

High Spirits

Christmas Eve day was shaping up to be so much fun. My mom and I had just finished shopping for our family and friends. She was dropping me off at the skating rink for a Christmas bash from three to five o'clock. My friends Riana, Layah, and Imani were all waiting for me by the front door. Of course, my mom lectured us about being careful, even though her friend Miss Pam, who was one of the owners, promised that she'd keep an eye on us. We also had strict instructions that when the DJ announced the last song, to start getting our stuff together right after that. That would be easy since all of us brought our own skates, and we wouldn't have to stand in long lines to turn in rented ones.

Mom rolled her window down to say hello to Miss Pam. “Hey, girl. Thanks for letting Carmen and her friends hang out today. They know how to behave and what’s expected of them.” Then my mom gve us a look. “Right, ladies?”

“Yesss,” we all said together, anticipating jumping out of the car.

“Girl, you know I can handle things. Plus, I know that Carmen Browne and any friends of hers behave like such *ladies*,” Miss Pam said, winking at us.

As soon as Mom pulled off, we darted inside to begin our party time. It wasn’t that we planned to do anything wrong that would displease our parents; it’s just that me and my girls couldn’t wait to just hang out with each other. Before we put our skates on, we decided to exchange Christmas gifts.

Imani went first. She handed all of us a cute, small, square box. Inside was a wallet that turned into a purse, if you put on the long strap. They were in the cutest colors. I had a pink one. She gave Riana purple. Layah had orange, and then Imani pulled hers out. It was bright gold. I took my money out of my back pocket so fast and put it in my new gift.

We all said thank you, and she said, “Just a little somethin’ I wanted to give you guys to carry, because you carried me these last few months when I was trippin’. It’s great to have y’all as friends.”

Then it was Layah’s turn. She gave us airbrushed sweat-shirts with our names on the back! They were *sooo* cute. We agreed to go to the bathroom and put them on as soon as we were done exchanging gifts.

“I thought it’d be fun to look alike,” Layah said.

Riana handed us pretty gift bags from Bath & Body Works with fragrances inside. She gave us each the same one, Warm Vanilla Sugar. I loved splashing on my mom’s sprays. Now I’d have my own. *But how will I keep my little sister Cassie out of mine?* I wondered. Smiling, I realized I could share.

“I thought it would be cool for all of us to wear the same fragrance,” Riana said. “Now we can really be sweet.”

My gift was last. I handed a small jewelry box to each of them. They didn’t even notice the shiny new chain that I was wearing. It was an adorable necklace that said, “Best Friends Forever.” They opened their boxes . . . and all three of them loved it.

“We’re best friends for life,” I said.

We ran to the bathroom to put on our sweatshirts and necklaces, giggling and discussing how excited we were to have each other as friends. Sometimes it was difficult dealing with different personalities. But nothing could break us up.

Just as quickly as I thought that, I saw my friend Spencer and Hunter enter the skating rink. Spence, as everyone called him, had a big smile on his face. He looked happy to see us, and it was cool seeing him. He came over and spoke to us. Then he asked me to skate a few times around with him. Sounded good to me. I gave my friends a quick wave good-bye, and I noticed little frowns on their faces, but I couldn’t let them “steal my joy” as my grandma always said.

We skated around side by side. The DJ was really jammin’.

He went back to his buddy and I went back to my girls. When I skated toward Layah and Imani, they skated away. They waved at me and gave each other high fives. The nerve. I was glad I was past taking things personal. I came. They left. So what. No big deal.

Just then I saw Riana a second too late. Tripping, I ran into her, nearly knocking her down.

“Girl! Carmen, you almost made me drop my nachos,” she said to me in an evil tone.

“It was an accident. I’m sorry. What’s wrong with you, Riana? Please tell me you’re not mad at me for skating with Spence.”

“No, I’m cool with that. It’s just. . . .”

“What?” I asked, hanging on for her next word.

“I wish Hunter would say something to me. He just waved and left.”

“Did you say anything to him?”

“I shouldn’t have to. Spence came over to you.”

“Forget him. He’s not the only boy in the world. Let him see you having a good time, girl. One thing having a big brother has taught me, and you should know this ’cause your brother’s the same way; boys are a trip! This is girlfriend time now anyway. You ready?”

“Yeah, let’s do this. You’re right. If he doesn’t wanna talk to me, I am not tryin’ to chase him. Let’s go.”

It’s funny how I told Riana that this was girlfriend time, but the first person I skated with when I got here was Spence, I thought to myself. Maybe it was friend time.

Riana and I skated right into Layah and Imani. This time Riana and I got our feet all tangled up together in the excitement. The four of us ended up on the hard floor. Immediately, everyone started cracking up . . . except Layah.

“Oww! Get off of me!” she said rudely. “Y’all need to watch where you’re goin’!”

Layah and Imani skated away.

“What’s her problem?” I said to Riana, hoping she knew what was up with Layah.

Layah was smiling one minute. Then the next she had an attitude.

Riana and I went to the concession stand to get something to drink, and Miss Pam asked if we were enjoying ourselves.

