

An excerpt of  
**A Natural Woman**  
by Lori Johnson

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**CHAPTER 1**

Aliesha sucked in a deep breath and pushed open the door. A bell tinkled over her head and seven pairs of male eyes swiveled in her direction. As if on cue, the rhythmic licks and beats of a guitar and a pair of sticks on a set of drums suddenly filled the air. Not more than a second or two later, Johnnie Taylor screamed and launched into the first verse of "Who's Makin' Love?" Aliesha exhaled, smiled, and strutted forward. Beneath the surface of her brave mask lurked the hope that she hadn't just made an incredibly egregious misstep. Today, rather than drive past Wally's Cool Cuts like she had for close to six months now, she'd decided to stop.

A white, nondescript concrete building housed the Jackson Avenue-based barbershop and two other tenants. Wedged between a beauty supply store on the left and a pawnshop on the right, indeed, Wally's Cool cuts didn't appear to be particularly special from the outside. Yet for some reason Aliesha's gaze had routinely gravitated toward the business on her daily treks to and from work.

Once inside the shop, Aliesha quickly noted that the length, narrowness, and layout of the interior was not unlike that of a shotgun house. On one side, awaiting their turns on cushioned benches, sat less than a handful of customers. Positioned across from them were four separate barber stations, two of them empty and two of them occupied.

Most of the piercing, fixed stares that had accompanied her entry had fallen away.

On having completed their assessment, most had found her unworthy of a linger, much less a leer. Most, but not all.

The barber closest to the door, a tall, light-skinned man who sported a thick but neatly trimmed mustache and goatee, shut off his clippers and nodded a greeting.

"Hi," she said. "Would you by any chance be Wally?"

"Yup, that would be me," said the man, who looked to be somewhere in the 45 to 50 age bracket.

When she reached him, she extended her hand. "I'm Aliessa. Aliessa Eaton."

She could tell by the sudden flickering of Wally's girlishly long lashes that he didn't know quite what to make of her overly formal introduction or her less-than-casual attire. A man of obviously good upbringing, he nonetheless pressed his palm against hers and returned her smile.

"Nice to meet you, Miz Aliessa. What can I help you with?"

She braced herself. "Well, I was wondering if I might be able to get my hair cut. You do take walk-ins, don't you?"

The barber's pleasant expression nose-dived into something more stoic. He turned to the barber next to him, a short, husky fellow who looked in dire need of a haircut himself. "Yo, Gerald man," Wally shouted. "Turn down that music for a minute."

Gerald, who had been busy snipping scissors across the backside of a customer's head while carrying on a loud, animated telephone conversation, frowned at the sound of his name. He muttered an obscenity before reaching over and lowering the volume on the ancient-looking boom box that sat between his and Wally's workstations.

For a few uncomfortably long seconds, Wally eyed the thick, black, unchemically treated hair crowning Aliessa's head. Finally, with crinkled brows, he said, "Yeah, we take walk-ins. But to tell you the truth, I don't generally do women's hair. You might want to talk to my man Gerald here. Hey, Gerald, Miz Lady here is wanting a haircut. Think you could help her?"

Gerald rolled his eyes and shouted into the phone, "All right, man! All right! Come on down then. I gotta go."

After shoving the phone into the front pocket of his work smock, Gerald stared at Aliessa, but spoke to Wally. "Sure, I can take her. Might be a while though. I just got done talking to Sam Junior. Said he'd be over in 'bout ten minutes with them badass twin boys of his. Before them, though, I gotta finish this one here and take that one over there." He pointed toward the bench directly across from his barber's chair, where a slightly disheveled-looking man sat, nodding and fighting sleep.

Aliessa glanced at her watch. It was only 12:30 and her next class wasn't until 2:00. After the cut, she'd hoped to run by her house in order to wash her hair, change her clothes, and if possible fix something to eat. She sighed and, like Gerald, looked at Wally. "Maybe I'll come back another time. Do you take appointments by any chance?"

