you are man enough to humble yourself before me..." I shrugged. "How can I not be woman enough to forgive you?"

His gaze searched mine. A soft smile formed on his lips. "Thanks, Alice," he murmured.

It had taken almost a decade, but I'd finally made peace with one of the ghosts from my past. I doubted DeAndre and I would ever be friends or hang out, but there was a serenity in knowing we could look at each other from here on out without that ghost wedging its way between us.

"I better go," I told him. "I have my first class tomorrow and it's with a sadistic professor."

"How do you know he's sadistic?"

"He scheduled the class for eight o'clock in the morning." I splayed my hands in total white girl style. "Only a sadist would do that to students."

DeAndre laughed. "Word."

"This was nice though." I smiled. "Thank you, DeAndre."

I prepared to stand up when his hand reached for mine and cupped it. "One more thing," he said in a low timbre, "because I'll never forgive myself if I leave here without it."

My eyebrows rose. "Sure. What's up?"

"There's something I've wanted to give you for a long time."

"What's that?"

DeAndre didn't answer me with words, but with an action. He leaned in close, his light brown gaze flicking from my mouth to my eyes, giving me time to turn away. I didn't. My breath caught in the back of my throat.

His full, silky lips came down on mine. My heartbeat skyrocketed and butterflies swarmed in my tummy as I shared my first kiss with the last guy on earth I'd ever thought to experience such a moment with. He didn't try to put his tongue in my mouth, which somehow made the kiss more poignant. His lips brushed over mine, again and again, lingering and sensual, igniting my entire being on fire.

DeAndre slowly and gently broke the kiss. "I hope our first kiss isn't our last one," he whispered. "I'll see you soon, Alice."

This time it was me watching him walk away. Wide-eyed and still reeling from all that just happened, I sat at the table unblinking until he disappeared from sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh. My. *Gawd*." Melissa wearily rubbed her temples. "Alice, you know this thing with DeAndre can't happen, right? Please tell me you get that."

I worried my lip. I didn't know how I felt.

"Oh no, Alice. Mute, please—you cannot get involved with a whipper!"

"Don't call him that!" My nostrils flared alongside my temper. "Do not ever call him that again!"

Melissa's expression was as shocked as my internal dialogue was. Never once in my life had I found the word *whipper* offensive. I'd never even questioned it. Now I sat here wondering if perhaps I should have.

My expression was firm. "How are we any different from the people who call us mutes—and believe we are—if we resort to summing up a person's entire being with a degrading word?"

Melissa shrugged. "*Whipper* doesn't feel derogatory to me, just accurate. They hold all the power, Alice, not us."

I understood why she felt as she did. How could I not? And yet...

"What we say and do matters too, Liss." My gaze softened. "I fear this world will never change until we all, black and white alike, become more concerned with the purity of our individual characters than with keeping score."

She mulled that over for a long moment. "Touché," she whispered.

We stared at each other in silence. Growing up was a lot more difficult than legend allowed. Especially once you commit to maturing into a thinking person instead of just existing as another number in a herd of sheeple.



## Chapter Six

My schedule wasn't too bad. Luckily I'd been able to get all the classes I needed at the times I wanted. English, World History, and Political Science were on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, while Algebra and Biology were held on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I just wished the classes themselves went as smoothly as their slotted times did.

If the first day of classes for my Freshman year at the university was to be an indication of what the next four years held in store for me, I wondered if I'd be able to endure this without either giving up and going home or strangling someone and going to prison. Both scenarios held equal allure at the moment.

English class at eight o'clock in the morning was exhausting all on its own without throwing racism into the mix. Yet here I was, the first college class of my life, already feeling it.

"Kim Carter," the black professor stated in a monotone for the second time during roll call. "Kim Carter."

Nobody raised their hand. Several of the black students kept glancing at me. I knew it was only a matter of time before the professor did too. Dr. Grover did not disappoint.

He looked straight at me. "Kim Carter?"

"No." I forced a smile. "I'm Alice Jackson. The *other* uncolored girl."

Some of the students looked down at the floor, embarrassed for the professor and probably themselves. Never mind how I felt.

"Do you know Kim Carter?" Dr. Grover asked me.

"No sir, I do not."

"Do you know anybody who might?"

I rubbed my temples. This had the makings of a long day. "If I don't know Kim Carter how would I know if I've met someone who does?"

A handful of students quietly snickered. It was sad when even they recognized how insensitive the professor was being. Finally a Latina girl came to my rescue.

“Dr. Grover,” she said in Puerto Rican Spanglish, “Uncolored People and People of Less Color aren’t in like a cult or something. We don’t all know each other.”

The professor blanched. “I-I never presumed that you did!”

I shared a “yeah right” look with the Latina who I would later learn was named Griselda, but we said nothing else. Eventually Dr. Grover gave up on me being “the white whisperer” and carried on with roll call.

The second the clock hit 8:55 a.m., I shoved my notepad into my backpack and scrambled to World History. I prayed to God it started off on a better foot. I also hoped like hell Kim Carter wasn’t signed up for that class too.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Kim Carter,” the World History professor called out. “Kim Carter.”

I sighed as I mentally prepared myself to be the Ambassador of Whiteville. I also decided when I finally met Kim Carter—if ever—I was kicking her mute ass.

“Okay,” Dr. Harding mumbled to himself, “I’m crossing out Kim Carter’s name.”

I blinked. To my surprise the aging, black professor didn’t even glance in my marshmallow direction. That should have delighted me, but instead it confused me. In that moment I uncomfortably realized I had prejudged the World History professor and painted him with the same brush as Dr. Grover with the very ease Dr. Grover had done to me.

That I had every right and reason to expect prejudice was a valid argument; it just wasn’t the woman I wanted to be. I might have only been eighteen, I might have been confused about my complicated history with and feelings toward DeAndre, but last night after talking to Melissa for two hours on the subject, I knew one thing with perfect clarity:

I didn't want to be a member of anyone's herd. I wanted to use my brain to be the best me I could be. Even if doing so *was* mentally draining.

Dr. Harding would eventually become one of my all-time favorite professors. He was laid back, hopelessly unfashionable, and incredibly witty. He was also intelligent on a level that made him something of an eccentric genius. If there was such a person in the United States who truly didn't see color, he was that man. It was as if his elevated IQ made him obtuse to subjects he viewed as trite—race being at the top of the list. Like a child with Down's Syndrome, he noticed everything that mattered and was blind to what didn't.

I found my first black role model in Dr. Harding. The irony wasn't lost on me.

I elevated this odd but wonderful man to Dr. Nancy Johnson status because he was incapable of seeing race, yet I revered Dr. Johnson for the opposite reason—her ability to not only see the racism that came with the cognizance of color, but her graceful resolve to be above it.

Come to think of it, maybe the reasons I idolized the two genius professors weren't opposing after all. Perhaps Dr. Harding couldn't see race because he'd never had to, whereas Dr. Johnson could because she'd been left with no choice. Whatever the case, both of my role models mattered equally to me because each of them represented different pieces of the person I was determined to become.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh. My. Gawd! Did he really ask you that?"

Seated across from me at a table in the food court, Melissa almost choked on the French fry in her mouth. She was laughing so hard she was snorting. Pretty soon I was giggling too.

"Yeah, he did," I said, chuckling. "I guess he thinks all uncs know each other."

"I'm dying here!" she announced, fanning herself and laughing. "Oh my stomach hurts from this!"

"That wasn't even my worst class." I grinned. "Poli-Sci should be renamed Black Savior 101."

"Poli-Sci? *Whaaaaat?* You don't like Dr. Lincoln?"

My head shot up at the sound of Mike's voice. I smiled at him and his friend Tony as they seated themselves at our table.

"We met at the USA mixer," Tony reminded Melissa.

"Yeah! I totally remember!" she enthused back.

"Mike is in my Poli-Sci class, Liss." My eyes lit up as I looked at my bestie, then to Tony, and finally to Mike. "Should I tell them or do you want the privilege?"

"Oh my Gawd, what happened?" Melissa asked. Her blue eyes widened.

Mike snorted. "What didn't? You start, Alice."

I was glad I was able to joke about it now because at the time I hadn't been laughing. I had felt many things—frustration, irritation, and exhaustion amongst them—but amusement hadn't been in the *mélange* of emotions.

"Don't get me wrong. I mean, Dr. Lincoln is a nice lady."

"She's one of them well-meaning blacks," Mike explained.

I nodded. "Anyway, over the summer she took part in a mission trip to Europe."

"Oh Gawd, I see where this is going already." Melissa shook her head. "But carry on."

"She presented to the class her slideshow photos of the month she spent in Germany helping to build a church for the locals." I grinned. "Every single time a photo of an unc came up? Yeah, she smiled and looked straight at me and Mike."

Melissa and Tony laughed. "Because you had to know them, of course!" Melissa guffawed.

"Of course!"

"I don't know what the hell she was thinking," Mike said. He whistled through his teeth. "I guess me or Alice was supposed to jump up all excited, point at one of the little

marshmallow kids, and go, 'Oh my Gawd, Dr. Lincoln! You totally found my long lost brother, Wolfgang Derflickinfarkin!'"

The table broke into raucous laughter. A few black students shifted their gaze toward us uncomfortably, like they were embarrassed *for* us because they knew what others were likely thinking. Namely that we were loud animals. I was too well-humored to care.

"Derflickinfarkin?" I squeaked, tears of laughter in my eyes. "Seriously?"

Melissa smacked the table. "Oh my Gawd! That is too hysterical!"

After a few minutes of back and forth banter, Mike and Tony asked us if we'd like to catch a movie with them this weekend. A new white comedy was debuting Friday night. It wasn't that I wouldn't watch or didn't enjoy movies with predominantly black casts about predominantly black issues because I did, but sometimes it was a breath of fresh air to watch something on the silver screen that I could relate to on a personal and community level. Hollywood had finally caught onto the fact that uncoloreds wanted to see movies written by and for uncoloreds.

