

# Alice

A short novel or a long story by Sheri McGuinn

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## **Early review from Amazon:**

**Alice - a modern day ethics story**

**M. Stuever**

I picked up this short book and read it in one sitting, just a little over an hour, and found myself laughing, crying and getting totally sucked into the story. Yet a day later, the ethical storyline is still sticking with me to the point of sending me online to write about this modern age tale of individual backbone in the face of corporate greed. Oh, the world needs more books like this...short, strong, compelling, but full of inspiration and hope that we not only can overcome the SYSTEM, we can change it and create a world where people count as much as profits.

## Chapter 1: The Arrival

This is the story of my mother, Alice McKenna.

You know her as the Rosa Parks of the Taxpayers Civil Rights Movement, because of the moment that August that sparked the Movement, the moment my mom said “No.”

If you’d known her a few months earlier, you’d never have believed it was the same person. I guess it started back in March, when she got pink-slipped.

Frankly, my first reaction was relief that she wouldn’t be teaching at the high school when I hit ninth grade the next fall. It was as if God had smiled on me. My girlfriends and I could have fun in high school, without teachers reporting every little thing to my mother.

She’d been teaching French for eight years in our small school system south of Buffalo, but then they cut all the foreign languages except Spanish. They had to keep one because four years of a language is required for a New York State Regents diploma. They said Spanish would be more useful.

Besides, that teacher had been there longer.

Mom said when she first got her teaching degree she had six interviews and six job offers, so I figured she’d have another position lined up by the end of the school year. There were plenty of districts within an easy commute, and if we had to move, my friends swore we’d stay in touch.

But school was out, and Mom didn’t have a new job. She’d applied to at least a dozen places, even in other states, and they only asked her to two interviews, close to the border with Quebec, where they thought French was more important than Spanish. But both of those schools hired less experienced—read that cheaper—teachers.

So the day after school got out in June, I helped her pack up her classroom and take everything home.

We were unloading the car, stacking all her stuff in the garage, when a yellow taxi pulled up in front of our house. A long-haired, scruffy old man in jeans pulled a dirty army surplus duffle bag out of the back seat and turned to look at us.

Maybe I should back up a minute.

You need to understand, my mom was perfect.

She always followed every rule. The only wild and crazy thing she'd ever done was go to a sperm bank for my other half. She said she was almost thirty when she decided that was the only way she'd ever have a kid.

Most people assumed she was divorced, so we let them think I had a deadbeat dad I never saw, instead of some guy who sold his sperm.

Anyway, in my lifetime, aside from that, she had always been very proper. If she'd ever had sex, it had to have been before I was born or while I was on an overnight at a friend's house, but there was never any reason to think either of those had happened. There had never been a man in her life, as far as I knew. She was pretty enough; it was that stiff prim and proper teacher thing that scared them off. At least that's what my friends and I had decided.

She never swore or used what she called "ugly" words.

But when my mother saw this scruffy old guy standing by that taxi in front of our house—well, she not only dropped the box she was holding but she said, "Shit," *as if it was something she said every day*, like someone who'd say it when they got gum on their shoe.

She put her hand up for me to stay put and started for the guy, shaking her head and saying, "No, no, no, no, no! No, you are not here. You never came here. Get back in that cab."

He opened his arms as if she was happy to see him but she took a step back with her hands up to warn him off.

"No," she said. "Leave."

"Could you pay the taxi driver?" he asked, as if he hadn't heard a word she said. "That bus trip took too long. I used up all the cash they gave me on food."

"Who they?" she demanded.

"The social worker, the one who found you on her computer. Just like Orwell's *1984*," he said.

"1984," she repeated. "That's the year I got the hell away from you, Jack."

Jack! My grandfather.

Of course I didn't know any relatives from the sperm donor. But because I'd needed information for a school project, I knew Jack was our only relative on Mom's side and that Mom left home at sixteen and never looked back.

That's *all* I knew.

She insisted she hadn't had any contact with him since she left, that he could be anywhere. In fact, she'd made it sound like he was probably dead by now, though I wasn't clear why. Now here he was, alive and making my proper mother swear. I'd never seen her get so angry or flustered, and the more upset she got, the calmer he sounded.

It was pretty entertaining.

"Now, Baby Girl," he started.

She shouted over him. "Don't Baby Girl me! What are you doing here?"

The taxi driver rolled down the passenger window at that point and let Mom know the meter was still running.

