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# Soft Tone

**T**his is the worst Christmas I've ever had in my ten years of life," I said honestly, stating how I felt to my adorable brown teddy bear, Budgie, as I went on pretending he could talk back. "What are you sayin'? Excuse me? It wasn't that bad? Yeah, right. We didn't leave the house the whole day. It was supposed to be family time, quiet time, just the five Browne family members time. Today made twenty-four hours seem like sixty. The only good thing about this Christmas is now it's nine o'clock, and soon Christmas will be over and my friends will be back home. Then I can start another day."

"Carmen, honey," my mom said as she talked to me on the other side of my closed

door, “your dad and I are heading downstairs to watch a movie. You want to join us?”

“No, thanks,” I uttered, sounding sort of pitiful as I looked down at my bear. “I just want to spend time with you, Budgie.”

“Carmen, who are you talking to, hon?” my mom asked, obviously able to make out part of my quiet voice.

I know I wasn’t headed to college or anything, but I thought myself to be pretty grown-up. I was in fifth grade, after all, ruling my new elementary school; but as I looked down at the stuffed animal that I had spent the last few minutes having a pity party with, I realized that I was still just a kid. But I couldn’t let my mom know that I was talking to the bear.

When I stalled and didn’t answer the question she said, “Oh, you and Budgie are talking, huh. I’m so glad Cassie found him for you. Well, relax, sweetie, you know we love you. And it’s okay to still talk to your bear.”

“I love you too, Mom,” I said with a big smile on my face, happy, feeling good that she made me feel good about me being me.

I had been looking for Budgie ever since we moved to Ettrick, Virginia. The place was okay, but it was nothing like Charlottesville. I missed my best friend, Jillian Gray, though. We were different in skin color, but we thought a lot alike.

I couldn’t be too down about her because my parents always taught me that God knew how to take care of His

own. He gave me two new friends in this mostly black town, though today I couldn't talk to them. I had left Layah, my tomboyish girlfriend, and Riana, my little shy buddy, several messages; and neither one of them had called me back.

My little sister, Cassie, had annoyingly been in and out of my room several times. The only time I cared was when she brought me my Christmas present, my Budgie. He was packed away in one of her stuffed animal boxes, and since she had four boxes, the one with Budgie was just recently opened.

"I know you missed me," I said as I squeezed his ears, knowing I missed him too.

The day really was boring because, though we were all there, we didn't really spend time together. Dad was home the whole day, but he was watching football. He wanted my brother, Clay, to join him. Clay did but was there in body only. My brother wasn't as much of a sports nut as my dad, and, well, they weren't getting along at all. My mom spent most of her time in the kitchen fixing breakfast, lunch, dinner, and cleaning in between.

Since I went to the grocery store so many times with Mom, helped her prepare all the food, and wrapped a bunch of gifts for her before Christmas, I didn't have to clean up the kitchen this time. Thankfully, it was Cassie's job. So that left me alone dialing my friends' numbers over and over again. Not once did they call me back.

“Oh, Budgie, I guess it’s just me and you. Let me see what else can I tell you,” I said, sounding quite pitiful.

All of a sudden, I heard the greatest sound. The phone was ringing. Quickly, I picked it up so that Cassie wouldn’t get it since the phone was in the hall, but I should have known she heard it. She was talking before I could say hello.

“Who’s calling for her?” she asked, being a pest.

“Cassie!” Riana yelled out, “is your sister there?”

“Maybe,” my sister said, still not bending.

Layah chimed in on the three-way call. “Silly. Get your sister.”

Pumped to hear from my girls, I said nicely to my little sister, “Cassie, I’ve got it. Please hang up the phone.”

I was so excited to hear my girlfriends’ voices that it never dawned on me that I didn’t hear a click from my little eight-year-old pest of a sister.

I was just talkin’ until Riana said, “I think someone else is still on the phone.”

