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CARMEN BROWNE SERIES #1

True Friends

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MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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Lost Vision

Heavenly Father, I know I'm not seeing right, I prayed as I stood in the family room listening to my parents discuss what had to be the worst news of my almost ten years of life. *Dear God, please help!*

"Dad," I said, "there's no way we can move. You can't coach at Virginia State. My life is here!" I yelled loudly, as if my forceful tone would change my father's mind.

Placing one hand on my shoulder, Dad gently replied, "Calm down, Carmen. I know Charlottesville has been your home all your life, but it's time to move on."

"I don't want to move on! This isn't fair," I argued, stepping away.

"Now, just a minute, young lady," my

dad, Charles Browne, said with a stern face. “You aren’t the only one who has to make a sacrifice. All of us—your mother, your brother, and your little sister—will be giving up things as well. If it weren’t a good opportunity, I wouldn’t even be moving our family. Besides, we’re not even leaving the state. You’ll love Ettrick.”

I dashed to my room, burst into tears, and threw myself on my canopy bed. How could my parents be so insensitive? Ever since I was in kindergarten, I’d been waiting for the day that I could run the school as a sixth grader. My year was finally approaching. I was just one year away. Now I had to move. Why was my life so crazy? *Why, Lord?*

I rolled over and stared from beneath my canopy at the bright white ceiling and the banana-colored walls. With my arms folded defiantly across my chest, I cried aloud, “Well, I’m not going. I’ll ask Jillian’s parents if I can live with them till I graduate from high school. I’m over there all the time anyway.”

My best friend, Jillian Gray, and I were inseparable. I hoped the Grays would love to have me as part of their family.

As I thought of a change in my surroundings, I hit the pillow to let out my frustrations. “Jillian would make a better sister than the one I’ve got anyway,” I grumbled.

For one thing, I wouldn’t have to worry about Jillian going into my stuff all the time, like my eight-year-old sister, Cassie, did. That morning she’d broken my gold

chain, which she had no business wearing in the first place. When I caught her with it on, she pulled it off real quick.

It was also annoying that Cassie used my hair grease. I wouldn't have to worry about that with Jillian. She wasn't black like me. Jillian was white. She told me that her hair was so straight and fine with natural oil, so she didn't need to use any.

Since Jillian was an only child, I wouldn't have to worry about an older brother. Every time I tried to watch television, my irritating brother, Clay, came in and changed the channel. He just surfed from station to station, not really watching anything. And he picked on me about everything. Yeah, I could definitely do without his big twelve-year-old mouth.

My folks wouldn't miss me anyway. After a year, Mom's at-home business was finally taking off. She was a visual artist and did pretty well at selling her paintings. My father was an assistant football coach for the University of Virginia. When it was football season, he was hardly ever around. With me gone, they'd have one less kid to worry about.

After about twenty minutes, I had completely sold myself on the idea. Now all I had to do was come up with a plan.



After dinner, my family headed to the garage to pack up stuff in there, but thankfully I didn't have to help. Since my mother knew I was sad about the move, she encouraged Dad to let me stay in my room. This would be my time to think without them nearby.

As soon as they went to the garage, I started packing. I couldn't take everything, but some items were essential. I stuffed my CDs, posters, headset, my Bible, and a few of my favorite clothes in two suitcases.

Writing a letter explaining my disappearance was next. But that was tough. Everything I felt inside sounded wrong when I wrote it down on paper and read it back to myself.

After several rushed attempts, I came up with this:

Dear Family,

I love you all, but I cannot, will not, should not move. So I'm running away. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. You all move on and I will see you if you come back to visit. That is, if I don't have other plans. Take care of each other.

Carmen



Gazing around my room, I almost had second thoughts. *How could I run away?* I wondered. Quickly, I realized that it was no time to get all mushy. It was now or

never. I picked up the two suitcases, jetted through the hall, opened the front door, and locked the wooden door. I dashed past my closed garage, hoping it would not open. Then I rushed two houses down to Jillian's.

I rang the doorbell ten times, hoping someone would open it. When that never happened, I hated that I hadn't called first. If I kept standing there on the front porch, my parents would spot me. So I marched around to the backyard and sat on the redwood deck.