"I'd love to see it, but I'll be broke as a joke on Friday," I admitted. "PBTS covers all our text books on the syllabus, but Dr. Grover wants us to buy and read a book *not* on the syllabus by Monday." I winced. "The damn thing costs sixty dollars."

"Uggh." Melissa sighed. "I hate to say it, but this joke is broke too. I've got the same situation, but in a different class."

"Ladies, we are wounded." Mike feigned a blow to the heart. "I know mutes don't got the best reps for being gentlemen, but Tony and I planned to pay."

My blue eyes rounded. I grinned. "Mike, did you two unc jocks just ask Lissa and I out on dates?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On if you say yes or not."

The table broke into laughter again. Melissa did the answering for both of us.

"If you're payin', we're playin', mutes." She laughed. "Which theater and what time?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tony is so hawt!" Melissa collapsed onto her bed with a dreamy sigh. "That light brown hair and those true blue eyes! Not to mention all those sexy muscles. Mmmm."

I smiled as I climbed into my bed. I wasn't as excited about Friday night's double date as she was, but I was determined to give things with Mike an honest try. I hadn't run into DeAndre today—thankfully—so I still had plenty of time to mull over what exactly my feelings toward him were. Tonight? I was too bone-tired to go there.

"Tony's definitely good-looking," I seconded. "And he was sneaking glances at you through our entire conversation."

Melissa gasped. "You totally swear it?"

"I totally swear it. And by the way, your red hair really sets off your eyes with that new do."

"Thanks!" She smiled as she fluffed her pillow. "Friday night will be a blast even if nothing romantic comes of it. Have you seen the trailer for *Unc-enstein*? Oh my Gawd. Too funny!"

"Yeah I did." I chuckled. "I caught it in the rec room."

I rolled over in bed after Melissa turned out the light. She was silent for so long I thought she'd fallen asleep.

"Alice?"

"Yeah?"

"I just want you to know..." She sighed.

My forehead crinkled. It wasn't like Melissa to hesitate before saying anything. The girl had no filter. "What?" I asked, rolling back to my left side to face her in the dark.

"I just want you to know that no matter who you decide to date, I've got your back. Mike, DeAndre—I don't care. I'm your best friend no matter what."

I smiled in the dark, which she could probably hear in my voice. "Thanks, Liss. And right back at ya."

She harrumphed. "Besides, remember the talk we had the day you moved in?"

"Which one? We talked about a lot."

"How it's not fair that our brothers can date whip—umm—*black* girls and nobody says a word, but if an unc girl dates a black guy the entire mute community acts like we went and betrayed our race."

"Preach. It's like a weird form of misogyny wrapped in uncolored pride."

Melissa harrumphed. "If you weren't an unc I'd never admit what I'm about to say to you out loud..."

My ears perked up. "Go on."

"I just—I don't know. It bothers me that mute guys cheat all the time. I'm not saying all of them, but a lot of them do."

"It's because they can."

"What do you mean?"

It was my turn to sigh. "Three-fourths of our men are locked up at any given time so there is a shortage of available males. Marshmallow women who've been made to feel shunned if they even think about dating a non-mute accept those cheaters back time after time, again and again, rather than be alone." I shook my head, even if she couldn't see it. "I won't let that be me."

"Same here. And everything you said is true."

"Do you think Mike and Tony are prowlers?" *Prowlers* was unc slang for *cheaters*.

"I hope not," Melissa replied. "But even if they are? I don't care. Because I'm with you on this one. I won't be that doormat."

It was a promise we would both keep.

## Chapter Seven

Yesterday's classes—Algebra and Biology—had gone by smoothly and without incident. I wish I could say the same for today's classes.

To be fair, English hadn't exactly been unbearable this morning and World History was always (knock on wood) fine. Dr. Grover had only called me "Kim" once and Dr. Harding was always a breath of fresh air (still knocking on that wood). Political Science, however, brought out the ugly in people. Dr. Lincoln was discussing the country's welfare system and several of the black students were quick to regurgitate the stereotypes their parents had undoubtedly taught them—lies they believed to be truths. Mike didn't show for class today so I was the only mute present.

"Chavella," Dr. Lincoln said, nodding at the black student with her hand raised.

"I just think," Chavella said, "Our tax money shouldn't go toward paying for people who have baby after baby after baby." When other black students murmured their support she continued, "Let them get off their backs, away from the hand-out lines, and into the employment lines."

I grit my teeth. Her ignorance was typical—disgusting and typical.

"I agree with Chavella!" a black, male student said. "My taxes are—"

"Do you have a job?" I asked.

Silence.

"Do you have a job?" I asked again.

He looked flustered. "Not yet, but I—"

"Well I do have a job," I interrupted. "When you join the workforce I'm already a part of then and only then do you have the right to discuss your mythical taxes."

A few students quietly snickered, though at the idiot and not me. And was that a small smile I saw tugging at Dr. Lincoln's lips? Was she actually *glad* I was speaking up?

Chavella huffed. "Whatever! Our parents *do* pay taxes!"



"Good for them," I said. My blue eyes narrowed. "Between collecting paychecks and paying those super-black, patriotic taxes, did they bother mentioning that more blacks than whites receive welfare?"

"I never said only uncoloreds receive welfare!"

"When you imagine a welfare recipient, what color do you see?"

"I-I don't. I'm not a racist." Chavella frowned. "A black person can't say *anything* without a white person getting all butt-hurt and chalking it up to racism."

"What color," I ground out, over-enunciating each word, "do you see?"

Her nostrils flared. She said nothing.

"As I thought." I splayed my hands, going all *white-girl-with-attitude*. I didn't care how anyone felt about it. "If we see color in everything it's because we don't have the privilege of overlooking it like you do."

"Why do you breed like rabbits? I suppose that's 'the black man's' fault too?"

"Jermaine!" Dr. Lincoln gasped. "Apologize to Alice!"

I held up a palm and verbally pounced. "First of all, I don't want an insincere apology. Secondly, not all of us 'breed like rabbits'. And thirdly, yes."

Nearly every pair of brown eyes in the lecture hall widened, the professor's included. It was quiet enough to hear the proverbial pin drop.

"How on earth is it my fault you people choose to have so many kids?" Jermaine snapped.

You people. I would have laughed if I wasn't so pissed off.

"Let me ask you this, Jermaine..."

"Okay?"

"Why do you celebrate Christmas?"

He rolled his eyes. "What does Chris —"

"Just answer the question!"

"Fine." His smile was as fake as the Rolex he wore. "I celebrate Christmas because I'm a Christian."

"It's a pagan holiday."

"Whatever!" He threw his hands up. "I celebrate it because it's a cultural tradition."

"A cultural tradition. I see. And why do you go to college?"

"Uhhh...because I want a good job," he said patronizingly.

"And why do you want a good job?" I continued, undeterred.

"This is stup—because I want to make good money, genius!"

"Why do you want to make good money?" I shrugged. "You can always marry a woman who makes good money and be a stay-at-home dad."

"Real men don't do that. Real men provide for their family—at least half the income, hopefully more."

"So you would feel like less of a man if you didn't have an income?"

"Yes."

I went in for the kill. "Cultural tradition and not feeling *less than* is important to blacks then?"

He sighed. "Yeah." Jermaine rolled his eyes again, earning him some supportive murmurs. "Now what does any of this have—"

"Cultural tradition and not feeling *less than* is important to whites too." I wanted to physically smack that smug look off his face, but I settled for the verbal equivalent. "You have cultural traditions handed down from generation to generation and we do too." My gaze bore into his. "During slavery—you know, that subject you tell us to 'get over' and don't like talking about? For the three hundred and fifty years of the European slave trade an uncolored woman's worth was determined by how many babies she bred for the *massa*. The more babies she bore, the more worthy she was."

The room grew dead silent again. If I managed to at least plant the seed of thinking in one black person's head today, I'd consider this ordeal worth it.

"Three hundred and fifty years...imagine that," I said. "Do you think beliefs and cultural traditions forced on us for three hundred and fifty years will change quickly? The last living, freed slave died when my mom was the age I am now, maybe a little older, so it's not like the institution of slavery is *that* antiquated." My jaw tightened. "The number of children an uncolored woman bears still reflects on her feelings of self-worth even if the reason that belief came to be has been removed. Yes, that is the fault of 'the black man'." My next words were ground out. "So until you've walked a mile in an uncolored woman's shoes do not *dare* judge us."

Silence. I glanced around at the black faces that outnumbered me 30:1. If I wasn't mistaken, some of them looked...I don't know. Sadness mixed with surprise perhaps?

"Well," Dr. Lincoln said quietly, "Alice has given all of us, myself included, things to think about." Her smile was kind. "Thank you for sharing with us, Alice. I'm not ashamed to admit I didn't know that historical information. I'm grateful to you for enlightening me."

I blinked. I hadn't seen that coming.

"You're welcome," I said slowly. I cleared my throat. "And thank you for listening with an open heart."

The professor nodded before dismissing class. "I'll see everyone Friday."

It was my last class of the day so I took my time putting my textbook and notes away. I had another twenty minutes before Melissa and I were to meet in the food court for lunch, approximately forty minutes to eat and chat with her, and then it was off to work I'd go.

"Alice?"

I glanced up. It was Chavella. Uggh. I mentally prepared myself for whatever it was she was about to say. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry." She swallowed. "You're right. I shouldn't have judged you without first walking in your shoes."

My entire body tensed. "Thank you," I whispered. My smile was genuine if a bit unsteady. "I'll try to always do the same for you."

"Here's my number," Chavella said, handing me a piece of paper. "Call me if you'd ever like to study together, hang out—whatever." Her smile was self-deprecating. "I promise we—I—don't bite."

I couldn't help but grin. "We—I—don't either." I shrugged. "Except on Tuesdays."

She laughed. "So call me on any day but a Tuesday."

