

What Happened to Alice?

By Jana Jones

Episode 6 - Revelations

While on the road to Aunt Darlene's, Ami turned the conversation over and over in her mind. *Aunt Darlene, could you tell me about a girl named Alice? Was she a family friend? Aunt Darlene, this is going to sound weird, but I had a dream...*

Ami parked in front of Aunt Darlene's house and sat in the car to compose her thoughts. She watched her sister's house through her driver's side mirror. Faith hadn't responded to the text Ami sent the previous day. No reply text from John either.

Ami glanced down at her phone. The lock screen image was from a surprise girls' trip planned by her best friends. Ami had just ended her engagement and she was slowly becoming undone. The women all looked resplendent in chic, colorful sarongs.

"Y'all are going to trip when I tell you about this," Ami muttered to the smiling faces on her phone screen.

Just as Ami went to open the car door to exit, a sudden gust of air shut it closed. Ami saw what looked to be flashes of white in her peripheral vision as she struggled with the door handle. Ami closed her eyes tightly and, breathlessly, began counting backward from ten. The last thing she needed was to have a panic attack around family she was just beginning to know.

She pressed the unlock button on the door and tried to exit the vehicle a second time. The door opened as expected.

"Hey, I thought that was you out here. I said, 'Is she sitting in her car?' I came out here to see if everything was okay." Uncle Clinton stood on the porch with his hands on his hips, which made his belly look extra round.

Something told Ami to lie.

"I was on the phone with a friend." She waved to her uncle. "I was telling her how great my visit has been."

As Ami and Uncle Clinton walked into the house, an agitated voice could be heard in the direction of the kitchen. Aunt Darlene, looking annoyed, soon stepped out into the living room. This was a departure from her usual spirited, even-keeled demeanor.

“Ami! So glad you made it.” Aunt Darlene quickly adjusted her countenance. “That dang Shawn, I was hoping he would be able to join us, but something is happening at the Pavilion construction site. On a Sunday. Can you imagine?” Aunt Darlene shrugged and shook her head.

“Hopefully, everything is okay.” Ami walked over to hug Aunt Darlene. Ami thought about what she planned to discuss with her aunt and uncle. She didn’t want to frustrate Aunt Darlene any further.

Ramona, the cousin disgusted by John’s ineptitude, came out of the kitchen with a glass of what looked like sangria. “Ami, it’s good to see you again. Doll said you’re leaving us tomorrow? It’s been good having you.”

“Well, it’s been good being here. This was a much-needed trip. To meet my father’s people...not to sound cliché but...” Ami fought hard to keep her voice from cracking. The visit to Faidley tapped into a well of emotions she was only just beginning to explore. “Meeting you all has given me the closure that, honestly, I didn’t know I was looking for. I’ll remember this trip for the rest of my life.”

Uncle Clinton sat stoically in an easy chair, hands folded atop a wooden walking stick. “Family is important. It’s vital. Your people are supposed to keep you rooted when the world tries to toss you to and fro. Aunt Ruby always said, “No matter where we Dawsons may lay our head, Faidley will always be our rock. Our port in the storm.”

Ami tried to keep a straight face at the mention of Aunt Ruby. Her mind went back to the news articles she’d found the previous day. Aunt Darlene called everyone to the dining room table. This gave Ami a little more time to get her words together. Ramona walked alongside Uncle Clinton while Ami walked behind as the aroma of fried fish beckoned them to come feast.

Before Ami could ask her questions about the family’s possible ties to someone named Alice, Ramona had an inquiry of her own. She was curious to know the details about Ami’s adoption story as well as the process of finding her birth parents. Ramona seemed impressed by Ami’s adoptive parents and her childhood experiences.

“Those are your real people, you know,” Ramona chimed in as more alcohol got into her system. “I mean, we’re your people, too. But your parents – the ones who adopted you – chose you specifically. That will always be special. Can’t walk away from that.”

Ami’s cell phone began loudly ringing and vibrating, which paused Ramona’s questions. She quickly excused herself and got up to put her phone on silent. It was John calling her. He texted her as well: AMI, PLEASE CALL ME. Ami shook her head as she put the phone on silent. She’d call him back at the hotel.

“Everything okay, dear?” Aunt Darlene leaned back slightly to check in the living room.

“Yes, just a call. It was my dad, actually. Just checking in.” Ami hurried to sit back down.

