

AUTHOR
Angie Gallion

THE SERIES
The Alison Hayes Journey
Intoxic
Purgus
Icara

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Young Adult / Literary Fiction
Contemporary Fiction

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THE AUTHOR

ANGIE GALLION

Angie was born and raised in East Central Illinois and has a strong relationship with the land and people from her childhood. She graduated college with a BA in English and wrote the first draft of her first novel, *Intoxic*, in a creative writing class at Eastern Illinois University, her alma mater.

She followed her love of theatre to California and spent several years there before she was drawn back to the Midwest, with its black soil, and rock and oil roads.

Angie is a wife and mother who resides now with her family in Georgia. She enjoys participating in author events and talking to people about her own books as well as their favorite books. She recognized early on in her publishing the importance of reviews in the marketing of her work. As she met more small press and independent publisher she saw a great void in spreading the word about some of these quality works. She started publishing reviews of quality small press and indie press books on her website, www.angiegallion.com.



THE JOURNEY

(SERIES SYNOPSIS)

Growing up is hard to do, even in the best of times, but for Alison Hayes, growing up feels impossible. Her broken mother has left her to figure it out mostly on her own, and Alison's anger and frustration at being one of the Have-nots, the biggest of the have-nots, is almost more than she can tolerate.

Walk with Alison as she begins her journey in Intoxic from chaos toward calm, walk with her through her first adult year and feel her transformation in Purgus as she faces the most difficult decision of her young life, travel with her as she strives to find a balance between regret and responsibility through the canyon of her youth and join her as she prepares for flight in Icara.

KEYWORDS

broken family
alcoholism
cutting
child abuse
poverty
child isolation
modeling
eating disorders
self-esteem

CATEGORIES

Fiction, Young Adult
Fiction, Contemporary
Fiction, Literary



LONG SYNOPSIS

INTOXIC

Alison will accept no charity. She is stubborn and independent, and well on the way to finding her own brokenness. She wants the quick answer, the easy answer, and there are none.

When Alison Hayes walks into her storm-darkened trailer the afternoon of her sixteenth birthday, she has no idea that it will be the beginning of a year like no other. Her mother has lost her job, again, the most stable man they've ever had in their lives is looking for the nearest exit, and her best friend is dating the prom queen. She can't remember the last time anything good had happened to her. If the rails still passed through the town, she would definitely be on the wrong side, always looking across to everyone else, it seemed, who had it so much better than she.

Dirty. Trash. The words have followed her through her life in her tattered, rust-stained jeans. She longs to understand her mother--who is lost and broken, driven by her addictions, by her losses--and to reconcile the memory of *MOTHER* before with *MOTHER* now.

In the chaos of their one acre in the world, Alison strives for sanity, forging a path through the wreckage into the light. She is alone and must learn to stand alone, or she will be swept by the same undercurrents of self-defeat that took her mother so many years ago. During these worst of times, she discovers her own strength and determination and a powerful drive to do something better.

LONG SYNOPSIS

PURGUS

When Alison Hayes finds herself suddenly set free in the world to build her life out of the crumbled ruins of her childhood, she must come to terms with her own demons before she can make her way out of the chaos left by her mother's life.

Were people right to think she would follow the same road her mother travelled, or would Alison be able to forge a new path? Is she destined to repeat the mistakes of her mother, or is she free to make choices for a better way?

When there are opportunities to make good choices, how will she ever know which choice is right?

Alison's first adventure into adulthood, on the heels of a man she thinks she thinks she loves, will lead her to the most difficult decision of her life and will set the course for her future and what kind of woman she will become.

LONG SYNOPSIS

ICARA

On the road again, Alison is running from the Midwest to the golden beaches of California. Can she build a life in the land of movies stars and dreams?

Alison Hayes is set to fly or flee. When she follows her friend, Cici, to California she hopes it will be the beginning of a new, perfect life. She has spent her days trying to do something better, trying not to repeat the mistakes made by her alcoholic and broken mother. Yet, she is haunted by the only "right thing" she has ever done being the one thing she couldn't keep.

Can Alison create a new, charmed life in a land where nobody knows her history? Can she soar to the elusive "something better?" Or, as she fears, will the cracks in her foundations break through and send her careening to the ground?

(AMAZON REVIEWS)

"This book was one of those books you just can't put down."

"Excellent! Very real!"

"This story pulled me in during the first chapter and I could not put it down. Excellent!!"

"I admire the ability of the author to put such details and descriptions into the characters and surroundings. I would easily lose myself in each chapter."

". . . grabs the reader by heart, and we become invested with every page turned. A movie possibly?"

"The book ended with me wanting more!"