“Miss Pam, our friend Layah has an attitude, and our other friend Imani just skated off with her,” I said.

“Well, I trust that you ladies can work it out,” Miss Pam said, smiling.

“I hope so,” I said, sighing.

Riana replied, “Let’s go talk to them, Carmen.”

I hoped Layah wasn’t upset because of Spence. Why couldn’t we stay cool? We had just made a pact to be friends for life, and now this. My older brother Clay said that girls always “keep somethin’ goin’.”

When we didn’t see Layah or Imani in the rink, we decided to check the bathroom. One of the many points in my mom’s lecture before she dropped me off was, don’t go to the bathroom alone. She said that at least two of us should

always be together. Like a buddy system.

We opened the door and there they were. Imani had her arm around Layah, as Layah leaned against the wall holding her stomach. *She's probably faking*, I thought. "You know what? I'm not trying to be mean or anything. But I don't understand you. Why do you have to spoil everything? Everyone is trying to have a good time. You know we didn't mean to fall on you. What's up with you?"

Imani blurted out, "She started her period."

"What? Her period?" I asked, shocked.

Layah said, "I started my period! And I don't know . . . but I just feel weird . . . my stomach hurts! How would you feel if your cycle started at a skating rink?!"

"For real Layah? You started your period?" Riana asked, patting Layah on the shoulder.

"Yeah, Riana, I did."

Then Miss Pam walked in.

"Girls, is everything okay?" Miss Pam asked.

We all looked at each other, unsure of what to say.

"Umm . . .", I muttered.

"Talk to me. What's going on?" Miss Pam questioned.

"Well, Layah just started—" Imani blurted.

"Imani, I can talk for myself. Miss Pam, my period started."

"Honey, was this your first one?"

"Yes," Layah replied.

"Were you already prepared with sanitary napkins?" Miss Pam asked.

"No, but my grandmother told me what to do if it hap-

pened to me in a public place. So I checked the sanitary napkin dispenser, and put my money in and got a napkin. My grandma said that if I couldn't get a napkin, then to just use toilet paper or paper towels until I could get what I needed," Layah said.

"Well, Layah, it sounds like your grandmother prepared you with information," Miss Pam said.

"You need to give your grandmother a call to let her know what's going on," Miss Pam said as we walked toward her office.

Even though I thought we had everything under control, I was glad that Miss Pam was there to help.

After Layah called her grandma we continued our celebration. I put aside being angry at her. Now I wanted to trade places with her.

"I can't wait for my cycle to start," I said. "I'm ready to be a woman."

"Me too," Riana chimed in.

"Me three," Imani said, being silly.

"Please. Y'all just don't know. Just wait. It's not all that."

All I could think about on the ride home was, *God, when is my time coming?*



Christmas morning I awakened to a busy household. Since I was getting older, the excitement of getting toys was gone, but I was hoping for a few outfits. I was excited to sleep

in, or at least I thought that was the case, until Cassie woke me up. We shared her room while my grandparents were visiting.

“Carmen, you gotta come and see! You have a whole bunch of stuff under the tree. You better get up, girl.”

My family and I said “Merry Christmas” to one another.

I thought Cassie had made a big deal out of nothing. But she wouldn't let me sleep. I saw a big box with “Carmen” on it. I had asked for a new computer . . . but it couldn't be. My dad told me I wasn't getting one of my *own* just yet. But I couldn't lift the heavy box with the angel wrapping.

“Go ahead and open it, sweetie,” my dad said as my mom smiled.

I quickly tore the wrapping paper. And it was a computer! This had to be the best Christmas ever.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you,” I said, planting kisses on my parents.

“We're proud of how you've been working really hard to pull up your grades,” Dad said. “I'll hook it up in your room later. But when it comes to surfing the Internet, Carmen, you'll still use the computer in the family room for that. *Understand?*”

“Oh, yes, Dad.”

I opened the rest of my gifts, which included cute outfits, gospel CDs, and books. Christmas wasn't about getting, but it sure felt good to receive.

“Well, now that everyone has opened their gifts, I'm going to take about an hour or so in the studio, putting fin-

ishing touches on my project,” Mom said.

I was glad to see her doing what she loved, because for a while she'd been undergoing all sorts of medical tests. Doctors had suspected that she might have breast cancer. It had been a difficult time for our entire family. I was so happy that my mom was healthy.

Later that afternoon I didn't know what to do with myself. So much was going on around my house. My brother and granddad were outside chopping logs. *Carmen Browne chopping logs? No way.* I could tell that they were bonding, so I didn't interrupt.

I went to the family room where my dad, who is head coach of the Virginia State football team, was hanging out with a few of his players. They stopped by to wish our family a Merry Christmas. Though I wanted everyone to be happy on this holiday, I wished I could just hang out with my dad. But I had to share him.

Coming from the kitchen was a delicious smell that seemed to call my name, so I headed there to see what was cooking. Cassie had an apron tied around her waist and was at the table busily stirring something in a bowl. That girl thought she could look just as cool as them. My grandmothers were busy chopping and slicing this and that. I asked if they needed another hand, but I was shooed away.

