

CATHERINE RYAN HYDE

Walk Me Home

Two sisters.
One life-changing tragedy.



About the Book

'You shouldn't trust anybody completely,' Jen says.

'Why not?'

'They're still just people. They can still let you down.'

Since their mother's sudden death, Carly has been in charge of her little sister Jen. She is terrified that the two will be separated.

Carly wants them to find their way back to the last person she trusted - their stepfather. But Jen holds a secret about him which could put them both at even more risk.

And so begins a journey neither girl could have anticipated. It isn't an easy one, and is often dangerous. But they are also confronted with the expected kindness of strangers. And some new relationships that hold the potential to change everything . . .

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Part One: Right Now

New Mexico, 1 May

New Mexico, 9 May

Arizona, 10 May

Arizona, 12 May

Arizona, 13 May

Part Two: Seems So Long Ago

Tulare, 17 December

Tulare, 18 December

Cradle Lake, the High Sierras, 19 December

Cradle Lake, the High Sierras, 20 December

Tulare, 21 December

Part Three: Now Again

Wakapi Land, Friday 13 May

Wakapi Land, 14 May

Wakapi Land, 15 May

Wakapi Land, 16 May

Wakapi Land, 17 May

Part Four: Seems So Long Ago

New Mexico, Christmas Day

New Mexico, 28 February

New Mexico, 30 April

Part Five: Now Again

Arizona, 18 May

California, 19 May

California, 20 May

Trinidad, CA, 21 May

California, 22 May

Wakapi Land, 23 May

Wakapi Land, 25 May

Author's Note

About the Author

Also by Catherine Ryan Hyde

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WALK ME HOME

Catherine Ryan Hyde

Part One
Right Now



New Mexico, 1 May

They creep along, walking their bikes past the big house in the pitch dark. There are no lights on inside. But Carly can't help thinking there will be. Suddenly. If they're not quiet enough.

Too much depends on this moment. Everything.

Carly hears the clicking of the spokes of Jen's bicycle wheels. She reaches over and slaps her hand down on Jen's handlebars to stop the bike - and her sister - in their tracks.

'We have to carry the bikes till we get past the house,' she hisses in Jen's ear.

'Easy for you to say. Yours is light.'

Carly sighs, and trades bikes with Jen. Jen's bike is a heavy old beach cruiser. And it has no headlight. So Carly duct-taped a flashlight to the handlebars.

The driveway is uphill, and Carly struggles for breath as she trots for the freedom of the road. It's a long driveway, and her chest is beginning to ache. She feels she can't keep going. But she does anyway. Because she has to.

Any minute now, a light might come on in the house. And Wade's brother might appear in the window. Then it will all be over.

But it doesn't. No light comes on.

Suddenly they're on the road, and free.

Carly trades bikes again with her sister.

As they straddle the bikes, prepared to launch down the hill into the night, Jen switches on the flashlight.

Carly reaches over and slaps her hand over the light.

‘Turn it off!’

‘But I thought—’

‘Not till we’re farther away. Not till we can’t be seen from the house.’

‘Carly ...’

‘What?’

‘I have to tell you something.’

‘Oh, my God, Jen. Not now.’

‘Has to be now.’

‘Jen. Listen.’ Carly grabs Jen’s bike and shakes once, hard. To stop all foolishness once and for all. ‘Listen to me. We have to get out of here. Now. And you have to stop acting like we have all kinds of options. We have Teddy. He’s the only option we’ve got. Now I hate to pull rank, but I’m older. And I’m in charge of the family now. What’s left of it. And we’re going. Now come on.’

They’re making incredible time. And they don’t even have to pedal.

They coast down the mountain, a few scattered lights in the valley below. The thin beams of light reveal the road in front of their bike tires. Carly can faintly see the headlights of cars on a two-lane highway below. Headed west. Well, headed both ways. But she focuses on the traffic headed west. The direction of Teddy, and home.

The only challenge of the downhill run is applying the brakes just right, and just frequently enough, to keep the bikes from speeding out of control.

No car has come down the road for ages. So they ride side by side in the traffic lane. The edge of the road is too scary. Just a drop-off. Not enough light to see where that would take you. But Carly can pretty much figure it wouldn’t take you anyplace good.

'What's that noise?' Carly asks. 'Is that your brakes?'

'Yeah. I think the pads are low.'

