

Jolene

I squinted and leaned back in the chair, the harsh sunlight breaching the blinds of the bay window inside Jolene's kitchen and stinging my eyes. My hostess set a steaming cup of coffee in front of me, and with barely veiled disdain, slid the creamer and sugar towards me.

"Why does she hate me?" I asked.

"She's fourteen," Jolene responded. "She hates everyone."

"Except you. She doesn't hate you," I whined lamely.

"Well, of course, she doesn't hate me," my older friend responded with an air of smug righteousness and a smirk. "How could she?"

Jolene was right. She was revered by all. In an age where almost every thirty-something mother with even modest means had a therapist, as far as I knew, none of the ladies living on Century Circle did. Jolene filled that role. And she filled it admirably.

I twisted my lips, preparing a response, but then my phone rattled. I looked down at the screen and sighed.

"It's my grandmother," I informed Jolene, picking up the device.

"Hi, Mumzie," I said.

Nothing. I tried again, this time raising my voice so that my eighty-year-old grandmother could hear me.

“MUMZIE! Hello?”

I listened as Jolene pulled out a chair across from me and slid into it gracefully.

“I can’t get this damn thing to work, Daphne!” Mumzie fumed.

“What thing, Mumzie?”

“This damn television. The one you bought for me last Christmas. I have more trouble with this thing.”

I shook my head and Jolene’s cheeks flushed with humor. I could practically see the grin behind the raised coffee mug covering her mouth. I elevated one hand, palm up, in mock surrender.

“Did you try turning it off and turning it back on?” I asked.

“What?”

I repeated myself, raising the decibel level twofold.

“Let me see,” Mumzie replied.

I waited a couple of beats.

“It’s already off,” Mumzie informed me.

“Well, you’re halfway there. Now turn it back on.”

“Huh?”

I tried again, twice as loud this time.

“Oh, okay. Yep! It’s working now! You fixed it, hon!”

Jolene laughed as I hung up. Her laughter was infectious, and soon I was cackling too.

“Maybe I should take her to New York,” I mused, resuming the conversation about my daughter. “Try to reconnect with her. We could see a Broadway show, shop on Fifth Avenue, picnic in Central Park.”

Jolene looked at me evenly but didn’t respond.

“Or the beach,” I stated. “We could rent one of those quaint cottages down at Seaside, sun in the surf, stuff ourselves with seafood at night. I might even let her have a glass of wine.”

Jolene reached across the table and patted my hand, a rare sign of physical affection.

“All that’s fine,” she said. “But mostly, she just needs to be loved and reassured.”

The simplicity of her comment was genius. Jolene always had a way of cutting through the nonsense. The fact that she’d never had children of her own made her sage advice even more impressive. Over the past six years, Jolene had become sort of the neighborhood den mother—not only to the moms but occasionally she dished out pearls of wisdom to the fathers and children on our street. Her confidentiality was sterling, and she never pushed herself on others. But when anyone came

through her door, she took the time to listen, often offering an objective view on whatever creation one of us had concocted in our heads.

I'd gathered bits and pieces about my friend over time. She'd always been a little guarded and reticent when it came to her past, but over the half-dozen years I'd known her, I had pieced together a bit of a profile.

Jolene had been born and raised in the Southeast. A stunning beauty, she had left home after graduating high school in 1979 at the tender age of seventeen. Like so many idealistic kids, she had sought stardom in Hollywood. Finding a room for rent in Van Nuys, she took a hostess job at a swanky restaurant in Sherman Oaks. Mingling with stars, producers, and filmmakers, Jolene soon learned to navigate the business. It wasn't all pretty, but a few years later, she landed a limited role in one of those 80's movies featuring a few household names from the era. Soon, she was getting numerous offers for similar spots and eventually landed a minor role in a television sitcom. That led to several commercial offers where she starred either rubbing shampoo through her hair or running along a valley of flowers promoting the latest allergy medication.

Eventually, Jolene scored a few major spots in B movies before helping with a screenplay of a very popular film. But like almost everyone in Hollywood, her fame dwindled, leaving her spinning in the wind in a region of the country that had never felt like home. She'd returned to the South in her early fifties, modestly wealthy and wanting to shed some baggage of the past. I'd known her for three years when I'd inadvertently discovered exactly what that baggage had been.

Reed, my husband, had been flipping through the channels on TV. Bored, he had switched over to Netflix before finally flipping off the television and grabbing his iPad. Rolling over, he touched my arm.

“Wanna watch some porn?” he inquired.

