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Dark Hour

My world was so perfect. I was doing well in school. I had two great girlfriends. I even had a boy who liked me. More important than any of that, what made me happy was knowing that my family was happy.

It was Friday night. Two more weeks of school to go. And instead of doing anything with my friends, or doing anything by myself, we were having family movie night.

My mom and my dad were nestled on the couch together. Dad was thrilled to be head coach of the Virginia State Trojans football team. Soon he would be preparing for what hopefully would be a good year. My mom's art business had really taken off.

She was going to paint murals for all of the Chesterfield County schools. They wanted her to finish twelve of them before the summer was over. Boy, was she really going to be busy.

My brother, Clay, had finally adjusted to the fact that we were his family; adoption didn't matter. He loved us and we loved him, and the problems he was having with my father were gone. My dad wanted him to play football in middle school. Clay wasn't having it at first, but now all of a sudden he had developed an interest. With the good throwing arm he had, I thought he'd be a dynamite quarterback. That made my dad feel good. Even Cassie wasn't bothering me as bad. I realized that my little sister loved me. Over the last couple of weeks we'd been able to talk through our differences. We hadn't been fighting like we normally did.

It was a great night. I had the movie, the popcorn, and all of my family. I could enjoy this scene forever. No sooner than I thought that, the quietness changed.

"Y'all hear that?" my dad asked as he got up from the couch.

Everybody looked at each other sort of confused. I said, "Yeah, Dad, I heard it. That sounds like police sirens or something."

My dad went out the front door and stood on the steps. The rest of us looked out the windows. Two police cars quickly headed toward a house down the street.

"Mom, it looks like they're at Shante's house," Cassie

said in a scared tone. “What’s going on over there, Mom? What’s going on?”

I couldn’t look out the window anymore. Something wasn’t right.

“I hope Michael’s okay,” my brother said, biting his nails, like a person eating corn on the cob.

I didn’t know the Thomas family that well. Their son Michael was the middle school bully. He’d picked on me about the way I talked when I first moved to Ettrick, and that hurt my feelings pretty bad. Boy, did I hate running into him on the street. He was so mean. Lately, Cassie had been playing with his sister, Shante. Cassie’s best friend was Riana’s little sister, but she was starting to hang with Shante too. I thought the Thomas family had some younger children too, but I wasn’t sure. Even though I didn’t know the family that well, I certainly didn’t want anything to be wrong.

“Mom, Shante told me that she was scared, because at night her mom and dad keep fussing. She told me yesterday in school that she never gets to sleep, because they yell all the time. Mommy, what’s wrong down there?” Cassie cried as my mom held her.

My dad came back inside the house. “Honey, some of the neighbors and I are going down the street to the Thomases’ house. We’re going to talk with the police to see what’s going on. Y’all stay in the house.”

The good movie we were watching didn’t matter at that moment. The yummy popcorn was now sitting in a

bowl untouched. The perfect silence that we had enjoying each other's company was gone, and our neighborhood was loud, loud, loud. What in the world was going on at ten o'clock at night in the Thomases' house?

About thirty minutes later, my dad came back and he didn't look happy at all. "Guys, I've got some really bad news."

My mother looked as if she was holding her breath. The look on her face frightened me. Part of me didn't want to know what my dad had to share. I only wanted to know good things in life. I didn't want to hear anything bad.

My dad came over and held mine and Cassie's hands as he sat on the couch and said, "Tonight Mr. Thomas made a very bad decision. I don't know all the details, but he and Mrs. Thomas were arguing. He hit her pretty badly. She is unconscious. They rushed her to the hospital. The police took him to jail, and her mother is there with the kids. It's not a good situation. We need to pray for them."

My mom said, "Oh, Charles, no."

My little sister grabbed my dad's arm. She was crying so hard. I felt awful. Mrs. Thomas just had to come around.

My dad led us in prayer. "Lord, right now my family is coming to You because our hearts are broken. We don't understand why bad things happen sometimes, but we trust You to take care of the bad things and make them

better. I don't know exactly what happened down the street to cause this, Lord. I mean, my family was down here having a great time enjoying each other, and just a few houses down the street there was a battle going on. We now lift up Mrs. Thomas. We ask that You make her well. We pray for the Thomas kids. Keep them strong as they go through this tough ordeal."

Cassie couldn't stop crying. Seeing her tears and knowing what just happened, I started sobbing too. This was a lot to handle.

My dad continued, "Lord, I pray for Mr. Thomas too. We hope he finds You."