He shook his head. "Me and Gerald both are strictly first come, first served kinda guys. He gazed toward the rear of the shop. "You could check with *Dante*," he said, suddenly speaking in a much louder voice and with extra emphasis. "*He's on break right now, but I fully expect him to be back on the job by 1:00. Got that D?*"

Aliessa followed Wally's gaze to the dark-skinned man stretched over the long bench at the back of the shop. An open-faced book rested atop his chest, his eyes

appeared closed, and the wires of an iPod's earbuds trailed from either side of his head. Even though he raised a hand to his brow in mock salute and acknowledgment of Wally's spiel, he didn't bother to sit up, open his eyes or remove his earplugs.

Wally turned back toward Aliesha. "Then I got a barber by the name of Yazz, who, as of late, has been clocking in around three or so. Both D. and Yazz generally stay till pretty late in the evening if you want to call and see about setting something up."

Before Aliesha could respond, the older-looking man seated on the bench across from Wally's chair said, "Appointments?" He laughed and widened his already spread legs. "You not from 'round here sugar, are you?"

"No," Aliesha said, trying her best to ignore the notes of condescension she'd readily detected in the man's voice and demeanor. "Not originally. I'm from Chicago."

"Chicago!" said the curly-headed man seated next to the old guy. "The windy city, huh? What on earth would bring a smart-looking girl like you all the way down here?"

"A job," Aliesha said. "I'm a professor at Wells."

"Is that right?" the curly-headed guy said, sounding impressed. "I guess that would make you one of them fine, educated, high-falutin' Northern gals my poor Arkansas-raised daddy used to try to get me and the rest of my bone-headed brothers hitched up with back in the day."

Aliesha laughed and said, "Well, I don't know about all of that. The truth is--"

"*Psst*," the older man spat with a dismissive wave of one hand. "The truth is, ain't nuthin all that special 'bout Chicago. What's it got besides a lot of racism, some poor, proper-talking Negroes, and a bunch of raggedy-ass streets? Hell, when you get right down to it, Chicago ain't too much more than Mississippi moved north."

Had it not been for his outright hateful tone, Aliessa might have voiced at least some partial agreement with her antagonist's harsh assessment. Instead, she said, "So, when was the last time you were there?"

The gray-haired man dropped his arms and leaned forward. "Beg your pardon?"

"Chicago? How is it you know so much about it? Tell the truth, I bet you haven't been so much as within a 100-mile radius of Chi-Town, in say, the last fifteen years or so--have you?"

A scowl narrowed his bloodshot eyes. "What difference do that make? I ain't never ate shit neither and don't rightly think I need to in order to say I don't think it's something I ever want to make a meal of."

Aliessa shouldered up her purse and took a step toward him. "You know what--"

But before she could tangle with him, a deep, barrel-toned voice rang out, "Say, yo! Miz Professor!"

Aliessa redirected her glare at the now-standing barber she'd seen lounging just a few seconds before. Momentarily captivated by her unobstructed view of his skin's rich ebony hue, she watched as he stopped shaking out a plastic cloak and draped it over one of his tight, muscular forearms.

He looked at her and said, "I've got an open chair back here if you want it."

She raised a hand to her hip. "I thought you were supposed to be on break."

"Yeah, I was, and now break time is officially over." He grinned and spun his chair around. "So, you gonna allow me the honor of taking care of you or what?"

The playful tease in his voice and the wide smile stretched across his dark face took some of the edge from her anger. Her nostrils still flared, she cast one last evil look

at the gray-haired instigator before sashaying past him.

Rather than back off or at least turn his attention elsewhere, the old guy grunted and said, "And I'll tell you another something about Chicago . . ."

"All right now, Ray," the dark-skinned barber said, his smile replaced with a look of dead seriousness. "I'd really hate to see you slip up and get knocked down over some ole foolishness."

"Meaning what?" Ray said.

"Meaning, ain't gone be no more of that. You're either gonna respect my customer or else you're gonna step outside with me and take the ass-whopping you got coming like a man."

The old guy turned toward Wally. "You heard that, didn't you? I'll be damned if I ain't been coming up in here and giving y'all my money for close to 'leven years now. Since when do you 'llow your boys to speak to your regulars just any ole kind of way?"