I shrugged. “Sure.”

I reached over and locked the bedroom door. When I’d rolled back, Reed was scrolling through Pornhub thumbnails.

“Oh! Look, Daph,” he said. “Vintage porn.”

I scrunched up my face. “They all look so hairy,” I commented.

“Yeah. Think of it as a change of pace.”

I scowled. A change of pace? It wasn’t like we looked at porn very often...or at least I didn’t. I decided to catalog it for a future discussion and settled in next to my husband.

We weren’t but a few minutes in when Reed paused the video, leaned in, and furrowed his eyebrows.

“I don’t believe it,” he barely whispered.

“What?” I asked, irritated at the interruption as I was just starting to feel a little frisky.

Reed placed his finger on the screen and pointed to the woman. She had just lounged on the bed after removing her last article of clothing, heaving breasts inviting, and a full golden bush on

display. Then his finger ran along the screen, stopping on the girl's upper arm.

I gasped and flipped the iPad facedown. Reed turned it back up.

"We can't watch this," I said, aghast. "Oh my gosh!"

Reed didn't start the video but he continued to scour the still shot. I didn't protest this time. It was a train wreck from which neither of us could avert our eyes.

"There," he said, pointing to the porn star's arm again. "You're seeing it too, right?"

My mouth went dry as I nodded. The little teardrop birthmark on the upper bicep was unmistakable. Then the familiarity washed over us both. We began a more investigative approach of the shot, neither of us aroused any longer.

Everything fit. There was little doubt.

"Turn it back on," I said.

Reed's reply dripped with incredulity.

"Are you for real?"

"I need to hear her voice."

Reed started the video and within moments, we were both ninety-nine percent certain who the female porn star from days gone by was. And she was living two doors down.

Jolene's hospitality and open-door-policy, though the trend, had exceptions. While it was rare for more than a day or two to pass, there were times when she was unavailable. It all depended on the presence of the pineapple. If the colorful piece of ceramic tropical fruit sat perched upon her porch railing, Jolene would accept company. She took it down when she wanted privacy. It was that simple, and I wasn't aware of anyone ever breaking the rule. Occasionally, a car would be parked in her driveway overnight, though an unusual occurrence. But her infrequent visitors, usually male but sometimes female, departed disheveled and disillusioned, despite sheepish grins on their tired faces. The pineapple might not appear for twelve to twenty-four hours following such an event, but her hospitality always resumed presently. I'd made the mistake of asking about her variety of visitors once, but an uncharacteristic icy glare and a change of subject told me a conversation about her sex life wasn't encouraged. But she was happy to discuss mine whenever I brought up the topic of my romantic adventures—or misadventures, as the case may be.

I had popped in with Reed a few months back during a hot July morning to have some iced tea with Jolene while Reed replaced a flush valve in her downstairs powder. Jolene had stared us down with humorous cynicism when we'd walked through the door. Profanity was somewhat unusual for my neighbor, so I was caught off guard by her remarks upon entry to her kitchen. She had looked back-and-forth between Reed and me with a widening smirk before speaking.

“Y’all have been fucking, haven’t you?”

I gasped and blushed, at a loss for words. Reed, who’d never been acquainted with an embarrassing moment, didn’t miss a beat.

“Let’s just say when Daphne took off everything but her Fitbit, things got rowdy, Jolene.”

“A girl has to get her steps in any way she can, I reckon,” our friend quipped, matching my husband’s quick wit.

I hadn’t recovered when Reed departed, making his way down the hall to the half bath.

“How’d you know?” I asked incredulously when I’d gathered myself and taken a seat across from her.

“I always know, dear. You have a certain glow about you.”

I covered my face in my hands but couldn’t stop laughing.

“Crap!” I said. “I can’t hide anything from you.”

“You’re an open book, Daphne. But isn’t it wonderful your sex life is so good?”

I shrugged. “Sex is always good. I wish the romance could match it.”

It was Jolene’s turn to shrug.

“Does Reed provide for your family?”

I didn't respond verbally. I knew it was a rhetorical question. She continued. "Is he faithful and loyal? Does he love your daughter? Spend time with her? Take y'all on lavish vacations?" She looked down the hallway. "Is he handy?"

I twisted my lips, feeling more than a little petty after hearing a listing of my husband's attributes from another woman. *Damn*, I thought. Wasn't she supposed to be on my side?

"I'm just saying, Daphne, don't the pros considerably outweigh the cons?"

I knew she was right, but the words stung anyway.