'Well, stay off them as much as you can.'

'I'll try.'

Jen begins to pick up speed. Carly eases off the brakes to catch up with her, but it scares her to go that fast. Too many curves. Too little shoulder. Not much margin for error.

'Maybe you need to slow down,' she calls to Jen.

Carly hears a ghastly metal-on-metal noise.

'Oh, shit!' Jen shouts as she flies over the handlebars and disappears into the darkness off the side of the road.

Carly steers her bike to the spot where Jen disappeared and jumps off, dropping the bike on the narrow shoulder.

'Jen! You OK?'

'I think so.'

'Keep talking so I can find you.'

'I'm right here,' she says, tugging at Carly's jeans. 'Where's my bike?'

'We should be able see the light from the flashlight.'

'It must've broken.'

'I'll get my bike and we'll shine a light down there.'

Carly carefully walks her bike a few steps down the hill. In the thin beam of the headlight, they see Jen's bike crashed up against the side of a squat, gnarled tree.

Jen scrambles down the hill to retrieve it.

'Oh, this is messed up,' she calls back up to Carly. 'I think the frame is bent. Yeah. I can't even roll it.'

'Well ... just leave it, then. Just sit on my handlebars and we'll keep going. We can't afford to slow down.'

Jen climbs back up to the road. 'Hmm,' she says, looking down the grade. 'Can I sit on the seat instead? And you pedal standing up?'

'Sure, whatever. Let's just go.'

'Before we go can we say a little prayer that your brakes don't give out?'

'I don't pray,' Carly says. 'But you can if you want.'

They walk the bike through a small town shortly before sunrise. Carly doesn't know what town it is.

'We need an Internet café,' Carly says. 'Or a library.'

'Library wouldn't be open this early. Why do you need that?'

'To get Teddy's new address. He promised he'd email it to me.'

Jen never answers.

'Never mind. We'll just keep going. By the time we get to the next town, something will be open. The farther away we get, the better off we'll be.'

She wants to think of this place they lived with Wade and her mom as a horrible dream. But it still feels vividly real.

They mount the bike again and pedal along the main drag to the highway. And run smack into a highway sign that says: NO BICYCLES. NO MOTOR-DRIVEN CYCLES. NO PEDESTRIANS.

'Now what?' Jen asks.

'Oh, shit, Jen. I have no idea. Let's just stay here until we figure something out.'

Collapse seems appealing. It speaks to her, promising relief. Carly regrets having already ruled it out as an option.

They sit on the library steps. Waiting. Watching the town wake up. People bustle by in both directions. On foot, in cars. Pedaling in the bike lane.

Carly's bike leans up against the brick of the building a few feet away. Unlocked. They didn't bring a bike lock.

Jen has a little scrape on her cheek. And her eyes look far away. Like there's no Jen at home inside. Like she's locked up and left the premises of herself. Carly wonders if she looks the same way. Then she decides it doesn't really matter.

A boy a little older than Jen rides by on an ancient and dilapidated old bicycle. On the sidewalk. Looking their way. A few minutes later he rides by again, going the other way. Still staring.

'He keeps looking at my bike.' Carly says.

'You think he's going to try to steal it?'

'I wouldn't care if he did. It's no use to us now. I think we're going to have to ditch it and hitchhike.'

On the boy's third ride by, Carly calls out to him.

'You like that bike?'

He skids to a stop, his unlaced sneakers braced on the pavement.

'It's a nice bike. Is it yours?'

'Yeah. And it's for sale.'

'I couldn't afford it.'

'I'd let it go cheap.'

'How much?'

'How much've you got?'

He carefully empties his jeans pockets. Separates out a few non-cash items. Carly can't quite see what they all are, but one looks like a red rock and another like a guitar pick. He counts a few bills, then digs back into his pocket for a handful of change. Adds it up, pointing to each coin, his lips moving.

'I only have twelve dollars and thirty-five cents.'

'Sold,' Carly says.

Carly's the first to sit down at one of two library computers. She pulls up her email on the web. She hasn't checked it for ages. Eleven pieces of spam mail. One email from her friend Marissa in Tulare. It says, 'Carly, why didn't you tell me you were moving? Where did you go? Write back, OK?'

Nothing from Teddy at all.

They get their first ride with a sweet middle-aged woman. Plump, with thin, graying brown hair.

'Where are you girls going?' she asks when they pile into the back seat.