"I could not conceive that a 75-year-old male, me, could really identify with a 16 year old girl, Alison, the book's protagonist. ...This is a really, really well-written and well crafted book that is so well presented that anyone, even me, can identify with her. Alison becomes very dear to the reader and we might even recognize ourselves or someone we love in her."

"Male or female readers will find they can relate with Alison in some way either themselves, a loved one or friend."

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

"The unconditional love that a daughter has for a mother was so heartfelt. Can't wait to read more from this author and hopes that she continues Alison's journey!!"

"I am writing this with blurry vision as tears are still running down my face. What a book."

"I think anyone can relate to Alison whether you are in your teens or in your 40s."

"Another couldn't put it down book."

"I absolutely loved this book! The author put such detail into every aspect of the book! I laughed (out loud) and also cried. I felt that I was actually there looking through Alison's eyes. It is a great continuation of Intoxic."

"This . . . book is well written and I had a hard time doing anything but reading it cover to cover as Alison continues to do life the hard way."

DOWNLOADABLES

We appreciate your interest in Angie Gallion and the Alison Hayes Journey. Please contact us at angie.gallion@yahoo.com (Attn: Press) for questions and to share where and when your article will appear.



Image AG1



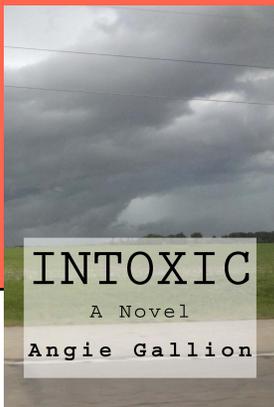
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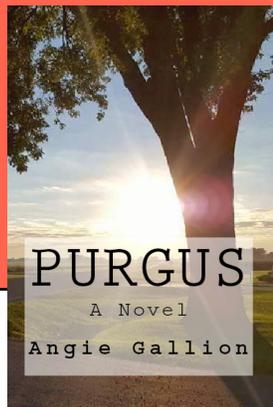
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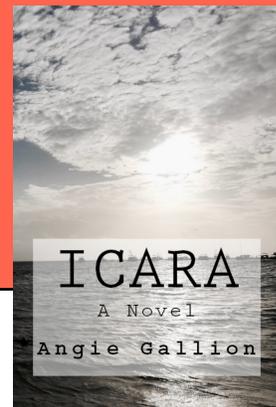
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[Intoxic](#)



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CONTACT

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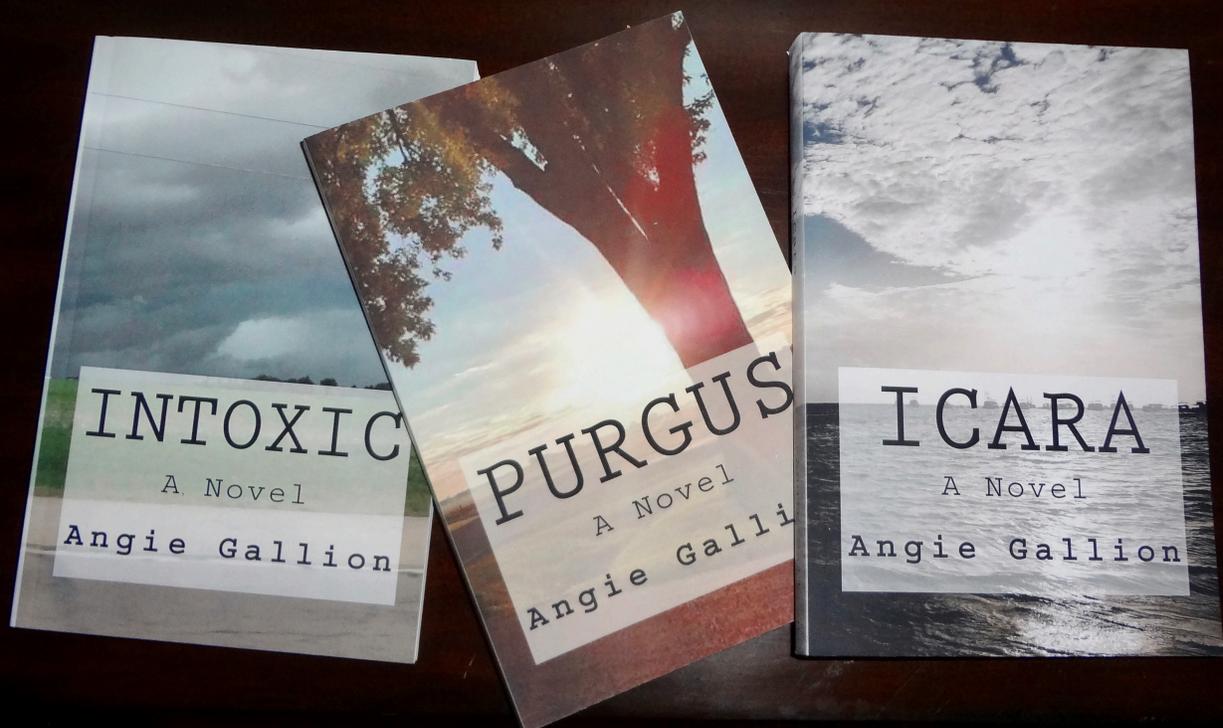
She publishes her work with Beech House Books, her personal publishing house and works in close conjunction with Janet Fix at thewordverve.com

