

What Happened to Alice?

By Jana Jones

Episode 4 - In the Pines

The skies of downtown Charlotte were gray and rain-sodden. Ami sat on the bed. Her knees pulled up to her chest. Dark brown cascading locs rested on her forearm. She rolled the tip of one between her fingers. Ami was still trying to make sense of the dream from the previous night. Rarely did she remember her dreams. Of the few dreams she managed to hold on to, none was as vivid and chilling as her latest one.

Who were the playful little girls in white? Ami could still see their faces. Brown skin with smiling eyes. The way they twirled and made joy amongst themselves, Ami almost felt ashamed for intruding. The dark, other-worldly forest reminded her of the trees she passed on the main road to Faidley. She remembered the song about someone being missing. Then there were the names being called out. Ami wondered what it all meant.

Ami turned on the television. Hopefully, one of the overly-cheerful morning show hosts would bring her back to the present. Just as suspected, she hadn't packed anything appropriate enough to wear to Little Walter's, so the mission at hand was to pull together a decent outfit for the evening.

Smooth jazz drifted from the car speakers as Ami drove to department stores and boutiques. She lucked up rather quickly with a cute pair of bronze peep-toe pumps. A little black dress was all that was left to find. Even a jumpsuit would work if push came to shove. Regardless of what she wore to the lounge, Ami knew she would have to shake off the weird feelings that were still

very fresh after the previous night's dream. The last thing she wanted was to appear strange around her cousin and his patrons.

Ami pressed the scan button on the car's satellite radio. She needed some music that would charge her up and get her excited for the rest of the day. A woman's sharp voice came over the radio's speakers and pulled Ami out of her driving daze.

"...and why didn't you stop her, Wallace? Wearing fresh clothes like that. Those were supposed to be for when Arnell came back home. How long have they been gone? You should have told her no!"

Ami examined the satellite radio dock mounted on the dash of the car. The station was called "Radio Days," likely an ode to the radio show programming from yesteryear. Another voice came over the speakers. This time, it was the voice of a man who sounded just as concerned as the woman but desperately trying to maintain calm in the face of the woman's fear.

"Sun is still out, Rhoda. They're children and children get into things. She'll be back soon. I know we have our own misgivings, but those are her people, too. She shouldn't have to carry shame that isn't hers. It's fine. She is okay."

Ami pulled into the garage of the hotel. The radio signal weakened as she drove further into the underground lot.

"Girl, get your mind right, please," Ami muttered to herself while gathering her shopping finds from the car's trunk. There was just enough time for a quick nap, a shower, and a little bit of glam. It wouldn't be a full beat, but Ami packed enough makeup to make herself presentable.

Little Walter's Blues Lounge had a charming facade exterior that called back to the days of leaky, tin-roof jukeboxes. Candles and string lights illuminated the interior with its red leather booths

and wood grain dance floor. Ami, despite starting the day on a strange note, was looking exceptionally alluring that evening.

The gentleman at the door waved Ami over as if he knew her sight unseen.

“Ami?” The tall man with a beautiful sable brown complexion and powerful build flashed the most dazzling smile in Ami’s direction.

“What gave me away?” Ami laughed. The light, happy feeling she had at the Dawson cookout was returning.

“Shawn said to be on the lookout for a gorgeous woman with beautiful locs.” The doorman extended his hand to Ami. He directed her to the V.I.P. section of Little Walter’s, where glass bottles of alcohol and juice were already sitting chilled.

It was open mic night, and people were beginning to show up to be placed on the performance schedule. Ami looked around to see if there were any familiar faces from the cookout. More than likely, they’d already visited the venue. Ami was the latest arrival to the family, so now it was her turn.

Ami ordered a drink while she waited for everything to begin. The blues music playing reminded her so much of the trips down to Macon to see her daddy’s people. Her grandfather would put an album on the record player, and some of the most rousing, drama-filled card games east of the Mississippi would commence.