“Okay, then, good night, y’all,” Cassie said in a sassy way before hanging up the phone from trying to eavesdrop.

“I’ve been calling you guys all day. This was the worst Christmas. Where have y’all been?” I asked, whining.

“Oh, did somebody miss us?” Riana said, teasing me. “Now you get a chance to see what it’s like.”

“Yep, she’s the one always on the go, leaving us bored at home,” Layah said.

I looked over at Budgie and rolled my eyes. My friends knew me well, which was really cool. *Plus, I thought to myself, a true friend would be happy that their friends were having a good Christmas, but yet I wanted them to be bored at home like me. That wasn't right.*

“Okay, I’m sorry,” I said, looking up, then turning away from my bright light. “I’m glad you guys were out and all.”

“Don’t sweat it. We’re glad you care,” Layah said.

Hearing that, I smiled. The light in my room bothered me, so I quickly turned it off. Then I nestled under my covers to talk more with my friends. I was so happy to be on the line with them. I tucked Budgie into bed so he could sleep. I didn’t need to talk to him anymore.

“Girrrl, we’re got the perfect plan,” Layah said, sorta scaring me.

“Yes, it’s really good. I’m nervous, but it’s really good,” Riana agreed, scaring me even more.

“Well, what is it, you guys? Just tell me!” I demanded.

“I’m about to tell you,” Layah said. “Here it goes. Remember how we are always saying that we are really grown and we don’t need to be babied by our parents?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I hurried her.

“Okay, one weekend, like in the next month or two, we are going to plan to go to the mall,” Layah said in a quiet tone as if she was saying top secret info.

“I’m not getting it. We’ve been hanging at the mall

together with our folks. What's so grown up about that?" I asked.

Layah went into a sly voice. "Good question. Here comes the good part: We'll have one parent dropping us off to another parent that will stay with us at the mall. But there won't be a parent there. We'll be alone."

That sounded really crazy to me. We couldn't lie. No way I was gonna go for that. Besides, how would we get home?

Layah continued as if she knew what I was thinking. "And we'll get home by telling a parent what time to pick us up, because the one they think will be with us will have to go somewhere other than home. They'll know all this before we go. Cool, huh?"

I waited then said, "Won't that be like lying to our parents? Come on, guys, we can't do that. We've got to re-think the plan."

"No, see, we knew you would say that," Layah voiced in a firm way. "How are we ever going to grow up if we don't take risks to show we are responsible? We've got to take a chance if we want them to see we can handle stuff. Are you a part of the threesome or not? The boys would do it, and that's why I always hang with boys. You guys threw a skirt on me, invited me to tea parties; now I want to be friends with you and do something a little adventurous, and you want to wimp out. And, Riana, you're not saying anything. Forget it."

I hit my pillow. I didn't want Layah not to hang with

us anymore. We'd come so far with our friendship over the last few months.

"Okay, okay, okay, I'm in. Let's do it," I said as I heard yells through the phone. "But we've got to have every detail down; my mom is smart. I'm not trying to get caught. She did tell me I could get a cell phone when I get responsible. I'm down to show her that I am."

We talked a little longer, and though the plan was way out there, I was excited about my friends. Though the whole lying thing made me uneasy, I thought I could tell a "little fib" to gain my parents' trust and be really cool with my friends. I was still new around here. I couldn't let Layah and Riana down yet.

Before we hung up the phone, the three of us agreed to stick to the plan. We said we'd work out the details and aim to make our parents proud. I hoped it was going to work.



After the call was over, Budgie told me that he had to go to the bathroom. Oh, well, that wasn't true. I had to go. Though the clock said ten, I wasn't really sleepy, probably 'cause I'd laid around in bed all day.

I stopped before I got there. I bumped into the wall because it was dark. I didn't want to wake anybody up. Then I heard a weird noise coming from my brother's room. However, I thought I shouldn't go in and investigate



because I knew Clay could take care of himself. He'd probably just go off on me for caring, so why even bother?