'West,' Carly says.

'Well, I know that. But where?'

'Um. Home.'

'But where's home? You girls seem awfully young to be out hitchhiking by yourselves. I usually never pick up hitchhikers, but I was worried about you. How far do you have to go?'

Carly kicks herself for not anticipating this problem in advance.

'It's just down this road about twenty miles,' Carly says.

'Does your mother know you're out here alone?'

In her peripheral vision, Carly sees Jen begin to cry quietly.

You're in charge now, Carly tells herself. There's nobody else. If a problem comes up, there's no one to run to. You have to solve it yourself. So, go ahead. Save the day.

She glances at the odometer. Memorizes the number plus twenty miles.

'It's like this,' Carly says. 'We went out last night with some friends. And they drove us way up into the mountains. We didn't know we'd be going so far. And we didn't want to go back with them, because they'd been drinking. Our mom would kill us if she knew. So we're hitchhiking home - I know. I know it's a bad idea. We're never going to do it again. It's scary. But if you'll let us off twenty miles up ...'

The woman sighs. 'I'm just glad it was me who picked you up.'

'Yeah. Me, too. Thanks. We appreciate it.'

Then the potential flaw in Carly's plan sinks in. What if twenty miles goes by and they're exactly in the middle of nowhere? No houses as far as the eye can see?

She sits on the edge of the back seat, peering through the windshield. Trying to be nervous without looking nervous. They pass intersection after intersection of long, paved roads crossing the highway. A scattering of ranch homes in each direction. If that changes, Carly will need to pretend she was wrong about the twenty miles.

Her luck holds.

When the odometer hits the magic number, Carly says, 'Next intersection. If you'll just let us off right up there ...'

'I can drive you all the way home.'

'No. Please. That'll just get us in trouble.'

Another big sigh from the front seat. The driver pulls over and lets them out.

'You girls take care, now.'

'We will. Thank you.'

They stand at the side of the little highway and watch her drive off.

Jen waves.

'Shit,' Carly says. 'That was close.'

'Close to what? She was nice.'

'Too nice.'

'How can you be too nice?'

'She wanted to help us.'

'We need help, Carly.'

'You know what she would've done. Don't you? If she'd known we don't have anybody? She'd have called child protective services. I don't want to get put in a foster home, Jen. We don't even know if they'd keep us together.'

'So what do we do, then? Do we still hitchhike?'

'Yeah. I think so. I think we have to. But this time let's have our story ready.'

The man who picks them up next doesn't seem interested in their story. He doesn't express any concern for their well-being. He's maybe forty. Thin and pale, like his skin has never seen the sun. He wears heavy black-framed

glasses. He won't stop looking at them in the rearview mirror.

They drive for well over an hour without any questions. He doesn't even ask where they're going.

Then, when he finally speaks, all he says is, 'You're making me feel awfully lonesome. Up here all by myself.'

Carly doesn't answer. Neither does Jen. But Jen shoots Carly a look. A silent question. Are we in trouble? Carly doesn't know. But it doesn't feel good. There's an 'ick factor' in the car. That was something Teddy used to say. This ick factor has hovered throughout the ride, Carly realizes. She just hadn't looked it in the eye. Until the man spoke.

She reaches into her backpack and feels around for her hairbrush, a round brush with a narrow round metal handle. The handle has a plastic cap on the end, but Carly pries it off with her thumb.

They're coming through a town. Thank God.

'Let us off right up here,' Carly says. 'Please.'

She can see an intersection. And a stoplight. But the light turns green and the driver speeds through it.

Carly looks over at Jen, who's gone stone-like again. Carly worries her sister's bones might melt, the way they did last night. They can't afford that kind of collapse now.

'I'm sorry,' he says. 'I wanted to make that light.'

'Well, you made it. So pull over. Please.'

'Next light. You can walk back.'

Carly squeezes her eyes shut and prays for the next light to turn red. It does, and the driver has to stop. Only then does Carly remember how she told Jen she doesn't pray.

Jen's on the passenger's side. The safe side to get out. She tries to open the back door. 'It's locked.' She tries to pull up the lock button. It won't pull.

Ick Man is watching in the rearview mirror. 'The child-safety lock is on,' he says.

'Then take it off!' Carly shouts. Just at the edge of panic. 'And let us out!'

