

## Excerpt - Loving Jesse

*April 30, 2006*

*Fort Smith, Arkansas*

“Tell Jesse not to bother trying to come after me,” my mom says, as she slips on a pair of boots, cramming the rest of her belongings into an old military duffel bag.

“Won’t do him no good. I ain’t living like trash the rest of my life, you hear?”

“But Mama,” I whine, “What about me—what about Scout?”

“You’ll be fine until he gets home. Scout’s napping and she’s good for another two hours. He’ll be home by then—wanting his supper on the table. So fucking predictable.” She shakes her head as if disgusted.

I feel the tears well up in my eyes not understanding how Mama can just take off like this, leaving her ‘babies’ as she likes to refer to us, even though I’m thirteen years old and long gone from being a baby. But my half-sister, Scout? She’s only four years old, how will she get along without her mother?

“What about after that?” I press.

“Oh for cryin’ out loud September!” she snaps at me, while shoving her make-up bag into the duffel and closing it up. “I’ll call your grandparents and let them know to come and get you, okay? I reckon Jesse will want to keep

Scout being that she's *his* and all. No telling where the hell that sperm-donor of yours is these days. Still running from the law somewhere, I reckon."

She stops her frantic packing and takes a quick look around the bedroom to make sure she's not left anything important behind.

Other than her two children.

"Now listen," she warns, pointing her index finger at me, "You don't tell Jesse nothing about the car that's outside waiting for me, you hear? You just tell him I left in a cab and that I'll call him later on and let him know when your Granny and Pappy will be down to pick you up. That's all you tell him, understand?"

I nod, the tears now spilling over and making a wet trail down my cheeks. She gives me a quick hug and kisses the top of my head.

"You're a big girl, September. You'll be fine with Granny and Pappy until I can come for you. And I *will* — I promise you that. Once I get my divorce from Jesse down in Mexico, I'll come back for you. I'll try my best to wrestle Scout from him, but I don't hold out hope I can win that one. No matter, I'll have a brand new step-daddy for you, one that makes lots of money and doesn't boss me around so damn much keeping me on some budget. We won't live in a dump like this," she finishes, looking around the trailer's one of two bedrooms. "No sir, we'll have a fine house in the city somewhere."

She hurries down the narrow hallway, blowing me one final kiss as she lugs the duffel bag outside of the trailer, letting the door slam loudly with the finality of her

departure.

As I peer through the mini-blinds behind the front room sofa, I see the large black car waiting for her. She tosses her bag in the back, and climbs into the front seat moving close to the man who's driving, and then she's gone.

Just like that.

I hear Scout's whiney cry from the bedroom that we share. The slam of the door must have awoken her. I wait several minutes until she quiets back down again. The digital clock on the old VCR reads 2:37 p.m.

I know that Jesse will be home at four-thirty sharp, just like he always is, and that he'll be expecting supper on the table, just like Mama said.

I wipe the wetness from my cheeks and take a deep breath. Mama's right; it's time I act like a big girl, not a crybaby. I'll be fourteen in September, practically an adult.

I stroll to the fridge and take several potatoes out of the drawer and begin peeling them over the sink. I know how to boil and mash potatoes, so that's what I'll busy myself with to pass the time and figure out what to say when my stepfather gets home.

I find some sausage links in the freezer, and take them out to thaw. Mashed potatoes and sausage. I climb up on the countertop of the small kitchen and open the cupboard, pulling out a can of green beans.

Mashed potatoes, sausage and green beans. That's what we'll have for supper. Mama's made that plenty of times. Maybe I won't have to tell Jesse anything if supper's on the table when he gets home. Maybe he won't even ask right

away.

He'll figure she's down the way, talking with Miss Maybelle, her friend who does her hair. I won't tell him any different until I have to.

Jesse's gonna be pissed.

I think about when Mama brought Jesse into our lives and to be honest, it seems as if he's always been there. I've always known he wasn't my daddy—only Scout's. I was six when he came into my life. He's always treated me good, raising me like I am his and all. I mean, I don't call him 'Dad' or anything, and he's never asked me to, but still I recognize that he's the boss. I show him the respect the same way a daughter would.

I don't remember my father at all—Mama says he knocked her up at seventeen, and then took off so he wouldn't have to pay child support. She says he never did see me. Doesn't matter because she says he's no good, just poor white trash that was horny.

Mama turned eighteen a couple of months before I was born. We were living with Granny and Pappy in Meridian, Mississippi when she met Jesse one day on a trip to town. He was working a construction job, building a new library for Meridian. Mama says she caught his eye and he gave her the biggest and loudest wolf-whistle ever.

She invited him for dinner the next night and my grandparents thought Jesse was a nice enough guy, but a little young for Mama. She had just turned twenty-five and Jesse was only eighteen—fresh outta high school.

Mama didn't care much about the age difference though, and they continued going out. I remember lots of

nights, Mama didn't even come home. Granny would shake her head and say that before long, I was likely gonna have a baby brother or sister, what with the way my mother was carrying on.