You will find her active on social media:

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SNEAK PEAK

INTOXIC

Part One: Spring

Chapter 1

It is raining outside, and I am home alone. Mitch is working evenings at United this week and won't be home until midnight, which is good—I won't have to see him. I don't know where Mom is, just that the trailer was dark and empty when I came home. Milk and soggy Fruit Loops sit souring in a bowl on the table. I wonder which of them left it here. Probably Mitch, since Mom doesn't usually eat food. I tip the contents of the bowl into the sink. The window behind the table is up, and now everything is wet: the floor, the table, the windowsill. I push the window down, leaning over the table, rain splattering against the sill and onto my arm. My skin prickles to gooseflesh, and I use a rag from the counter to mop up all the water so the worn linoleum won't warp, a wasted effort considering the state of everything already. The metallic clang of the rain slapping against the tin roof of our trailer pings out a metallic chant. The lamp is turned over on its side, evidence of the morning battle. I set it right again. I believe Mitch is on his way out, which is good—it's past time.

The fridge is empty, except for some cheese, old cheese, left over from Christmas and wrapped in foil from one of those prepackaged sampler sets. The light in the fridge reflects off the foil and bounces a rectangle of white into the dark kitchen. I flip on the light switch and let the refrigerator door fall shut. I find chicken noodle soup in the cupboard and crackers in the cabinet. There is a pan in the sink, so I wash it and set it on the stove, adding water to noodles, turning the heat up to medium high. The flames lick out beneath the pan, blue fingers grasping at the scarred silver metal. Broth begins to bubble, and I eat a cracker, staving off my hunger while my mind hisses like gas from an unlit stove. I wonder where she is, where she has gone, and when she will return.

In my mind's eye, she is lying dead on the bed with an empty bottle of pills. I go to her room, turn on the light, and there she is, her head turned slightly to the side, her mouth open. Her chest is rising and falling in time with the shallow catching of breath that passes for snoring in the heavily sedated. I run my finger along the disintegrating edge of a bruise along her jawline. She said that she tripped coming up the steps, but I think it looks very fist shaped. I told Mitch that if

I ever catch him hitting her, I will kill him. Maybe that's why he is working late this week, waiting until the evidence disappears.

On the bedside table is a glass, and peaking from beneath the bed, I can see the cap of her liquor bottle, her own self-prescribed tranquilizer. I bend down and lift the bottle, tilting it up to see the remains—a shallow pool of clear liquid in the bottom, all that was left to drain from the sides after the last drink was poured. I take her glass, too, and leave her sleeping. I rinse her glass in the sink and tuck the bottle into the trash can alongside another companion. Everything is getting worse and worse and worse. Something should happen to break the cycle, one way or the other, but what? Maybe Mitch leaving? She was a little better after Ed left, for a little while. I don't know.

I nudge her shoulder. "Mom." She groans and turns to face me, one eye opening to a slit. "Mom. Where's the car?" She groans, turning her face away from me, her hand drawing up to cover her head. "What are you doing here? You should be at work." She draws a deep breath and breathes out enough vodka vapor to stun a horse. "Where is the car?" Did she wreck it? How did she get home?

"S'at work." She groans yet again, her words mushed together like she is talking through mouth full of food.

"What? Your car is at work?" I pause. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Just leave me alone," she mumbles, trying to push me off the edge of her bed.

"Did you get fired?" I ask, my voice ringing in the room. "Mom, did you get fired?"

She tells me again to leave her alone and edges toward the other side of the bed to sit up, weaving when finally upright.

"What happened?" I ask. I demand.

"Leave me alone." There is a sheen of sweat erupting on her lip and forehead. "I'm gonna be sick."

I help her stand up, and she pushes my hand away, weaving toward the bathroom, banging solidly against the doorjamb as she enters. Maybe she did fall on the steps. I listen to her vomit splashing into the bowl and wait. The water in the sink comes on; she sluices the water around her mouth, spits. I am waiting for her when she comes back. Her eyes slide off of me like I am a shadow in the corner.

"Why did you get fired?"