No answer. Nothing moves. Carly watches the blood drain out of Jen's face, leaving her skin white like a porcelain doll.

'Open this door or I'm getting the gun,' Carly says.

The light turns green.

Carly pulls the hairbrush out of her pack, careful to keep it behind his head, where he can't see it in the mirror. She presses the round metal of the end of the handle to the back of his head.

'Do *not* step on the gas,' she says.

The back-door locks clicks up. A beautiful sound. Jen swings the door wide and they bolt out of the car. The man drives away with his rear door still open.

'Oh, my God,' Jen says. 'Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God.'

'Relax, Jen. Calm down. We're OK.'

'I can't do this, Carly. We can't keep doing this.'

'OK. We won't, then. No more hitchhiking. I promise.'

'So what are we going to do, then?'

'We'll walk.'

'To *California*?'

'Not to California. Of course not. Just from one phone booth to the next. And when Teddy picks up the phone, he'll drive out and get us. Or he'll wire us money for a bus ticket or something. But the more we walk, the closer we'll be to home, and the faster he can get us there. And we won't be in one place long enough for anybody to decide they want to help us by putting us in foster care. We'll just walk along like we know exactly what we're doing. And if anybody asks, we'll just say we're walking home. That's true. Right?'

'We're walking home,' Jen says. As if the story needs rehearsal.

'Right. We're walking home.'

They walk until dark. About ten hours.

Carly calls Teddy four times that first day. Teddy doesn't pick up.



New Mexico, 9 May

Carly is keeping a close eye on Jen. Maybe even more so than usual. She's watching Jen walk on the shoulder of this skinny, raggedy little blacktop road, kicking at the scrubby grass and gravel at the edge of their path.

For a time, Carly doesn't know why she's keeping such an eagle eye on Jen this morning. In most ways, it's a morning like any of the last nine. It's just their new normal.

She looks up ahead to see the black road dip down into a valley. And in this valley is ... nothing. Just more scrubby weeds. A line of low mountains at its far end, mountains they will have to walk across in time. In the far distance, a few rock spires in different shapes and sizes, like the classic desert formations she's seen in old cowboy films. And the clouds are edging the sky in great puffs, dense at the mountains, more sparse above their heads, white on top and copper at their bottoms, unable to crowd together and cover the steely blue sky.

Too bad, Carly thinks. Because they're fresh out of sunscreen as of yesterday.

The clouds move on the stiff breeze. They scud, Carly thinks. She's not certain why - or from where - she remembers that odd word, but she's quite sure the clouds scud.

Jen does another exaggerated kick step, and Carly puts her finger on what she's been noticing. Where's all Jen's

energy coming from? They're both exhausted. Sure, they've only been walking for less than an hour so far today. But when you put in the miles they do, day after day after day, you wake up tired. There's no such thing as rested. There's no such animal as fresh.

Jen stops, and looks all around them, 360 degrees. She's been doing that all morning. Thoughtfully. As if there was something out here to see.

'Pretty here,' Jen says.

'What's pretty about it?' Carly asks, clear in her tone that the kid is talking crazy.

'Well,' Jen says, looking all around again. Breathing in a piece of that sky. 'There's that.'

She points at the wind-whittled formations just in front of the mountainous horizon.

'You're nuts,' Carly says. 'It's rocks.'

'Pretty rocks.'

'No such thing.'

They walk a few steps more, Jen kicking a few more times. The crunch of their footsteps and the click of kicked gravel is the only sound. That and the wind in Carly's ears.

'The sky,' Jen says.

'We have clouds at home, you know.'

'Not the clouds. The sky.'

Carly stops. Jen walks a couple more steps, then notices, and also stops.

'You're being stupid,' Carly says. 'It's the same sky everywhere.'

'No, it isn't. I never saw a sky like this one.'

'Don't they teach you anything in school? The sky is the sky. Each place doesn't have its own sky.'

'I know that. But this sky is bigger.'

'You're just seeing more of it. You just can't see so many miles of sky where we come from.'

'Right,' Jen says. 'That's what I mean. That's what's different. That's what's better.'

Carly sighs and walks again, and Jen joins her. A bit more subdued. And, though it ignites a pang of guilt in her gut to admit it, Carly is more comfortable with Jen that way. That's what's been eating her about Jen all morning. How could she act ... almost ... happy? At a time like this?