But Mama continued seeing Jesse, and before I knew it, we had his truck packed up and were heading to Arkansas because that's where his next job was.

And that's when we got our first home by ourselves—well, I mean by ourselves with *Jesse*. It's the trailer we live in now, but so many things have changed since we first moved here.

For one thing, Mama and Jesse got married, and then Scout came along around the time I was ten. I remember being so excited at having a sister, even though she's only a half one, I still love her.

I remember how I felt having to share Jesse back then. He'd become mine in a way, but once Scout arrived on the scene, it had changed all of that. He adored her; that much had been obvious.

She's the picture of him now, only in a little girl way. Thick dark hair like his, sparkling blue eyes that can darken the way his do when she's upset or happy; triggered by emotion, I guess.

I take after Mama everyone says. Blond hair, tawny brown eyes and long legs. I'm the tallest girl in my eighth grade class. The other girls tease me about it, but I've noticed the boys kind of like it. Chad Miller even calls me 'wong wegs', but I know he means it as a compliment, because he smiles and winks.

I don't know what Jesse's gonna tell Scout when *he* finds

out about Mama, and worse than that, I don't know what he's gonna expect of me. I'm not even sure whether I can get up the nerve to tell him. He's got a temper though he's never raised a hand to any of us. His eyes can flash sapphires when he's pissed off, and Mama sure did her share of instigating those episodes.

Jesse works harder than anyone I know. He does keep Mama on a budget, but it's only so they can save money for a house. She wants to get a job—or did, but Jesse says her job is taking care of Scout until she goes to school full-time in a couple of years. Says he wants his daughter being raised by her Ma, not some daycare center.

I hear his pick-up truck pull up alongside our trailer, just as Scout is coming down the hallway, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. She's wet the bed again, and that won't please Jesse.

At all.

“Where's Mama?” she asks looking around.

“Hush,” I reply, finishing up the mashed potatoes and setting them at the small table on the other side of the counter that serves as our dining room.

I grab a cold beer from the fridge, just like Mama does every afternoon, so that it's waiting for Jesse when he hits the door.

“Go change your britches before Jesse gets in,” I instruct her, mustering up some authority from somewhere. “Go on, hurry up, Scout.”

She turns and heads back to our room as he opens the door to our trailer, lunch box in hand, and ball cap perched on his head.

At twenty-five years of age, Jesse is more handsome than when Mama first brought him home. I've noticed the bulge in his muscled arms, broad shoulders and thick mass of dark hair. I like the way it peeks out from underneath his ball cap that he always wears to work. I dream of finding a guy like him some day. I know I shouldn't think those thoughts, but I do. I guess Mama thinks money is more important.

He slams his metal lunch pail on the counter, and grabs the beer I set out for him, taking a long swig.

He wipes his mouth, looking around.

"Where's Libby?" he asks, taking off his ball cap and running a hand through that thick mass of dark hair. Makes me wish I had hair like his.

"September?" he says, "Where's your ma?"

"Dinner's ready," I reply with a meek smile. "Uh, she's gonna be a little late."

"Why? Where she'd go?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you *don't* know?"

"She left," I finally reply, wanting it off my chest. "She says she's not coming back."

"What the hell?"

I'm frozen in fear; he's never laid a mean hand on me, like I said before, but then I've never had to give him this kind of news before.

"What in God's name are you talking about, girl?"

I burst into tears, sinking to the linoleum floor, covering my face with my hands. "That's all I know, I swear! All she said was that she was going away and not to look for her!"

She's said that she would have Granny and Pappy come to get me. I'm so sorry."

I'm sobbing uncontrollably now—not just for me, but for Jesse and Scout too. We've all lost her and I need to feel some comfort. I want him to comfort me and to tell me that everything is gonna be just fine in his deep, rich voice. Maybe put his strong, muscular arms around me and assure me that the three of us will just have to make do until he can figure out how to bring Mama home.

He does none of these things.

I look up from where my face has been buried into my knees. I wipe the salty wetness from my cheeks with the back of my hand, just in time to see Jesse fly out of our trailer like a bat out of hell, cursing loudly. In seconds, I hear him fire up his truck and take off, leaving a patch of rubber on the concrete roadway that winds up to the main road.

I didn't see him again for two days.

The weeks go by with all of us living in a fog; the fog that Mama had created when she took off. Jesse got the lady down the road, Miss Maybelle, to keep Scout while I'm at school. He calls my grandparents each evening to see if they've heard anything from Mama.

They have not.

Finally, school is out for the summer.

Granny and Pappy drive to Fort Smith to pick up me and Scout for the summer. They tell Jesse how ashamed they are of Mama, and promise him they will help out in any way they can.

When fall rolls around it's only Scout that returns to



Fort Smith. She's going home to Jesse, and I'm starting ninth grade in Meridian, living with Granny and Pappy.

Jesse comes to Meridian for Scout. He gives me a hug, and tells me that he'll keep in touch. He instructs me to behave for my grandparents and I almost tell him that I don't want to be here, that I belong in Fort Smith with him and Scout. But I'm afraid to say those words to him.

No one has heard a thing from Mama.