Then I tried to walk back to my room in the darkness. However, I couldn't pass Clay's door this time without going in. I was sure the funny noise was him crying.

I opened up the door and said in a soft, concerned voice, "Are you okay?"

When my brother didn't answer, I turned to try and walk away but went back anyway.

"Clay, listen, I know you think of me as your nagging little sister and if you don't want me in here, I don't care. I know I don't say it all the time, but I love you. I've never heard you cry like this."

I stood still, waiting for him to open up. He didn't. I couldn't give up.

"Clay, did you and Dad argue or something? What's going on? You're scaring me."

"I'm all right," he said, sniffing to try and dry up his tears.

I walked in the dark only a few steps before tripping. Walking a little more toward his voice, I thought I had a clear path, but leave it to my brother to have his skateboard in the way. I tripped over it, fell on the bottom part of his bed, and hurt my toe badly.

"Ouch!" I screamed.

"You okay?" Clay rushed over to me and asked with deep concern.

Smiling I said, "See, you care about me too."

“Were you acting?” he said, lightly hitting me with his pillow.

“No, I wasn’t. My foot hurts. That stupid skateboard. Mom told you to put that thing in the closet.”

“No one was supposed to be in my room. I knew it was in the middle of the floor.” My brother went on talking to me like normal. Then he blurted out, “You know Dad and I, we just don’t get along. I’ll click more with my real dad. I want to find my family.”

There was silence between us. His words hurt. Why was he saying those things? “Carmen, can you understand that for a minute?” he asked before crying again.

I didn’t understand it. Though we had just recently found out that he was adopted, he was my brother and no other family mattered. Yet he was just crying so badly that it hurt me that he was hurting. Since he said that he wanted to find his family, then I had to put my feelings aside and help.

“How could parents give their children away?” he said.

“Different things happen to people, Clay. I don’t know why all the stuff that happens does. I do understand being a little bummed out about it, though. God showed me that He knew what He was doing when we moved and He worked everything out. And just know He’s going to show you why you’re better off with us. I’m happy it worked out this way.”

“What do you mean you’re happy?” my brother asked in an upset voice.

“Because, Clay, if it didn’t happen, then you wouldn’t be my brother. Who’d nag me and who would help me with the computer? And who’d understand Cassie getting on my nerves? Only you. I’m happy you’re here.”

“I hear ya. I’m really sad that my parents didn’t love me enough to keep me. I got to find them, Sis. I want them to look me in the eye and tell me they don’t want me. I know my real dad won’t be able to do that. Can’t you see, Sis?” he asked.

I could not join him in imagining the happy union. If he moved away I didn’t know what I’d do. He asked me if I would keep his secret that he wanted to meet his parents to myself. I agreed to honor his wishes and we said good night.

When I got back to my room, I just prayed, “Lord, please help Clay be happy with this family. And if that’s not supposed to be how it goes, help me find peace with him leaving us. Also, I’m so sorry I thought today was the worst Christmas ever. Guess sometimes I’m really selfish. I just wanted today to be about me getting a whole bunch of things. Me having so much fun with my friends—the focus all on me and not on You and Your Son’s birthday. Please forgive me. In Jesus’ name, amen.”



The next day, I helped Mom with the waffle maker. Pouring the batter through all the little grooves was kinda cool. I just push it down for a minute and when it beeps, I let it up . . . presto, perfect waffles!

I was really caught off guard when she said, “So, Miss Lady, I heard you talking when I passed your room last night. Your girlfriends called you back, huh?”

I slowly nodded, hoping she didn’t hear what I was planning with them. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And what had you laughing so?” she asked.

With excitement I said, “We’re planning a sleepover and outing at the mall.”

I could have stuffed my mouth with the waffles I was making. I didn’t mean to tell her what I’d just hoped she didn’t hear. I didn’t have any details, and I knew she was going to ask a ton of questions.