Out of nowhere, startling Carly, Jen squeals and breaks into a run, her backpack bouncing wildly. Carly looks up to see what Jen has seen.

Horses.

Three horses graze in a field, behind a fence almost laughable in its construction. It's made with branches for posts. Some straight, some curved, some forked. Branches standing straight up out of the ground, at intervals, strung with three strands of wire in-between. Not barbed wire. Just wire. And it goes on for ever. Two of the horses are white, but not as pretty as that makes them sound. Dirty white, with long yellowish tails and ribs showing just a bit.

But the third one is a beauty. A brown and white paint, with a brown tail and a thick white mane so long it trails down below the bottom of his neck. Carly never thought much about calling a pinto horse a paint, but she sees now why that description fits. It's as though someone took brown paint to a white horse in big, broad splotches, then got bored and stopped halfway through.

The paint looks younger. And he acts younger.

As Jen gets closer to his fence, he's infected with her energy. He runs the fence line toward her, then turns and runs away, bucking as if trying to shake off something invisible, kicking out his heels.

Jen squeals laughter.

Carly stops and watches, trying not to sort out the parts of her that both do and do not like what she's seeing.

Then Jen breaks stride and hops on one foot, four hops, yelling, 'Ow, ow, ow, ow,' one 'ow' for each hop.

She hops over and stands at the fence, holding one branch post, and looks at the bottom of her filthy white sneaker. The horse has stopped running as well, and seems to be trying to decide whether he dares approach her. Jen drops her foot and leans over the ridiculous fence, trying to entice the paint to come close and be patted.

Carly breaks into a trot.

'Don't,' she says. 'Maybe he bites.'

'He won't bite me,' Jen calls back.

'And you know this *how*?'

'He won't.'

By the time she catches up to them at the fence, the horse is rooting around in Jen's palms with his muzzle, twisting his lips and showing yellow teeth. Carly stands close enough to smell him. That deep, musty, not-at-all-unpleasant horse smell.

'You want some food, don't you?' Jen says to him, the way you'd talk to your pet dog. 'But if I had some food, let me tell you, I'd eat it myself. You can eat grass. You're lucky. Wish we could eat grass. And sleep standing up in a field all night and not mind.'

Carly sits gingerly on a big tire that's half-buried in the dirt against the fence. Extra big, like a tractor tire. She has to use her hands to ease herself down.

'We have food,' she says.

Jen comes and sits with her.

'What do we have?'

'Two more Snickers bars.'

'Breakfast! Score!'

Carly takes off her own backpack and roots around in there until she finds the two candy bars at the bottom. She hands one to her sister.

'Make it last,' she says.

'I'd rather have it all now.'

'But then you'll be sorry later.'

'But maybe we'll get more food later.'

'But maybe not.'

'I'll take my chances.'

'Look. I'm the grown-up now. And I say just eat half.'

Jen rolls her eyes, but she breaks the candy bar in half, folds the wrapper over the half she's been told to save, and slides it into her shirt pocket.

'You're as bad as Mom,' Jen says.

Carly can feel the darkness in the air between them, the sense that Jen would snatch the words back inside if only she could.

'I can't believe you just said that, Jen.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean—'

'But you didn't mean it in a good way, right? When you say I'm as bad as Mom, that's not a compliment to Mom. You're saying Mom was bad.'

'Hey! You're the one that—'

'That's called speaking ill of the dead, Jen. And it's a thing nobody is *ever* supposed to do, *ever*. And you're the superstitious one, so I'm really surprised you would speak ill of the dead.'

Jen looks up and around, as though trying to identify a particular area of sky.

'Sorry,' she whispers.

Then she takes a bite of her breakfast.

The paint horse leans over the wire, snuffling his muzzle in the direction of the food. His lips make a popping sound that causes Jen to turn around, and she laughs out loud to see him there.

'Horses don't eat Snickers bars,' she says.

But a minute later a strong breeze upends the long, dark strands of Jen's curly hair, and both of Jen's hands fly up to her head to brush it back into place. And the horse, seizing an opportunity, leans farther over the fence and nicks the candy with his teeth.

Jen screams laughter again, and holds the treasure close against her chest.

'Ick,' Carly says. 'Now you have to throw away the part he touched.'

'No way. I'm not wasting it.'

'You'll get a disease or something.'

'People don't get diseases from horses.'

'How do *you* know?'

