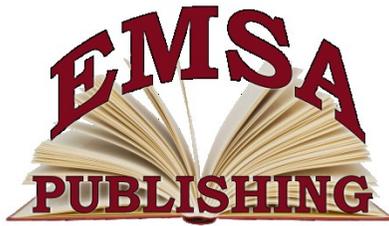


I Was, Am Will Be Alice

Elise Abram



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Praise for *I Was, Am, Will Be Alice*

Also by Elise Abram

Phase Shift

The Mummy Wore Combat Boots

Throwaway Child

The Revenant

Acknowledgements

I Was, Am, Will Be Alice

by Elise Abram

"I'm sure I can't be Mabel...she's she, and I'm I, and--oh dear, how puzzling it all is!"

-- *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll

"I wish for a moment that time would lift me out of this day, and into some more benign one. But then I feel guilty for wanting to avoid the sadness; dead people need us to remember them, even if it eats us, even if all we can do is say, 'I'm sorry' until it is as meaningless air."

-- *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger

I Was Alice

1

Alice is 9

The first time it happens, it happens like this:

I'm huddled beside the bench in the grade three cloakroom, head scrunched against my knees, hands clasped behind my head. I hear the shots, three of them, and I swear my heart stops pumping each time. There's a woman next to me, kneeling, whispering in my ear, telling me it's going to be okay, but I'm either too frightened or it was too long ago to remember exactly what she says. Her hand grips my shoulder firmly, and there's a familiar quality to her voice that's somewhat soothing. The man's heels clack into the cloakroom and the gun cracks as he readies it for the next shot. The woman stands and I can tell by the air she moves with her that she's taken a step toward him. Her lips make a wet sound as if she's parted them, and she draws in a breath as if to speak, and then the gun booms--it's deafening--and she goes down.

I scream and I go away.

When I come back the woman is gone. So is the man with the gun. The classroom door opens with a whoosh. My breath catches in my throat and my heart thumps in my chest and I hear shoe clacks again...

2

Alice is 9

"Alice?" a man says when the clacking stops. It's loud enough to snap me from my trance. "You're covered in blood! Are you okay?"

I blink at him. "I don't think it's mine."

The man, Principal Cotton, clucks his tongue and says, "For God's sake, girl, why are you still here?"

I shrug my shoulders. I have no idea.

His shoes click away. When they click back he has a woolen blanket in his hands. I feel the warmth of his body as he nears and the wet warmth of his breath at the back of my neck as he drapes the blanket over me. He's a smoker. I can tell.

The blanket's scratchy, like Daddy's beard on a weekend morning. It starts to slide off me, but I grab as much of it as I can and pull it close.

Mr. Cotton holds his hand out to me. I take it and let him lead me to the office.

It's weird sitting in the Bad Kid Chairs, and I get A Case of the Nerves waiting for my parents to come. I have to breathe deeply and evenly; the last time I got A Case of the Nerves, I went away, and I don't want to do that again. Not here. Not now.

By the time my parents come for me, Mr. Cotton has let me get washed up. My clothes are sticky in places where the blood is still wet and hard where it's dried in others. We sit in his office, the four of us around a small, round table. I try to picture us sitting this way in a coffee shop, waiting for the waitress to take our orders. Mom orders a latte, lactose free and with three sugars. Dad orders something slushy. Mr. Cotton looks like a tea man to me. I order something fruity and icy with lots of whipped cream.

Mr. Cotton says, "She was curled into a ball when I found her," spoiling the illusion. "She was just glued to the spot, huddled into a ball and holding her breath."

"Where did the blood come from?" Mom sniffles. I hate it when she cries.

"We don't know. She seems physically unharmed." Mr. Cotton shuffles the papers on the table in front of him. "I want to give you this." He hands her a pamphlet. "Grief councillors will be here for the foreseeable future to talk to the children who need it, but seeing as Alice was so close to...well, to the action, Post Traumatic Stress is a likely possibility."

Mom gasps. "Oh God!" Dad reaches for her hand. I sit in my chair taking long, deep breaths, willing myself to grow smaller and smaller until I disappear.

"Call this number, Mrs. Carroll. There are councillors there to help *you* cope, too. Support groups and the like."

Mom reaches for a tissue from the box on the table. She blows her nose, looks at her lap, and continues to weep.

"Thank you, Mr. Cotton," Dad says. He stands up and shakes the principal's hand. He touches Mom's shoulder and she stands, too. She nods and forces a smile at Mr. Cotton.