"Do you want to pay me, lady? Sounds like this could take some time for you to sort it all out, and that could get expensive."

"Can't you just take him back to the bus station where you picked him up?" she asked.

"If you want to pay double the fare," he said.

"I'd have to walk all the way back here, Baby Girl," Jack reasoned. "That doesn't make any sense."

Mom glared at Jack and pulled some cash out of her back pocket to shove at the cab driver, who burned rubber getting away from the scene.

"You can't stay. Why are you even here?" she demanded.

"Well, when they were ready to release me from the hospital, the social worker insisted I needed to be with family. You're it, Baby Girl."

"Why were you in the hospital?" she asked.

"It wasn't a heart attack," he said.

"What was it?"

"Well, they weren't really sure, is what I think. But they did a bunch of tests and said there was no damage to the heart, so it wasn't a heart attack."

I could almost hear Mom's teeth gritting as she pulled the answers out of him.

"Were you having chest pains?"

"Well, I got so upset when those cops came," he said.

She interrupted. "You were being arrested again?"

Mom had obviously forgotten I was still there in the garage where I could hear everything. They were talking plenty loud enough.

“I’d been in that house for years,” he complained.

“What house?”

“In Garberville.”

“You went back to Humboldt County.”

Mom said this as if it meant more than she was saying, something negative.

“I’d been renting the same place for, I don’t know, probably ten years. Then the owner decided to take it back!”

“You?” she scoffed. “You were in the same place ten years?”

“Well, Baby Girl, I’m getting up there, you know. Moving around gets harder as you get older.”

“It’s tough when you’re a kid, too, bouncing from one school to another every few months, *when* you remembered to register me.”

“It wasn’t that often, and besides, living different places is more education than you’d get in school.”

“Yeah, I remember. That’s what you said every time you wanted to catch a Dead concert, or you wanted more sun, or you needed to get away from trouble with the law or break up with some woman. It’s a wonder I ever learned how to read.”

“I always made sure you had books, and I read with you every night.”

“Every night you weren’t too drunk or stoned. I could count the times you read to me on one hand.”

At this point, he started rubbing his chest.

“Not true! You’re not being fair, Baby Girl.”

“Don’t bother pretending to have a heart attack with me. I’m not a wet-behind-the-ears cop. I know you, Jack.”

He squatted down by his bag on the sidewalk and pulled out a little bottle of pills.

“Quit faking,” she said.

He stuck one of the pills under his tongue, closed his eyes, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly, all the while massaging that spot on his chest.

“You’re not fooling me,” Mom said, but she sounded a little worried.

“If you’ll just call a cab and pay them enough to get me to the nearest truck stop, I’ll hitch myself a ride and leave you alone.”

“Fine,” she said, pulling out her cell phone. “I’ll do that.”

Well, I wasn’t about to let my grandfather leave without at least introducing myself, so I walked on out to the sidewalk. Mom was doing a search for a cab company, but she saw me and told me to go into the house. I ignored her. It was probably the first time I was ever that blatant about going against a direction from her, but hey, the guy was my only other relative.

“Hi, I’m Nina, your granddaughter. Are you okay now?”

His full smile was like a light going on. I could totally see how he might have attracted women back when Mom was a kid.

“Granddaughter. Wow. Here you are half-grown, too. How old are you?”

“I’ll be fourteen the first of August.”

“That’s almost as old as your mother was when she decided to be on her own.”

“Jack,” Mom warned, “don’t you start on her. She’s a good kid and I’ve given her a stable life.”

“I understand,” he said. “You don’t want me around here causing problems between you and your husband.”

“She’s not married,” I told him. “My father was a sperm donor.”

Jack grinned. “Really?”

“From a sperm bank,” Mom snapped. “Having a man in our lives would only complicate things.”

“So now you know what it’s like being a single parent,” said Jack.

“I was *always* the parent,” Mom answered. “Nina didn’t have to make her own breakfast at four years old; she didn’t get left alone for days on end at any point in her life. I’ve always arranged my work to be with my daughter as much as possible and *she’s never had to take care of me.*”

“I did when you had the flu,” I reminded her. “I even made chicken soup from scratch.”

“You cook?” he asked.

“I can,” I answered.

“Man, I’m hungry,” he said. “Do you think we could convince your mother to let me stay for some lunch, at least?”

“Fine,” Mom said. “Lunch. Then you leave.”

Of course that’s not what happened.