Wally stopped lining his customer and looked up with a frown. "Ray, man, you started that mess. Don't even think about trying to drag me all up in it."

"Oh, oh so it's like that, huh?" Ray leaped from his seat. "Fine, then. Later for all y'all tired, backward-ass, pussy-whipped Negroes," he said, prior to stomping out.

Before she sat down in his chair, Aliessa looked directly into the eyes of the man who'd spoken up on her behalf, a man whose athletic build and dark magnetism reminded her of the singer-turned-actor, Tyrese; the pretty-boy model, Tyson Beckford; and the lyrical front man for the Roots, Black Thought, all rolled into one. "I could have taken him, you know," she told him in a quiet voice.

He nodded and without the slightest hint of amusement in his voice said,  
"Uh-huh, in a Chicago second, I'm sure. But is that really what you came in here for?"

## **CHAPTER 2**

A decent haircut was all she really wanted . . . all she'd really come in there for. Rather than speak her mind, she stared at the dark-skinned barber's reflection in the mirror attached to the wall behind his workstation and said, "So is it D. or Dante?"

"Depends," he said, while standing behind her and tying the cloak around her neck. "Which do you prefer?"

She studied his face and said, "Personally, I like Dante."

He shrugged. "So, for you, Dante is who I'll be." He swiveled her around in the chair and smiled down at her. "Now, tell me how you want it cut."

Before she could respond, he reached out and buried the fingers of one hand into the hair above her left ear. Startled by the unexpected wave of pleasure that rolled off her scalp, ran down the length of her torso, and landed square in her lap, she jumped.

He withdrew his hand. "I didn't hurt you, did I? Don't tell me you're tender-headed."

"No," she said. "I'm not." She reached into her purse, dug out a comb, and started picking out her hair. "If you could just even it out for me, that would be great."

"It's pretty," he said, taking the comb from her and starting to fluff where she'd left off. "Healthy, too."

Was he flirting or simply affirming aloud what she already knew to be true? She couldn't tell. What she did know from thirty-three years of having lived in the world was that men like Dante didn't typically bother to look twice at women like her--dark-skinned Black women who avoided, elected not to, or simply outright refused to straighten or chemically alter their natural hair.

"So, Miz Professor, what is it you teach?" he asked.

"Anthropology," she said.

"Oh, yeah? Interesting," he said.

She waited for him to come back at her with some version of, *Come on, do you honestly think humans came from monkeys?* Or else the always popular in these parts, *An anthropologist, huh? Guess that mean you one of them atheist who don't believe in God?*

After several minutes passed without him asking either, she wondered if he truly lacked a sense of curiosity about what she did or was simply too clueless about her field of interest to even pose the most basic of questions.

At least he had yet to come at her with the line of inquiry Black men of all educational and socioeconomic backgrounds in the midsized Southern city she'd called home for the past couple of years appeared to enjoy assailing her with: *Why on earth would a nice-looking girl with such a decent head of hair choose to wear it . . . like this?*

Dante didn't seem to care one way or the other. After picking out her 'fro in silence, he handed back her comb and busied himself with the assortment of clippers, scissors, and hairstyling instruments on the counter behind his workstation.

"Do you have any other female customers?" Aliasha asked, attempting to make

polite conversation.

"Nope. Not here," Dante said. "But I had several when I lived out in Cali."

His accent was unmistakably that of a Southerner, but Aliasha asked anyway. "Is that where you're from?"

"Nope, I was born and raised in Roads Cross; it's a little dusty town, not more than an hour and a half drive away from here. I moved out to Cali on account of a cousin whose got her own shop out there. All Styles is the name of it. They do both men and women's hair."

Her interest piqued, Aliasha said, "So how is it you ended up in Riverton?"

"Told you. I'm a Southern boy. That West Coast lifestyle just ain't for me. I like a slower pace and being around folks who are a little less fake and self-absorbed. Besides that, I missed hanging out with my Big Mama and 'nem."