I slowly inclined my head. "I will."

\* \* \* \* \*

Work was grueling. I did more running around in the Athletic Center today than most athletes do on the field. I couldn't wait to go back to Beta Hall and take a long, hot shower. I knew every muscle in my body would be aching tomorrow.

I glanced at my watch. Only forty-five minutes left to go.

"Alice, can you run these new keys over to Coach Herns?" my boss asked.

Antoine Davis was a handsome, forty-something-year-old black man in charge of the entire Athletic department. He was always kind, a very hard worker, and currently looked as tired as I felt.

"Of course." I smiled as I held out my hand for the keys. "What is it with coaches losing their keys today?"

"Pffft! Tell me about it!" He chuckled as he dropped the keys into my palm. "Only forty-five minutes left to go."

"You're counting too?"

"Every damn second."

I giggled. "I'll be back as quickly as my sore feet will carry me, Mr. Davis."

"Take your time, Alice. I know today has been a bear."

I turned to walk away and then remembered something. I glanced over my shoulder at my boss. "Didn't you say something about needing a folder delivered to Coach Herns too?"

"Oh right!" Mr. Davis rifled through his desk. "Thank you for remembering," he muttered, still rifling. "Sweet Jesus, this day can't end soon enough."

Twenty seconds later, keys and folder in hand, I made my way toward Coach Herns' office. I overheard Mike and Tony talking animatedly to someone so I poked my head into the room to give them a quick hello before continuing on.

I stilled. And did a double take.

"You are one *fiiiine* black girl," Mike purred to a cheerleader who looked very interested in his attention. "When you gonna let a mute take you out?"

She blinked coquettishly. "When does he want to?"

"Friday night?" Mike asked.

My eyes widened and my jaw dropped. That sleazy son of a —

"Saturday night," Tony said, his attention on another cheerleader. "We got, uh, practice on Friday night, remember?"

"Oh right." Mike nodded. "But I'll skip practice if LaShawna says yes."

My heart dropped. I felt sick inside. I was nothing but a back-up plan. In the blink of an eye I felt like that ugly, plain, little marshmallow girl all over again.

"I wouldn't want you to miss practice for me," LaShawna gushed.

"I don't mind missing it at all," Mike said.

I wanted to cry. Or kill him where he stood. I forced my emotions to go numb and planted a fake smile on my face.

"Good news!" I said loudly, startling Mike and Tony. "Practice on Friday night just got cancelled."

They stared at me, wide-eyed, but said nothing.

"LaShawna?" I asked, still smiling. "I'm Alice. You and your friend have fun on Friday night with Mike and Tony."

LaShawna smiled back, oblivious to the backstory playing itself out. "Thanks! It's nice to meet you, Alice!"

"The pleasure has all been mine." I glanced at Mike and Tony then back to the cheerleader. "See you around."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Those mute sons of bitches!" Melissa bellowed. "I want to go bite the white clean off them!"

Freshly showered, I harrumphed as I let my robe fall to the floor of our dorm room. I proceeded to put my pajamas on. This pair was exactly like my pink ones, but in blue. "You know what's funny?"

"Nothing?"

I grinned at that. "I was *soooo* hurt when I first overheard them, but now I feel..." I shrugged. "I'm not sure. Free, maybe?"

Melissa splayed her hands. "Damn straight. We're free to find us some LaShawnas now too. Well, you know. LaShawns – dudes."

"Good lord, don't date a guy just to get back at those prowlers." I shook my head. "Not fair to him or you."

She sighed. "I wouldn't do that. I'm just talking smack."

"I know."

Melissa plopped down onto her bed. She had showered before I got off work so was already in her snuggly PJs. "Why did they even ask us out, Alice?"

"I don't know." I reflected on the subject a bit more. "Maybe it all goes back to the mute prowler thing."

"And since mutes are supposed to be wild animals in bed, LaShawna's got some Mountain-Fever."

"Preach."

Melissa plopped her face in between her palms. "You wanna go halvesies on a pizza? I'm hungry and I've got PMS."

"Sure." I winced. "I think my period is coming too."

"That's not the PMS I've got."

I quirked an eyebrow.

"Post Mute Syndrome," Melissa clarified. "Hopefully the pizza will keep it from reaching Postal Mute Syndrome."

"Listen to you!" I shook my head a bit as I laughed. "I'll take extra cheese and light sauce on my half."

Melissa grinned, displaying neat, white teeth. "I'll call now."

## Chapter Eight

"Alice, you can leave after you run these folders to the proper coaches," Mr. Davis told me.

It was Friday. I was more than ready for the weekend to officially commence—even if part of it would be spent reading that dumb English Lit book—but I didn't want to go back to my dorm early.

"Thank you," I said slowly. I hesitated. "To be honest, sir, I really need the hours though. Every cent of my pay is already accounted for."

He blinked. "What mess are you talkin'? You were here til five o'clock. I dare anyone to say otherwise."

I tried not to laugh. "Thanks, Mr. Davis."

He gave me a congenial wink. "You're a hard worker, Alice. If anyone deserves a break it's you."

My heart warmed at the compliment. I was so happy he'd noticed all the effort I put into every task assigned to me.

"Thank you," I said again. "Genuinely." I picked up the folders and turned to walk away.

"Alice," Mr. Davis said, stopping me.

I halted in place and turned back around. "Yes sir?"

"You might think I don't understand why you bust your ass three times harder than any other student working here, but I do get it."

I doubted that, but didn't say as much. I nodded respectfully instead. Just as I was about to walk away again he pulled out his wallet and showed me one of those J.C. Penney's kind of photographs of him, two mixed race children, and a marshmallow woman. My eyes widened.

"That's my wife, Elizabeth," he said proudly. "And our two daughters."

"Your family is beautiful," I whispered.



"I might not get what you're going through like it happens to me, but I see what my wife has to put up with at her job. It sends me into a rage truth be told."

My heart was in my eyes. I'd never had much contact with black people until I arrived at USF. They were turning out to be less homogenous than I'd always presumed them to be.

Yes, becoming a thinking person was mentally tiring. It was also worth it.

"You're gonna be all right, kid," Mr. Davis assured me, smiling. "There's something special about you and I don't just mean your work ethic." His expression turned contemplative. "I can't quite put my finger on it. I talked out my thoughts on you with my wife and according to her sometimes you can just tell certain people are destined for greatness." He nodded. "You're at the top of that list, Alice."

I was stunned. I didn't know what to say. Never before in my life had someone — *anyone* — made me feel so humbled and empowered all at once.

"Thank you, Mr. Davis," I said quietly. "I'll do my best to never disappoint you."

He smiled. "Go on and take the folders to them pain in my ass coaches. Then go enjoy your weekend."

I smiled back. "You enjoy your weekend too, sir."

I rode my bicycle back from the Athletic Center to the Argos Complex. I decided to use the two-hour gift from my boss as time to get that book read for English Lit. All my other assignments were finished. Once I got that paperback out of the way the weekend would officially be mine.

My cell phone dinged, letting me know I'd received a text message. I locked my bicycle up to one of the various posts made for them, grabbed my backpack, and pulled out my cell. It was from Chavella.

*Wanna chill 2nite?*

I smiled and typed back.

*Sure. I've got 2 read a book 4 English first tho. What time u thinkin?*

I put my cell back and walked through the doors to Beta Hall. My phone dinged again, telling me she'd replied. I decided to wait to read the message until after I got to my dorm room.

Today was a wonderful day because of Mr. Davis. I was lost in thought as I made my way past the rec center and to the door of my room. Me? Destined for greatness? Had he been anything but completely sincere I would have thought he was just saying such things to be nice. I smiled to myself as I sank the room key into the lock.

"Hi Alice."

My head shot up. I had been too distracted to notice him hovering nearby.

"Hi Mike," I sighed. I turned to face him. "What do you want?"

"I saw you walk in and I just wanted to apologize for —"

I held up a palm. "It's fine."

He made an exasperated sound. "Alice, come on. Don't be like that."

"Don't be like what? Someone with self-respect?"

"It's not like you and I are in a relationship!" Mike argued.

This was a ridiculous conversation I didn't have the time for or interest in. "I thought we were in a friendship," I said honestly. "Friends don't treat friends like disposable trash."

He rolled his eyes. "I didn't act that bad."

I blinked. Only a self-absorbed ass would downplay what he'd done.

"I thought maybe we could try this again," Mike said.

My jaw dropped. Was he an idiot or just that self-entitled? Wrong unc, wrong trailer park. "What's the problem? Did LaShawna decide she didn't wanna go mute after all so you're willing to lower yourself to 'practice' again?" I splayed my hands. "As I said, totally not interested."

There was a gleam in his green eyes that didn't set well with me. "You got a lot of attitude for a skinny little see-through bitch."

Mike was purposely taking a jab at my self-esteem. Two weeks ago that rejoinder would have stung. Today it just made me realize how utterly pathetic he was. I smiled without humor.

"You think I haven't seen this mute behavior before?" I asked. "You think I'm too stupid to figure out the lengths an unc will sink to in order to degrade uncolored women into feeling too ugly to attract anyone else?" My laugh was taunting. "You're not the sharpest tool in the football shed, are you?"

His jaw tightened. "You think you'll find a better mute than me?" he ground out.

I vigorously nodded. "I could wear a blindfold, get spun around until I'm dizzy, stumble back to the crowd, and the first man I touched? Yeah. *Wayyy* better than you." I rolled my eyes. "Unc or no unc."

"Unc or no unc? *Oooooohhh* I see now." His smile was pure malice. "You dating whippers now cos you can't handle a real mute?"

"Hmmm. If I ever meet a 'real mute' I'll be sure to let you know," I said grandly. "Maybe LaShawna can have her friends spell it out on the field for you. Gimme a M, gimme a U, gimme a T and an E!" I splayed my hands. "That's assuming you can sound out spelled words, of course."