"Aren't you supposed to play on my team?" I asked petulantly.

She cocked her head but gave me a little look of sympathy.

"Maybe if I was the one fixing your toilet," I added, making us both laugh.

We sipped our beverages in silence for a moment, listening to the dull clanging of tools down the hallway as my husband fixed Jolene's toilet.

"Willow and I are going to Belk later," I finally said, referring to another friend and neighbor from the cul-de-sac who attended a weekly shopping excursion with me nearly every Saturday. "Do you need anything?"

Jolene shook her head. "I invited Lilly over for lunch."

I nodded. It wasn't unusual for my daughter to hang out with Jolene for a few hours during the weekend. My neighbor had

even been mentoring Lilly in the world of painting. She'd set up an extra easel, and the pair had been doing some rather vibrant reproductions of floral arrangements in Jolene's art studio.

"Don't let her corrupt you, Jolene," I said.

"Too late," my neighbor responded. "She's set her hooks in me."

I could only shake my head.

Reed finished his project and we skipped home so he could mow the lawn before the Braves came on in the afternoon. He could have his time alone in the house throwing back a few beers while Lilly pestered Jolene, and Willow and I got in our shopping therapy.

I saw Jolene once during the following week on a Tuesday evening but didn't encounter her again until Friday. We all saw her on Friday because that's the evening she hosted a dinner party for the neighbors on Century Circle. Jolene furnished the meat, this time a London Broil, while the neighbors brought side dishes and drinks. Reed and I lugged a cooler full of Corona with the requisite limes along with a bottle of red wine to her house. Fridays at Jolene's had become a thing, and everyone looked forward to it all week. During the summer, the party often ended with most of us swimming in her spacious pool inside her fenced backyard. Lilly sometimes joined us, but other times did not. On that particular Friday, our daughter decided we hadn't been overly uncool during the past few days and tagged along.

Willow's husband, Walker, bragged about his potatoes au gratin, and admittedly, they were quite tasty and a perfect complement to the meat.

“You burnt my pan, Walker,” Willow chided. “I guess you’ll be scrubbing on it tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry if you want an apology,” he said with mock smugness at his quip. Then he shrugged. “It’s more likely I’ll just buy you a new pan.”

Properly disarmed, Willow forked a slice of pink meat into her mouth and chewed, but still looked at Walker with a hint of disapproval.

“The steak is fabulous,” I told Jolene. “Where did you get it?”

“Kroger, believe it or not. Their meat is just as good as the butcher shop and half the price.”

Lilly kept quiet mostly, answering with polite monosyllabic replies when spoken to, but when Jolene placed a dish of sliced Granny Smith apples lightly sprinkled with cinnamon on the table, Lilly gave her a peculiar look.

“If you think that’s dessert, Jolene, I’m coming across the table!”

I inhaled a raspy breath and Reed froze. A split second passed with total silence before Jolene let loose a powerful belly laugh. Lilly began laughing next, winking at our hostess, and then the entire table was cackling—except for me.

I chewed my lip, trying to decide whether to verbally reprimand my daughter or let it go for the moment. Reed patted my hand and gave me a soft smile. Jolene was wiping her eyes and Lilly was grinning mischievously. Then my

daughter plucked a sliver of fruit from the tray and winked again at Jolene before slipping the apple into her mouth.

“I think Willow brought dessert,” Jolene sputtered, still broken up by the outburst of my comedic offspring.

I shot daggers at my daughter with my eyes but decided to leave it for the moment.

“That’s right,” Willow chimed in. “I made a coconut cream pie!” She glanced at Lilly. “I hope you’ll approve.”

“I’m sure I will, Willow,” Lilly said politely while barely concealing a snicker.

After dessert, we carried drinks outside to the pool and reclined on the deck. Stars were out and the mid-seventies temperature was nearly perfect.

I sat at a table with Jolene, Willow, and Walker, letting the alcohol soothe my anxiety while Lilly dangled her feet in the pool next to Reed. They were just out of earshot, but Lilly had the loose, relaxed countenance of a teenager comfortable with her dad. A pang of jealousy washed over me. God knows I’d tried with our daughter, but it seemed the more I tried, the worse it got. I didn’t realize my thoughts had escaped my mouth until I heard the words ring hollow in my ears.

“Then stop trying so hard, hon,” Jolene responded. “She’s growing up and wants to spread her wings. Maybe it’s time to give her some room.”

“But I’m her mother. Am I just to sit back and allow outbursts like the one at the dinner table?”

