

The Key to Circus-Mom Highway

Allyson Rice

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The Key to Circus-Mom Highway is a zany novel in which two adoptees rediscover their family roots.

In Allyson Rice's feverish, entertaining novel *The Key to Circus-Mom Highway*, siblings go on a road trip in search of their mother's past.

Single, tattooed Jesse lives on the fringes of society. Jennifer, her sister, has a picture-perfect life and is married to a podiatrist. When they receive a phone call from a Tallahassee lawyer, they join together to claim a million-dollar inheritance. But their biological mother, Angie, hasn't made it easy: they're tasked with completing a weeklong scavenger hunt first.

The story swerves through unusual events, forcing the sisters into closer proximity than they'd like. Jennifer has initial difficulty yielding to the ludicrous nature of the trip, and Jesse has to shift from pain and anger into empathy for Angie. But they persist, and together they visit a circus show and a house in Louisiana's backwoods where performers who knew Angie live. They spend time in a drag bar and end up kidnapping Jack, an impersonator whom they're supposed to include on the trip. Clues are given at each stop about where the next stop should be. They encounter a bungee-leashed dog, a narcoleptic juke joint owner, and a healer whose sharpshooting instincts help to save the day. They also deal with a wayward GPS system.

The sisters' tongue-in-cheek poking at each other mixes with childhood flashbacks, heightening their shared exasperation and affection for each other. Jennifer expresses background concerns regarding her husband, who she fears is unfaithful, while Jesse's musical leanings tie her closer to Angie. Eventually, Jesse, Jennifer, and Jack all discover what binds them together.

The truth about Angie's past may be somewhat macabre, but the novel evades despair well. However, in its hurry to arrive at the fun hijinks of the road trip, the novel rushes through the introduction of its cast, whose members seem preoccupied and too given to banter. And the supporting cast seems present mainly to reveal Angie's connection to the circus and the truth about how she came to abandon her children. The book's final twist upends much of what came before it, and it is executed in a halting manner, proffering sudden explanations and deep traumas.

A tall tale featuring violence and bayou gators, *The Key to Circus-Mom Highway* is a zany novel in which two adoptees rediscover their family roots.

KAREN RIGBY (August 23, 2022)

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