Jen raises the candy bar and chomps off half of what's left in one big bite.

'If my neck starts getting longer,' she says, her mouth full, 'and my feet get hard, you can throw a saddle on me and ride me all the way to California.'

'We're not walking all that way. Teddy'll come get us.'

Jen doesn't answer.

Remembering something, Carly grabs one of Jen's ankles and pulls her leg out and up, until she can examine the bottom of Jen's sneaker. Even though she can't remember which foot it was.

'Ow,' Jen says. 'What?'

On the bottom of Jen's sole is a hole about the size of a quarter, worn clear through. Carly can see the dusty dark green of Jen's sock. She drops that ankle and grabs the other. The bottom of that sole has a hole the size of a dime. Carly gives Jen her feet back.

'Why didn't you tell me you had holes in your shoes?'

'It's not like you could have done anything.'

'We could put cardboard inside or something.'

'Oh. Yeah. I guess.'

A minute later Carly stands up, using her hands for support, and tugs on Jen's sleeve.

'More miles,' she says.

'Right,' Jen says. 'I know. More miles. How did I guess? Because it's always more miles.'

Jen leans over and kisses the horse on his nose before they walk on.

The paint ambles the fence line with them, loose-kneed and confident, until he runs out of pasture.

Jen waves sadly to him.

'Bye, pretty.'

'He's not your boyfriend.'

'Says you.'

Jen gazes over her shoulder at him three more times before the road dips, obscuring their view. Then she looks one more time, as if it helps her remember.

Half a mile later they pass a ranch house with a garden hose coiled on the side. No cars. No garage to hide a car. No one seems to be home.

They drink their fill before moving on. It's the first day they've been without a gas-station bathroom for more than half a day. It scares Carly to be so far from a source of water. And a phone.

They make it over the low mountains that same day. They crest the top and look down into the next valley. Carly expects to see more of the scant food, water and shelter sources that have lined their path at intervals so far.

What they see is more nothing.

They stand on a sidewalk together, Carly marveling at how long it's been since they've had a sidewalk to stand on. Carly appraises what thin opportunities this place has to offer. Gas station with tiny convenience store. Thrift shop. Ice-cream stand. Hardware store. Native American blankets, Hopi and Navajo, both.

'What town is this?' Jen asks.

'I don't know. I never saw a sign, did you?'

'I don't think so. But I was busy looking at those rocks. They're pretty.'

Beyond this stretch of highway imitating civilization, the landscape is made up of tumbled rocks, big and small, some forming tumbled rock mountains, others going it alone. All the same shade of ordinary rock brown.

'What's with you and rocks all of a sudden?'

'I dunno.'

'Maybe it's too small a town to even have a name,' Carly says.

'All towns have names.'

'How would you know? You're twelve.'

Jen says nothing, and Carly knows she's crossed a line. And then she knows she's been crossing a line with Jen for days, being meaner than situations require. But she's not sure she has the energy to fix it just yet. Or even knows how.

There's a rough bench on a dirt lot near the sidewalk, made with a plank on two cut tree stumps. They hobble over to it, and slide off their packs. Carly eases herself down and unties her shoes, pulling one off.

Jen flops on her back in the dirt and puts her feet up on the bench.

'You're lucky you're not a redhead,' Carly tells her sister.

'Don't take your shoes off. Why is that lucky?'

'I have to take them off. My feet are all swollen.'

'You'll never get them back on.'

'I can't help it. They're killing me.'

'Why is it unlucky to be a redhead?'

'Because they burn so easy. They have that fair skin. Can't take any sun at all. Like my friend Marissa. You didn't know her. She was from my high school.'

'Which one? New Mexico or California?'

'California. We can buy more sunscreen.'

'With what?'

'I'll get somebody to give us some money. I always do.'

Jen has the back of one hand thrown across her eyes. Probably to shield them from the sun, but it makes her look dramatic. Like one of those old-time movie actresses depicting angst. Though angst was never Jen's style.

'Carly,' she says. 'I'm hungry. I don't care if I burn to a crisp. I don't care if I burn till I blister. Do not waste ... like

... *four dollars* on sunscreen. You know how much food we could buy for *four dollars*? You want more miles, I need more *food*.'

The holey soles of Jen's sneakers keep calling Carly's eyes back.

She squeezes her eyes closed, and when she opens them, there's the thrift store. Right in front of her. Like she's been trying to conjure something, and now it's arrived, just as ordered.

