

Emergent  
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Alison Hayes Journey, book 4

Prologue

When I was young and my life was full of chaos, before my mother died, before my life began, I loved a boy. I've tried to relegate what I felt for him to "first crush," but all the days since the last time we met, my heart has longed for him. In my soul, I believe that he loved me once, but we could never seem to wait for each other. We left on bad terms the last time I saw him, and we've never found our way back. Dylan, the boy, is a married man now, with a son, and I am too broken even to consider going on a date. My best friend Charley thinks I should warm up to dating by going out with a woman, which might be less threatening. I'm barely capable of making friends—lovers seems a stretch.

Once, during that last horrible year, he came for me after my mother had been in a car wreck and brought me back to his family home. It was a frozen night with ice coating the road and the winds growling like some wild, rabid beast, I remember it like it was yesterday. I remember the spillage of his headlamps into the inky blackness and the cautious slippage that passed for driving on this night. When we had arrived at his home, his parents met us in the living room, lit only by the glow of the fireplace. power lines had given way under the weight of the ice, and we sat together, almost like a family. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Dylan's father, Jake, had asked, because that was the kind of man he was. How was I planning to support myself? How was I going to grow up and not be a burden on society? How was I going to grow up and not be my mother?

I've been trying to answer that question ever since the moment he asked it. At the time I gave the simple answer, "I want to be an artist." I can almost hear the sound of my younger self saying the words. It was like whispering a dream or speaking a magic spell. I didn't know the proper sounds, the right herbs to put in the boiling cauldron to make it reality. There was no rhythm to my incantation. I had no concept of how I moved from that dirty little spot in my life to anything else. Nobody ever asked about *who I wanted to be* when I grew up. Who I wanted to be was a different answer, a more real answer. Who I wanted to be was someone who wasn't hungry all the time, someone who didn't eat peanut butter, ever. I wanted to be a person surrounded by peace and calm and quiet. I wanted to be able sit from one day to the next and watch the light shift

without any chaos. I wanted my life to be smooth and comfortable. I didn't know then that peace and calm would turn out to be so lonely.

I still believed I could grow up to be normal.

I wanted to be anybody but myself, anybody but Alice Hayes's daughter.

I'm in my art room, putting paint to canvas. The echo of Jake's voice, the precise formation of words, rebounds again in my mind. There is something wrong in the memory, something missing, but I can't figure out what I've lost, what I've misremembered. I messed up something in the spell, but what?

Remembering the girl I used to be is like picking at a dry scab, which never peels free. I thought that if I ever got free of my mother that I would never think of her again. Instead, I think of her always and try to understand, now that I'm an adult, what made her the way she was. It runs in the blood, maybe. Her dad was an alcoholic, too, and my grandparents have told me what they could about my mom. She was a victim of abuse, like I was. But she suffered from Stockholm syndrome, the victim who loved her abuser, and back then, nobody talked about what had happened. They just expected her to be okay once her dad was gone. She wasn't. We never are. Abused children can grow up to function, to seem okay, but inside there is always some shattered place that we can never entirely rebuild. I finally understand that she was using the alcohol to be numb, to not have to look at all her parts. My mother was always the child she was. She never matured; she never grew up. She was stuck emotionally at her most traumatic point—when he left. It's a real thing, arrested emotional development; I looked it up on the Internet, and when I found that information, it felt like the biggest piece of the puzzle clicked into place. It explained so much about the woman I remember. She was always an adolescent. It doesn't make it better, understanding that. It makes it more tragic, because she never knew that what had happened wasn't her fault, that she didn't have to own it, and if she had been willing to work through some of her issues, maybe she could have grown up. Perhaps she would still be here, and we'd know each other in some real way.

I've analyzed my life and think I've got it all figured it; I understand why I am the way I am. Most of my adult choices have been fueled by doing the opposite of what my mother would have done. I didn't want anybody ever to say that I repeated my mother's mistakes. I didn't want anybody ever to say that I was like her. I refused to be stuck, the way she was. The reality, I know, is that I've just painted myself into a different corner, and I'm every bit as stuck.

The only sounds in my apartment are from the open window, voices from the alley, cars moving down the street on either end of the block. It's early afternoon, and the light cuts a stark elongated rectangle into the room, splashing across the canvas.

Haven't I done just what I said I wanted to do? Didn't it work? I must have said the right combination of words, the right incantation, all those years ago when Jake asked me those questions—because I am all of those things. I am an artist. I am not a burden on society. I can afford my bills and have some to put aside in the bank. I work as a nurse at the hospital, I am giving something back to society. On my days off I paint. I do the circuit of summer festivals every year, and sometimes I get a commission to paint a family or a beloved pet. Two years ago, the hotel on Lincoln commissioned a piece for their lobby, and I'm in the running to do a series of line art for the Charleston Historical Society annual holiday cards and calendar. I'm still waiting to hear about that. I've already started work on them, sketches of the historic houses lining 7th Street and Old Main at the university.