"You uppity, marshmallow bitch!" He grabbed me by the shirt and jerked me forward, causing me to drop my backpack. "You're lucky I even gave your ugly ass the time of day!"

"Let go of me." My nostrils flared as adrenaline caused my heart rate to skyrocket. "Now."

He grabbed my shirt tighter. He leaned in closer. "Maybe I should just rape your ugly ass and show you who's a real mute."

"If I'm so ugly, why are you so obsessed with me?" My blue eyes narrowed. "Let go of me. *Now*."

He threw me against the door so hard it exploded open. "You need to remember who you're dealing with. After I put this inside you, you won't forget again."

I kicked my backpack inside the room and turned to face him. "I suggest you leave." A small crowd had gathered, though they kept a distance. "Before I call the campus police."

"Dude," Tony called out. "What are you doing, man?"

Mike was beyond rationality. I had defied everything he'd learned by example while growing up of how to keep an unc girl in her place. He lurched toward me. I totally lost it.

I screamed out a war cry as I launched myself at him, causing both of us to fall to the ground. He tried to swing at me, but I was much smaller and faster. I pounded my fist into his face multiple times in rapid succession, my knee grinding into his testicles simultaneously. He screamed as I went crazy on him, pummeling him with my fists.

"You don't *ever* lay your hands on a mute bitch from a doublewide!" I raged, kneeling him harder. "Come near me again and I will *kill* your stupid, mute ass!"

At that moment two strong arms reached down and plucked me off him. I turned to attack the new threat when I realized it was DeAndre. I blinked. My heart was still pounding in my ears, but some of the fight went out of me.

"It's okay, Alice," he murmured. "I'm here."

DeAndre set me down beside him and turned to face Mike. The fury in DeAndre's face practically scared me.

"You like hitting girls?" DeAndre bellowed. "You wanna fight someone, you fight me! Get on your damn feet! Or did this tiny girl do you in too bad?"

The crowd started to snicker. My breathing was labored as I watched Mike watch me through enraged eyes. My jaw tightened as I met his gaze with equal ferocity.

A black girl I didn't know rushed to my side. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly, her expression concerned.

I needed to calm down. I didn't want to scare someone showing me kindness.

I nodded. "Yeah." I took a deep breath. "Sorry you had to see that."

"Girrrrl," she grinned. "I'm not! You a badass!"

I found my first semi-smile. "Thanks."

"Get him out of here," DeAndre barked to his friends. "Jefferson, D-Dog..." He shook his head. "Before I kill him, get his ass out of my sight."

"What's going on here?" an unc resident advisor asked while rushing down the hall. DeAndre's friends forced Mike to his feet. The guy DeAndre had called Jefferson gave the RA the breakdown. The advisor frowned at Mike. "Please continue to hold him until the campus police arrive. They've already been called."

"Will do," Jefferson agreed.

By the time all was said and done my two-hour reprieve was gone, a hysterical Melissa had returned from work, and a shocked Chavella had walked over to check on me. I assured everyone I was okay, but they piled into my and Liss's dorm room regardless. I was touched. Slightly embarrassed, but very moved.

Mike, thankfully, faced expulsion. The RA assured me it was all but a done deal. I was so grateful there had been black witnesses because I knew if it had come down to an unc "he said, she said" situation, the inmate waiting to happen would have gotten away with it altogether. Especially considering the only physical damage that had been done was to him.

"You should have seen her," my newly made friend, Vantrice, told a wide-eyed Melissa and Chavella. "Girlfriend knocked that mo fo to the ground!"

Melissa and Chavella squealed with excitement. I hesitantly smiled at DeAndre, his bemused expression making me wonder if he felt proud of me. It sure seemed so.

"And then," Vantrice exclaimed, "she told him, 'You don't *ever* lay your hands on a a'...well, m-word...'bitch from a doublewide!"

"Oh my God!" Chavella laughed.

M-word? I shook my head a bit, smiling. "It's okay to say the word when you're quoting me," I assured Vantrice.

"Yeah," Melissa grinned. "We won't go doublewide on ya."

Everyone in the dorm room shared a group laugh over that quip. Even I couldn't help but giggle.

I was surprised we could all fit inside the tiny room. Chavella, Melissa, and Vantrice sat on Melissa's bed, Jefferson, D-Dog, and DeAndre sat on mine, and I sat in the chair from the desk I shared with my roomie.

"I just don't feel comfortable using that word," Vantrice said. "Not even when quoting you." Her expression was apologetic. "Sorry."

Melissa and I shared a confused look. "You never use the word 'mute'?" I asked.

"No!"

"Hell naw!"

"No way!"

Vantrice, Chavella, and Jefferson were quick to wave that away. "Only blacknecks talk like that," Vantrice said. Her hand flew to her heart. "My parents would have washed my mouth out with soap!"

"Same," Chavella squeaked. "Blacknecks are too embarrassing!"

"Word," Jefferson confirmed.

I glanced at DeAndre. His expression was guilty.

"I used it once," D-Dog quietly admitted. "I'm sorry."

Melissa and I blinked at each other. "Did you tell the person you said it to sorry?" Melissa asked.

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Then why are you apologizing to us?"

His brown eyes rounded. "I don't know." He glanced back and forth between Melissa and me. "Is that wrong?"

"No," I assured him. I smiled. "The point Melissa is trying to make is we just want to be normal people to you and normal people learn by making stupid mistakes." My gaze clashed with DeAndre's. "You don't have to walk on eggshells around us. If you

say something stupid, I'll smack the black off you." I returned my gaze to D-Dog. "I guarantee you'll learn that way."

DeAndre smiled. The room broke into laughter again.

Vantrice raised her hand. "After watching Alice go doublewide this evening, I vote she only does that to the brothas. Just pinch me or something. I'm too soft for all that mess!"

More laughter. Jefferson clapped his hands together. "Word. I'm with Vantrice, yo!"

Pretty soon we were all laughing so hard that weird little noises were erupting from all of us. Snorts, guffaws — you name it, we made the sound. Then we laughed at that.

"This has been fun," Vantrice said. "My boyfriend will be here to pick me up for date night soon so I gotta go dress, but lets trade cell numbers! Oh and if you need anything, I'm down the hall that way." She pointed east. "Just two doors down from here."

I spouted out my cell number so Vantrice could put it in her phone. She sent me a text message to make sure she'd input it correctly.

"Yep, I got it." I smiled up at her as another text came in. "I'll store yours in mine now."

"Okay. I'll see everyone later!"

I glanced down at my phone as the others gave Vantrice their goodbyes. The second text that had come in was from DeAndre. My heart thumped pleasurably in my chest as I read it.

*Glad I got ur # now. I plan 2 use it.*

The others were busily talking to each other so I smiled as I typed back.

*That a threat?*

I saw him grin as he typed back to me.

*Naw. Just a promise.*

"Oh my Gawd. Are you two actually texting each other?" Melissa asked.

I frowned at her lack of filter. "No," I lied at the exact moment DeAndre said, "Yes." Another round of laughter ensued.

"Well," Melissa announced, "I vote we leave Romeo and Juliet to talk alone while the rest of us get something to eat."

I blushed. DeAndre grinned.

"Word," Jefferson seconded. "I am one hungry mo fo."

"Same," Chavella groaned.

"I'm down," D-Dog nodded.

"Actually," I interjected, "I'm so hungry my belly hurts. Can somebody bring us some food?"

"I got us," DeAndre said before the others could speak. "If you're okay with ordering in?"

The butterflies were causing more commotion in my belly than hunger pangs were. I nodded. "Sounds good."



## Chapter Nine

I couldn't remember ever being this nervous. Thankfully DeAndre was behaving a bit shy himself. I knew one thing that needed accomplished.

"While you order dinner," I said, "do you mind if I change out of my work uniform?"

"No, of course not." His expression grew thoughtful. "Are you wanting to shower?" He shrugged. "I'm cool with waiting here if you're cool with me being here."

I really did want to shower. I was such a creature of habit when it came to certain things. Plus I wanted to wash the Mike off me.

"Are you sure?" I asked hesitantly. "I don't want to be rude."

"It's not rude at all. Besides, I know it's been a messed up day." He glanced around. "No TV?"

"No, sorry. I'll get one when I can afford to. I figure I'll have enough money saved up by...ohhh...never."

We grinned at each other. The nervousness was wearing off.

"You got a laptop?" DeAndre asked.

My smile faded. I was starting to feel like a piece of po-dunk trailer trash. "No, sorry."

"It's okay," he said quickly. "I'll play a game on my cell phone." He smiled. "Go shower and I'll order dinner."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

I nodded. "Okay then. Thanks." I opened the closet and grabbed my toiletry case. "I'll be right back."

By the time the hot water hit my naked body, I was a thousand times more grateful for DeAndre's thoughtfulness than before, which was saying a lot. A part of me, the

little girl from the doublewide, still felt like a deer caught in headlights that DeAndre Jones was sitting in my dorm room waiting on me. The other part of me, the young woman coming into her own, just wanted to get to know him—the real him—without all the past baggage.

I knew that would take time for both of us. Something deep down inside assured me it'd be worth it.

My parents wouldn't be pleased if something romantic came of my friendship with DeAndre. I wondered how his parents would feel. Would he tell them if it came to that? Or would he want to keep me a hidden part of his life? I knew I couldn't accept such a situation, knew too I'd be unable to forgive him if that ever played itself out.

*Why are you buying yourself problems, Alice? You've shared one kiss! Slow down.*

I towed off and put on my black pajamas. Ordinarily I didn't change in the shower, but as my dorm room was just that—one room—and there was a guy sitting in it...

Yeah. I put my pajamas on in the shower area.

"Great," I muttered to myself, "I forgot my bra."

I sighed. Being ever cognizant of the stereotypes surrounding uncolored women, the last thing on earth I wanted to appear was in any way sexually promiscuous. I shrugged. At least this pajama outfit was black. It was similar in style to my others, but not as sheer because of the color.