So I said, “Before you ask me anything, we haven’t planned it all out yet.”

“That’s fine. I wasn’t trying to get all the information now just as long as you have everything in place later. Set the waffles on the table and get the orange juice out too, please, honey. A slumber party sounds great. I trust you to make the plans. And I can go with you all to the movies. Let me know. See, moving wasn’t a bad thing, after all, was it?”

I smiled. Though I had laid the foundation with my mom, deep down I felt bad, knowing I wasn’t telling her the whole truth. I had left out the most important part

that she would say no to . . . going to the mall without parents. What had I agreed to?

To make me feel worse, my mom came over and threw her arms around me, gave me a big kiss on the cheek, and told me she was proud of me. I felt so close to her. Seemed like I could talk to her about anything . . . well, anything except our plan and boys.

She said, "I love you dearly. Just keep doing the right thing. Let the Holy Spirit guide you."

Biting my lip, I once again started second-guessing myself. Mom asked me to get the rest of the family for breakfast.

"Am I letting the Holy Spirit guide me?" I asked myself in a soft tone.

# On Key

**F**ifty-eight, fifty-nine,” I counted with my arms in the air so that Riana and Layah would know when to yell out with me. “Now!”

“Happy New Year!” the three of us said together as we drank some sparkling grape juice from my mom’s fancy crystal goblets. I didn’t have the refreshing, fizzy stuff often, but when I did I loved it.

“Let’s all say what we want this year,” Layah said in her bossy tone.

We’d already talked all night, so I didn’t want to talk more. Plus, I was so tired. I was happy my friends were staying over, and at first I wanted to be up all night. However, my body was pooped. I looked at them with

a disapproving glare. Layah rolled her eyes. I knew she wanted me to do what she requested. And these were my guests, so whatever they wanted to do I decided to tough it out and be down for.

This impromptu sleepover turned out to be a great idea. I was so tired because my day was so much fun. We giggled all day looking in fashion magazines and modeling our new Christmas clothes. We really had a deep conversation talking about things that were bothering each of us. I didn't want my friends to have drama like me, but it was nice to know I wasn't the only ten-year-old going through things. It came out that we all had family issues. But we vowed to be there for each other.

Layah talked first. "I used to like wearing boy clothes. But now I really want to change. And I appreciate you guys saying you will help me get a little stylish. I'm getting older now and some of that cute stuff you both wear I like a lot. This year, I want to be more into fashion."

Riana and I smiled at her. Next it was Riana's turn. She laughed and laughed. Layah gave her the eye, like *come on*. When Riana giggled in my direction, I motioned for her to hurry up.

"I think I want my bad feelings for boys to change," Riana barely uttered before busting out with another laugh.

"Yuck," Layah said. "Who cares about them?"

I pointed to myself and quickly gave Riana a high five. Layah just shook her head in disappointment. Riana

and I so admired that Layah got to hang with the boys we liked all the time because of her cool athletic abilities. She could beat all of them at everything. Riana liked a bad boy in our class, and I liked Spencer, or Spence, as we called him, the shy guy who happened to be the grandson of my dad's boss.

Layah didn't understand where Riana was coming from, but I said, "I hear you, friend."

"Quit fooling around," Layah said, sorta irritated with Riana and me.

"Okay, my turn," I said in a silly way. "I want us to continue being there for each other."

"We don't do that," Layah said to me as if what I said was so dumb.

"Yes, we do," I said with a little frustration in my voice. "Earlier today we talked about so much. We were honest with each other and really shared our feelings."

"No, we didn't," Layah said, still being difficult.

"Yeah, Layah, we did," I challenged. "You were all sad talking about your dad dating again. We listened and then made you realize that you'll always be number one in your dad's eyes, remember."

She started smiling. "You're right!"