“Why not?” Jolene answered. “She wasn’t being disrespectful. She was being funny. She’s trying to fit in with a group of adults. Had Willow said it, how would you have reacted?”

I toyed with a bottle cap from the Corona, averting my eyes. Jolene was right again.

“I suppose I would have laughed.”

“I wished I would have said it,” Willow remarked. “But I’m not as clever as Lilly.”

“Great,” I chuckled. “You’re on her side too.”

“Of course I am,” Willow replied. “What are friends for?”

Willow was about ten years older, and she and Walker were empty-nesters. Their twenty-two-year-old son and nineteen-year-old daughter were both in college, their son choosing to spend the summer doing an internship at the university he attended out of state. Their daughter was home for summer break, but working at a camp to earn some spending cash.

“Did you go through this with Sarah?” I asked.

Walker piped in. “Actually, I did. Sarah and I were close when she was little, but she’s always been tight with Willow. Kevin was easy for us both.”

“You had a strained relationship with Sarah?” I asked, my voice dripping with disbelief. “I never saw that.”

Walker nodded. “For a few years when she was about Lilly’s age. She was pushing away and I tried pulling her back...too

hard, I realize now. She rebelled, but we figured it out. So will you,” Walker said kindly. “Just tread lightly, Daph.”

“So, it’s all good now?” I asked.

Walker nodded as Willow interjected.

“I might strangle her, though,” Willow said. “Of course, in hindsight, I should have specified and said ‘and turn it on’ when I requested she throw my clothes in the dryer this morning.”

Now we were all laughing. Reed looked over, curiosity dancing in his eyes as Lilly surveyed me suspiciously. I thought back to a year earlier when I’d grounded her for the weekend for not cleaning her room when she’d told me she had. After a heated confrontation, she had stormed off and slammed her bedroom door. Halfway down the hallway, I had paused in horror, hearing her low voice spewing venom.

“Suck it, Mom,” she had hissed, thinking I couldn’t hear her.

I guess I was still salty about it. I took another long pull from my beer bottle and stood. Then I strolled over and joined my husband and daughter by the pool. Passing by Reed, I slid in next to Lilly, who gave me a neutral look. My husband, sensing my distress, offered a soft smile.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey back,” my daughter replied nonchalantly.

“What are you two discussing?” I asked, trying on a smile and using a conversational tone.

“You, Mom. It’s all about you.”

“Good to know I’m the hot topic.”

Lilly harrumphed and rolled her eyes. I sipped my beer and eyed Reed, who was looking at nothing and kicking his feet in the water. Lilly looked at me with a tinge of malevolence that I guess no one else ever seemed to notice and spoke.

“Why do you have to be so annoying, Mom?” my daughter inquired. “Oh my, Gaawwwd!”

I shook my head and stood.

“You know what, Lilly?” I asked.

She had turned away and was now ignoring me.

“Lilly,” Reed said. “Stop being disrespectful to your mother.”

Our daughter brought her feet out of the pool and started to stand. That’s when I leaned in and gave her a hard shove.

“God will forgive you, but I won’t,” I roared, as my daughter pinwheeled her arms and went flying into the pool. The look on her face was priceless when her head emerged from the water. Lilly’s mouth opened in mute protest as I reveled at her loss for words.

“Holy shit!” Reed exclaimed, but the laugh lines around his eyes and his pursed lips validated my actions.

I was on a roll now. Emboldened, I leaned down and pushed my husband into the water alongside Lilly. My daughter’s face

went from horror to amusement. After the initial shock, Reed's evil smile spoke loudly of his intentions. But there was no way I was going to give him the pleasure, so I jumped and did my best cannonball, landing right between my daughter and husband.

Walker, not to be outdone, was dragging a protesting Willow towards the edge of the pool. But when he gave her a push, my neighbor latched on to his arm tightly, bringing two more bodies into the water. I wouldn't say that was the day things began to turn around for Lilly and me, but at least they stopped getting worse—a day Reed often referred to as Lilly's baptism.

Reed's mother was in town the following week, so I only saw Jolene on Wednesday. We missed our usual Friday gathering as my mother-in-law insisted on dining out. My husband drove his mom to the airport on Saturday morning for her return trip home, and I convinced Lilly, who had been more amenable towards me since her baptism, to accompany them. So after seeing the pineapple perched on my neighbor's porch rail, I popped in and slumped into my seat across from Jolene for a late Saturday morning pow-wow.

"You look weary," Jolene said, understating how I felt.

"If you step on a crack, does it work for your mother-in-law too?" I asked.

