

Excerpt from *The Key to Circus-Mom Highway* by Allyson Rice

Day One
Tuesday Evening

Jesse pulled up to the curb in her 1999 Alpine Green Dodge Neon, the left side of her front bumper tied on with nylon rope, with her stolen dog and all her earthly possessions in tow. She turned off the engine and tried to quell her rising sense of inadequacy as she stared at Jennifer's fairytale, Brady-Bunch-on-steroids house.

She took a deep breath, looked at the puppy that was sitting on the passenger seat next to her cell phone, and said, "I'll be right back. Don't make any long-distance calls."

She walked up to the front door, took another fortifying breath, and rang the bell. Jennifer, in all her straitlaced glory, opened the door and stared at her younger sister for what seemed to Jesse like fifteen minutes but was probably more like ten seconds. Jesse ended the standoff by getting right down to the more pressing business at hand.

"I assume you got the same call I got," she said.

"I did," answered Jennifer.

There was another awkward pause.

"You gonna invite me in, Jen? Or should I just break into your neighbor's shed, grab a lawn chair, and make myself at home here on your porch?"

Jennifer wrinkled her nose, sniffed, and said, "You smell like vomit and dog poop."

"Yeah?" Jesse countered, "Well, you smell like judgment and superiority."

No comment from Jennifer. *Here we go again*, she thought to herself.

"Okay, that was harsh. I'm sorry," continued Jesse. "I'm having some stress issues. I think I might have an ulcer. If you'd just let me in, I could clean up a little. Trust me, I'm well aware that I'm not 'minty fresh' at the moment."

Jennifer reluctantly stepped to the side and let Jesse into the McMahon home. It was beautifully decorated in a *Town & Country* beige sort of way and smelled like French vanilla potpourri.

"So what do you make of it all?" Jesse asked.

Jennifer let her guard down a bit. "I don't know. I was a little thrown by it, I have to admit."

“Yeah, me too. I thought maybe we could go to the airport together in the morning?” Jesse suggested.

Jennifer shook her head. “I’m not going. I don’t need the money, and I have *no* idea who this woman was. For all I know, she could’ve made her money in the Blood Diamond trade.”

“Well, how abstractly and self-servingly conscientious of you...” Jesse mumbled.

“Besides,” continued Jen, “I have some really serious personal stuff happening here right now. I can’t go away in the middle of it all. I just can’t. I’m sorry.”

Jesse wasn’t prepared for that response. “You *have* to go! You heard what he said—if both of us aren’t there then all of the money is forfeited!”

“I don’t see how they can do that,” Jennifer mused. “If you show up, I’m sure you’ll get your share.”

“Of course they can do that! It’s a legal document. He was very clear about that, Jen. Look, I know you don’t need the money, but I do! I’m not married to Steve Mnuchin like you are. I haven’t had health insurance for four years!”

“Would you *please* stop calling him Steve Mnuchin? That’s horrifying. Can’t you at least reference a non-Republican with money in your insults?”

Jesse smiled and said, “I could, but where would the fun be in that?”

Yet another awkward pause.

Jesse sighed. “Seriously, you have to go with me, Jen. I just had to quit my job to be able to go to Florida tomorrow, so I have no job now.”

“*Again?*”

“I really need this money, Jennifer,” Jesse continued. “*Please*. I’m begging you.” She paused, debating whether or not this was the best moment to broach the subject. “And I also need a place to stay tonight. When I quit, Kyle kicked me out of his place.”

“Jesus,” Jennifer responded, shaking her head.

“You know what? Forget it,” said Jesse, her self-esteem running on empty. “I’ll sleep in my car. I’m sorry I asked.”

Jesse turned around to head back outside to her new house on wheels. One glance at Jesse’s old beater at the curb and Jennifer’s guilt kicked in.

She sighed and said, “Wait... You can sleep in the guest room. But NO SMOKING in there this time! I had to have the curtains and duvet professionally cleaned after your last stay. I know I’m going to regret this, but ... I’ll go talk with Sean about heading to Florida with you tomorrow.”

Jesse, smiling, turned back and gave Jennifer a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you *so much*. You’re my favorite sister!”

“Shut up,” Jen said, trying not to smile. “And *please* go brush your teeth,” she added as she headed to Sean’s office.

