



FINDING PONY

Kara Lucas



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Always.

One

tweaker pad (n): a place, usually a home or apartment, inhabited by methamphetamine users.

The TV glowed blue in the darkness. Our trailer was quiet except for the tinny echo of David Hasselhoff's voice and Pony as she slurped her grape soda through a straw.

"Pone, can't you be quieter?" I nudged her. "I'm trying to listen."

"Sorry." She scraped the last bit of ramen noodles from the Styrofoam cup. "Can I have more?"

"Nope. That's it."

"Oh. That's okay." She grabbed her pink stuffed horse and clutched it to her chest, rubbing the frayed ear with her cheek. "I thought Mom said we had no food."

"Mom doesn't know everything." I forced a smile. Darryl would kill me if he found out I lifted from him—even if it was only a couple of bucks.

She leaned her head on my shoulder. "You're the best big

brother ever.”

“I’m your only brother, brat. Now quit talking. Let’s watch the show.” I focused on the screen, the scene a perfect beach with the hottest girls I’d ever seen wearing red bathing suits that were tight in all the right places. I’d never seen the ocean, but I was sure it was just like the show. Blue and enormous. Peaceful. I closed my eyes and imagined the way the waves would sound crashing around me.

“Do you think Mom’ll come home tonight?”

“No.”

She’d been gone for about three days. I had to miss school so someone would be home with Pony. But like all the other times, I knew that eventually Mom and Darryl would come home when the meth ran out, and then they’d crash for days.

“Jesse?”

I sighed. “What?”

“Is it real? Do people really live like that? On the beach, wearing bathing suits all the time?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Her face scrunched up. “I don’t believe you.”

“You calling your brother a liar? It’s all true.” I watched her eyelids grow heavy. “That’s Malibu. Everyone lives on the beach, even the little kids. They sell ice cream on the sand, and there’s a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round, right on the beach.”

“Right on the beach? Can we go?”

“Not now. Someday, like when you turn five. Maybe, when I’m a famous artist, we’ll even live there.”

“...In bathing suits?” She yawned and closed her eyes.

“Sure. In bathing suits.”

She snuggled against me, and I could feel the bony point of

her elbow dig into my side. Within a minute she was asleep, her chest rising and falling in shallow, rhythmic breaths.

I stared back at the flickering screen. *Just another exciting Friday night for Jesse Sampson.*

* * *

I must have fallen asleep sometime during the second Baywatch. All I know is I was having the best dream in my whole life. I was surfing in Malibu, like I'd been surfing for years. My board was shredding down this huge half-pipe when it crashed. The salty waves were all around me; I couldn't breathe and struggled to swim toward the light. Out of nowhere one of the girls—the hottest blond one—rescued me, and said that she had to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I said okay (not saying no), but I was breathing fine, and she said, just shut up Jesse, and then we started kissing like crazy, and I was so into it, and then—

Knock knock knock.

My eyes flew open.

When your stepdad's a drug dealer, there are only two reasons that someone would knock on your piece of crap trailer in the middle of the night: drugs or cops.

Knock knock knock.

Junkies aren't usually so demanding. They rap very quietly, and creep through the back door by the kitchen, so I'm thinking that this must be cops.

Holy shit. The cops.

I rolled off my mattress, and fumbled for Pony's bed in the

darkness.

“Jesse?” She yawned and rubbed her eyes with a fist.

“Shhh. Someone’s here. Cops.”

My heart thumped in my chest as I heard the knock again, louder this time. I reached under her bed, yanking out dirty clothes and trash. Trying to make room. Through the thin paneled walls I could hear the front door opening and Mom’s voice.

“Jesse, I think I hear Mom——”

“Shhh!” I picked her up, it was like lifting a feather, and stuffed her under the bed, piling the clothes on top.

“What are you doing?”

“Hiding you. Look—stay put, you hear? Whatever you do, don’t move.”

“Aren’t you hiding, too?” Her voice was a whimper.

I was panting, terror snaking through my gut. There wasn’t enough room. I’d be caught. We both would be.

The conversation was muffled through the closed door and I could hear the police officer’s heavy boots shift in the living room. Mom sobbing. Metal handcuffs, clinking against each other. A softer, female voice—probably the social worker, was calm, soothing.

“Any minors in the house, ma’am?”

It was almost too late. Frantically, I shoved a final filthy blanket around her. “Remember what I said,” I whispered.

“Jesse, don’t leave me,” she begged.

“I have to.” I spoke to the pile of clothing and stuck a hand underneath, giving her arm a quick final squeeze. “I’ll come back for you.”

I raced to the window; it squeaked and shuddered as I pushed

it open. The bedroom vibrated with three strong knocks. “Police. Unlock the door.”

My knees banged as I hoisted myself up and crouched on the windowsill. The aluminum cut into my bare feet. I jumped onto the hard dirt and took off toward the river. Tumbleweeds scratched my legs, and with every gulp of air my mind registered only one thing: Pony.

I thought of her hiding there in the dirty laundry, scared and alone. I just left her to fend for herself. In her four years, she had never been taken away, never been in foster care. Not like me.

I could puke with the guilt, but my legs kept moving. Either instinct or fear—it didn’t matter. I just couldn’t do it.

I couldn’t get taken again.