She shrugs, her eyes touching the spot where her glass was, missing it, noticing that the bottle is gone from under the bed. Her eyes flash and flick to me, then the anger is gone as suddenly as it came.

"Were you drunk?" My voice whispers out of me, a sigh, a gasp.

"Lee me'lone." She flops back into her bed and closes her eyes.

I heave a huge sigh—disgust, anger, and frustration coming out with my breath. Crap. I make my way over her piled clothes and back into the hall, slamming her door behind me. Crap. Crap. Crap. “Goddammit!” I scream, slamming the side of my fist into the front door as I pass. My skin stings. Happy sucky birthday to me.

My soup is hot by the time I return to the kitchen, but my hunger is gone. I wonder what she did at work today. Did she go in drunk or get that way later? I turn back to my soup and dip a cupful out, leaving the rest to grow cold with the fire gone.

The noodles spin in my bowl, and I stare out the window, the water still sluicing in rivulets. Listening to the chant on the roof, I think about the woman lying at the end of the trailer, my mother. The word itself draws up images of something very different. Something that maybe she used to be but isn’t now. I don’t know. I just know I hate that drunk version.

The rain begins to slacken, and the rivulets running down the window break into drops, clinging to the glass, quivering with the force of gravity pulling them downward. The sun begins to break through the clouds, and I take the remains of my soup, which I haven’t touched, and put it and what is left in the pan into a bowl covered with foil in the fridge. Another something to sit and wait for mold.

When I step outside the air is tinged in orange from the sun seeping through the still-roiling clouds. I grab my bike and peddle down our road, avoiding the potholes and puddles, weaving as the spray whistles off of my tires, heading toward Dylan’s house, my mood hovering in dark corners until I see his barn break through the tree line.

We’ve always been friends, since I moved here. Friend by proximity I suppose. I don’t know if I want Dylan to be there or if I just want the horses. I used to always want him to be there, but things have changed a bit since I stayed back in sixth grade and he moved into junior high. Even though we never really hung out at school because I am a year younger, that took him to a different school entirely, and we’ve never really gotten back to where we were. It made a difference, him moving on and me staying behind. Our worlds shifted a step further apart that year, and even though we are still friends, we are not the friends we were. It was stupid for me to have to repeat a grade, but it was the year my mom spent three months in the halfway house and I was left to shunt pretty much on my own. She was clean when she finally came home, and stayed that way for a bit, long enough to get Mitch to come home to her, but it was too late for me. I had already missed too many days of school to pass on, regardless of how my grades turned out. So I stayed behind, and the kids in my class figured I was stupid, even though I’m not, and that changed everything. The kids coming into sixth grade also figured I was stupid because they saw me as going backward. It was a really bad year. By the time I did make it to junior high, I almost didn’t care that I was mostly alone in it.

I wheel my bike into the lane and swing off. The ground is soft under my feet, and the muck

sucks up around my shoes and makes a low, thooing sound as I pull away. The clouds tumble just above the barn, and the soft, orange glow fades as the sun is forced back behind the shifting clouds. It could rain again at any second. Thunder growls around me, and the newly budded leaves on the trees turn their light sides up against the wind. In the distance, a flash of lightening slashes through the grey. The grass is bright, vivid with color after the long winter, shimmering when the errant sun sparkles across it. Not that there has been much sun over the last week, with one storm system rolling in after another. But the buds on the trees and bushes lining the lane are beginning to pop, just ready to open.

The barn stands to the left of the house. The gingerbread house, with its white siding, deep green shutters, and orange roof. It's a beautiful house. In the spring and fall, it blends with the colors of the trees around it, and in the winter, it's a splash of color against an otherwise desolate landscape. As I come through the paddock, I see the horses, nuzzling at the trough, waiting for their feed. There are three of them: Pride, the white Arabian; Adelaide, the chestnut; and Chessa, the red with a thick blaze on her face. Chessa and Adelaide are Morgans, with finely shaped heads but not as delicately boned as the Arabian. With the three of them nuzzling at each other and watching the front of the barn so intensely, I know Dylan must be there, portioning out oats and grains for the feeding. I hesitate and almost turn back, but then I slip inside. There he is, just as I thought, filling the pail with oats and cracked corn. The naked bulb overhead swings, throwing shadows across the walls. I lean against the jamb, just watching. He won't see me until he turns to come out.

He is dressed in blue jeans and a white T-shirt. His rubber boots come up to his knees. He leans into the feed bin and back out, pouring oats and corn into three separate buckets. He is liquid motion. He has very loose limbs that don't seem hindered by joints or bones. He is hanging the buckets for the horses when his dad, Jake, arrives in the doorway beside me. I jump, bringing my hand to my neck.