My mind had been too preoccupied earlier to notice what DeAndre was wearing, but as I opened the door to my room and saw him sitting at my desk, I realized he was, as always, dressed stylishly. Casual, but trendy. His black jeans looked crisp, brand new and off the rack, while his athletic shoes were Pete Robertsons—the latest brand name craze endorsed by an unc soccer player. The tight, white t-shirt he wore hugged his perfect musculature and caused his ebony skin to radiate. His hair was buzzed close to his head, underlining the fact that even that part of his anatomy was perfectly sculpted.

I swallowed. DeAndre Jones was beautiful. Not just handsome, but beautiful. Like a work of art.

His light brown eyes lit up when he saw me walk in. His gaze flicked over my body before settling back on my face. "Cute PJs."

"Thanks," I said, feeling shy again. I absently noted the laptop he'd been on and did a double take. "You had yours with you?"

"Naw. I ran to my room and got it. I'm only like ten doors down, you know."

"No. I didn't know that." I walked toward where he sat. "I don't know much about laptops, but that looks nice."

"You like it?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'm giving it to you."

I stilled. My blue eyes rounded. "De—"

"I have three," DeAndre interrupted. "I never even use this one."

It was an incredibly kind gesture, but I didn't feel right accepting such an expensive gift. I told him so.

"Too bad," he said.

"Too bad?" I bemusedly replied.

"Yep." He grinned, showing off his straight white teeth and adorable dimples. "This isn't a totally selfless act on my part because now we can use video chat together." He pointed at a second laptop, obviously the one he used regularly.

"Video chat?" I'd heard of it, of course, but had no clue how it worked. "It was all I could do in high school to figure out email for computer class."

"Be patient. I'm gonna teach ya."

His excitement was catching. I watched him click on an icon and bring up the video chat service.

"One nice thing about Argos Complex is the free wifi," he told me.

"They don't have it in all the dorms?"

"Naw. I don't know why, but this is the only complex that has it."

I suspected it was because Argos mainly housed the children of affluent black people, but I said nothing. There was a time for politics and there was a time to breathe; this Friday night qualified as the latter.

"Let me install this one program," DeAndre said, "and then we can sit on the floor and practice if that's cool?"

His eyes shone bright; I couldn't bring myself to turn down his thoughtful gift. "Sure. I'd really like that."

Twenty minutes later I was something of a video chat guru. We laughed as we sat across from each other and talked on the screens. A knock sounded at the door, interrupting us.

"That's probably dinner," DeAndre said, standing up. "I'll be right back."

Thirty seconds later he returned with bags full of food. My eyes widened. "Did you order the entire menu?" I laughed.

"Naw. Just half."

Five minutes later, the contents of the bags were spread out on the floor. He'd ordered from Donatellos—an Italian eatery. Most black people referred to it as ethnic food. Most uncolored people referred to it as...well...*food*.

"This," I said, munching on a breadstick, "tastes like Heaven."

"You taste better."

I stilled. My pulse picked up from his very unsubtle reminder of the kiss we'd shared. I swallowed and blushed simultaneously.

"Sorry," DeAndre chuckled, sounding not sorry at all. "I couldn't resist."

I don't know what made me admit it, but the words came out of my mouth. "That was my first time."

His smile faded into a serious expression. "Your first...kiss?"

I nodded and tore off another piece of breadstick with my teeth. "Yeah."

He was so quiet I wondered if that knowledge was a turn-off. I pretended like I wasn't affected, but steeled myself for whatever he'd say next.

"I'm honored," he murmured.

My gaze clashed with his. I swallowed the bite of breadstick. "Yeah?"

"You think I wouldn't be?"

I shrugged. "I don't know much about these things," I admitted. "I never had time to do anything back home but study. Scholarships are increasingly hard to come by and I had to make sure I was one of the lucky ones."

His gaze hardened. "Alice, there was no luck involved. You earned your place here."

"You sound angry."

"I am. Don't ever underestimate your value to me again."

I was so taken aback I didn't know what to say. I hadn't even realized I was devaluing myself until he'd pointed it out. That DeAndre had noticed when I had failed to warmed my heart. "Okay," I whispered. "I won't."

We stared at each other in silence. An unbreakable bond forged us together in that moment.

"I can't stand the thought of you dating another guy," DeAndre murmured. "Or kissing another guy. Or looking at another guy. Or eventually having...you know...with another guy."

Wow. "My heart races every time I see you," I confessed a bit shakily. "In my entire life, you're the only guy it's ever raced for."

His eyes widened. He stilled. "I'm not gonna lie and say I haven't been with other girls," he told me. His gaze bore into mine. "But I can tell you with one hundred percent honesty I've been in love with you my whole damn life."

Silence.

"DeAndre..."

"I know you don't feel the same way, Alice. I just —"

"Then you don't know much at all."

Our gazes searched each other's. I could see his breathing grow as labored as mine. He slowly opened his arms.

I molded into his embrace as if it had been created for only me. At complete odds with our first kiss, which had been soft and uncertain, our lips smashed together, hard and sure. We kissed forever and not long enough, our tongues wrestling and our hearts racing. I could feel him harden beneath me. He tore his lips from mine.

"Alice," he panted, "we have to stop before I can't."

I didn't want to stop kissing, but I knew I wasn't ready to have sex with him. I wasn't on birth control and had no condoms anyway, even if I had been ready. I relented, not wanting to be a tease.

"You're right," I whispered back. I took a deep breath before offering him a shaky smile. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he murmured. "Just be mine."

I looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't want us to see other people. I mean I want to take you out on real dates." His expression was a bit unsure. "I want to...you know...the boyfriend and girlfriend thing."

I couldn't help but giggle. "Do all black guys take a person around the block to get across the street or is that just you?"

He grinned. "It's a black thang."

I grinned back. "I'll answer you in black then."

He quirked an eyebrow.

"I was thinking," I mimicked in proper English, "that maybe I could possibly...you know...I think perhaps...say, well...okay. Dawg."

"You're a brat." DeAndre laughed. "But you're my brat now so I can deal with it."

I gave him a quick kiss on his nose. "Let's finish eating. We barely got started so my belly will be growling shortly."

"Word." He returned my kiss with one planted on my forehead. "I'm hungry too."

\* \* \* \* \*

"And then what happened?"

Melissa was hanging onto my every word. She was as excited as I was about tonight's events. We both had the world's dopiest grins plastered on our faces.

"We ate dinner and then he taught me more stuff about the laptop and using the Internet." My eyes glittered. "We also have a date tomorrow night to see *Unc-enstein*."

"That makes two of us." At my inquiring look, Melissa explained, "Jefferson and I really hit it off! He asked me out and I said yes."

"No way!"

"Way!"

We giggled like loons. We giggled with the carefree vivaciousness of two eighteen-year-old girls – a luxury that poverty and circumstance had rarely afforded us.

Melissa and I couldn't allow ourselves to ever make the mistake so many black kids made by not putting our classes first. If a black student earned a bad grade, chances were he or she didn't have a scholarship they had to worry about getting revoked...and mommy and daddy would likely pay for them to retake the class. Every grade Melissa and I earned, on the other hand, mattered and counted. There was a lot more performance pressure on us, knowing that our every choice made the difference between staying at USF or being tossed back into the trailer park.

I'm sure there were black PBTS students who knew how we felt. They just didn't tend to be the norm, at least not in my experience.

"Maybe we can go on a double date tomorrow night?" Melissa asked.

I shrugged. "I don't see why not."

We went back to eating leftovers and animatedly chattering about our respective nights. Apparently Chavella and D-Dog were a thing now too. Who knows? Maybe we'd end up on a triple date Saturday night.

I fell in bed around one o'clock in the morning feeling the happiest I'd ever been. I was young, in love, had an awesome best friend, was earning my degree, and felt like a world of possibilities awaited me.

My cell phone vibrated. I picked it up and read the text message from DeAndre.

*Miss u already. Can't wait 4 tomorrow brat.*

I grinned as I typed back.

*Miss u 2. Don't go round the block 2 get down the hall when u come 4 me.*

I hit the send button, waited for the message to upload, and then put my cell on the nightstand. I smiled as I turned out the light and snuggled into my warm covers.

I didn't know if I was destined for greatness, but for the first time in my uncertain life I allowed myself to believe I was destined for happiness.



## Chapter Ten

*I hear u and D-dog are a thing ☺*

*Say whaaaat?!*

*No?*

*Hell naw! Girl, he gay as the day is long.*

I almost choked on my coffee as I read Chavella's last text. I quickly typed out my next reply. *D-Dog is gay?*

*He listens 2 classical music, his dorm room is cleaner than either of ours & his favorite movie is a musical. U tell me!!!!!!*

I laughed. Yep, D-Dog got his bread buttered on the opposite side. *That's kewl. I don't care. But LOL @ ur description!!!*

*He's a cool brotha & I'm 4 gay rights 2.*

That was good to know. I was growing very fond of Chavella so I'd purposely avoided asking her for her views on the subject of marriage equality. There weren't many issues that were a deal breaker for me, but that was one of them. I knew myself well enough to realize I couldn't abide bigotry in any form. Ignorance of particular subject matters was amendable—people could learn—but blind bigotry? I was yet to meet a bigot who'd had a "come to Jesus" moment and changed their ways.

My parents were religious so gay marriage was a sore subject back home. Homosexuality was frowned on in most trailer parks, which had always struck me as odd. I mean, I understood how much the church had meant to my people since the days of slavery, providing hope for a happy afterlife during a miserable present one. What I couldn't understand, religious or not, was an oppressed minority subjugating another oppressed minority. In my mind that phenomenon went together as well as water and oil.

A knock sounded at my door. I glanced up from where I was sitting on my bed. My gaze instantly narrowed.

The door was open because Melissa had gone for more coffee and was coming right back. Apparently she should have taken her key. This was one face I had hoped not to see any time soon. "What do you want, Tony?"