Later in bed, I prayed tomorrow would be a brighter day. The end of this one had taken away my happy spirit and I wanted it back.



When I woke up the next day, I immediately went to my knees. I needed to talk to God. I was so fortunate to have a mom and dad who loved each other. I was thankful that my dad was not violent like Mr. Thomas. Although my mom and dad didn't get along all the time, at least they talked things through. I just wish more adults in the world would do the same thing.

I prayed silently, *Lord, this is tough. I don't understand. Why do adults fight? I'm just asking You to help people talk stuff out more. People shouldn't get so upset at one another.*

Folks should not always have to have their way. And thank You so much for my mom and dad. Thank You for helping them love each other so much. I used to say “ugh” when they kissed, but now I want to see them do that more often. I pray this prayer in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“Carmen, honey, you’d better hurry up and get dressed,” Mom said, interrupting my thoughts. “Mr. Golf will be here any minute.”

With everything that happened the night before, I had completely forgotten that this was Kings Dominion Theme Park day. I had planned this a few weeks back, along with my girlfriends, Layah Golf, who lived with her dad, and Riana Anderson, who lived down the street with her dad, mom, and two siblings.

I had been to Kings Dominion several times before with my family. We had made it a Browne summer family outing. We didn’t get to go last summer, though, because we moved.

Mother’s Day was just around the corner, and Layah and her dad always did something special around this time, since her mom moved away. She told Riana and me that she really didn’t care that her mom wasn’t living with them, but it was something about the sadness in her eyes that told us she wasn’t telling the truth. I so wished I could snap my fingers and make that situation change for her, but I wasn’t God. I couldn’t do that, but what I could do was pray for her and make sure to be a good friend. So when she asked Riana and me to tag along on the special

date with her dad, we were happy to agree. Kings Dominion had the best roller coaster rides, tasty elephant ears, and coolest arcade games in the world.

It took me no time to put on my jeans, T-shirt, and my brand-new, black Nikes. My mom had given me thirty dollars, and since Mr. Golf said he would take care of my entrance fee, I had that money to spend on whatever I wanted. I planned to spend it wisely.

Riana and I rode in the back of Mr. Golf's sweet ride. It was a black Mercedes Benz with tinted windows. We were styling. It looked more and more like being a lawyer like Mr. Golf would be cool.

As we headed out of our neighborhood, Riana and I talked about what happened last night. We were both sad about the Thomas family.

"What happened?" Layah asked.

Though it was hard to keep talking about it, it actually made the time go by fast. The forty-five-minute drive from Chesterfield County to the north side of Richmond, Virginia, where Kings Dominion was located, flew by. Her dad was open and honest and told us that, sadly, adults don't always get along.

Mr. Golf said, "Sometimes folks need to be apart so that they can calmly think about their situation."

"Like you and Mom," Layah said in an irritated tone.

Her dad didn't reply. Riana and I looked at each other. She and I didn't want the tension to mount. But the car was as silent as if no one were there.

Layah looked out of the window with sad eyes. My heart felt bad for my friend. Not having your parents together had to be tough.

Riana whispered in my ear, “Carmen, we’ve just got to make this day really special since she misses her mom and stuff. We have to do whatever she wants to do all day, okay?”

I didn’t make a comment. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do everything Layah wanted to do. Real friends make sure everyone is happy. But just to keep Riana off my back, I agreed.

The first few hours at the park, Riana’s plan was working. Whatever Layah wanted to do, I was cool with. The three of us were having a ball. Mr. Golf was so funny on the rides, shouting like a big kid. Even though I was fine with riding what Layah wanted to ride, deep inside the Drop Ball was all I could think about.

The Drop Ball was a ride that went straight up and down. I had hoped that ride would be on her agenda so we wouldn’t have any problems between us. Unfortunately, though, by the end of the day we had ridden everything except the Drop Ball.

It was almost ten o’clock and Mr. Golf told us this was going to be the last ride of the night, so we had to choose quickly. Layah wanted to ride on something that we had already ridden twice before. I had been hinting about getting on my ride every time we passed it. I was ignored.

I said with confidence, “Let’s ride the Drop Ball now.”

Layah insisted, “No, I don’t want to ride that. We’re not going to ride that. You guys are here with me. My dad paid for the tickets. We’re not riding that.”

She was so bossy. Not only did I scream out in frustration, but I pouted too.

When she and Riana lined up to ride the roller coaster for the third time, her dad sat with me. I couldn’t hold back my tears.