I never eat peanut butter. My life is quiet. I have no chaos.

I am insanely bored.

A low hollow pit sits in my stomach, and I feel that something is wrong. Something is missing. It's been riding there for days like an omen and feels like the beginning slide of depression. Since I started working on the town sketches I've been dropping into the past more often, remembering the town as it used to be, thinking of the houses as they once were, remembering who lived where. It has made me ache for the past. It's like picking that scab.

I miss my mother.

I am nobody's daughter.

I will be older than she ever was on my next birthday, and I am nothing like her. She was passionate and always looking for love or her next fight. She was never bored. She is heavy on my mind, filling the edges of my thoughts. My mother. She has been gone as long as she was with me. I don't know how to live the rest of my life without her as a barometer. She haunts me.

My brush touches the canvas, filling in the highlight for a rail on a sailboat, overlooking a vast and stormy sea. There is still space, left white, with only the shape of bodies yet to be painted. All the painting I do for me is from my memory and captures my regrets, in vivid color. Ask me if I have regrets, and I will always answer no. I hope that I have left nobody worse for knowing me, but I know I have. I've hurt people along the way, I've lost people, and like an alcoholic, I'm stuck on the ninth step, making amends.

Along the walls, leaning, are paintings already mounted and ready to hang. They are finished, but they'll never hang anywhere. They are just paintings I had to complete as part of my private therapy. There is Jenny, a little girl I knew when I was in California, with her wide-set eyes and wispy blond hair, sitting on the swing at her family's Del Mar home. A book is open in her lap. She is smiling, happy.

There is my mother, standing on the back step of the trailer, her shirttail blowing in the breeze, laughing back at me. I had been so humiliated that day when she tottered across the yard offering lemonade to Dylan and me. The image sticks in my mind, like a photograph. She was trying to do the right thing, to be a mother. If I were to meet her now, I think I could help her. I understand so much more about what drives people now. But I was just a child, angry and hormonal, with my private side of issues.

Another painting is of Dylan, riding Pride in front of me, his face turning, caught in profile. Another is of Trey, his hair tousled and blowing, looking out toward the incoming wave from the top of his surfboard.

There is Cici, who I followed to California, pregnant, sitting on the sofa in the common room at Life House, smiling that radiant, intoxicating smile. There is another of her with black wings erupting from her shoulder blades. Cici was two different people.

There is Warren, smiling, the silver glint of his pierced eyebrow catching the light.

There are the girls from the Mexico modeling shoot, tall and lean and beautiful, hollowed out with chosen hunger.

There are Vicki and the twins, and Ina, with all the deep crags of her face. Ina gifted me an understanding of the life I could make; she made me see that it was my choice how I would live, as a river or a canyon.

There are several of the bird Cotton, who gave the most beautiful hugs. He was almost human, better than human. Sometimes I think what I need is a bird, a Cotton, to talk to me when I am home, but I work long hours and am gone more than I am here. No other bird would be Cotton.

There is my daughter, as I remember her, held in my arms that first and last day before I handed her over to another mother.

None of these will ever be displayed. These are therapy sessions, my regrets, my memories, the ones I can't seem to let go. These are the people that are forever stuck with me in the ninth step, as I wait to make amends.

The rest, the festival pieces, are of scenery, animals, and children that I've compiled from my imagination; pictures people could put behind a sofa or in a hall or above a toilet. They are marketable. My memories are not.

The paint has dried, and I am still standing, staring at, but not seeing, the space where the people will be. I drop the brush into the water and step away. I'm not ready to finish it yet, and now I want to be away from all the memories. I have holes in the exhibit collection that I should be working on, but the mood to paint has passed. I clean my brushes and my palette, stacking everything to dry. I close the window, and the room gets quieter, tuning out the traffic, the wafting voices. I latch the door behind me.

The walls of my apartment are bare. There are no paintings, no images, not even a calendar. hanging. On the refrigerator is a single sheet of paper with my schedule for the

month, printed from work. As each day passes, I mark the date, another day down, another day put in the bottle and tossed to sea. I glance down at my watch; it's just after three. My restless blood stirs.

Time moves at a snail's pace when you are all alone.

The fridge is empty, and I let it fall shut, the condiments rattling in the door racks. I'm not hungry. I'm bored, or restless. "Antsy" is the word my mother would have used. I'm antsy. I feel expectant, like something is coming, something is going to happen, I am on the edge of something. My mother would have made herself a drink and forced the feeling to pass.