Jolene released a hearty laugh, but all I could do was shake my head and sigh.

"Apparently, I can't load or empty a dishwasher correctly, nor do I understand the art of folding bath towels. In addition to that, I'm an awful mother, unsupportive wife, and generally a deplorable human being. Oh! My cooking sucks too!"

"Take a breath and relax, Daphne," Jolene laughed. "You'll live longer."

I rolled my eyes and sighed again.

"How about some coffee?" she asked. "I just brewed a fresh pot."

“That sounds heavenly,” I responded, grateful to be in the presence of my friend whose judgment of me I actually valued. She brought me a steaming cup of Joe, and I took a tentative sip of the hot brew.

“Ah, that hits the spot,” I said before taking another careful sip.

We chatted briefly and had another laugh about the pool incident and Lilly’s mild transformation in her attitude towards me in the days that followed. Jolene had just poured us both a second cup of coffee when we heard the front door swing open. Our eyes diverted to the entry of the kitchen as we listened to the quick and deliberate steps through the hallway.

“Well, as I live and breathe,” I said with little enthusiasm.

Jolene gave me a playful kick under the table while offering a kind smile to our other neighbor, Miranda, who had missed the last few Fridays at Jolene’s. She wasn’t my favorite person in the world and I offered no pretense.

“I can’t stay long, y’all,” drawled Miranda in her fast-paced and breathy southern accent. “Jeremy has a soccer game at one and I have tennis at four.”

“Hmmm, too bad,” I muttered, eliciting another kick from Jolene.

Miranda gave me a quick glance, and her nose curled up like she had just caught wind of something unsavory stuck to the bottom of her shoe. I took her in and smirked. She was a piece of work, but I had to admit there was no denying her good looks. Blonde, slim, and athletic, Miranda had no compunction

about showing off her gym body. Along with tennis, she also led Pilates and yoga classes at the local YMCA and ran 10Ks along with the occasional half marathon. Miranda's toned and tanned arms in her tight, green tank top glistened in the morning sunlight. The space between where her top ended and her snug matching Lycra shorts began boasted a flat belly. Her toned and shapely legs led to tapered ankles anchored by dainty feet hidden inside a brand-new pair of bright-orange Nikes. She rarely wore anything but fitness clothing. I found her loathsome.

Miranda was in her early thirties, younger than the rest of us. Her husband, Doug, was the male equivalent of Miranda. They were the perfect couple, who Willow and I referred to as Ken and Barbie. Tall and chiseled, Doug was in his late thirties, handsome enough, even though he looked like a shark when he smiled, making me wonder if he had a few extra teeth. The couple doted on an eight-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter, both emerging stars in their respective travel soccer leagues. Doug was a deacon at the neighborhood Baptist church, who was all saintly on Sunday, yet hadn't a second thought about ripping off a business client on Monday morning. He had even boasted about his dealings to Reed during a recent golf outing that my husband had been indifferent about attending. Doug had weight-room muscles but had probably never done a day of manual labor in his life. The youngest guy on the street, he didn't even perform the landscaping of his lawn. Instead, he paid a crew of Mexicans to do it and was often seen berating them if they didn't tend to his yard with perfection. I found him loathsome as well.

And if that wasn't bad enough, Ken and Barbie were the kind of couple who dressed their children in matching clothes during family outings and sent out smarmy Christmas cards with a

long letter detailing all their yearly accomplishments. And to make matters worse, they filled the envelope with red and green sparkles that spilled all over the carpet when opened.

“Jeremy finally made the top travel team, and the coach said he’ll start at center-mid in today’s game!”

Jolene smiled and I sipped my coffee. I didn’t give a good dad gum about soccer and didn’t know a center-mid from a smack on the ass. Miranda continued.

“I don’t know why the coach didn’t start him on the top team at the beginning of the season,” she whined. “He’s probably the best player in the organization.”

I rolled my eyes while Jolene played along. Miranda got her second wind.

“I’m sure the combination of multi-vitamin and protein shake I’ve put him on has helped though. He’s getting bigger and faster and stronger every day!”

I stifled a moan. Miranda’s part-time job instructing at the Y had introduced her to supplements and elixirs she couldn’t stop ranting about. I let her give her little infomercial until she preyed on me.

“You look tired, Daphne,” Miranda sneered. “Maybe you could use the Beta-Omega mix with an assortment of B vitamins. You know, give you some zip and give your skin a healthier glow.”