She pushes her feet back into the shoes, but they barely squeeze in. It hurts. It would be easy to cry out, but she doesn't. She can't even bring herself to lace them up again. She'll just have to be careful not to trip.

'Come on. Walk with me.'

'We're resting!' Jen howls.

'No, I don't mean that. I mean we're going in that thrift store.'

'For what? We don't have any money.'

'Just shut up and walk with me.'

'You go. I'm tired.'

'No. You have to come, too.'

Jen sighs deeply and rolls over, pulling to her feet. A couple in their twenties stroll by. Each has an ice-cream cone. Two scoops apiece. The woman smiles at them. Jen stares at the ice cream until it's too far away to ogle.

They cross the street together to the thrift store. The window is hand-painted, and says all proceeds go to benefit St Ignatius Hospital.

A bell jingles when Carly opens the door.

'How're you girls doing today?' the woman asks.

She's maybe forty, reading a paperback book. She looks Indian. Native. Native American, Carly should start saying. Indian might offend somebody. They're getting close to Navajo country, the big reservation, but Carly doesn't think they're quite there yet. But at least they're finally over the border into Arizona.

Carly never answers.

‘Anything special in mind?’

Carly sees a bird cage hanging near the woman’s head, with two blue and green parakeets. They make a chirping racket, almost like singing.

‘Shoes,’ Carly says. ‘We were looking for some shoes for my sister.’

‘Go all the way down that aisle and then left. They’re on the floor in the corner back there. All two dollars unless they got a tag says they’re more.’

‘Thanks. Want us to leave our backpacks here?’

People don’t like for kids or teens to come in their stores with backpacks. They’ve learned that for sure.

‘It’s fine. I’ll trust you. Let me know if you need help.’

Then Carly feels bad. The lady’s trust makes her feel extra bad.

Jen tugs at her sleeve as they walk down the aisle, but Carly knocks her hand away again. She shoots Jen a warning look. The shop is small. The woman won’t be able to see them once they’re back in the corner with the shoes. But she might hear.

Jen runs straight to a pair of cross-training shoes in about her size. She has her hand on them before Carly even sees them. They’re scuffed up pretty good. But when Jen picks them up and turns them over, the soles are nice. Not worn much at all. She turns them back upright, and they both look at the tops of them. They have a tag that says they’re five dollars, not just two.

Carly takes a quick look over her shoulder, then pulls off the tag, breaking its string. Jen sucks her breath in, and Carly shoots Jen another warning with her eyes.

‘Try them on,’ she whispers.

There’s no place to sit, so Jen sits on the floor and pulls off her holey old sneakers. Meanwhile Carly spots a pair of lace-up boots. She picks them up, considering. She turns her foot over and holds them sole to sole with the shoes she

has. They look about right. A little big, maybe. But that would give her feet room to swell.

She puts them on and laces them snug to make up for their bigness, then looks up to see Jen sitting up straight on the floor, the new shoes on. Her eyes seem extra wide. Carly catches Jen's eye and Jen nods. Those are the ones, all right.

Carly picks up her old shoes, and Jen's old shoes, and arranges them in the line on the floor with all the others. They don't look much worse than some of them, at least, if you don't turn Jen's over.

'OK, well, we looked, anyway. You happy now?' Carly asks in a normal volume, and too cheerful.

'I guess,' Jen says, sounding nervous.

Carly reaches a hand down to Jen and pulls her to her feet.

She looks down at the new boots. They're sturdy. That'll help. But they're a risk, because they're more one-of-a-kind than Jen's trainers. The lady might spot them walking out the door. She looks back at her old shoes, and almost decides to take them back. But her feet have swollen even more by now. She probably wouldn't get them back on.

'Don't look at her,' she whispers in Jen's ear. 'Don't talk to her. Let me do all the talking.'

Jen is a terrible liar. Jen is so honest she busts herself every time.

Carly tugs the sleeve of her sister's shirt and they walk. God knows if there's one thing they know how to do by now, it's walk.

'Thanks anyway, ma'am,' she calls, prepared to keep walking right by the counter. Then she realizes that's not the best thing to do. She should stop and talk. Because that's just what a person who's stealing something would never do.

'You girls have yourselves a good day.'

Carly stops, close to the counter, where the woman can't see their feet anyway.