Mr. Golf asked as he handed me one of the napkins from around his snow cone, “Carmen, you want to tell me what’s wrong?”

“I only wanted to get on one ride in the whole place, just one,” I confessed before blowing into the napkin. “Your daughter wouldn’t let me. She is so mean sometimes, sir. And she takes over. I’m her friend and everything, but she makes me mad.”

“I agree with you,” he said between slurps. “You have every right to be angry with her. Layah invited you and Riana to come out here to this park to have a good time—not for you guys to just follow behind her and grant her every wish. I’m actually surprised you two let her lead all day long.”

I was glad Mr. Golf was with me on this. “Well, it was Riana’s idea. She thought since Layah was sad about her mom and because this was a trip for her to help with her mom not being with her on Mother’s Day and stuff, that we should be nice and do whatever she wants. I was fine

with that, but I didn't think that Layah wouldn't let us choose one ride, you know?"

He nodded and said, "Well, that's very nice of you guys. You two are really good friends of hers to pick up on the fact that though she tries to be so tough, she is really sad that her mom is not constantly in her life. Carmen, I can't tell you not to be mad at Layah because she was wrong. She wasn't raised to be bossy."

I wanted Mr. Golf to give me some dap on that one. Layah had no reason to act pushy. Even her father thought I should stand my ground.

"But . . ." He switched tones, showing me that he was about to make an adult point. "I can tell you, if you can find it in that golden heart of yours to keep showing her grace, maybe you and Riana can help her really deal with her pain."

What was he saying to me? Did he want my help in getting Layah to admit that she still deeply missed her mom? I believed that until she said it bothered her, she could never ask for the help to move on.

He continued, "She cries herself to sleep some nights, Carmen. She picks up the phone to call her mom and almost every time she gets the answering machine. She goes into a store and wishes her mom were there to help pick out a nice dress. She comes away disappointed when she sees other girls her age shopping with their moms. I don't want to make excuses for Layah, but maybe we all need to help her see that she is hurting."

Wow, that was a lot. I never knew my tough friend was so wounded. As I listened to him, the anger I had for her was drifting away like a sailboat leaving the shore.

“Like me, I need to do better as a dad to tell her not to be so bossy. Particularly with two friends who really care about her, but understand, this time you are giving her will help her through Mother’s Day. She’ll be able to look back and remember the fun time she had with you guys here. Folks who are bossy usually aren’t bossy by nature. They’ve got something else going on with them that they gotta work through. Good friends don’t bail on them. They don’t give up on them. Best pals try to help them get over the pain. Got me?” Mr. Golf asked as I nodded.

When my two friends came running talking about how much fun they’d had, I looked at Layah in silence and was actually excited to see a smile on her face. I couldn’t imagine going through life without my mom. It hurt me that she was hurting like that. So what? I didn’t get to ride the Drop Ball this time. I was able to help a friend, and that was more important.

As the three of us walked behind her dad toward the exit out of the park, we passed the Drop Ball one more time. Layah wrapped her arm around my shoulder and said, “Carmen, I didn’t get on that ride because I was scared and I didn’t want anybody to know that. I’m sorry I didn’t let you get on your favorite ride. You’re tougher than me.”

Wow, I thought to myself as I smiled at my friend.

Layah was afraid to get on the Drop Ball and she called me tough. Now, I really couldn't be mad at her anymore.

This was a good night. I didn't come for me; I came to support Layah.

"Next time my family comes, I'll see if you can come with us, Layah. It's really no big deal."

Her dad looked back at us and said, "We've got time for one more ride. I know I told your parents I would have you home at eleven, but I'll call."

Layah hesitated. "Will you guys ride the Drop Ball with me?"

"I'm scared too," Riana said. "I'll watch you guys down here."

"No," I said, pulling both of them to the empty line. "We're buddies. We're going together hand in hand."

Minutes later, I held on tight to my girlfriends as we dropped down. At the same time we physically dropped, I also felt all the bossiness, meanness, and sadness drift away. We screamed screams of joy. How cool.



When we got to school on Monday, there was a big assembly, and a bunch of important people were there from our county to talk about domestic violence. The incident in my neighborhood was something everybody wanted to talk about in class on Monday, so the principal called a

big assembly and brought professionals in to deal with the difficult subject.

An important-looking man with a suit said, “Hello, boys and girls. I’m Mr. Redmond and I’m here from the Chesterfield County Hospital. I’ve been brought in today to speak to you for a few minutes on the subject of domestic violence.”