“I’ll tell you what, Miranda,” I seethed. “If there was a supplement to get you to shut the hell up about supplements, I’d shove the whole bottle down your throat!”

She harrumphed and turned her attention to Jolene.

“We hated to miss the past two Fridays. Two weeks ago, we had late games, and as you know, Doug and I just returned from Jamaica last night,” she bragged.

Before Jolene could respond, I piped in.

“You didn’t have any trouble with the TSA agent this time, did you?” I asked nonchalantly.

Miranda’s face turned red and she narrowed her eyes at me.

“That was a dirty trick and I won’t forgive you...or Willow.”

I laughed and could see Jolene was trying not to crack up. Miranda was right; it was a dirty trick. Several years back, a group of the neighborhood women had taken a trip to South Beach in Miami and had invited Miranda to join. We had only known her for a few months and hadn’t accumulated the misgivings about her we all now had. But after five days together, everyone realized what an insufferable bitch she truly was, and I couldn’t resist playing a little prank on her to reward her for almost ruining the vacation for us all.

The last night of our stay, Willow and I had downed a few too many Pina Coladas and come up with a devious scheme. Across from the patio bar where we drank, an adult novelty store sat, neon lights flashing in the balmy twilight. We decided to check it out, even making a little purchase. The shock and surprise on Miranda’s face when the TSA agent at the security checkpoint removed a rather sizable adult toy from within her clothing

made all the suffering we endured during the week almost worth it. We still haven't stopped laughing.

"Well, at least you got a buddy out of the deal, Miranda."

"Eww! Gross!" she said, and now Jolene couldn't keep from laughing any longer. "I threw that awful thing away at the airport! Yuck!"

"You poor thing," I muttered, actually feeling a little sorry for my prudish neighbor.

"What?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I said, standing up. "Reed is probably home by now, Jolene. I'll catch up with you a little later."

I left Jolene with Miranda, snickering all the way home.

A few weeks later, school was back in session and my mornings were smooth and unobstructed. Most days after I had tidied up the house and completed my morning workout, I'd stop in at Jolene's for coffee or a cup of tea and a bit of gossip.

"How are things going with Lilly?" she inquired as we settled in with our beverages.

I sipped and nodded.

"Actually, they're pretty good. She's enjoying school and has a crush on a boy in third period."

Jolene smiled and raised her eyebrows.

"Do tell!" Jolene nearly squealed.

Lilly and I had been spending a few evenings together after she finished her homework, eating ice cream and watching chick flicks. Reed would exile himself to the basement where he'd while away watching the Braves make their postseason run, sipping on a few beers from the mini-fridge we kept on our terrace level. When the movie would finish, or if we got bored with the characters and plot, conversation would turn to my daughter's latest infatuation.

"This one is more serious than last year's crush," I told Jolene. "I think Lilly is a little starry-eyed."

Jolene's eyes twinkled.

“She hasn’t said a word to me about it, but I’ve noticed a change in her demeanor...her makeup and hair to boot,” my friend offered.

I laughed and nodded.

“She actually seems happy for a change. I hope nothing alters it.”

I went on to explain how dreamy Nathan was, according to Lilly—his bushy dark hair and smoky blue eyes. I told her about how they sat across from each other in World History, and how he shared a stick of gum with her every day. And finally, I relayed to my friend how Lilly had confessed to kissing Nathan in the hallway during their lunch period.

“Oh, wow! Does Reed know?” Jolene asked.

I shook my head.

“Nope,” I said conspiratorially, giving my friend a wink. “Just us girls.”

Jolene made a horizontal movement with her thumb and forefinger across her lips, letting me know she would keep our little secret. Then she sobered.

“It’s nice she’s confided in you, Daphne. That must feel really good considering how rocky things were a few months back.”

I reflected, twisting my lips into a frown as I reminisced about the darker days with my daughter.

“I took your advice, Jolene. I backed off and gave her some room. Ironically, it’s what brought her back to me.”

Jolene smiled and I thought I detected a little moisture brimming in her eyes. Then the door swung open, followed by Miranda’s patented footsteps down the hallway and the moment was lost. When Miranda appeared in the entryway, she paused briefly, then scurried into the room, sitting down next to Jolene and across from me.

“My Kaitlin won student of the week,” she boasted with glee.

Jolene smiled politely as I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. When I opened them, Miranda was staring at me, her nose curled.

“What’s the matter with you, Daphne?” the perky blonde inquired.

“I suddenly have a headache,” I answered.

“It’s probably your diet,” Miranda responded.

