

# Back from the Brink

By Donna Price



“Ten minutes! Wake up and get your shoes on,” Dad called from the driver’s seat. Of course, my 8-year-old brother, Luke, and his friend, Conner, weren’t sleeping. They were chatting about dinosaurs.

“There are no dinosaur fossils at the La Brea Tar Pits,” Mom read from a Los Angeles tour book. “There are dire wolves and saber-toothed cats . . .”

I wasn’t really asleep—just pretending, so I wouldn’t have to seem happy. My friend, Kayla, was going to be on this trip. But that changed yesterday, and even worse, she wasn’t my friend anymore. We’d been best friends for six years, since kindergarten, and now it was over. I cried all night.

I kept seeing yesterday’s scene in my mind and hearing, “Crybaby, crybaby!”

The day started off fine, just riding our bikes in the park, like always. We were supposed to leave if teenagers were hanging around. Then we saw two older boys and a girl. Kayla said she knew them, and one called, “Hey, Kayla! Come here.”

“Don’t go!” I whispered, but she did. They looked over at me and laughed. Then one boy offered Kayla a cigarette. And she took it! I stood there with my bike, not knowing what to do. I didn’t want to leave her alone with them, but it was sickening to see her smoking.

Then the girl pointed at me and said, “Hey, you. Come on.” She held up the cigarettes. Kayla waved me over. I couldn’t believe it. I shook my head no.

“Chicken,” the girl sneered.

Then the other boy pulled something out of his pocket—brightly-colored pills that looked like chewable vitamins or candy. I saw on the news that those could be drugs! I was suddenly scared. I got upset, and tears welled up in my eyes.

“Oh, Jenny, you’re such a crybaby,” Kayla

laughed. It felt like a bucket of ice water was dumped on my head. All our years of friendship, and now this. “Crybaby, crybaby!” they chanted.

I raced home and ran inside.

“Mom! Kayla’s with some teenagers in the park. They gave her cigarettes and pills and—” Mom dashed out the door before I finished.

When they saw her coming, the teenagers ran off. Mom took Kayla home and talked to her parents. When Mom came back, I told her everything.

Mom frowned. “I know you’re upset with Kayla, and sad that she can’t go to the tar pits with us. Right now, she has a lot to talk about with her parents.”

“Jenny. Earth to Jenny!” Dad called. I tried to put Kayla out of my mind. We walked up to the tar pit museum. It has the largest collection of extinct ice age plant and animal fossils in the world! Right in downtown Los Angeles. Kayla would have loved it. Well, the old Kayla would. We passed an open excavation pit with a safety rail. Below, excavators were lying on boards, picking through the sticky tar. It smelled like roadwork.



Inside, we learned that the tar was called asphalt. It got so sticky in the warm climate that animals would get trapped—even big, strong ones like woolly mammoths. Then they would die of exhaustion or get picked off by predators. Their rebuilt fossil skeletons were on exhibit, the bones turned brown from the asphalt.

Big displays showed scenes from 10,000 to 40,000 years ago, including trapped and dying animals. In one scene, a mother saber-toothed cat was trying to drag out one of her cubs. But she was getting stuck too. She couldn't save it. I stared at the tiger cub.



Suddenly, I burst into tears again. I ran outside. It dawned on me that Kayla's troubles didn't start yesterday. I had worried about her before. Now I knew. Take one step into the tar and you can pull yourself out. Two steps and others could pull you out. Go too far and maybe no one could save you! But what kind of friend would pull you in on purpose?

Mom and Dad followed me outside, and Mom handed me a tissue. The boys hung back.

"I don't want to cry," I blurted out. "I'm *not* a crybaby."

"It's okay to be upset," Mom said. "What Kayla did was dangerous, and it wasn't fair to you. You were smart to tell us."

"What's wrong?" asked Conner.

"Her friend got in trouble *and* tried getting Jenny in trouble," Luke explained. "So they're not friends anymore." Conner nodded sadly.

"I can't save her! Just like the mother cat couldn't save her cub from the tar pit," I told Mom and Dad. "Kayla's been acting weird for a while. She's too far in."

"It's not your job to save her," Dad said. "Her parents will get her out."

"And it's up to her to stay out of trouble," Mom added.

"She tried to pull me in!" I yelled.

Mom and Dad both put their arms around me.

"We won't let her," Mom said.

"I won't let her. She's not my friend anymore."

"But she's been your friend for a long time. You can still encourage her and pray for her," Dad said. "And maybe someday she'll make better choices, and you'll be good friends again."

I nodded. I saw the boys watching me. "Sorry to ruin your fun," I told them.

Conner scuffed the ground. "Sorry about your friend." Then he turned to my brother. "Don't worry, Luke. I'll never do that to you."

"Me neither," Luke promised. They ran off and pretended to save each other from falling into the tar pit. My parents cringed, thinking their show of friendship would upset me even more.

"I'll stop them," Dad said.

"It's okay, Dad," I said, holding his arm. "Let them have fun and help each other. That's what real friends are for."