Aliasha smiled. "I used to spend summers down here with my Big Mama when I was a little girl."

"Yeah?" Dante said. "For me, it doesn't really feel like summer unless I've spent a hot day or two sitting out on the front porch with my Big Mama, sweating, fanning, and shooing flies." Before he switched on the clippers, he pinched his thumb and index finger together and asked, "Is about this much good?"

Without giving it much thought, Aliasha reached out and gently guided his fingers closer together. "Right about there is fine," she said.

Their eyes met, and in that brief instance, Aliasha felt something unspoken transpire between them.

She settled against the barber's chair and spent a few minutes thinking about his

hands. They were nice . . . large and midnight black without a trace of ash between the knuckles . . . and with skin that was smooth and pleasantly warm to the touch. His nails were clean, looked healthy, and bore tips that were short and well rounded.

Even though Dante had repositioned her with her back to the mirror and she couldn't see what he was doing to her head, Aliesha harbored none of the doubts and fears that usually accompanied her climb into a new barber or beautician's chair. She closed her eyes and gave herself permission to drift into that realm of semi-consciousness that exists somewhere between sleep and deep meditation.

After about thirty minutes, she heard him say, "All right, Miz Professor. What you think?"

On reaching for the long-handled mirror he offered, she swiveled from side-to-side, checking out her hair from every conceivable angle. The mirror attached to the wall behind her allowed for a nice view of both the back of her head and her neckline.

"Perfect," she said.

"I could wash it for you if you like," Dante said, while brushing hair clippings from the cape covering her shoulders. "I've got a nice-smelling shampoo with a built-in conditioner."

She glanced at her watch, then asked, "How much extra is it going to cost me?" Inwardly she cringed, realizing she'd failed to ask how much he'd charged in the first place and hoping he wouldn't attempt to gouge her.

"The total for everything?" he asked, as if reading her mind. "Cut, shampoo, and style? Oh, I'm thinking no more than twenty."

Aliesha nodded her okay and followed Dante to a dark room off the rear hallway.

Even though he paused at the door and flipped a switch alongside the wall, it took her eyes a moment to adjust to the dramatic change in light. On focusing, she realized he'd led her into a utility room, one that housed not only a shampoo bowl but a washer, a dryer, and a couple of deep, wide sinks. She slowed her pace as they walked toward the shampoo bowl positioned in the dimly lit back corner of the windowless room.

When she finally eased onto the reclining chair in front of the bowl, Dante helped her properly position herself against the tub's curved neck rest.

"You comfortable?" he asked.

"Oh, sure, this is fine," she said.

Dante picked up the sprayer and turned on the water. "Let me know if it's too hot," he said.

The warm jet streams against her head soothed her in much the same way a full body massage might. She smiled and an involuntary "Umm" slipped past her lips.

Dante smiled down at her. "Feels good, huh?"

Aliesha stared into the face hovering above her own. Ordinarily, she might have felt a twinge of embarrassment. However, in this instance, her smile only grew broader. She openly appraised his good looks, the large liquid brown eyes, the full lips, the dark and neatly groomed hairs nestled beneath the wide nostrils and shadowing the well-defined cheekbones, chin and jaw line.

*I'll be damned if this ain't one hell of a pretty Black man,* is what she caught herself thinking.

"If you enjoyed that, wait till I hit you with some of this," Dante said on removing the top from a bottle and squeezing a blob of the contents into his hand. He worked the

shampoo into her hair. When his fingers commenced their repetitive rub against Aliesha's scalp, she found herself closing her eyes and biting her lip to keep the moan she felt stirring way down deep in her gut from bursting forth.

On composing herself, she braved a peek at him and said, "I don't know if it's the technique you're using, the shampoo, or a combination of the two, but just so you know, that feels absolutely wonderful."

Dante nodded. "I figured you'd like it." He squirted a bit more of the liquid mixture into his palm. "Just so you know--this isn't something you can just buy at any ole store. No, ma'am, this comes from my Big Mama's own private stash."