I looked at her sullenly.

“Yeah, well now I’m nauseous.”

She was undeterred.

“Well, maybe you have leaky gut syndrome. Or maybe you need to stop cooking with vegetable oils and use ghee or olive oil!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Or maybe I need to take a frying pan to the side of your head, Miranda,” I groaned.

Miranda harrumphed as I stood.

“Well, don’t run off on my account,” the perky blonde chided.

“I have to rush home to google leaky gut syndrome,” I retorted.

Later that afternoon, when Lilly arrived home from school, I sensed something was wrong. She was quiet and distant, so I inquired.

“What’s up, buttercup?”

“Nothing,” she stated flatly.

“It’s something. You can’t fool Momma.”

Lilly brought a dish of cookies and some apple juice to the table and sat across from me. She pulled an Oreo apart but didn’t bite into it.

“I have a problem.”

“Tell me.”

“A few of my squad want to go to the football game this weekend, and this girl I’m partnered with in Biology lab wants to tag along.”

“And the squad doesn’t approve?” I inquired.

“No, not really,” she said.

“Do *you* like her?” I asked.

“I don’t NOT like her.”

“You are indifferent?” I pressed.

“Yeah...that’s the word. Indifferent.”

I shrugged.

“As long as you are decent to her, I suppose it’s not a big deal either way.”

Lilly didn’t appear consoled.

“What’s the real problem?” I prodded further.

She looked at me sheepishly.

“You see, Mom, she likes all my Instagram posts and laughs at my jokes on Facebook. I don’t want to lose that.”

“Real-world problems, kiddo,” I exaggerated. “I think you better include her. That’s too big a chance to take...losing a social media responder.”

She laughed and so did I. Hearing her concerns out loud seemed to diminish their significance.

“I guess I’m being petty, huh?”

I smiled and stroked her hair.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Resolve washed over her face.

“I think I know the answer then, Mom. I should include her.”

I beamed and nearly choked when she thanked me for my counsel, but I managed to ward it off. Lilly popped the cookie into her mouth, and I snagged one from the plate.

“How’s Nathan?” I asked.

My daughter smiled brightly.

“Omigod! He is so cute...and nice!” She paused and then stood hurriedly. “I almost forgot. We are face-timing in fifteen minutes. I gotta get ready.”

And like that, my daughter whisked herself from the kitchen. I finished the plate of cookies and enjoyed the moment. It was nice having my daughter including me in her life again. I vowed to hang onto it as long as I could.

Halloween passed and Thanksgiving was upon us in the blink of an eye. We were leaving for my folks' place in Tampa the following day to eat Turkey, watch football, and loll in the Florida sun. I always enjoyed the week but didn't relish the seven-hour drive. I tended to get bored after a few hours riding, and Reed insisted on being the driver. I popped into Jolene's one last time before our departure.

"So, we'll be gone for the week," I told my friend. "We will arm the security system, but don't hesitate to call if something crazy happens."

I tilted my head. Jolene seemed preoccupied. I wondered if being alone on Thanksgiving bothered her. This was the first year I could remember where all of us were traveling out of town for the holiday. She had eaten at Miranda's last year and Willow's the year before.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh...yes. I'm fine. Y'all have fun and enjoy the great weather."

We chatted for a minute, but I really didn't have time for coffee and such. I felt kind of bad when I begged off; I felt even worse when she gave me an uncharacteristic embrace that lasted several moments.

"I love you," she said when she released me. "I know you know that, but I wanted you to hear me say it."

I looked at her strangely. In all the time we had known each other, I couldn't remember an instance where she had said those words to me, even though I knew the words were true.

"Uh...I love you too, Jolene."

An awkward moment hung in the air, and then I leaned in and embraced her once more.

"I gotta run," I said when we untangled from each other's arms. "Whatever you get into, I hope it's fun," I added jokingly, trying to lighten the heavy moment with a reference to her mysterious visitors.

As I packed my bags and arranged all the details for our trip, I couldn't help thinking about the odd encounter with Jolene. Something was off, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I eventually dismissed it as her not having a neighbor with whom to share Thanksgiving, but it nagged me nonetheless.

We enjoyed temperatures in the high seventies in Florida, and Thanksgiving dinner was the usual. Dad lamented about the state of the nation, why the Bucs needed another quarterback, and why he would never own a foreign car—preferring his Cadillac sedan to those German and Japanese go-carts. I had never known him to drive another car. He had owned Cadillacs since I was a baby, and I couldn't imagine him driving anything else.