'What's the name of this little town?' she asks.

'Not really a town exactly. Just part of McKinley County. The mailing address is technically Gallup, though that's a pretty long way south of here.'

Carly looks to Jen, happy to have been proven right. But Jen is staring up into the bird cage, oblivious. Either hypnotized by the birds, or paralyzed by fear. Or both.

'But that's a different state,' Carly says.

'Not sure what you mean,' the woman says, sounding patient.

'Gallup is in New Mexico, and this is Arizona.'

'No. This is New Mexico.'

Carly feels Jen's reaction, at her left side, without even looking. She's been promising Jen they've already crossed over the line into Arizona at long last.

'Really?' As though it could still turn out not to be true.

'You girls lost?'

And then Carly realizes her mistake. She's raised a red flag, just what she's been teaching herself not to do.

'No, ma'am. Not at all. We're on a road trip with our dad. He's out gassing up the car. He told us we were over the line into Arizona. Wait till I go tell him how wrong he was. How far from here to the state line? You know. Just so I can tell him.'

'Twenty miles or so. Maybe a little more.'

Carly is careful not to look at Jen, knowing how hard that news must be settling in. More than a day's walking. Just to get to where they thought they already were.

'OK. Thanks, ma'am,' she says.

'You girls have a good day.'

Then the woman puts her nose back down into her paperback book. She doesn't look at Carly or Jen's feet as they walk out the door.

Carly watches Jen walk down the shoulder of the road with her backpack balanced on her head to keep the sun out of her face. There's more of a spring in her sister's step.

'We didn't end up getting to rest much,' Jen says. 'These are really bouncy.'

She bounces more stridently, to emphasize the point, but carefully, so as not to drop the backpack.

'I just wanted to get a little farther away from there first,' Carly says. Which is phrasing it mildly. They ran scared, but at a fast walk.

She's using the jacket-held-over-her-head method. Her backpack is heavier.

'Did you get their address?' Jen asks.

'Yeah, I'm holding the number in my head till I can write it down.'

'These sure are a whole bunch better. Can we rest now?'

But there isn't much of a place to stop. Nothing like that nice bench they'd had before.

'There's a rock,' Jen says.

They walk to it, and sit.

The sun is off at a slant already, and Jen's still doing that thing she's been doing, looking around like there's something worth seeing out here.

Carly slips off her backpack and digs around in it until she finds the little blank book, its pen still clipped on. She flips to the first blank page and writes:

We owe \$7.00 to the St Ignatius Thrift Store at 3397 Route 264, McKinley County, sort of near Gallup, New Mexico. Look up zip code.

She sees Jen peeking over her shoulder.

'How much do we owe by now?' Jen asks.

'Over thirty dollars. But it's OK. Teddy'll give us the money.'

'You act like he has money. He doesn't have money.'

'Well. Some. Not much. But that doesn't matter. He'll give us what he has. Teddy's like that. He'll know how important

this is to us, and he'll find a way.'

'You act like he never did a thing wrong in his life.'

'He didn't. It was Mom—'

She tries to stop herself. But the word 'Mom' slips through the gate.

Jen's mouth forms a small, tight 'O'.

'Now who's speaking bad at the dead?'

'Sorry.'

Oh, shit, Carly thinks. We should have called him again in that last town.

And that's more than true. They should've done a lot of things in that last town. They should've gotten someone to give them a little money, in that special way Carly's learned how to do without raising big flags. And bought food. And bought sunscreen. And rested. And, yes, called Teddy again. Because Teddy will buy them a ticket to ride a bus or a train. Or maybe he'll drop what he's doing and drive out to get them. They only have to walk until Teddy answers the phone. It was never supposed to take nine days.

'We'll call him again. Next phone,' she says. 'We have to walk if we're gonna get someplace by sundown.'

Jen doesn't even complain. Just unfolds her skinny legs, and brushes off the back of her jeans.

They start off down the road again.

They hear the first engine they've heard in a while.

Carly looks over her shoulder to see an old motor home lumbering up the hill. Her heart falls when it slows and then stops in the road alongside them. A middle-aged woman leans out the window. Carly can feel air conditioning pouring out of the rig. It feels weirdly comforting, something she forgot existed.

They've been lucky with the weather. Warm but not hot by day and cold but not freezing at night. But it's getting warmer now.

'You girls OK out here all by yourself? Need a ride?'