Though I knew I needed to learn more about the subject, I was squirming in my seat. *Why do I need to know more about this tough issue?* I wanted the world to be perfect. However, I knew that wasn’t realistic; and learning as much as I could, even about the bad stuff, was a good thing.

When Mr. Redmond introduced the short man dressed in a karate suit to help him, the students looked interested. The man started out with some karate moves. His cool skills eased the whole atmosphere. He finished by breaking a piece of wood with his hand. After that, we were all ready to listen.

“Did you all like that demonstration?” Mr. Redmond asked as he came back to the stage.

The cafeteria cheered collectively.

“Well, breaking that board in two is okay, but using that same power to harm another person is not good. First of all, I want you guys to know what domestic violence is. It occurs when there is a physical fight, or threatening argument, between family members. This might take place between a husband and wife or any other

family members. In most cases the husband or male is the abuser. However, we have found incidents where the wife or female has been the abuser too.

“Anytime someone in the relationship uses verbal, mental, or physical abuse of any kind toward someone he or she is supposed to care for, that is also domestic violence.”

As Mr. Redmond gave us the serious information, the students grew serious as well. I think a lot of kids were scared that maybe what happened to the Thomases could happen to them. We did need help, I guess. I mean, what is a kid to do if their parents fuss really, really bad? Maybe this lecture would show us the best way kids should respond.

“We want you to know that you don’t have to be scared in your home. If you feel frightened about a situation in your home or someone’s home that you’re visiting, you should immediately call 9-1-1. If you or someone you know just needs to talk, call our hotline number, 1-800-NOABUSE, where counselors are waiting to speak confidentially with you. We want to get moms, dads, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, neighbors, and anyone who needs it the help they need,” Mr. Redmond said as he looked slowly around at all of us.

He gave us three important warning signs to look out for. One, if you are in your home and you hear adults arguing loud, someone threatening another, or stuff being thrown around the house, don’t go in there and try to

stop it; call the police. Two, when you hear one of the adults saying stop or begging the other one to leave them alone, call the police. Third, when you see one parent or person crying after an argument, saying they want to leave because they're scared, then you need to encourage that person to call the hotline themselves and get help.

In closing he said, "We can't help anyone who won't help themselves, but this is how we can help you help your family. We want your families to be happy and healthy. We want you to be aware, because domestic violence can start off small and end up big. It's nothing to laugh about. Know that it's okay to be aware of what it is. Seeking help for anyone who won't help themselves or encouraging your family member to seek help is a way to get through that dark hour."

Warm Moment

Beaches, sand, waves, cold lemonade, and bathing suits were all part of my exciting dream. I was laughing, imagining pouring sand all over my dad's head. Then in the dream, when he tried to catch me, he fell in the hole where Cassie had built a castle.

"Girl, what are you laughing at back there?" my dad asked, waking me up from my dream.

"Dad, I was dreaming about the family vacation, I guess. We were on the beach. It was so hot, so fun, and so cool. When are we going to Hilton Head?"

He laughed. "Carmen, you've only got two more weeks of school left. Just be

patient. You'll be there in no time. We leave next month."

It was Mother's Day weekend and we were headed to North Carolina to see my grandparents. I didn't have anything against going, but I wanted to spend my weekend at home. Most of the weekend would be spent driving six hours there and then driving six hours back. However, I didn't complain.

The DVD we put in an hour ago was now watching us. I looked over to my left and Clay was snoring, and on my right, Cassie was fast asleep with her mouth wide open. They both looked funny.

At first, all the Browne kids had to keep my dad company on the ride because my mom had worked so hard on the paintings she was doing for the schools and the Pure Grace CD cover that she was asleep as soon as we hit the road. Pure Grace was my favorite gospel group. I even got a chance to sing on their CD. But not too long after we drove through Chick-fil-A, a fast-food restaurant, we all went to sleep as well.

"I knew y'all couldn't hang," my dad teased.

"Okay, I'm going to stay up. We'll have daddy-daughter time," I said, scooting up behind him. "So, how does the football team look this year?"

"I'm training you well," he said as we passed the car with a Florida license plate. "You've always loved football, Carmen, huh?"

"Yes, sir. So much that I wish I could play the game."

Chuckling lightly, he asked, “If you could play, what position would it be?”

“Guess, Dad,” I said, playing with him.

He guessed every position but the one I’d strive to play. So I said, “None of those, Dad. I’d be the field kicker. They don’t work as hard, but they have a big job.”