"Just to talk," he said quietly. "Please."

"If you're here to talk me out of demanding Mike's expulsion you're wasting your breath."

"I'm definitely not here for that. Can I come in, please? The door is open so you're cool."

"Oh I'm cool anyway." I sighed. "Fine." I waved a hand agitatedly. "Take a seat at my desk."

I quickly typed back to Chavella that I had to go before setting down my cell and giving Tony my attention. "So...?"

He was quiet for a moment. His appearance was haggard, his expression unreadable. "Yesterday was messed up. I'm sorry that happened, Alice."

I crossed my arms under my breasts. "I'm not angry with you for yesterday. I was there. I'm aware you weren't egging Mike on." My gaze seared into his. "What I do have a problem with is how you disrespected my best friend."

"I have a problem with it too," he muttered.

I quirked an eyebrow. Tony sighed and absently scratched his five o'clock shadow.

"I heard what you said to Mike yesterday," Tony admitted. "You know...about how low a mute will go to keep a girl insecure so he can play the prowler?" He shook his head. "That ain't the man I want to be. I don't ever want to be like my worthless ass daddy."

My gaze softened. "I'm happy to hear that, Tony," I said truthfully. "I really am."

He smiled without humor. "I was hoping Lissa would be here so I could apologize to both of you. I guess —"

"I'm here," Melissa interjected. She was carrying our coffees. "I heard what you said." She walked into the room and handed me my salted caramel mocha latte. "I appreciate you having the gonads to apologize in person."

"I've got a lot of junk to work out in my head, you know?" At our inquiring glances Tony clarified, "It's one thing to want to be a good man. It's another thing to be one. I'm sure you know how mute dudes go to acting, pressuring everyone in the T-park to be as hypersexual as they were taught to be." He scratched at the stubble on his face again. "I swear if you don't got at least three girls going at the same time it's like there's something wrong with you."

Melissa and I nodded thoughtfully. There was no denying what Tony had said. I'd never scrutinized it from the male unc point of view – probably because I couldn't – but everything he said made sense and rang true to me.

"Maybe it's because we're stereotyped as hypersexual by virtue of our race," I offered. "And by virtue of sexism..." I shrugged.

"Mute guys embrace the label and mute girls shun it," Melissa finished. "Huh. Interesting."

"Interesting?" Tony frowned. "It's damn depressing! I don't want to think I act a certain way *because of* the man. We're supposed to be behaving in spite of him not because of him." His lips puckered. "Then again knowing it is now curing me with a quickness."

Melissa and I burst into laughter. Tony found his first small smile.

"Think y'all can forgive me and we can be friends again?" Tony asked us.

Melissa and I glanced at each other and then back to him. "I don't know," Melissa drawled out, "a mute in recovery as a friend?"

"Sounds kind of dangerous," I teased alongside her. "What happens if he relapses during a USA meeting or something?"

"We'll have to call Animal Control."

"Or the zoo. A primate specialist maybe."

Tony chuckled. "Is that a yes, sistah uncs?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

"Me too," Melissa added. "Yes."

"Cool." Tony smiled. "Speaking of the USA, anybody know when our next meeting is?"

"Ummm..." I held my coffee in one hand and pulled up the calendar in my cell with the other. "It says two more weeks until the next meeting." I looked up, frowning. "Can that be right?"

"Yeah." Melissa took a sip from her coffee before explaining. "Someone at the mixer told me things don't pick up until we've been here a month. At least not for the Freshies."

"Ahh." I nodded. "Makes sense."

"I'm still getting used to practicing football at the crack of dawn," Tony admitted. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph you'd think they'd wait til after classes instead of before."

I harrumphed. "Earlier than English at eight in the morning?"

"Yeah. Much. Try five-thirty!"

"Ouch!" I said.

"Dang!" Melissa exclaimed simultaneously.

"What are y'all doing tonight?" Tony asked. "I still wanna see *Unc-enstein*. Man I love any movie Bob Thomas is in!"

"Actually," Melissa said, "we are going to the movies. But..."

"We have dates," I finished.

"Oh. Anybody I know?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, probably," I said. "DeAndre and Jefferson. They play for the same —"

"I know who they are." Tony's voice went cold. His jaw tightened. "My question is *why?*"

Melissa cast her gaze to the ground. I was tempted to do the same and loathed myself for it.

"Because they are nice to us," I replied evenly, meeting his gaze. "Because they treat us with respect. And because we like them."

Tony rubbed his jaw. "I guess I deserved that."

I rolled my eyes, exasperated. "Tony, it's not about *you*! Why do uncolored guys act like it's a personal vendetta if an unc girl dates a black guy, but we're supposed to be all love and rainbows and unicorns when y'all bring home a black girl?" My nostrils flared. "Remember the wagon? You're already falling off it!"

He chuckled. "Never really thought about it like that."

"Well think about it," I said. "It's not too early to go doublewide on you."

The three of us burst out laughing. And just that quickly everything between us was fine.

"I knew there was something funky about Mike," Tony said, growing serious. "But damn! I did not see *that* coming."

I snorted. "Which part?"

"How many parts were there?" Melissa asked.

I took a sip from my latte before answering. "There were quite a few," I said, shaking my head. "But the part that creeped me out the most?" I waited for both of them to nod. "He threatened to rape me."

Silence.

"Actually," I clarified, "he threatened me with rape twice."

"Are you serious?" Tony asked quietly.

"Yep."

"Wow," Melissa said. "Believe it or not I'm stunned."

"Did you report that part to the campus po-po?" Tony asked.

"No." I shrugged. "I didn't think about it."

"Well think about it, Alice," Tony insisted. "That is not a normal threat to make. Most people make up idle nonsense in the heat of an argument. They don't go threatening to *rape* someone."

"Twice," Melissa reminded me.

I worried my bottom lip. I'd never been in a fight with a spurned guy before. I'd just assumed it was idle posturing. "Do you think I should be worried?"

"Yes."

"Definitely."

They both chimed in without skipping a beat. I suddenly felt vulnerable in a way I hadn't since the night in Savannah.

"How about if me and Tony walk down to the tables and wait for you there while you change out of your pajamas?" Melissa offered. She smiled. "We'll take you to the police. You don't have to go by yourself."

*"Could I talk to Alice alone?"*

My head shot up at the sound of DeAndre's deep voice. My eyes widened when I saw how furious he looked.

"Umm sure," Melissa said. "Tony and I will be at the tables."

DeAndre didn't acknowledge either of them. He stared straight at me while they took their leave and closed the door behind them. My eyes narrowed.

"That was rude!" I snapped in a fervent whisper. I didn't know how far away from the door they were yet so I kept my voice as quiet as I could. "What the hell?"

"Why was he in your room?" DeAndre barked, ignoring me. "Why did you let Tony in here?"

"The door was open when he got here if you must know."

"Why?"

"Because Melissa went down to get coffees for us and —"

"Why did you let him in here? You aren't even dressed yet."

I blinked. "What is wrong with you? Why are you acting like I'm prowling or something?"

"Are you?"

My shocked expression managed to jar him from whatever had possessed him. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

"I'm sorry, Alice," DeAndre muttered. "I just got...I don't know."

"You just got what?"

"Jealous!"

"Jealous of what?" I threw my hands up. "Jealous that I'm having a conversation with someone who happens to have a penis but that I have no interest in?"

"I'm not usually like this."

"Good. Life has enough drama without my boyfriend of—let's see—fourteen whole hours going all loco on me."

He sighed. "No 'boyfriend of fourteen hours' award for me, huh?"

I snorted at that. He grinned.

"You're lucky you have an adorable smile," I told him. "Otherwise this might have been a short relationship."

He walked over to the bed and sat down beside me. "Don't even say that. You're my brat."

I took a sip of my latte before offering him some. He accepted it and drank.

"Mmm. This is good. What is it?"

"Salted caramel mocha latte."

"I'll have to remember that."

I rested my head on his shoulder. He wrapped one strong arm around me. We sat in cozy silence while he sipped. It was a long moment before he next spoke.

"It's because he's uncolored," DeAndre finally said.

"Huh?"

“Tony. I got jealous because he’s uncolored.”

I straightened myself up and looked at him. “Why?”

He shrugged. “I can compete on damn near every level, but I can’t change the color of my skin and conveniently become a minority.”

I was as surprised by his admission as I was bemused by it. “And you thought I was hoping you’d find some crazy surgeon to try and give you a radical pigment-ectomy that doesn’t exist or something?”

His smile was sad. “It’s just...I don’t know. He shares something with you that I never can.”

“Trailer parks?”

“Very funny.”

My forehead wrinkled. “Actually I was being serious.”

DeAndre shrugged. “It’s not the trailer park. It’s the shared history, culture, and community it represents.”

“Ahh.” I nodded thoughtfully. I hadn’t considered any of this before, but I supposed I could empathize with his point. “I’ve had eighteen years of living with salt. I’m down for mixing it up with some pepper.”

He chuckled and gave me a friendly nudge with his elbow. “What if the pepper makes life too spicy?”

“There’s no such thing. Unless the pepper keeps getting jealous over dumb junk.”

“Brat.”

I grinned. “DeAndre,” I said, growing serious, “If anyone should feel vulnerable it’s me. But I trust you so I don’t.”

“You? Why you?”

My heart leapt at his confusion. “You’ve been Mr. Popular since—well—ever. Girls throw themselves at you left and right.”



"Like guys aren't always ogling you?" He shook his head. "I've damn near been in three fights within the last fourteen hours alone."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You're making that up! I haven't even been out of this room!"

"Sadly I'm not making it up. I told the brothas who my girl was and they're all like, 'that pretty uncolored girl with the big titties and sexy ass eyes?'" His lips curved into a frown. "I almost acted a fool for real."