"And, Riana, you said how you felt bad because your aunt and uncle might be splitting up. Layah told you to keep praying and maybe they'll work it out. Only a true friend could really be there and listen like that. You haven't thought about your family any more today."



Riana nodded her head, and I got real close to both of them and said, “I just wanted to drink my juice and go to sleep, but you guys kept making me stay up and get over myself and help me enjoy this whole thing. I love you guys.”

“Oh, Carmen,” Riana said. “Group hug.”

I leaned in to Riana and then I turned toward Layah. She was cool but wasn’t down for the hug and all. I gave her a puppy-dog look.

“It’s getting a little too mushy,” Layah yelled out, before giving in and hugging us anyway.

At 1:10 a.m. we finally settled down. I was so glad my two friends brought their own sleeping bags, because my full-sized bed wasn’t big enough for the three of us. When we slept in my bed, Layah was in the middle and, boy, was she sleeping wild. She kicked Riana and me off of the sides. And when we both ended up on the floor, we woke Layah up and pulled her down with us, and we made our bed on the floor. Then we were all able to drift off to sleep.

The next morning before breakfast we went over our plans for the mall-shopping trip. My conscience was bothering me kinda bad. I had to tell myself that we were going to do this for a good reason. We wanted to prove to our parents that we were responsible. A little fib to get that point across to them was okay, I told myself.

The rest of the morning was so much fun; I had my friends help me make waffles. It wasn’t until Layah put a

little too much dough into the mix and had to throw her whole bowl out that things got really funny. Riana tried to help her make another batch, but hers was too watery. So I just had them sit there and watch me work.

I was happy that my brother and sister were down at Riana's house. Riana and I still couldn't believe our families had siblings the same ages. I not only made breakfast for my friends, but for my parents too. See, that was part of the plan. We agreed to do really well in school, do extra chores at home, and just be really perfect so that our parents wouldn't even question our plans to go to the mall.

Yep, we had it figured out pretty good. I was still scared a little of lying, though. I hoped I'd soon become totally confident in the plan. I was tired of second-guessing myself.



"Mom, it's just not right," I whined in a pitiful tone, hoping that my sad voice would make her let me go shopping. My mom was a volunteer with an organization called the Family Alternative. They educated potential parents on the benefits of adoption. "I don't understand why I have to go to this adoption thing. I mean, why don't you take Cassie? Mom, she loves to play hostess; why me? Grandma sent me some money, and I just want to get a few more things before school starts back next week. Please, Mom? I don't wanna go."

I could tell I was sorta getting on my mom's last nerve, as she sometimes said. This time she didn't say it; she just sorta looked out the window up to the sky as if she was asking God to give her the strength not to lose it with me. So I settled down and decided not to push.

"Carmen, I really need you to help me today," my mother said, getting her coat out of the hall closet. "I've been asked to be a board member for this adoption agency. And today is an awareness meeting and luncheon for people interested in learning more about adoption. You're old enough to do community service. You'll be very helpful."

"Me help somebody with adoption, huh? Mom, you're not making any sense," I said, sitting on the steps looking pitiful. "Clay's the adopted one. How can I help?"

"There will be parents there with their biological children. The families are considering adopting and want to have their children interact with kids like you so that they can find out from a child's point of view how adoption affects a family. Maybe you could talk to those kids and tell them something that might make them really excited about the whole adoption process. I don't know. I just know God can use you to help me today," she said, making me feel bad that I didn't want to do it.

My mom always saw so much in me. Definitely stuff I never saw in myself. I thought she was completely wrong. Two hours later, I was sitting with four kids from different families. Some were not excited about their parents con-

sidering adoption. I was surprised about how much I did know on the subject. I knew the stuff that mattered to them. When I made the statement that a kid who doesn't share the same blood as the ones already in the home can have a bond, the questions started.

A girl whose mom was thinking about adopting an older sister asked, "Well, because she's not my sister, how can I feel like she's my sister? How can I welcome her? How can I make her feel comfortable?"