"Didn't mean to scare you." He says in his very calm, well-mannered voice. I like Dylan's dad okay, but he makes me nervous.

"You didn't." I smile and look away, feeling my face flood with color. I step closer to the wall, giving him more berth to pass through.

"Dyl, dinner's on," he calls from where he stands beside me. Dylan turns and grins when he sees me. I raise my hand and wave. "Have you eaten, Alison?"

"Yes sir, I ate at home."

"That's too bad, there's enough for thrashers." Jake smiles, displaying large, somewhat crooked teeth.

“She’ll eat.” Dylan closes the feed bin. “Won’t ya, sneaky?” It’s not so much a question and neither of them wait for a response. He really hasn’t changed. It’s just me. I’m the awkward creature in the corner of the room, the one drooling and farting and gnawing on the carpet.

“Great, I’ll tell Vaude to set a plate.” Then Jake turns on his heel and is gone, loping toward the back door as Dylan reaches up and pulls the beaded chain to make the light go out.

“Ya sneakin’ up on me, Al?” He makes his way toward me.

“Not really.” He drops his arm over my shoulder, and I duck under before he can catch me in a headlock. He never hurts me, he just doesn’t let me get away. It’s something he’s done for years, a holdover from younger days when we’d wrestle across the living room floor, trying to pin each other. That was before he hit his growing spurt and gained about sixty pounds on me, and before we both hit puberty. I like it though, his arm resting across my shoulder, the fingers dangling, following the curve of his wrist. I like his closeness. But today I feel so prickly that I have to shrug my spines away so I don’t poke him.

“How ya been?” We walk toward the back door, swaying slightly, squishing into the wet grass. I haven’t been around much this spring.

“All right, I guess.” I pause. “Mitch is working late this week.” I don’t mention that my stupid mother got herself fired today. I’m not ready to divulge that personal tragedy yet. “You know you don’t have to feed me.”

“Thought so. His truck wasn’t there when I went by. I looked for you after school.” He ignored my last comment, and my stomach turns over.

“I caught the bus.” We’ve reached the back door, and he swings it open. “I thought you had your student council thing tonight.”

“Got cancelled. John’s got the flu, and Mindy had cheerleading.” We step inside, and he bends to pull off his boots, removing his arm from my shoulder. I kick my shoes off, too, and leave them, covered in muck, outside the door beside the welcome mat. I can hear Jake and Vaude talking as Dylan pulls up his socks, and we pad our way to the dining room. I love Dylan’s house. It’s very clean, with cream-colored carpets and vaulted ceilings. The dining room opens out from the kitchen, where Vaude and Jake are putting the finishing touches into a salad.

Even though I love the house, I don’t like being inside it. There should be signs that say “DO NOT TOUCH” across everything. I feel like I’m going to run into something or spill cranberry juice on the carpets. It used to be homier, but now it’s pristine, like newly fallen snow. The carpets still smell new. It’s overwhelming, all that white, and when I get overwhelmed or nervous, I get very quiet, like a hummingbird, hovering, but never quite touching down.

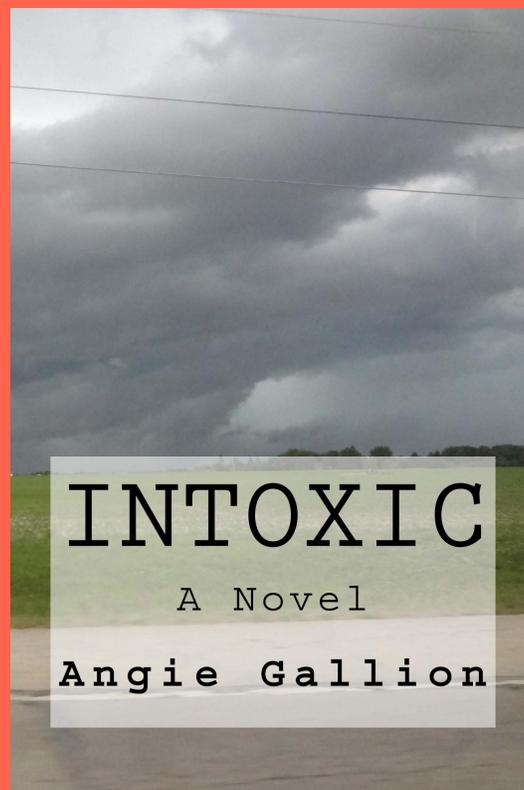
Jake and Vaude are smart and funny, and they seem to love each other too much to have been married forever like they have. What makes that work for some people and not for others? I can’t imagine Mom ever making a salad with someone. Actually I can’t honestly imagine Mom cutting

up a salad—maybe an olive for her martini. She’s not a fan of “rabbit food,” and when it comes right down to it, mealtimes are certainly not events in my house. Maybe that’s the problem, not enough roughage. But Dylan’s family is nothing like mine, and I sometimes find myself wondering what my life would have been if Jake and Vaude had been my parents instead. Would they be talking about colleges for me and planning our summer trip to Alaska or something? What if I had won the family jackpot and Dylan had been dealt the snake eyes.