I grinned. He had no idea how much he'd just boosted my ego. "As complimentary as I find all this, you really need to chill out. Nineteen is too young to be having heart attacks over nothing. Besides, you're the only guy I've ever kissed so obviously I'm not a prowler."

"I know. I'm acting all Tarzan trying to make sure I *stay* the only guy you've ever kissed." He blinked. "Wait. Hold up. How did you know I already turned nineteen?"

Now it was his turn for an ego boost. "August 1<sup>st</sup>," I said with a soft smile. "Every August 1<sup>st</sup> I wondered where you were, what you were doing, and who you were doing it with."

His stunned expression warmed me up inside. "You really did think about me over the years?" He swallowed. "Despite everything?"

I nodded. "I hoped one day I'd be pretty enough to attract someone like you. In a million years I never thought I'd attract the actual you."

His heart was in his eyes. "You've always been pretty enough."

I glanced away. "Not really. I—"

"January 29<sup>th</sup>," DeAndre interrupted.

I stilled. My eyes widened as I looked up at him.

"Every January 29<sup>th</sup> I wondered where you were, what you were doing, and who you were doing it with."

My eyes filled with tears. I smiled through them. "Put down that coffee cup."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to throw myself at you and kiss you," I admitted. "And I just washed the sheets."

We both laughed, but he quickly complied. Our lips met in a soft, perfect kiss. Contrary to my words, gentle was what I needed right now. I could tell DeAndre did too. We kissed until we both knew we had to stop.

He collapsed on my bed. I snuggled into his embrace. He held onto me tightly.

"Never let go," I whispered, feeling safe and secure and happy. "Promise me."

"I promise." He rubbed my back. "You don't have to promise me because I won't let you leave me anyhow."

I grinned. "I believe you."

DeAndre held me tighter. I reached for his large hand and he cupped my much smaller one. We fell asleep that way, pale skin against dark, our heartbeats in sync with each other's.

## Chapter Eleven

"Wake up!"

"Hello!"

"Yo!"

DeAndre and I jolted awake and groggily gazed up at three amused faces. We sat up in my bed.

"Oh my Gawd, Lissa, I am so sorry," I said in a raspy voice, still waking up.

"You're lucky I had my key on me, muteeayy." She grinned. "No worries. Tony and Chavella have been entertaining me."

"I really wish y'all wouldn't use that word," Chavella chastised. "Even to each other."

"What word?" Melissa asked.

"You know..." Chavella coughed uncomfortably into her hand. "The M-word," she whispered.

Tony, Melissa, and I burst out laughing. Chavella rolled her eyes, but grinned. "Y'all are hopeless," she told us.

"I just love the way you whispered it," I admitted. I smiled, my dimples showing. "The M-word," I said in a hushed tone. "You looked too cute, Chavella!"

We all shared a laugh. Tony mimicked her in a falsetto, earning him a thump on the shoulder.

"Anyway," Melissa said, turning the subject, "You still aren't dressed." She snapped her fingers. "You need to get up and moving. We still have to go to the campus po-po and *Unc-enstein* starts in two hours."

"Police?" DeAndre's eyebrows rose. "Something else happen?"

I gave the trio my *please-shut-up* eyes, but Chavella apparently didn't pick up on it. I hated to say it—especially because she was quickly becoming a treasured friend—but

Chavella was the embodiment of the air-headed black girl stereotype. I winced as she brought DeAndre up to speed.

*"He what?!"*

Yep. Pretty much the reaction I had expected. I rubbed my temples.

"Alice, why didn't you tell me?" DeAndre asked. His expression was furious. "I should have known this!"

"Would you please not lecture me? I would have told you, but we fell asleep," I lied.

He begrudgingly backed down. "I'm sorry." He sighed. "They are right, though. We need to go report this."

"I figured I should go too," Tony told DeAndre. "Since I was there."

DeAndre nodded. "Cool. Me and you both."

"I'm going too!" Chavella and Melissa said simultaneously.

"But you weren't there." DeAndre looked bemused. "Either of you."

"If you want me to stay here, I will," Melissa said. Her eyes narrowed. "But Chavella should still go."

Chavella's and DeAndre's expressions were equally confused. "Why me?" Chavella asked.

Tony shifted uncomfortably. Melissa cast her gaze toward the floor. I sighed and told her the truth.

"Because you're black," I said bluntly.

DeAndre glanced away. Chavella, beloved airhead that she was, was still perplexed. "Huh?"

"The police will take this more seriously if they see black support for Alice," Tony explained. He shrugged dismissively, but I implicitly understood the pain he felt. "It's just the way life is for uncs."

"My father is the Chief of Police in Tampa," Chavella informed us. She smiled. "I promise that's not true."

DeAndre's embarrassment was obvious. Melissa, Tony, and I evaded her gaze, but said nothing.

"I promise," Chavella said again. "I'll take you all to meet him if —"

"That's okay!" Melissa, Tony, and I declined in unison. We all forced smiles on our faces.

"We believe you!" Melissa gulped, wide-eyed.

"Totally," I lied.

"Yep. I'm a believer." Tony blew out a breath. "No need to intro us to daddy."

"Let's leave so Alice can shower and dress," DeAndre announced. I felt badly for him. I could tell he wanted to be as distanced from Chavella's naïve viewpoint as possible. "Thirty minutes long enough?" he asked me.

I nodded. I just wanted to get it over with. "Plenty. Thanks."

They might have only been campus police, but I still got nervous just thinking about being in their proximity. If it wore a uniform and was black, life had taught me to avoid the situation at all costs unless given no other choice.

\* \* \* \* \*

I filed my addendum to the initial report without incident. Though Chavella didn't realize it, her mere presence in the campus police office had kept everything running smoothly. I wasn't asked all the embarrassing questions—or given any of the empty promises—I knew would have occurred had she and DeAndre not been there. I'd seen it happen to other unc girls. I knew how it went down.

*Were you having sex with him before this allegedly took place?*

*Why was he at your dorm room?*

*Are you trying to get even with him for a break-up?*

*Do you really want to ruin this kid's football scholarship over something that didn't happen?*

*Sure, we'll look into it.*

*He was probably just blowing off some steam.*

*What's your name again? Mary?*

Being a female in situations like this was enough of an obstacle; being an uncolored female made for a weird mixture of misogyny and invisibility. I was just relieved it was over.

*Unc-enstein* turned out to be as funny as its trailer promised—a rarity for any movie. We had decided to go as a group of three couples: Melissa and Jefferson, Chavella and Tony, and DeAndre and me. D-Dog had been invited too, but he'd declined with a grin and informed us he was expecting a gentleman caller tonight.

Remembering DeAndre's expression at the moment it dawned on him the big, burly football player was gay...can we say *priceless*? He quickly recovered, awkwardly patted D-Dog on the back, and mumbled something about he hoped everything went well.

"He's gay," I'd said to DeAndre afterwards, amused, "not recovering from cancer."

"I just didn't know!" He'd grinned at me. "Not even a clue!"

As the credits started to roll, our well-humored group began to stand and stretch. "Let's watch until the credits are done," I suggested. "Bill Thomas usually has extra footage afterwards."

"True," Tony confirmed, sitting back down. He pulled Chavella down beside him. She yelped. He chuckled. "Wanna sit in my lap instead?"

I shook my head good-naturedly. If I wasn't mistaken, Chavella seemed to actually like Tony's attention.

The whole group sat back down and waited for the credits to end, which turned out to be a good thing since my hunch had proved true. We were laughing as we ambled out of the theater. We took turns mimicking our favorite one-liners from *Unc-enstein*.

"I hope there's a sequel!" Melissa enthused.

"Me too," I said. My eyes lit up. "*Bride of Unc-enstein*."

We shared another laugh. DeAndre held out his hand and we threaded our fingers together as we walked toward the parking lot.

"What's going on?" Tony muttered, his expression going from jovial to somber in the blink of an eye. "Why are the police here?"

"Looks like an accident," DeAndre offered.

There were four police cars in the cinema's parking lot, totaling eight cops altogether. The strobe lights on the hoods of the vehicles were all lit. Tony, Melissa, and I instinctively shriveled up, casting our gazes low and away from the scene. Two of the officers approached us anyway. My heart started to pound. DeAndre gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Good evening," one of the officer's said, smiling.

"Good evening," all uncoloreds mumbled in unison.

"Good evening!" Chavella chirped.

"Is there something we can help you with, officer?" Tony politely asked.

He looked Tony up and down. "Some cars were burglarized in the parking lot tonight. An eye witness gave us a detailed description." The black officer was smacking gum and smiling. "You fit that description."

"I was in the theater watching a movie," Tony stated, looking the cop in the eyes. "Wrong dude."

If looks could kill, the *traitorous bastard* glare I gave the uncolored officer standing next to his "partner" (more like massa) would have laid him out. He sighed and looked away from me.

"Uh huh," the black officer continued. "You got ID, boy?"

"Oh my God!" Chavella gasped. "Why did you call him 'boy'?" The emotions playing out on her face were heartbreaking to me. In that moment she'd lost an innocence that was worth far more than virginity. Realizing your most valued beliefs

are predicated on a lie is never an easy pill to swallow. "I know his rights! He doesn't have to show you a damn thing unless you have enough evidence to arrest him!"

The officer turned his gaze to an outraged Chavella. "How do you know that I don't?"

"Because all five of us have been with him the entire time," DeAndre said loudly.

"I bet she's 'been with him' all right," the cop said snarkily.

Chavella's jaw dropped. "How dare you!"

The black cop's eyes narrowed dangerously. My pulse quickened.

"Chavella," I whispered. "It's okay. Tony, show him your ID."

Tony nodded. He reached for his back pocket. Both officers drew their weapons and aimed for his head. Tony immediately stopped reaching and slowly put his hands above his head.

The other six cops encircled our group as the black officer threw Tony down on the pavement and handcuffed him. My eyes widened in horror. *Please just arrest him, don't kill him!* Nausea flooded my belly. My heartbeat threatened to beat out of my chest.