“Do you think you’ll try out for cheerleading in middle school?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t think I can try out until the end of sixth grade; so I still have a while before cheering, Dad. Guess I’ll have to stick with cheering for VSU.” He smiled at what I said.

At school there was a guy I sort of liked, but he had nothing on what I felt for my dad. I could never imagine loving a guy as much as I loved Charles Browne.

Finally, we arrived at his parents’ house. As soon as we got there, Grandma Annabelle was there standing with open arms, hugging me tighter than I ever knew I could be hugged. Grandpa Harry asked for a peck on the cheek. It was good seeing both of them.

“Hey, Carmen, baby, now go on up there and get some sleep. Tomorrow we gonna head to the mall. I got so much stuff I want to buy for y’all,” she said as I gave her a huge hug back.

She didn’t have to tell me twice. Before I could say good night to anyone else, I hopped in the bed, ready for a big day at the mall. I guess shopping was my favorite thing to do.



The next day ended up being so cool. My grandma Annabelle had such good taste, and she knew how to spoil all her grandchildren. She bought me some of the prettiest summer dresses and short sets I'd ever seen.

There was a phrase she always used to tell me. She'd say, "I'm not rich, but I worked hard enough back in the day so that in my old age I could have as much fun as I wanted, spending it on my grandkids."

Clay was so happy when he got some name-brand tennis shoes and clothes. I don't know what middle school had done to him, but he was into the "gear." Cassie got spoiled too. My parents kept telling my grandma she was doing too much for us. She didn't care though. It was Mother's Day weekend and she was giving us stuff. Finally, we took her to Red Lobster. It was her favorite restaurant in the entire world. She loved seafood and I did too. I remembered the first time she ever let me taste crab. *Ooh, it was so good.*

At dinner Grandma Annabelle said, "I hate that I won't be able to see you guys tomorrow. I know you've got to go to your other grandma's house. I just love showering my sweet babies with gifts. It fills me with joy."

Splitting our time between the two of them in Durham, North Carolina, was hard. Both grandmothers wanted all of our time. I had learned how to make the

most of the time I spent with each one of them. Grandparents are dear people who had so much to teach me.

“Baby, I am so proud of you,” she said as she looked over at my father. “You have a precious family, a lovely wife, adorable children, just . . . just . . . can’t say enough. I’m just so proud of you, Mr. Head Coach.”

My dad reached in his pocket and pulled out a beautiful shiny box. He told his mom that my mom had picked it out, and she smiled bashfully. I didn’t know much about jewelry, but my grandma had introduced me to Tiffany & Company a few summers ago. She loved things from there. I recognized the pretty pale blue box with the white ribbon. I loved the way the three-diamond-stone necklace sparkled.

“Oh, a past, present, and future piece,” Grandma said, taking the necklace from the box. “This is so sweet,” she said as she looked at my parents.

“Well, I just thought of it this way,” my mom said. “One stone represents all the things you do for us, Mama; another stands for the things you used to do, and the last stone is for all the things you’re going to do. We love you so much. If it wasn’t for you, Mama, I wouldn’t have your son.”

The next day at my mom’s mother’s house, things weren’t so sweet. My mama and my grandma were fussing. My mom wanted to cook everything, but my grandma Lula liked things a certain way—old-fashioned southern cooking. I didn’t care. I was just happy I didn’t have to be

in the kitchen. Then, when it was time to eat, we had to wait another hour for my auntie Chris and uncle Mark to arrive.

Boy, when they finally showed up, we all had mean looks on our faces. We were hungry! No one said hello.

My grandmother said something to them, though, and it wasn't pleasant. "I can't believe this Chris. You and your husband are so selfish. It's Mother's Day. Y'all were supposed to have been here. My food's getting cold. Getting here this late, you could have stayed away."

My aunt gave her husband a very mean stare. If looks could hurt, then somebody would be in the hospital. Unfortunately, the way Auntie Chris stared him down made Uncle Mark really upset.

My uncle said harshly, "Chris, don't be looking at me that way. I told you to go on. You decided to wait. I didn't ask you or tell you to, and if you give me any more drama, you gon' be here with your family by yourself."

Uncle Mark went storming off to the bathroom. My aunt's eyes were watering. I felt really bad for her. She couldn't look at us. Her husband had embarrassed her in front of all her family. I hated to see what would happen if he really got angry.

My grandma put her arm around her daughter. We prayed and started eating without Uncle Mark. When he finally came to the table about fifteen minutes later, the tension was thick, so thick that a knife couldn't even cut it. This Mother's Day was not going well.