Jesse went to retrieve the entirety of her life from the car.

Sean’s office was, of course, beautifully furnished. His Northwestern diploma and doctor’s degrees were framed on the wall next to an antique oak bookshelf filled with hardback medical texts. The shelves on the adjacent wall displayed an array of Civil War memorabilia that Sean had been collecting over the past couple of years, below a tattered, framed Union flag.

Sean himself was also “beautifully furnished,” with a chiseled face framed by a (mostly full) head of wavy brown hair, and a body tanned and muscular from years of tennis and racquetball at their country club. He was the quintessential handsome doctor, the kind that seemed to get better looking with age, a fact that hadn’t escaped Jennifer recently while she examined her elephant-skin elbows that seemed to have appeared virtually overnight.

Sean was sitting at his antique oak desk intently focused on his computer screen through his tortoise-shell reading glasses, so he didn’t register Jennifer when she stepped into the doorway and watched him for a moment. She tip-toed behind him, encircled his shoulders, and kissed him on the top of his handsome head while trying to peek at the computer screen (allegedly).

He shut his laptop quickly, which wasn’t lost on her, but immediately took one of her hands and kissed it tenderly. “You startled me!”

“What are you working on?” she asked lightly and with a smile.

“Nothing interesting. Just answering work emails, going over billing invoices, that kind of thing. What’s up?”

“My sister just showed up,” said Jen. “Unemployed and homeless.”

He chuckled. “So what else is new?”

“I need to ask you a favor,” she continued.

He swiveled around and lovingly pulled her in close, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Of course. Anything for you.”

“I need to go to Tallahassee with Jesse tomorrow for that meeting with the lawyer.”

“I thought you’d decided not to go,” he said, surprised.

“I had,” continued Jen, “but she knew all the right buttons to push. I need to do it for her. Can you hold down the fort for a couple of days? I’ll move a few things around, fly down there for the meeting tomorrow afternoon, and then fly back first thing Thursday morning.”

“Of course. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine,” he said. “Take as long as you need.”

“Thanks,” she said, trying to cover the sadness those words triggered in her.

Jennifer walked back into the foyer just as Jesse came through the front door with her guitar case slung over her shoulder, the puppy tucked under her arm, and all of her bags in her other hand.

“What’re you... NO. You can’t leave a puppy here!” exclaimed Jennifer. “Sean works all day.”

“No, I’m taking him with me,” Jesse responded. “The airline lets you bring a therapy dog on the flight with you. I already called to check.”

“You have to have a legit doctor’s note to be able to do that,” Jen responded.

“Can’t you get Sean to write one for me?” asked Jesse. “He’s a legit doctor.”

“He’s a podiatrist, Jesse.”

“Like they’re ever gonna know that. He can say I have a life-threatening hammertoe condition that makes me super anxious.” She laughed. “Please? Tell Sean if he writes one for me, I’ll name the puppy after him.”

“Oh, yeah, that’ll be huge incentive. Just a dream come true for him.” Exasperated, Jennifer headed back out in the direction of the office. “*Sean?...*”

As Jesse started off in the direction of the guest room, one of the plastic grocery bags ripped, sending all of her shoes spilling onto the floor. When she set the puppy down to focus on her “sole retrieval,” forcing the scattered shoes into her already overstuffed duffel bag, the puppy peed on the potted palm in the foyer and trotted off.

Jesse stood up trying to balance all of her worldly possessions. Just then, Jennifer’s nineteen-year-old son Connor, captain of the Northwestern Men’s Lacrosse Team, and her eighteen-year-old daughter Maggie, math whiz and this year’s Big 10 Robotics Champion, entered the front door.

“Hey, Aunt Jesse!” said Maggie.

“Hi, guys! What are you freaks doing home?” asked Jesse as she gave them each a hug.

“Laundry,” they responded in unison.

“My God, you’re getting so tall, Connor, I barely recognized you.”

Connor smiled then scrunched his nose as he looked around and sniffed the air. “It smells like piss in here,” he said.

“Shit!” mumbled Jesse. “Sean must’ve peed on the rug. Sean?!...”

She rushed out in search of the errant puppy.

Maggie looked at Connor, confused. “Dad peed on the rug?”