“How is your mother?” Vaude asks, as she always does, polite and mannerly.

“She is fine.” I answer as I always do. “Thank you for asking.” Vaude was my seventh-grade history and English teacher, which was odd but nice, since she already knew me so well.

We eat lasagna, garlic bread, and salad. I watch them and listen as they talk about their days. This is how it’s supposed to be: a FAMILY, in great big capital letters. I wonder if they are different when they’re alone. Do they fight and yell and throw whatever is handy? I glance at their flawless walls and know there is no throwing of anything in this house. Still, I wonder if they keep the peace until the house is empty and then let it rip, when nobody can hear. They seem almost too much like “family,” the way families are supposed to be, like it just comes easy and natural. Unlike my family, where the basic form of talking is yelling and the general topic is complaint. I wonder if that is the difference, what makes them the “Haves” and us the “Have Nots.”



SNEAK PEEK

PURGUS

Part One: Spring

Chapter 1

The light outside the window is haloed around the street lamp, and I am sitting in the police station, on one of the metal folding chairs that line the front window. A fan whirs in the corner, moving the sultry air from one side of the room to the other. I am so alone—not so much different from every other day, really. Except it is. Today is different, and nothing will ever be like it was again.

“You can come home with me,” says Leslie McGill, laying her large, square hand on my arm.

I am here because this is where they brought me after they put up the yellow CAUTION tape and began to process the scene. The crime scene. The scene where my mother had ended her life, or somebody had ended it for her. Suicide is murder—ending a life. No difference. I remember being asked months ago if she had suicidal tendencies, and at the time, all I could think was: *don't we all?* Back when I had sliced my own little lines of self-destruction into my skin, writing the words that defined my life on the arches of my feet, into the hollows below my ankles, and finally, just angry, wordless lines in the soft flesh of my arms.

I do not look up at her, this large, soft woman, but stare at the dark skin of her square hand, her clean, trimmed fingernails showing pink. She is fabulously big and round, in a tunic that may have been originally designed as a tent. It is every color imaginable all at once. Her black tights stretch taut over the thick muscles of her calves. I think I have seen her somewhere before, but don't have the mental capacity to figure out where. “I don't want to go home with you. I have a home,” I say, looking away from her hand and back through the window, out into the night. The

glow of headlights pool in the street as a car passes.

“Yes. I know you have a home, but it looks like your home is going to be tied up for a little while.” She pauses, lifting her hand off my arm, folding it over the small manila envelope that sits across her lap. My name is written in the top left corner. **Alison Hayes**. Written in black pen, with such force that I can see where the paper has dented with the passage of the pen. “You’ll just be with me until we find your family.”

“I don’t have any family,” I say. I’ve been through this already, with the policeman who brought me here. “I don’t have any family. I don’t know my father. I don’t know who my grandparents are or if my mother had *siblings*.” It rolls off my tongue, foreign, their word, not mine.

“Yes. That’s what they told me. I am sorry,” she says in a quiet voice, resonant with sympathy, and I glance up at her for maybe the first time. She has blue eyes, large and slightly protruding, circled in dark by the skin around them. The dark color fades to a ruddy mocha down her cheeks, and her full lips are compressed to a tight line. “I am very sorry.”

I believe her. Her eyes are pooled with liquid, and for a second, I think the liquid will spill over and run down her cheeks. But she blinks several times, looking away from me and out the window, watching as a car moves slowly past, then back. When her eyes latch to mine again, they are dry. “Won’t you come with me? I have a cozy room with a nice little bed in a room you’ll have to yourself.”

“When will I be able to go back home?”

“I don’t know, honey. It depends on what the police decide.”

My mother flashes through my mind, as she was when I went into her room, her mouth open, her skin gone to gray. I close my eyes against the vision and feel my brows rising into my forehead. When I have forced the vision out, I open my eyes again and stand up. “Then let’s go.” I stride to the door and turn back to her as she pushes herself up from the seat, holding one leg out straight, like the knee is stiff and sore. “Can we go by and get some clothes on the way?” I ask. It isn’t really clothes I want; it is my backpack that has all my money stashed inside.

“No. They won’t let us in until they are done.”