"Come, sweetie," Dad says to me. He takes my hand and pulls me from my chair.

The drive home would be silent, but for Mom's sniffles and snorts and gasps. When we get there, she announces, "I'm going to lie down for a bit." She smiles at me and says, "You can lie with me if you like, Alice," as an afterthought.

I nod. I don't feel like being comforted by my mother. I feel embarrassed at losing control. Ashamed at being found by Mr. Cotton of all people, just sitting there, crying like a baby. I want to eat chocolate cake till I puke and crawl into a hole somewhere and die.

"Ice cream sundaes, kiddo?" Dad asks.

I nod and smile in spite of myself and follow him into the kitchen.

3

Alice is 9

Dr. Hatfield is a pretty redhead about Mom's age. She lets me go into her toy room when we arrive. "Pick any toy you like," she tells me. I choose a stuffed pink and fuzzy unicorn with iridescent horn and wings.

Dr. Hatfield smiles at my choice and says, "She's pretty, isn't she?"

I turn toward her, hold the unicorn at arm's length and say "It's so fluffy!" in my best *Despicable Me* Agnes voice. Dr. Hatfield smiles, but I don't think she gets it.

We go to the next room. I sit on a worn sofa. Dr. Hatfield sits in a worn, brown leather arm chair on the other side of a beat up, old, wooden coffee table.

"What happened, Alice?" she asks me.

I shrug and pretend to be more interested in the pink unicorn's fur. I think I'll call her Princess Pinkie Pie.

"Do you want to tell me about your last day at school?" Mom pulled me out of school after It happened. I haven't been back in three or four days now. Mom hasn't been to work in that time, either. It's really boring at home with her. We watch a lot of television, bake, and make crafts. Mostly Mom lies in bed and either watches television or sleeps.

I shrug again. Princess Pinkie Pie's horn looks twisted, but when I try to unravel it I realize it's just a cone of pretty material sewn to look twisted.

"When did you first think you might be in trouble?"

Again, I shrug. I let Princess Pinkie Pie run her fluffy, white tail through the circle that forms when I touch the tip of my thumb to the tip of my forefinger.

This goes on for a while, Dr. Hatfield asking questions, me shrugging as I examine every centimetre, every millimetre of Princess Pinkie Pie's body. At last, she tells me to put the unicorn to sleep for the night and calls Mom into her office.

There's an oversized bed in an oversized doll house that's not quite large enough for Princess Pinkie Pie to sleep comfortably, but the room has pretty pink and cream striped wallpaper with pale pink flowers in full bloom. There's a window, and a dresser, too. A picture of thick blades of grass and a happy-faced daisy under a blue sky is hung over the headboard. A fat yellow and black bee wearing a huge grin buzzes over the daisy.

As I lay Princess Pinkie Pie on the plastic bed I imagine myself in a make-believe house, in a make-believe room, lying on a make-believe bed. I am the same as all of the make-believe people who live in the house. I am the perfect doll of a child. I never get into trouble. I am not sick with Post Tra...whatever Syndrome. I never disappear. I never find myself bloody and shaking in the cloakroom at school, make-believe or otherwise.

"...traumatized to the point of..." I hear Dr. Hatfield say. I kiss Princess Pinkie Pie goodnight, lay her on the bed, and sneak to the door. If I stand behind the open door and peek through the crack between the door and the jamb, I can just see Dr. Hatfield and my mom in the next room and hear them as if I were still in the same room as them, as if I were right there, still sitting on the ratty old couch beside my mom.

"What do I do?"

"I can help her. Next time she comes, we'll play a game or two, try to build a rapport." Whatever that means.

"I'm hoping she'll open up to me once she trusts me."

"What about school? I can't keep her out much longer. I can't miss work much longer either."

"Take her back to school tomorrow. Stay with her for a while."

Like that's going to happen.

"She needs to begin to feel safe in the school environment again."

When we're alone in the car I tell her, "I think I can handle school tomorrow."

I can tell it takes a lot of effort, but Mom smiles. "Didn't I tell you it's not polite to eavesdrop?" She backs out of the spot in the parking lot. When we're on the road she says, "I can go with you, you know, till you feel safe and all."

"It's just school, Mom."

"But Dr. Hatfield said—"

"I heard what Dr. Hatfield said." Mom looks at me out of the corner of her eyes and presses her lips together in disapproval. "But I think I'm good."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

There's one other thing I'm good at apparently—lying to my mom.