Thinking of my bond with Clay I said, "I think all that's going to come naturally. Just be who you are and let her be who she is, and believe you guys will become close. You don't have to force it. I have a sister—a blood sister—who is two years younger than me and, trust me, I would trade her in for an adopted sister any day."

They laughed, knowing that I wasn't serious. However, it proved my point that it didn't matter whether a brother or sister was adopted or biological; in reality, only love matters.

A boy with red hair and freckles asked, "My parents are thinking about a little boy who is on medicine or something. Won't that be bad?"

"I can't tell you anything about that. But I know if your parents are considering him, they'll be able to handle it. My brother who is adopted has flaws just like me. But even with all of them put together I still don't want to ever give him back." I actually got really sad as I thought about Clay wanting to leave.

I talked with the other kids a little while longer. When we left our session, they told me they were ready to share their parents with a child who didn't have any because of our positive discussion. In the car with my mom on the way home, we talked about everything that was said.

"See, I knew God could use you," she told me as she gave me a wink.

I winked back as we pulled into the mall. I was glad I was honest with my mother and told her why I didn't want to go to the adoption luncheon. She helped me to see that I could benefit from being there. What a blessing. Now I could be blessed even more and buy some school clothes. And I couldn't wait to prove her wrong about me shopping without her. She'd see.



School had been in for a week. It was a new semester and instead of taking P.E., we would be taking music. I loved to sing, but I hadn't really sung since we'd moved. I just didn't feel like joining the church choir or singing the songs on the radio. When my teacher told us that we were going to music class, I got so excited. I liked that so much better than P.E. In P.E. it was almost like I was a fish out of water. I wasn't good at softball, kickball, volleyball, or any kind of ball. But music was definitely my thing.

As we walked down to the music room, Spence was be-

hind me. I could tell something was on his mind. I wanted to turn around and ask what was up, but our teacher strictly informed us to be quiet. The last thing I wanted to do was start the year off on the teacher's bad list.

My teacher, Miss Pryor, was getting ready for a wedding. Our P.E. teacher, Mr. DuBois, proposed to her last year. I knew the wedding was going to be something special. Weddings were sweet. I remember when my sister and I were flower girls in my aunt's wedding.

"Hey, Carmen," Spence said in a whisper, "don't turn around or we'll get in trouble. Can you keep a secret?"

I nodded without saying a word.

He continued, "I hate I don't get to see you at games anymore. We had fun."

*That is so sweet,* I thought to myself.

*He missed seeing me on weekends even though he sees me Monday through Friday.* Maybe he thought I was extra cool too. When we got to music class I sat with my girls.

"Hello, boys and girls. I am Ms. Hastings, your music teacher. Come in and take a seat. Our school got a grant, and we have many new things."

There were all kinds of instruments around the room. Drums, bells, tambourines. I could tell everyone was in awe.

There were four fifth grade classes. Two of us had P.E. last semester and two of us had music. The music class had gone on and on about how much they liked music. They had a Christmas concert, and those singing sounded

great and those playing instruments sounded good too. We were all very excited that it was our turn. None of the boys wanted to sing. They all wanted to play instruments, and they went rushing to grab some.

“No instruments today, guys,” Ms. Hastings said. “I asked you to sit down. You have to follow instructions.”

She was really cool. She was around the same age as our teacher but instead of having brown skin with medium-length hair, she was a little darker with a short, sassy haircut. Layah really liked that because Ms. Hastings looked like her. And the clothes she had on were tight.

When Ms. Hastings stepped out into the hall to talk to the teacher, my friends leaned in so that we could talk.

“What was Spence talking about in the hallway?” Riana quizzed.

“Yeah, give us the 411,” Layah seconded.

“You guys are so silly,” I said, trying to play it off, but clearly something was on my mind. “Spence misses seeing me at the college football games,” I told them.

The three of us giggled.