I nod, not surprised, and push the door open and step out into the night. She leads me to her

van, a burgundy Town and Country, and I go around to the passenger side and let myself in. When she settles her bulk into the driver's seat, the van squats with a groan. She inserts a key attached to a collection of dangling fobs that jingle and clink together. She squares her bottom more comfortably in the seat, and the engine roars, taking off and down the street for the whole two minutes it takes to arrive at her house on Polk Street. I almost laugh when she pulls into the drive and turns off the car. I had thought I was going somewhere else, somewhere in another town, Mattoon, Arcola, Tuscola or Arthur, anywhere else. I didn't think I would end up just three or four blocks south of where we started. I could have walked here in as much time as it took her to get settled into her seat and out again.

The McGill house looks like a little cracker box ranch, stretching out the length of the yard. The living room, which we now step into, is long, connected and open to the dining room. A hall heads off in the other direction toward the two bedrooms at the end of the house. I take my shoes off and follow her as she walks down the hall, flipping on lights as she goes. "Mr. McGill," she says, "is a fireman. He won't be home until day after tomorrow." She motions for me to follow her, and I do, my socks sinking into the soft, blue carpet. "You know my son?" she asks, and I shake my head. "Tommy. He's maybe a year younger than you. You sixteen?" I nod, but really I'm seventeen today. Today is my birthday. "You a sophomore?" I nod. "He's a freshman. You can meet him tomorrow."

"Tommy McGill?" I ask, because there is something in the name that seems familiar. "Does he play soccer?" I am rewarded with a radiant smile that lights up the hallway.

"That's my Tommy." The pride oozes from every pore of her body, and I wonder what it would have been like to grow up with this woman as *Mother*. "He's pretty good with that soccer ball."

"Seems to be." I only vaguely recollect the things I have heard over the last year, about how the soccer team was excelling and how it was due to this scrawny little freshman named Tommy McGill. I feel my mouth spreading in a smile, unable to contain it in the glow of this woman's pride.

"You hungry?" she asks. We have reached the end of the hall, and she opens a door to the left and illuminates a room, dressed in pink roses from ceiling to bedspread. The blue carpet stops at

the door and is transformed into a mauve-pink version, still just as soft.

I shake my head, taking in the roses peeking from the skirt of a dressing table and from the bowl of the lamp. “I guess you like roses,” I say, laughing just a little.

“Charlotte likes roses.”

“Who is Charlotte?”

“She was a girl who stayed with us for a time.” She smiles. “She has moved on now. Got a family of her own.” She pauses, a small smile on her face,. “I’ve just never had the heart to change it.”

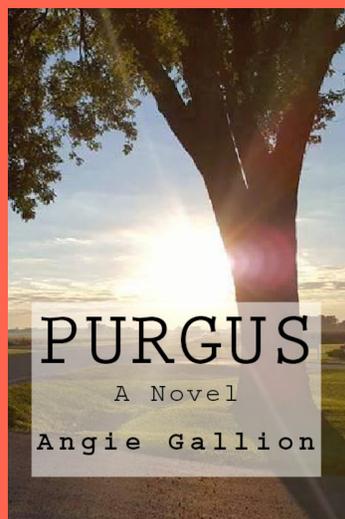
“Where did she go?”

“Oh, she’s just over in Mattoon. You’ll probably get to meet her.” She says “probably” like “prolly,” and I decide right then and there that I am going to like this woman. I am going to like her, and I am going to let her be kind to me, because apparently that is the thing she does best. Suddenly, I am weary on my feet; I’m so tired. She makes her way through the room, showing me that there are several options for clothing in the drawers and hanging in the closet. She tells me that she’ll be up for a while more, in the living room, if I need anything. I almost want to give her a hug, which may be the strangest sensation I’ve ever had, but I contain myself.

“Thank you for coming to get me.”

“Oh, darling,” she says, “we all need somebody to come and get us from time to time.”

She leaves me alone in the rose encased room, and I open drawers, looking at the pajamas and sweatpants that fill them. The scent of lavender rises from the drawers, and when I finally choose something to put on, I sit for a very long time just holding it up to my face, breathing in the *clean* of somebody else’s life.



SNEAK PEEK

ICARA

Chapter 1

The deserts of Arizona had completely taken my breath away. I wish now that I had planned to come through at dusk or daybreak, like Cici had suggested, but I had slept through daybreak and woke with the sun already moving high in the sky. I had driven through the Painted Desert during the late hours of the morning, and it was still beautiful, with the stark shadows falling out on the sand from the sandstone hills and mounds. I almost wished my drive ended there, so I could stay in those painted dunes, but Cici was waiting in California, so I drove on. Hours and hours on.