The food was delicious, the weather perfect, and the company mostly tolerable. But by Saturday, I think we were all ready to part company and get back to our normal routines.

I was dozing when we pulled into the garage. Reed gently pressed my arm.

“We are home, hon,” he said.

I shook myself awake and stretched.

“How long have I been out?” I asked.

“Since before Macon, I think. Did you have a good nap?”

“I did,” I responded.

We unloaded the car and unpacked our cases. As I moved around the house, it dawned on me how much I’d missed Jolene. My mind went back to our last encounter, and I suddenly wanted nothing more than to visit my friend and neighbor. I had a lot to tell her.

There was a bit of a chill in the afternoon air, so I slipped out of my beach-appropriate clothes into jeans and a sweatshirt. I knew something wasn’t right after a few steps down Jolene’s driveway. I stopped and stared. The first thing I noticed was that the pineapple wasn’t on her rail. Disappointed, I almost turned and walked back home, but then something else caught my eye. Or perhaps it was the absence of what I had been so used to seeing that alerted me. The wind chimes outside her door were gone, the artsy pieces she placed in her windows were missing, and lovely potted plants that lined her porch were nowhere to be seen.

I stood for a moment frowning, and then slowly marched forward. Taking the steps up the porch, I looked around bewildered. I felt like I was in The Twilight Zone...a ghost town.

I did something I'd never done before. I rang her doorbell—the sound from within returning hollow and empty. I banged and rang the bell again. Nothing. I moved down the porch and peered into her bay window. And again, it wasn't so much what I saw, but what I didn't see. Jolene's counters, usually comfortably cluttered, were empty. The little cart that sat inside the window holding indoor plants had vanished. And the kitchen table where I'd spent so many afternoons drinking coffee and chatting with my friends was gone.

Frantically, I ran around her house, looking in every window and seeing nothing—no furniture, no bric-a-brac, no wall coverings or paintings, not even a dust bunny on the hardwood floors. And that's when the tears came. Hopelessly, I walked to her backyard and stood on my tiptoes to see over the wrought-iron fence that enclosed her pool. The water was covered and the deck furniture was gone. I ran home screaming and blubbering and completely empty—as empty as the home of my friend of the past six years.

Willow and I pieced it together over the next few days. We both saw the realtor placing a For Sale sign in Jolene's yard and ran over to pump the poor man for information. He had no details on the owner's whereabouts but did confirm that he had met with her several weeks back to list the house. Willow and I had both called Jolene's phone, but it was an exercise in futility. There was no answer.

I walked around my house like a zombie, and Reed and Lilly weren't much better. Willow and I alternated crying and angrily bashing our friend for abandoning us. Then we would try to make sense of it by saying she must have had a good reason for what she did, even if we didn't know the reason.

Then the sadness and anger would surface again, and we would repeat the process.

I got a little clarity on Tuesday. Reed was at work and Lilly at school, when the UPS driver came to the door, delivering a box the size of a toaster. The return address was a UPS store in Reseda, California, making my breath hitch as I took the package from the driver.

I carried the delivery to the kitchen and located a pair of scissors in the utility drawer. Slowly, I cut the box open. A small note was attached to another box. I took the letter and read the two sentences.

I love you and will miss you so much. It's your turn now.

Jolene

I opened the second box and pulled the contents from the bubble wrap and packing material, and then I understood. I walked back through the living room and out the front door. And then I placed Jolene's pineapple on the rail of my porch, just like it had sat on hers for a half-dozen years.

Willow showed up first. I made coffee and set out a plate of macaroons. We nibbled and chatted, avoiding the painful topic of our friend and neighbor. When the door to my living room opened, I wondered if Reed had come home early. But the determined patter of footsteps told me otherwise.

Miranda stood at the entrance to my kitchen. Crestfallen and broken, tears streamed down her face.

"Jolene is gone?" she barely whispered.

I nodded and stood before heading to the counter and selecting a mug from the cabinet above. I poured fresh coffee into the cup and walked back to the table. Setting the mug down with one hand, I used the other to pull out a chair next to mine.

“Sit,” I said to Miranda.

She looked both surprised and touched, a goofy smile widening on her tear-streaked face. I pushed the sugar and creamer towards her. She stared at my hands as I completed the process.

“If you want sassafras oil or some other nonsense, you’ll have to furnish it yourself, girly,” I said and winked.

Miranda laughed and Willow and I joined in. Then I reached over and placed my hand over Miranda’s, giving her a quick squeeze and letting her know she had a friend.