“Wait until I talk to him,” Layah said harshly.

“No, you can’t!” I yelled out.

Everyone in the class looked at me, wondering what I could have possibly been talking about. They couldn’t tell him; he’d be angry. I hadn’t keep my word to him.

In a softer tone I said, “Nobody can know. It was supposed to be between him and me. I shouldn’t have told you guys. Now I feel horrible.”

“Yep ’cause I want to know why Hunter hasn’t said anything sweet to me.”

“Riana, you can’t mention it to him either. Promise me you . . .”

Just then, Ms. Hastings came back in and class went on. Though Riana and Layah had given me their word, I was really paranoid because I had also given Spence my word, and I had just told the secret. What made me think that they wouldn’t do the same? If he ever found out . . . I dreaded the thought of it. Our friendship would definitely be over before it really began. I would have no one to blame but myself and all because I couldn’t keep my big mouth shut. I could only hope I wouldn’t regret it.



The week had gone by and we were on our way back to music class. Spence was behind me once again. This whole week had been weird. It was like he was avoiding me. I had a bad feeling of what that meant.

I quickly whispered, “Spence? Spence?”

“What, Carmen?” he answered back in a harsh tone.

A lump came into my throat, but I had to find out why he had changed. What had I done? As if I didn’t know.

Before I could say anything he got pushed from the back into me.

“Ouch!” I said.

“Hunter, what are you doing?” Spence asked him.



“I just thought you wanted to hug your girlfriend so I pushed you into her.”

A couple of boys in the class laughed. I could tell he was humiliated. I didn't know if it was Layah or Riana who had told, but somebody sure had. What he felt for me was nothing nice any longer.

“Spence, I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, I bet you are. I asked you to keep a secret and you couldn't. Now I'm the big joke of the class. I thought you were different from all of these girls, but you are just like them. All of y'all talk too much.”

He quickly raised his hand and asked if he could go to the bathroom. I wanted to cry. He thought I was like everyone else. He thought I was now just a regular, ordinary girl with a big mouth. Whether it was true or not, it didn't matter. What mattered to me was the boy that used to like me now didn't like me at all.

Sitting in music class Ms. Hastings played, “You've Got a Friend in Me.” She could really sing. At that moment I didn't feel like I had a friend in anybody. I didn't know if I could trust Layah or Riana, and the one guy that I had been starting to understand was changing.

“I need you guys to sing on key. We're going to sing the first part, ‘You've got a friend in me, you've got a friend in me.’ I'm going to break you up into first soprano, second soprano, alto, tenor, and bass.”

Last week Ms. Hastings had told me that I had a really nice voice, so she put me in second soprano. That meant

that I could either go really high or really low. But today I just didn't feel like singing.

"No, Carmen, that's not the right key. I need you to listen to the piano and sing the note I play."

Though she played it three times so I could clearly get it, I sang it wrong three times. One would think I was tone-deaf. I really wasn't concentrating on the music. I could only replay the scene in the hall. What a mess I had made of things.

It was now Saturday and I hadn't talked to Riana or Layah. They tried to talk to me after school. They tried calling me on three-way the night before. I told my sister to tell them that I was asleep. One of them or both of them had betrayed me, and I wasn't up to finding out which one. I didn't want to hear anything they had to say. I moved to Etrick without friends, and if I didn't have any it would be just fine with me. I made up my mind that I was going to be a singer, and I would concentrate on my career without any girlfriends.

Being honest with myself, I did miss them, though. But as my auntie taught me, *Do me wrong once, shame on you. Do me wrong twice, shame on me.* I wasn't going to let them get close enough to do me wrong again.



My family was now headed to the Super Bowl. It was going to be in the Washington Redskins' stadium. It was

the Broncos against the Cowboys. I didn't care for either team. Since we had to come, I tried to enjoy my family.

My mom said this was so much fun since we weren't babies anymore. We went on tours of the Washington Monument and the White House. It actually was good to be in a different place.