Poway, California, sits north of San Diego proper, and it is nearly full dark when I pass the sign leading into the city. I miss my merge onto 67 toward Ramona and have to drive on down to another exit to get back to where I need to be. I finally merge onto 67 going toward Ramona and turn left onto Scripps Poway Parkway. Another five miles before I merge off the highway onto Pomerado Parkway, a main thoroughfare through the town. I make a left onto Tarzana and an immediate right onto Annabelle Drive and into a parking lot, serving as a sort of courtyard in the middle of a series of squat, two-story buildings. I look around at the building, perplexed. Cici said her cousin had a house. I reach over to grab her letter from the passenger seat and confirm the address, disappointment rising. When I'm convinced that I am at the right address, I pull Little Red into a spot and let the engine go silent, sitting for just a minute, enjoying the novelty of not being in motion. Reframing my expectations

Somewhere off in the distance sirens begin to wail. I step out into the night. A whisper of air dances across my skin, dry and hot, and I am caught for a moment in a wind devil, my hair rising in a vortex, up and away. I close my eyes and let the wind touch me, like hands lifting my hair, caressing my neck, wicking the sheen of perspiration that has coated my skin the entire long

drive from Illinois. Little Red does not have air conditioning, and I feel wind battered and beaten from the miles driven with the windows down.

The sirens are closer, and when I open my eyes, I see the red and blue lights bouncing from the buildings, seconds before the two cruisers steer into the lot. I jump back against my car, out of their way, feeling guilty, feeling that low panic in my stomach, that rising of fear.

I haven't done anything; they are not here for me.

The cars come to haphazard stops behind a blue sedan parked a couple of cars over. One officer steps out and, glancing at me, says, "You need to get back inside." His eyes scan the remainder of the lot, finding it empty, and turns back toward the building, nodding at the other officer that all is clear.

I hear what I hadn't heard before—chaos through the wind—now that the magic of that dry gust is gone. A thud sounds against a wall, then I hear voices yelling, a man, a woman. It's a domestic disturbance. That's what the police came for, somebody in a battle, throwing down. I should be unnerved, uncomfortable, this being my first landing in my new land, but the fight, the chaos feels like home. It feels normal. This is how people live, everywhere. That sudden understanding about the nature of life shows my mother to me in a different light. I judged her too harshly. I was too unforgiving, and this is just how people live.

I am here in California because Cici said her cousin had a room in her house I could rent. I came because it was Cici, my best good friend, and because it was a house, not a trailer, not an apartment, and that had felt like a move in the right direction.

The report of a gun echoes against the facing complex, and the cops hustle toward the building where the struggle is taking place. I slide back into my car, crouching low in my seat, and peer out into the night of blue and red. I wait. There are shouts, and I am taken back to the day Warren was taken by the police, to the sounds of the door being broken down, to his shouts into the phone, to their voices, the authority of their voices. Another shot rings out, and I draw my hands over my ears. I should leave. I should start my car and just leave. This isn't a house. This isn't what I came for.

I reach to put the key into the ignition and see the two cops exit the building, pushing a short, dark-haired man ahead of them. They wrestle him into the back of one of the cars, and I notice his hands are strapped behind his back. The police are followed by four women, the first holding a cloth to the side of her face. The third one is Cici.

They are all talking, and I stay low in my seat. The key in my hand drops away from the ignition. One of the cop pulls out his notebook to fill in the paperwork.

Cici is letting her hair grow, and it softens her. It is her voice that I hear ring out, "Of course she wants to press charges," but the woman with the cloth held to her face looks forlorn and shakes her head. I breathe. Cici looks like her head may explode, and I smile. There she is—Cici,

conqueror of life. Of course, he's going to be charged with something, even if the woman holding her face doesn't want it. There are rules about guns, and surely you can't shoot one off in the middle of an apartment complex. Public endangerment, or something.

I wait, watching the women, watching Cici, pacing and angry. Every inch of her skin glows with a fire burning inside, and I wonder how I never realized how beautiful she is. It's more than just being pretty—she is vibrant, like all the atoms of her being are bouncing together at a higher rate than everybody else's. I sit for a very long time, listening to them while red and blue lights flash through all the edges of the lot. A few people have come out of their apartments to see the excitement, huddling in small groups.

When the police are finished with their questions, they climb back into their cars and the lights stop flashing. The woman with the cloth reaches out to the man in the backseat, and a flare of anger sparks against my chest. I will never let a man hit me. I can just hear her saying, "But he loves me. He didn't mean to." Stupid woman. I put the key back into the ignition. I don't have to stay.

But Cici is here.

When the police are gone, and when the women have gone back inside, when all the neighbors have floated back to their own spaces, I sit unnoticed for another half an hour, working my way through to this new reality. I have left chaos to find chaos, and my new understanding of the world is that all is chaos. I gather my nerve, hoping the drama is over.

I get out my car, go up to the door, and knock.