“The guest of honor is here. I’m glad you could make it, cuz.” Shawn and his camera-ready smile had made their arrival. With him were two additional guests, his business partner, Aaron, and Aaron’s fiancée.

The group exchanged greetings and made small talk until the performances began. Shawn and Aaron discussed their plans to open a second Little Walter’s in the Charlotte metro area. The

Pavilions mixed-use housing development, of which Shawn and Aaron were on the planning team, was moving full speed ahead.

Ami thought of Aunt Darlene's words from the previous day. About how Shawn was the family's mogul in training. Her cousin's acumen impressed her; she then remembered the family's disappointment over the man her father could have become. Some had it, and some didn't, but Ami wondered if there was more to her father's story. Ami intended to have a deeper conversation with him when she returned to Philadelphia.

The emcee for the evening, a beautiful brown-skinned woman with a chic, honey blonde cesar, stood in the middle of the dance floor getting the crowd ready for the open mic performers. The overhead lights dimmed. The first act was a man doing spoken word while his partner tap danced. A woman got up to sing an original composition. Another performer played the saxophone.

Ami didn't know much about business forecasting, but she could easily see that her cousin had something special with Little Walter's.

"This place is really nice. I plan to tell my people to visit when I go back home," Ami leaned over slightly and whispered to Shawn.

"The family looked at me like I was nuts when I first told them my plans." Shawn laughed before taking a sip of his drink. "'Sounds like a money pit,' they said, but here we are."

Ami got comfortable on the black velvet settee and poured another drink. Finger snaps and claps went up as performers came and went.

A small-built man carrying a guitar that looked just as big as him made his way to the center of the dancefloor. He sat down on a metal stool and quickly looped the black guitar strap around

his body. There were a few snaps and cheers from the audience as the man took a few deep breaths.

“This is my tribute to the blues and to the land that brought the blues out of us,” the man quickly spoke into the mic.

His fingers nimbly plucked the strings for the opening cords of ‘In The Pines,’ an Appalachian folk song that entered the Blues cannon after being remade by Lead Belly. The crowd sat in reverent silence as the man’s rich tenor filled the space.

A sudden blast of cold air pulled Ami from the feel-good haze brought on by the alcohol. She rubbed her arms as she looked up to see if they were sitting under an air vent. They weren’t.

“In the pines, in the pines...”

The man’s haunting rendition sent Ami back to the forest from her dream. Standing in the shadows watching the two little girls in white dance and play. Ami rocked a little in her seat, trying to shake off the phantom chill. Shawn and other VIP guests remained focused on the young man’s performance, oblivious to Ami’s sudden discomfort.

“See, this is what Little Walter’s is for. Moments like this.” Shawn turned around suddenly to face Ami with a fire in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. “This is our history he’s performing, you know? A place to go where we can celebrate us. I know you get me.”

Ami gave what she hoped was an encouraging nod to her cousin’s words. She prayed she didn’t look as spaced out as she felt. The performance ended, and the man gave a modest wave as a rousing round of applause went up throughout the lounge.

Ami got up to leave as another performer was setting up on the dance floor. She thanked Shawn again for being such a gracious host and assured him that she would spread the word

about Little Walter's. Sounds from the lounge drifted into the night's stillness as Ami hurried to her car.

Between the vivid dream from the previous night and the performance at Little Walter's, Ami wondered what she had stepped into. She remembered the hissing noises coming from the woods after her traffic stop. A sense of uneasiness descended on Ami as if it were a physical bird of prey.

Ami was deep in her thoughts as she drove along the dark road. When the car's radio signal began to glitch, she figured she had reached an area with bad reception. Despite the lateness of the hour, the traffic on the highway was still steady. "*Black girl...black girl,*" the voice sounded scratchy and distorted. As if the vocals had been chopped and screwed. Ami turned the volume down, waiting for the signal to fix itself. "*In the pines...in the pines,*" the sound continued to drag. Suddenly there was silence, even though Ami hadn't turned the radio off.

Clear and direct, a child's voice called out from the car's speakers: "My name is Alice. I'm lost. Can you help me get home?"