I tried to break all the silence and said, “Auntie, Grandma, Mommy, happy Mother’s Day. I love you all.”

They all smiled at me and I knew, though we weren’t the perfect family, I wouldn’t trade them in for anything. Seeing them smile made my heart feel good.



“Layah,” I said to my friend the next week as she looked so pitiful, “what’s wrong?”

“We have two more weeks of school, and I’m sad,” my usually tough friend replied.

“School will be out soon. Next year we’ll be going to middle school. Come on, girl, this is a good thing. No sad faces, okay?” I said to both Layah and Riana.

“I’m going to miss you guys,” Layah said as she put her arms around our necks. “I know I’m supposed to be the tough one, but this year I really changed. I’m really into girl friendships. But I won’t see my two buddies much anymore. You guys live right down the street from each other, so you’ll see a lot of each other. It’s just me and my dad. Besides you two, I don’t hang with anyone. I don’t want fifth grade to be over.”

My friend was serious. I handed her a tissue to catch the tears streaming down her face. I let her know that the three of us had a bond that wouldn’t be broken.

“Girl, don’t sweat it. Whenever you wanna see us,

we'll be around. Plus, I know you're tired of me and Riana anyway," I said as the three of us laughed.

Having these friends was a blessing. I hadn't even thought about missing them over the summer because I was so tired of school. I'd be thrilled to have a break for a while. Now that Layah had brought it to my attention, I was truly going to miss my friends. Even though I had two siblings at home, having friends was different.

After school that day I was minding my own business, sitting downstairs in the family room in the recliner chair. As I channel surfed, I was enjoying watching a little bit of everything that my parents would approve of—going back and forth from Nickelodeon to Disney to the Family Channel to PBS. With school ending soon, we were just reviewing for exams, and I wasn't a whiz or anything, but after I studied a bit Mom said I could watch some TV.

All of a sudden, Clay walked in and snatched the remote out of my hand! He jumped on the couch, crossed his legs, and turned repeatedly to channels I didn't want to see. He kept going to ESPN and to some car mechanic show. *Ooooh, my brother is driving me crazy.* He never once looked over to see how much steam was coming out of my ears. Then he turned to some reruns of an old show called *Good Times*. He laughed wildly at this painter dude named JJ.

Am I going to let him boss me around and take the remote and have his way? I asked myself.

No way! I quickly stood to my feet, put my hands on

my hips, and stomped over to my brother. I leaned over him to grab the remote, but he yanked his hand back, waving it far out of my reach.

“Clay,” I whined, “this is my time. I was sitting here watching TV. That’s not fair. You can’t take the remote.”

“Blah, blah, blah, my sister is saying something, but I can’t hear her. Blah, blah, blah,” he teased. “Tell ya what, if you can get the remote, you can change the channel.”

He ran around to the other side of the couch. I tried to catch him and take the remote, but I was too slow. When I saw I couldn’t outrun my brother, I took a coaster from the table and swung it at him. It hit him right above the eye.

“Ouch, girl! See, I was gon’ give it back to you. Now I’m going to watch TV,” Clay said in a defiant way.

He held his forehead with one hand and gripped the remote to his chest with the other. Then he said in pain, “You were down here watching TV; now I want to watch TV before Cassie comes down here and starts bothering me. Carmen, you gotta share, girl.”

He had a point, but I had only been watching for a few minutes. The way we handled TV watching was, whoever was in the family room first decided what we would watch all the way up until dinnertime.

How did Clay get to decide he was going to change the rules? How could Clay be so mean to me? I’d gone out on a limb for him recently. A month ago I helped him find information about his birth parents. When nobody else

would help him, I was there. I was his sister, his little sister, for crying out loud, his sister that he owed something to, his sister that he didn't have any right to boss around. The more I thought about it, the madder I got.

When a tear dropped down my face, he looked over at me and said, "That's not going to make me give you the remote. Toughen up, girl. Go bother one of your friends on the phone or go play with a doll or something. I was just playing with you at first and then you gonna throw something at me. You're not gettin' no remote back now Sis, sorry."

"I'ma tell Mama," I said to him.

"And what you gon' tell her? You'll be the one in trouble when I tell her that you threw something at me. Plus, my head hurts," he said, acting like I'd really gotten him good.

He had another point there. But no way could I let him boss me around and get away with it. I headed upstairs to sulk.

As I got halfway up my brother taunted, "Hey, Carmen, I'll call you when and if I'm done, *maybe*."