Aliesha's eyes widened. "Oh yeah?" she said. The upturned corners of her lips fell into a straight line and all her earlier confidence began to dissipate.

"Yeah," Dante said. "She makes and bottles it out on her little piece of land."

"So, what's in it?" Aliesha asked, trying to keep her mind from conjuring an all too vivid image of her hair as a clownish shade of orange and falling out in big clumps.

"Besides water from the creek and a healthy dose of lavender? Hell, if I know," Dante said. "But don't worry," he added as if sensing she were about to raise her fully lathered head off the bowl and make a fast break for the door. "I promise you, this is the milk and honey of shampoos. It's gonna have your 'do looking tighter than it's ever looked. And if it doesn't, come back and I'll give you double, naw, I'll give you triple what you paid me for it."

Aliesha didn't say anything, but the thought uppermost on her mind was, *Uh-huh, and if all my hair falls out, I'll be coming back up here with a summons and looking to sue you and your Big Mama's ass.*

After the wash and rinse, Dante towed as much water as he could from her hair, prior to going over it with the forced heat of a hand-held dryer. He used little more than her pick and his hands when it came time to style her.

She held her breath when he finally passed her the mirror again.

"Well?" he said.

She blinked at the stunningly regal image that greeted her. On exhaling, she looked up at him. "You were right. It's beautiful."

"Uh-huh, me and Big Mama had you worried there for a moment though, didn't we?" He handed her a card with the Wally's Cool Cuts address and phone number printed on it. "If you need me to hook you up again, give me a call. My hours are on the back."

"Thanks," Aliesha said. She paid Dante what she owed him, plus a generous tip. On rising from the chair, she noticed the paperback jutting from atop one of the wide, front waistline pockets of his work smock. She wondered if it was the same book she'd seen resting on his chest earlier.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

He pulled the book from his smock and passed it to her.

"Kafka's *Metamorphosis*?" she said.

"Not exactly what you were expecting, huh?" Rather than give her an opportunity to respond, he added, "Give me a second and I'll walk you out."

After reinserting the earbuds connected to his iPod, Dante invited her to walk in front of him. He escorted her past the new group of customers who'd come in since her

arrival, among them Sam Junior and his hollering-ass twin boys, as well as a small but rowdy group of young men who looked to be in their late teens or early twenties. He led her by Gerald, Wally and the wailing boom box that had at some point wrapped up its Johnnie Taylor set and moved onto the likes of Bobby "Blue" Bland.

On stepping outside, Aliesha watched Dante bob his head to the music coming from his iPod. She motioned for him to remove the earpieces and on his compliance she said, "I thought you were a good ole southern boy. What? You don't like J.T. and Bobby B.?"

Dante shook his head. "That's old man music. It's all right every now and then."

Aliesha reached for one of the iPod's earbuds and raised it to the side of her head. What she heard, Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready" shocked her. The song had been one of her father's favorites. She grinned and said, "If what they're listening to is old man music, what do you call this?"

"Who? Curtis Mayfield? Naw, see, Brother Mayfield is what you call retro. That's right, retro, progressive, and timeless. What? You didn't know? Come on now, Miz Professor. You'd better ask somebody."

He laughed with her, then said, "I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to need that back." He pointed at the book still in her hand. "I'm not exactly finished with it yet."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. After returning his book, she looked into his eyes and said, "Thanks . . . you know . . . for being such a gentleman."

He held her gaze and in a voice that was soft and serious said, "That's how my

Big Mama raised me. I don't know any other way to be."

She walked to her car. The thought of him eyeballing her from behind sent a rush of warmth to her cheeks and gave rise to a hint of a smile on her lips. But when she reached her car and turned around, she found the sidewalk in front of the barbershop vacant. It almost felt as if Dante had never been there.

She slipped inside of the car and stuck her key in the ignition. The start of the engine coincided with the ringing of her cell phone. She fished the phone from her purse and glanced at the flashing number before flipping up the receiver.

"Hey, sweetie," she said. "What's up?"

"You tell me," Javiel said. "I thought you were gonna call and let me know what time to stop by. Are we still on for tonight or what?"