

CARLIE'S BEST FRIEND

by
Jennifer Phillips

It should have been a happy day.

I was surrounded by yummy holiday food. Mom and Dad said I could sample anything I wanted. And we got free swimming at the city pool after the neighborhood party.

But was I having fun? No, I was not.

Instead, I was stuck at the food table trying to escape Debbie.

I stared at the candle, the one at the middle of the trouble. Actually, the fire was pretty. The yellow, blue and orange flames moved like waves of water.



Debbie whispered in my ear. "Carlie, you've got to take dare double-dares seriously."

I swiped some cake frosting from a plate.

"Chocolate, anyone?"

Debbie rolled her eyes. I let the chocolate melt in my mouth. I spotted my parents. They weren't noticing my little problem here. Instead, they were chattering away with other grown-ups.

Debbie was in my after-school program. She always had a new plan for me, usually something against the rules. Couldn't I at least get a break on the weekends?

"I'll get into trouble," I whispered back.

Debbie shrugged. "They won't even notice."

I started moving away. Debbie blocked me. She's taller than me and likes to get pushy.

"Guess someone is just a 'fraidy cat."

I felt like screaming, but a deep giggle came out instead. "I am not. You know the rule on fire. No touchie!"

"I'll show you. It doesn't hurt," Debbie said.

She checked to make sure no one was looking. I hoped my parents would see and rescue me.

“Now!” Debbie whispered. She swooshed her finger through the flame. She grinned. It made me wonder when my own front teeth would finally come in.

“See. Not a bit of pain.”

I pulled my long hair into a ponytail and acted like it was no big deal. “You just got lucky.”

Debbie blocked me again when I tried to leave.

“Dare, *triple* dare.”

“My mom and dad have told me over and over to stay away from fire!”

Debbie brushed her brown hair out of her eyes. She did the Debbie laugh, which meant I didn’t know anything. “Parents have to say those things. It’s not like we’re starting a fire or something.”

CLINK, CLINK. CLINK, CLINK, CLINK!

We both jumped. A neighbor tapped his glass with a spoon. “A toast! A toast!” the grown-ups said. The neighbor talked about appreciating

each other, the gift of having good friends and how he prayed for peace...

“Blah, blah, blah,” Debbie whispered, making silly faces behind his back. She pinned me



against the table.

I looked at the candle.

My neighbor’s words

weren’t so bad. He talked about having good friends. I knew that wasn’t Debbie. She was just annoying.

My parents looked over. My mom gave me a smile.

Right, I thought. You don’t know what I’m going through over here.

My mom believes we all have a best friend inside us. She calls it a special voice. She says it guides us if we learn to hear it.

Well, nothing else was working. While the grown-ups talked on, I tried finding my special voice.

Debbie interrupted. “Okay. They’re done. Do it now.”

I looked at the flame. I looked at Debbie.

“No. Let me go or I’ll make a big deal out of it.”

My words surprised me but, hey, they sounded good!

“If you turn down my dare, you have to do everything I say after school next week,” Debbie said.

“No, I don’t. And I won’t do the dare. I don’t want to play with you anymore.”

I wish I had a picture of Debbie’s face right then!

I pushed away from the table and zipped over to my parents. Maybe it would be a good day after all.

If they wondered what I had been doing, I would say I was talking with my best friend. Not Debbie. This other friend would always be around, helping me do the right things.

Instead, my mom just asked if I wanted anything else to eat. She laughed as I did her favorite face. She calls it the goofy, wide-eyed look.

“No thanks,” I said. “I’ve had enough fun at the food table for now.”