When my dad used to play for the Redskins, he'd made quite a few friends on the team. He had kept in touch with many of them. And my mom missed all their wives that she was friends with. Their old buddies were all doing so many different things. One, in particular, owned a gospel record company. I was really pumped when my dad said we could go and tour his studio and drop Mom off there for a little gathering with his wife and some of their other old friends.

There was a group there called Pure Grace. They were three college girls from Howard University, another historically black college, like Virginia State where my dad coached. They could really sing. I sat there in the twirling chair listening to them. Every note they sang sounded great to my ears. I wanted to be just like them. Their music had such nice beats and such deep meaning.

"I see you're into our music," one of them said to me.

Smiling I said, "Yeah, you guys sound really good."

"What grade are you in?" she asked.

"Fifth."

"Do you like to sing?"

"Yeah."

“We saw you singing the chorus. Why don’t you come back here and sing on the mic.”

“Mom, can I?”

“Sure,” my mom said before heading across the hall to a dinner with her friends.

I jumped out of the chair, grabbed a headset, and was ready for my turn.

“You sound good,” another one said to me after I had messed around a bit.

“So, Charles,” Mr. Perriman said to my dad, “your daughter has got some voice. We’re always looking for new groups.”

Boy, was I excited. He showed us the rest of the place. We went by the room down the hall, which had place settings for four. Mrs. Perriman and the other two ladies came running to the door to see Mom. They were really sweet, but I was tired of my cheeks being squeezed. They were all set for the game. Food, fellowship, and a big screen TV made me want to stay with them.

My mom told them she’d be right back as we continued on our tour of the place. Mr. Perriman started talking to my mom about her artwork. He was explaining how he wanted to do something different with the album cover for Pure Grace.

My mom asked, “Do you have a photo of them? I could do some sketches or something.”

“That would be great, Claire. Hook it up and I’ll pay you later. You know my money is good,” he joked.

“Yeah, I know. You used to be a big spender back in the day,” she laughed back and said.

When we got back to the room where we started, it was time for my brother, sister, and me to go with my dad. The group was still recording and I really didn’t want to leave. I couldn’t stop looking in awe at all three of them. Mr. Perriman had to know what I was thinking because he said, “You know Carmen is welcome to stay if she wants.”

“Carmen, do you want to stay here with me?” my mom asked.

“Oh, please, Mama, please.”

Mr. Perriman turned to my dad and said, “Charles, my sound guy would love to go to the Super Bowl with us. Let the girl stay. I’ll buy her ticket.”

My parents gave each other eye movements. I knew they were discussing me staying or going. They had a language all their own.

“Okay,” my dad said, giving me a bear hug. “Carmen, you can stay. And, man, you don’t have to buy the ticket. You’re blessing us as well by letting her sit in on the session.”

Once the game crew left, my mom made sure I knew to be good. She was just two doors down and said she’d check on me. I was so pumped to stay.

It took no time for the older girls and me to bond. They were treating me like their mascot. I had found out that their names were T.J., Mona, and Bianca.

“I wanna be in a group just like y’all,” I said to them.

“We just sing for the Lord,” Bianca said.

“Yeah, lifting our voices to Him comes so easy,” T.J. replied. “We love the Lord.”

“Is it easy being in a group? I think I might want to be a solo artist. My girlfriends can sing a little, but I can’t trust them. That’s what you’ve got to have in a girl group, right?”

They all looked at me as if I were wrong. Before any of them spoke, I thought about my friends, whom I’d missed dearly. Was I wrong?

“Don’t misunderstand us,” Mona said. “We don’t always get along. I’m sure your girls are straight. Plus, if they did something, they need grace. In our group, we’ve got to not only have slammin’ voices but also trust and respect for one another, much grace to give each other, and the love of the Lord. Many folks don’t realize singing in a Christian group is much more than just singing on key.”