I had to pass by the kitchen to get to my room at the end of the hall. My mom was in there stirring up the best Italian sauce I'd smelled in ages. With a long, gloomy look on my face, I pitifully walked into the kitchen and grabbed a few cookies and some milk.

"Is this snack okay, Mom?" I asked slowly.

“That’s fine, honey. What’s the matter with you? I thought you were watching TV.”

“My brother gets on my nerves. I wish he’d go back to wherever he came from.”

Harshly she scolded, “Carmen Browne, we don’t joke like that—understand?”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but Clay does get on my nerves. He was down there telling me what to do. He won’t even let me watch TV and I was there first.”

“That boy,” my mom said as she placed the spoon on the stove.

My mom started to leave the kitchen, and I knew she was going downstairs to set Clay straight.

“No, no, no,” I said, stopping her on her way.

With her hand on her hip, she asked, “Why don’t you want me to go downstairs to talk to Clay? What is he going to tell me? Did you do something, Carmen?”

Nodding, I said, “I threw a coaster at him, but I wasn’t trying to fight him or anything like that.”

My mom told me that I’d better not throw anything at anyone anymore. I told her I understood and then she asked me to have a seat at the kitchen table. Knowing there was something deeper going on with me, she questioned me until I told her why I was so frustrated.

“Why do some people have to have their way all the time? Clay just bossed me around, and it even happened at Kings Dominion a couple weeks back. Layah was bossy too.”

My mom cut me off and said, “Young lady, you are bossy sometimes as well.” I looked at her as if she’d mis-spoken. “Come on, admit it, dear.”

“Okay, maybe sometimes I want to have things my way,” I blurted out.

“Well, then I’m glad you’ve experienced how it feels when someone is too pushy. Because of how Clay and Layah treated you recently, you have a better sense of how to treat others. And I’ll speak to your brother about his behavior as well, though. Carmen, again, I can’t stress it enough. You’ve got to treat people the way you want to be treated,” my mom said, kissing me as I headed out of the kitchen.



“Go, Carmen, go! We can beat the boys!” I heard Layah yell as I hopped in the potato sack and tried to win the race on field day a week later.

I hopped and hopped and crossed the finish line before the boys in my class. Excitement made my knees start shaking, and my two friends came up and hugged me tight. We jumped up and down for joy. At the three-legged race it was my turn to sit on the sidelines. Layah and Riana were tied together, and I had to cheer them on as hard as they cheered for me.

I was interrupted from watching when Spencer Webb or “Spence,” as we called him, startled me and said,

“Tomorrow is the last day of school. My granddad told me that he was going to have your family over for dinner soon. I hope you come; that way I’ll see you.”

My dad hadn’t said anything about going to eat at his boss’s house. But I hoped that we were going because Spence was a guy I was fond of, and getting to see him over the summer would be cool.

“That’s cool,” I said before moving my head so I could finish watching the race. “Can’t talk right now, though, Spence; the girls are killing the boys. We just won another race. Yeah!”

At the end of the day the girls had won more races than the boys had. We took first place. Tomorrow there would be a pizza party to celebrate. Layah, Riana, and I couldn’t stop shouting. But to top off that excitement, we had a water balloon fight with no winners or losers. It was just pure fun. Ten minutes later, we were all soaked.

I saw Layah and Riana drenched and I realized we were only going to have one more day of this. I got a little down. Last week Layah felt like this and I acted like it wasn’t a big deal. Well, it was. I was going to miss our time together.

“Why are you looking so sad?” my mom asked me later that evening when we went shopping for Miss Pryor’s gift. “Tomorrow is the last day of school. You’re supposed to be excited about that.”

“I’m just going to miss my friends, that’s all,” I said as we headed to the cash register to buy a nice lotion set.

“Well, that’s understandable. I’m glad God sent you good friends. We’ll think of some creative things to do with them this summer, and Riana’s just down the street. You’re going to be fine.”

On the way home my mom told me I needed to treasure all the memories of being in elementary school, from where we used to live in Charlesville to our home in Ettrick now. Take all the lessons that I learned, particularly in the fifth grade, and be smarter in middle school. I heard everything she said, but I still wasn’t happy.

At the next red light I said, “I enjoyed my class this year, and next year I’ll have so many classes; who knows if I’ll have any classes with Layah or Riana again. I hate change, Mom.”

