

"Our bond is stronger than ever"

For years, Julie and Jade Carter were plagued by headaches so excruciating they caused blackouts, yet doctors dismissed them as hypochondriacs. But Julie knew her pain—and her daughter's—was real . . .



"Now we're unstoppable!" smile Julie, right, and Jade.

In the pale morning light, Julie Carter heard footsteps, then the creak of the door, and she knew: it was happening again.

"It hurts, Mom," her 15-year-old daughter, Jade, cried, climbing into bed beside her.

"Oh, honey," the Billings, Montana, mom whispered, "I know." She had the same thunderous pressure, the same excruciating headaches no painkiller could touch—and no doctor could figure out why . . .

When Julie's headaches began when she was 12, doctors chalked them up to everything from migraines to rheumatoid arthritis.

But Julie refused to give in to the pain, eventually becoming a hairdresser and, after marrying Lon, a mom to Jade and Sapphire.

Maybe it was the hormones, maybe the sleepless nights caring for a toddler and a newborn—but Julie's headaches intensified.

"Rest," Lon and her mom said. "We'll take the girls."

But I'm their mommy! Julie's heart ached with guilt.

"The pain starts in the back of my head, then my vision gets weird and my whole body goes weak . . ." she told doctor after doctor.

"I just don't see anything," they'd say, scribbling prescriptions for pain relievers or muscle relaxants—and looking at her like she

was a hypochondriac.

I'm not crazy! Julie felt like screaming. Yet she knew it wasn't normal to pop a dozen aspirins a day, or hurt so badly she wanted to die.

"My head hurts, Mommy," Jade groaned

Her only saving grace was her girls—Jade, Sapphire and the youngest, Chalcedonae,

all named for precious gems. That's what you are to me, she'd think.

Like mother, like daughter

But it was Jade who was most like Julie. "Two of a kind," Lon would tease. "I'm in trouble now!"

But he loved it—and so did Julie. She had to smile, seeing the dark eyes so much like her own; hearing her own voice echoed back in little-girl pitch.

In fact, that's what doctors thought it was when 10-year-old Jade began complaining of headaches, too.

"Kids are great mimics," they said. "And Jade is sensitive. If she hears you saying your head hurts . . ."

But even when Julie stopped talking about it, Jade didn't. "My head hurts, Mommy," she'd groan. "And my body's all pins and needles!"

That's exactly what happens to me! Julie gasped. Dear God, have I passed this on to her, too?

It was like a sickening déjà vu as Julie took Jade to doctors only to hear, "There doesn't seem to be anything wrong."

Jade's pain is real, Julie knew. My pain is real!

Desperate, she tried changing their diet, removing all refined sugars. But nothing helped.

Jade had to quit the basketball team and school newspaper—and even began blacking out in class.

And now, as she snuggled beside her mom, Julie couldn't bear to face another day of agonizing pain—hers or Jade's.

"I won't give up until we're both cured"

Grasping at straws, Julie made an appointment with an orthopedic surgeon, John Schneider, M.D.

"I understand you're in pain," he said kindly, and Julie's heart leapt: Somebody believes me!

Still, when Dr. Schneider recommended an MRI, Julie didn't expect much. I've had them before, she sighed . . .

But reading the results, Dr. Schneider was incredulous.

"You have chiari malformation," he announced. It was a rare condition—so rare many doctors didn't even know to look for it—where the bottom part of the skull was too small, forcing the brain down.

"See how your brain is pressing against the brain stem and the top of the spinal canal?" Dr. Schneider asked. "That explains the headaches, the tingling . . ."

Julie exploded in tears of relief. All these years the doctors said I was out of my mind—I was, she thought, literally!

Almost immediately, Julie underwent a three-hour surgery in which Dr. Schneider removed sections of her skull to relieve the pressure.

"I feel like a new person!" Julie announced when she awoke headache-free for the first time in decades.

But for Julie, the best part was having a solution not just for herself—but for Jade, too.

"There's no evidence of a brain abnormality," Jade's doctors insisted. But Julie knew all too well that

FAST WAYS TO SOOTHE A HEADACHE

Here's what experts recommend:

- Massage from your neck to your hairline, squeezing the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders.
- With your palm facing down, massage the soft area between your thumb and forefinger, an acupressure point.
- Drink fruit juices.
- Turn on soft music, which studies have found to bring relief.
- Take a warm bath to release tight muscles.
- Eat a mint. The scent of peppermint has been shown to relieve headaches.
- Take a 20-minute nap.
- For sinus headaches, alternate five-minute applications of hot and cold compresses.



doctors made mistakes. So she took Jade to The Chiari Institute in Great Neck, New York, where they confirmed what she already knew: Jade had chiari, too.

Soon after, Jade underwent a surgery similar to Julie's.

"It doesn't hurt anymore!" she gushed afterward as mother and daughter began singing their favorite song, "Free."

"Free from worry/free to live/free to give/Free to smile . . ."

That's us, Julie thought. We're finally free!

Two months later,

Jade graduated from high school with honors. Today, she's a freelance writer, and she and Julie have formed a chiari support group where they're often mistaken as sisters, their matching scars covered by cropped hair the same shade of brown.

"After everything Mom and I survived, our bond is stronger than ever," Jade says.

—Elizabeth Holzemer