I knew my mom needed time for her project. *But didn't she say she'd be done in an hour?* I needed to check on her to see if she needed a sandwich, something to drink, an extra hand, whatever. I tapped on her door and walked in.

“Hey, Mom!”

Quickly she snapped, “Carmen, you can’t just walk in, honey. You have to wait for me to say come in. I’m working, baby. What is it?”

“Sorry, Mom,” I responded in a disappointed tone. “I just wanted to see if you needed anything.”

“No, dear. I have everything I need. I’m trying to finish up this piece before dinner, okay?”

I didn’t know why she had to bark at me. It was already past an hour. But I realized deep down she didn’t mean to hurt my feelings.

Okay, Lord, I don’t want to be in a sad mood. Help me out here. That’s when I realized I could find joy just hanging out with myself. Over the past year, I had moved to a new city and had to make new friends. Then I had problems with those friends. I ended up on my own for most of the first semester of middle school anyway.

Since it was Christmas, I decided to read from the book of Luke about Jesus’ birth. I didn’t realize how much time had flown by until Mom came into my room. I had been reading and playing my Kierra Sheard gospel CD for a couple of hours.

“Let’s set the table for dinner, sweetie. What are you reading?” she said, peering around the corner of my bedroom door.

“I was reading about the birth of Jesus. Trying to spend time with God. We do that to get to know Him better, right?”

“That’s right, honey. Just like a new friend that you’re get-

ting to know. People can tell you about the person, but until you spend personal time with them, you don't really know them for yourself.

"I owe you a big apology. I'm sorry for being short with you like I did earlier."

"It's okay, Mom, I understand."

"I've been thinking that maybe it's time for you and I to *talk* some more."

"Talk more about what?" I asked, sort of confused.

"Well, sweetie . . . girl things. Menstruation. Cramps. You're at an age where you may be getting your cycle soon. I've tried to explain things to you in stages, when I've felt you were ready. And when you got home you told me one of your best friends just started her cycle yesterday at the skating rink."

"Mom, when did you say you started your cycle?"

"I was eleven, so there's a possibility that yours could begin in the near future. Some girls begin earlier than others. It just depends. Once you get your period, you'll have it for many years. That's the way God designed it."

"Do you still have yours?"

"Yep! And I'm nearly forty. That's why I'm apologizing, because sometimes your cycle can bring discomfort and irritability. I usually have a handle on it. But I let it get the best of me today. I allowed stress and fear of not meeting my deadline upset me. I should've budgeted my time better, so that I wouldn't be working on Christmas Day anyway. This is family time."

I hugged her. “Really, it’s okay.”

“Anyhow, we’ll keep up with your cycle by charting it and marking the calendar, so you’ll know pretty much when to expect it, and you’ll be prepared.”

“Like preparing for a big storm or hurricane?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t want you to look at your cycle as being destructive like a hurricane, or to have a negative view of it. You’ll probably hear some girls refer to it as a ‘curse,’ but it’s not. It’s the way that God designed the female reproductive system to function.” My mom laughed and pinched my cheeks. “But you certainly do need to prepare and have the appropriate supplies.

“Several months before your cycle begins, you may notice a wet, clear substance in your underwear. That’s called menarche. When your cycle actually begins, you may experience cramping at first, or see blood in your underwear, which might appear red or brown.”

“Well, I’m just glad I have you. I feel bad ’cause Layah doesn’t have her mother to talk to.”

“But she has her grandma, honey. God is looking out for all you little ladies. I can’t believe how you all are just growing up on us. I’m so glad that Miss Pam was there to help.”

“Yeah, I was glad too, but I think we could’ve handled it.”

“I know you all are at the age where you feel like you’ve got all the answers,” she said, pinching my cheeks again.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you back, Carmen.”

We left my room arm in arm, on our way to set the

dinner table. If I trusted God with my life, He would work things out. I wasn't going to doubt Him. This Christmas wasn't so bad after all.

On Sunday morning both of my grandmothers were whipping up a huge Sunday morning breakfast as we prepared for church. Pancakes, French toast, sausage, Canadian bacon, eggs, hash browns, homemade biscuits, with coffee, tea, and orange and pineapple juice to drink. My grandmas *always* went overboard!

At church Pastor Wright spoke from Galatians 5:22–23 about the fruit of the Spirit. As Christians we're supposed to demonstrate love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. *Me? Do all of that!?*

“Regardless of circumstances,” Pastor Wright preached, “and of how we feel, we must obey God’s Word. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live for Him. We can’t exercise the fruit of the Spirit without that power. He should always be in control.”

“Amen!” everyone shouted.

I concentrated on Pastor Wright’s sermon. If I let God be in control of everything: how I relate to my parents, my siblings, and friends, I could have peace and not worry—even about my cycle, which my mom said might start soon. Silently I prayed, *Lord, help me to be patient and wait for You to make changes in my life. I know that sometimes I get anxious and want to grow up fast. Show me how to be an eleven-year-old who can have fun and still please You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

I left church feeling good that day. The Holy Spirit gave me power to live. As we sang the benediction song, “Till We Meet Again,” all the church was rocking. We were uplifting God with our *high spirits*.