“Oh, come on, Carmen. Change isn’t bad. It’s sort of how you look at things. You know what I always say: The glass is half full. You have to look at it from a positive angle. Next year you will be going on to bigger and better things. I know it might seem a little scary, but don’t worry about that, sweetie; you’re going to do great. You’re going to be fine. You’re going to be dynamite. Yes, there will be some changes, but change is a good thing. You will always have the past to treasure and build on.”

Still needing more advice, I asked, “But what if we’re not in class together next year, Mom?”

“You’re not in class with your old buddy Jillian anymore, and you guys are still friends,” she reminded me.

I giggled slightly. “That’s true. I should call her.”

I loved that my mom was always there. Since I was going to middle school, I knew I was going to have to lean on her for so much. This pre-middle school talk let me know that I was going to be able to tell her anything. It was a good conversation.

The next day at school, I tried as hard as I could not to be upset, but I was. And I wasn't the only one; we were all excited to get our yearbooks signed and enjoy a pizza party. As the day drew to a close, the reality of change hit me. Miss Pryor gave us time to talk as long as we agreed not to be rambunctious. She loved the album I gave her as a thank-you gift. It was engraved on the front.

“Layah, I owe you an apology,” I said to my girlfriend.

“For what? You didn't do anything to me.”

“Yeah, I did. Last week I told you it wasn't a big deal that we wouldn't be in school together anymore. I wasn't sensitive to your feelings, 'cause now I'm really sad. I'm going to miss both of you guys. Yeah, Riana is just down the street, but she has a lot of activities like I do, and who knows when we're going to see each other,” I said to my two friends.

The three of us held hands. We got teary eyes. I had to be real and tell them what they meant to me.

“I love you guys. I didn't want to move here at all, but because I met you two, I love it here now.”

Layah chimed in. “I never really liked girls. Hanging around them and playing with them wasn't my thing until

you guys came along. I talked to my dad and he said that maybe we could do more things together this summer.”

“Now what if we go to middle school next year and we never even talk to each other?” Riana said, putting a damper on the whole situation. “Carmen, I really didn’t have any friends until you came. What if it’s that way next year and the two of you guys find new friends?”

“It’s not going to be that way. We have our own special sisterhood now. Nobody or nothing is going to break it,” I said as we hugged.

Later that day, the three of us ate our pizza over in the corner. Miss Pryor was making her way over to sign everybody’s yearbook. When she came over to us, we had long faces. I didn’t know why we were so sad. We had talked about how we weren’t going to be together in sixth grade but that we would still be friends. For some reason our hearts were still hurting.

“Well, if it isn’t my three little musketeers over here in this corner. What in the world is going on?” Miss Pryor asked as she took her hand and lifted up my chin.

I couldn’t answer her. She just had to figure it out. There was just no way to make us happy. We didn’t want things to change, bottom line.

Miss Pryor was happy because she was engaged and getting married soon. Her change was a good change. But when she said she was proud of all three of us, we perked up a little.

“At the beginning of the school year, Carmen, you

were new and hoping to find your way. Riana, you were so shy you never answered any questions in class. And, Miss Layah, well, girl, you were such a bully. But the three of you all are good together, a great balance. You did something special in your friendship. Friendships are very important. You guys have learned how to share, you've taught each other things, and you've made a difference in each other's lives."

Hearing her say that was encouraging. Miss Pryor was the best teacher I'd ever had. She knew how to relate to her students.

"You may think you're too grown sometimes. Your parents told me about your disobedience in the mall incident, but you learned so much this year. Look at me, ladies," she said as she noticed our heads down. "Don't think about what you might not have anymore; think about how strong you are academically, how happy you are for each other as friends, and how proud your parents are of you guys. I'll tell you a little secret. You guys are my favorite students. I enjoyed watching your friendship mature into something special. I still have some of my same friends from elementary school. A few of them will be my bridesmaids. And you all can be the same way too. You have that special ingredient of caring that's going to make your friendship last and last. So put some smiles on your faces."

We all hugged her. We didn't want to leave her either. She was the bomb.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be checking up on you. My fiancé just got a job at your school. He’ll be the new gym teacher, so I’ll see you ladies every now and then, and when I do, I know you’re going to make me proud.”

She was right; we did have a lot to be happy about. We said it to each other; my mom had said it—now we just had to believe it. I looked at the two of them and they responded with big smiles. I just knew our friendship would stay intact.

We had a group hug and Miss Pryor said, “Wait, let me go get my camera. I have to take this picture to put in my new album. It’s a true picture of friendship. This is a warm moment.”