“Well, tell him you’ve been lovely and that his family in Faidley misses him tremendously.” Ramona droned while poking at her pasta salad.

Ami suspected there was a bit of shade in her cousin’s response. There would be many questions for her father the next time they spoke. The Dawson family was definitely a family of characters. Ami knew that she had only scratched the surface of who these people were.

“Well,” Ami upped the sunshine in her voice as she began to speak, “speaking of family history and the like, I found an article about Reverend Russell Dawson. I think we may be kin. Aunt Darlene, am I on the right track?”

Aunt Darlene beamed. “That’s Big Daddy. Reverend Russell Jeremiah Dawson. A noble man and a strong patriarch. He and Mama Mary are our foundation, indeed.”

“Too bad you’re leaving us. We could have taken you out to Second Mount Zion. It’s still in the family, too.” Uncle Clinton nodded while he studied the few pieces of corn still left on his plate.

“That’s so wonderful. It was pretty cool seeing information about him online. I found an article about a search he’d led to find a missing girl. Alice, I believe her name was. Do you all know anything about that?”

The article Ami found about the search never mentioned the missing girl’s name. She dropped it in just to see what the reaction would be. A small voice told her not to mention the dreams and other strange occurrences. Aunt Darlene and Uncle Clinton exchanged quick glances while Cousin Ramona swirled the fruit and ice at the bottom of her glass.

“Alice?” Uncle Clinton furrowed his brows as if he were piecing together memories.

“She was a girl from the neighborhood, a childhood playmate of the Dawson children. I was told it was a sad time when she went missing. Got lost over there in those woods.” Aunt Darlene was matter-of-fact with the back story.

“She was illegitimate, so I’ve heard.” Cousin Ramona waved her arm as if a gnat had invaded her personal space. “Mother ran off. Grandparents weren’t of means, you know. Poor. People of the soil and such. Sharecroppers. I tell you, those Dawson men weren’t too picky when—”

“Ramona!” Aunt Darlene cut her eyes at her talkative dinner guest.

The word “illegitimate” turned Ami’s stomach sour. She took a sip of her sangria, but her appetite had long passed. She was ready to head back up the road to the safety of her hotel. Slowly the story of Alice was coming into better view. Her presence was a quiet

indictment of the seemingly respectable family. A family whose bedrock was self-made excellence.

“Well, a family can’t rise with strays around.” Uncle Clinton sniffed.

And at that moment, Ami felt the euphoric high of connecting with her family completely dissolve. The walls in Aunt Darlene’s house began to look distorted as if they were in a carnival funhouse. Ami took another sip of her drink before politely excusing herself to go to the restroom, grabbing her purse along the way.

There were five missed calls and six texts, all from John begging Ami to call him. The yellow wallpaper in Aunt Darlene’s bathroom made Ami’s eyes burn as she texted her father back. She watched the text bubbles on her screen, then a message: Ami, I need you to leave. Please. And call me when you’re in the car.

“Ami, is everything okay? Are you good?”

Cousin Ramona’s voice came through sharp and clear from the other side of the door.

“All good!” Ami made sure her voice was as cheerful as possible.

Between Uncle Clinton’s comment about illegitimates and her father’s pleading texts, Ami realized she was in dangerous territory.

Although she didn’t use the bathroom, Ami flushed the toilet and turned on the faucet for appearance’s sake.

As she stepped back into the dining room, Ami observed Aunt Darlene quickly jerk her hand away from the glass of sangria Ami was enjoying with her meal. Uncle Clinton and Cousin Ramona both gave Ami quizzical stares, but she no longer had time for table talk.

“I’m so sorry, y’all, but I have to run. My stomach is giving me trouble, and I want to make it back to my hotel to lie down.”

“We have ginger ale in the fridge.” Aunt Darlene’s face was a mixture of shock and concern.

Ami went around the table giving quick goodbye hugs. “This has been so lovely. I mean it. Aunt Darlene, Uncle Clinton, Cousin Ramona. I’m so glad we connected. I’ll call you when I get back to the hotel.”

Just as Ami walked out the front door, she ran into two men who looked to be in their early twenties. They resembled the rest of the Dawson tribe, so she figured they were kin of some sort.

“Hi, I’m Ami. Nice to meet you! Bye.” Everything was said in one rushed breath.

Ami prayed she didn't look too out of sorts as she walked over to her car. As she got in, she looked back at the house one last time and saw everyone was now standing on the porch staring in her direction with blank expressions on their faces.