"What the fuck are you doing!" DeAndre bellowed.

"Calm down, son," a back-up black officer told him. "Officer Miles is only doing his job."

"His job is to terrorize people who haven't done anything?!"

"Calm it down."

"I can't breathe," Tony gasped. His face was drained of all color. "I can't—"

The officer kicked him. Chavella screamed.

"You're hurting him!" Melissa raged at the officer. "You're going to kill him!"

My gaze found the uncolored officer's. My jaw tightened and my eyes narrowed. "*Judassss*," I hissed.

The unc cop's face reddened. He forced me away from DeAndre and started to handcuff me.



"Do not touch her!" DeAndre growled.

Two officers subdued him. Melissa ran toward Tony, whose pallor was hauntingly closer to death, and jumped on the officer's back. She hit his shoulders with her fists. "You're killing him you racist piece of shit!"

The officer threw Melissa off him with a roar. She hit the pavement hard, a sickly cracking sound accompanying the blow to her head. Jefferson yelled out to her. Blood gushed from the wound. Her eyes rolled back into her head and closed.

"Lisssssaaaaaaa!" I screamed. "Nooooooooooooo!"

"You better call ambulances now!" DeAndre demanded. "And you better kill me where I stand because otherwise you will not get away with this shit!"

"Everybody needs to calm the fuck down!" one of the black officers bellowed. He clicked a button on his shoulder and called for ambulances and more back-up.

Chavella's entire world had come crashing down around her, but to her credit she found her voice anyway. "All of you will pay for this," she said, unblinking. "I'll make sure of it."

"Are you threatening an officer?" the cop who'd started this whole mess asked incredulously.

"No, I'm promising an officer."

He made a move toward her. She held up a palm.

"My daddy is the Chief of Police. You are so done."

That announcement stopped him dead in his tracks. His eyes widened.

"Fuck I knew I recognized her," I heard an officer mutter.

Chavella must have heard him too because she turned the full force of her facial fury on him. "It's because you've been in my house and had dinner at my table, you awful excuse for a human being! How could you not only just stand here and watch, but actively participate in this?" She looked back at the instigator. "You better pray Lissa isn't dead because I'll make sure you fry. Uncuff Tony *now*!"

More police cars sped into the parking lot. Two ambulances were on their heels. A tear tracked down my cheek as I saw Melissa's broken body lifted into one of the emergency vehicles and taken only God knows where. "Please let her be alive, God," I quietly cried to myself. "Please." Tony was placed in the other ambulance, but I knew he was okay. His color was coming back.

The man who must have been the Chief of Police—Chavella's father—hurried from his vehicle and sped toward her. "Are you okay, baby?"

She recoiled from his touch as though his fingers were made of acid. "You are not my father," she rasped out. Tears filled her eyes. "There is no way these *pigs* would have brutalized innocent uncolored people unless *you* condone it!"

His eyes rounded. "Chavella, that's not true. I—"

"Don't touch me!" She backed away from her father. I was still in handcuffs so I couldn't be there for her. "As I stand here before you I swear to God you are dead to me unless you fire every single officer here now!" She jabbed a finger at the black cop who'd started the mess. "And arrest him for two counts of attempted murder."

"Calm down, baby. Let me do my job and get to the bottom of—"

"I defended your men to my friends," she said shakily. Tears streamed down her face. "Just this afternoon I told them there was no way the TPD was racist because my father would never allow it." She shook her head. "But they were right all along. The only foolish one here is me."

"Uncuff that little girl!" Chavella's father snapped. I supposed I was 'that little girl'. "Somebody better have a really damn good explanation for all this right the fuck now!"

"How many pieces of gold did it take?" I whispered to my captor. His jaw tightened as he released me from the handcuffs. "I hope it was worth it."

In that moment, I came to loathe uncolored police more than black ones. Maybe it wasn't fair to expect more from an officer of my race, but I did. They should be part of the solution rather than encouraging the problem.

"Sir?" A very young black kid of no more than ten approached the Chief of Police. His father stood with him. "I videotaped the whole thing."

Chavella's father looked down at him. "Thank you, son."

"Ohhh I see how it is," the boy's father said, shaking his head. "If you're black you get called 'son' like my kid and that young man." He pointed at DeAndre. "But if you're uncolored like that poor teenager taken away in the ambulance you're a 'boy'! I have never been more embarrassed to be black than I am at this moment."

"Welcome to my club," Chavella muttered.

"Sir," the Chief said calmly, "I just arrived on the scene. I don't know what's happened, but I hope the video will help me find the answer."

"The only reason I let my son give it to you is because I just uploaded it to YouTube. You won't be conveniently losing that evidence. Nuh-uh. Not gonna happen."

DeAndre was finally allowed to approach me. He hugged me while I cried. "What if she's dead?" I gasped.

"She's not. We can't think like that."

"Do you know what hospital they took her to?"

"I'll go ask."

"Don't leave me!"

"Babe..." He rested his chin on my head. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

I clung tighter, making it impossible for DeAndre to go ask anyone anything. He improvised.

"Which hospital were they taken to?" he yelled. He held me tighter. "We aren't standing around here all damn night! If you need my name, statement, and all that, come get it now. We have friends who we don't know if they are dead or alive."

By the time all was said and done, it was another hour and a half before we reached Tampa General Hospital's emergency room. Chavella, Jefferson, DeAndre and I were put in a room so the doctor could speak to us.

The clock ticked by. One hour turned into two, two into three, and three into four. As exhausted as I was, I couldn't have fallen asleep had my life depended on it. I was tired, my wrists were sore from having been bound in handcuffs, yet paradoxically my body was somehow numb from shock.

Everything was too surreal. How had we gone from a fabulous night of six college students enjoying a movie to *this*?

The sound of a door creaking open jarred me from my thoughts. The doctor walked in. His eyes were filled with compassion. My heart began racing to the point I feared fainting.

"We did all we could," he said gently, looking at me.

"No, no, no, no, no!" I put my hands on top of my head and stared at the black doctor. "She's not dead!"

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

I could hear Chavella crying. I could see DeAndre and Jefferson mist up. Yet I could hear and see nothing but the silent screams echoing inside me.

Melissa, the uncolored girl who'd worked so hard all her life for her college scholarship.

Melissa, the one I could always count on to make me laugh.

Melissa, the first best friend I'd ever had.

Melissa, the feisty redheaded girl who would never get the chance to fall in love, lose her virginity, get married, have children, or work at her dream job.

Melissa...

The wonderful, loving soul who'd laid down her life to save someone else's.

A cry of anguish erupted from me as I fell to my knees. "Noooooooo!" I wailed. "Lissa nooooo!"

I felt two strong arms pick me up, but my thinking was too splintered to register who they belonged to. Whatever residual piece of my heart that had been alive and willing to play by the black man's rules died in that hospital with my best friend.

The next half hour was a blur. The video must have already gone viral for as we exited the hospital, journalists shoved microphones in our faces. The incessant flashing of camera bulbs made seeing impossible. It didn't matter. Not really. I could barely blink as it was and my mind had detached from my body the moment the doctor spoke the words that would forever torment me.

My Melissa. Gone.

Most of the media attention focused on me, yet I couldn't think. I answered their questions in a monotone, my gaze haunted, my world enveloped in a surreal haze.

To this day I couldn't tell you what I'd said to those reporters if my life depended on it. I'd have to go look up old video footage to even quasi-remember.

*"What's your name?"*

*"Your name?"*

*"We need your name."*

*"Your name."*

I couldn't blink. I couldn't move. I couldn't process anything but hatred, anguish, and vengeance. They would pay—all of them would. Even if I died in the process of ensuring that outcome.

"My name is Alice." I slowly raised my head. My nostrils flared. I narrowed my eyes into blue slits as I looked at the closest camera. "Alice X."

## Author's Notes

The breakdown of dialogue and thereby progress between racial groups in the United States is heartbreaking—especially to those of us whose multiracial and/or interracial families are caught in the middle of an ideological war that grows closer to becoming an actual second Civil War every day. I understand both sides of the proverbial story. It's not that I'm smarter or in any way more exceptional than the next person; I "get it" simply because I have no other choice. I live somewhere in the middle of this chaos every day.

My goal with *Alice X* was to give white readers the ability to step into the shoes of black Americans and vice versa, or at least as much as one can through literature. If Alice's story angered you—good. If her story made you think—even better. If something—anything—in my writing causes just one person to think outside their own box, then I'll chalk my effort up to a success.

I love this country and her people, though at times I get so angered by what I see and hear that I forget that fact and just want to abandon ship. Well to hell with that. Nobody likes to be called out for bad behavior, but I see it every day from all sides. It's time to quit finger-pointing. It's time for everyone, myself included, to own up to the part we play in creating radicalized individuals. Nobody starts off "bad". There is, however, only so much injustice, goading from our in-groups, and callousness from our out-groups, that a person can take before they lose themselves to hatred.

Tina

## About The Author

Tina Marie Engler is the founder & co-owner of Ellora's Cave Publishing. Ms. Engler has been featured in every major news outlet—from the L.A. Times, Forbes, Publisher's Weekly, Salon, and Time, to national TV news stations, major radio shows, and television talk-shows such as Montel. Ellora's Cave, and thus Ms. Engler, was officially recognized by Romantic Times Magazine with their first ever Trail Blazer award for, among many reasons, the pivotal role she played in popularizing the e-book. Writing under the USA Today bestselling pseudonym Jaid Black, her books have received numerous distinctions.

Engler has been an active champion for the economically disenfranchised since her early twenties. She is especially vocal about the plight of poor women (a.k.a. “welfare moms”) and their children, police brutality, and the inhumane treatment of U.S. prisoners. You can email her at [jaid@ellorascave.com](mailto:jaid@ellorascave.com) or visit [www.jaidblack.com](http://www.jaidblack.com) for her updated information.