A few minutes later, I heard a car pull up out front. I peeked around the corner of the house and saw Mr. and Mrs. Gray pulling into the driveway in their pretty new white Jeep. When I saw them unload a few bags from stores in the mall, I realized they had just gone shopping. My best friend's parents were so cool. They always bought her tons of clothes. I knew they'd do the same for me if I lived with them.

"Jillian," I whispered loudly, peeking from around the bushes as she started following her parents inside. When she turned and saw me, I said, "I need your help."

My friend was taller than me. She had short strawberry blonde hair. Big freckles covered her face. We had been close since nursery school, but I'd never needed her more than that moment.

Jillian snuck over to where I was hiding. "Carmen, what's wrong?"

"I need to stay here until I graduate from high school," I confided.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

I pointed to my suitcases, still sitting on the deck. “Help me get my things inside, and I’ll explain everything.”

As we stretched across Jillian’s bed, I told her about the move. We both started weeping.

“I can’t imagine a world without you in it,” she wailed. “Of course you can move in with me.”

We spent about an hour talking about how cool it would be to be sisters. Exchanging secrets until dawn would make our every-night slumber parties extra fun.

“Let’s go tell my parents,” Jillian suggested. “I’m sure they’ll be okay with you living here.”

As we started down the stairs, I heard the angry voice of my father. Jillian and I stopped on the fifth step from the bottom, listening to him rant and rave. All of our excitement vanished.

“I’ve got to get my stuff and get out of here,” I told Jillian in a panicky whisper.

“Where will you go?” my friend asked, her eyes wide.

I had no answer. My grandparents all lived in Durham, North Carolina. And I didn’t have any other close friends.

Taking a deep breath, I took the last five steps and bravely entered the living room. My mother threw her arms around me the instant she saw me. I felt sorry for causing her pain. My stomach ached as bad as if I had the flu.

“Oh, baby,” Mom gasped with relief. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

“I’m okay, Ma,” I said, wiggling out of her hug. “I’m sorry I worried you. I just thought—”

My father cut me off. “That’s the problem—you didn’t think. Carmen, I am sick of this foolishness. Get your things right now, say good-bye to Jillian, and let’s go home.”

“But Dad, I—”

“Close your mouth right now, Carmen Lynn Browne! Do not say one more word. We’ll talk about this at home.” My father opened the Grays’ back door. Mom mumbled something to Mr. and Mrs. Gray.

I looked at Jillian, then followed my parents, wishing this wasn’t happening to me.



I was put on punishment for a week. No phone, no friends, and no television. My father said I was acting too grown-up and needed to be reminded who was in charge.

Those seven days were spent packing boxes of stuff. That was even harder to take than the grounding. It finally hit me that I was leaving my entire world behind.

As I pouted in my bedroom, while looking at my fourth-grade yearbook, my little sister came in—without knocking, as usual. She held out a cherry Popsicle toward me, cherry juice dripping through her fingers.

I just stared at her for a while. For the most part, Cassie was a good sister. Even though she got on my nerves, I still loved her.

I finally took the Popsicle, smiled, and said, "You're being awful sweet."

"I don't want to move either," she said. "But if I have to go, I want you to go too."

What a cool thing to say! When I first thought of living with Jillian and her family, I thought no one would miss me. At least my little sister cared.

"Cassie," my dad called from the doorway, "please go downstairs and help your brother pack the videos. We need to speak to your sister alone."

As my sister scurried out, I saw my mom standing behind my father. They both came in and sat on my bed, leaving no space between them.

I had been a perfect angel on punishment, but as I sat down, I felt nervous. Their faces looked serious. Maybe they were going to extend my suffering.

"Mom . . . Dad," I said, "I want to apologize for being such a bother lately."

"Looks like you've been busy in here." I looked around my bare-walled room. Labeled boxes covered the floor. "You go, girl." My dad gave me a high five, finally turning back into the cool, fun, laid-back dad I was used to.

My mother put her arm around me. "Since next week is the Fourth of July and your tenth birthday, your father

and I thought you might want to have a party. It would be a nice way to say good-bye to your friends.”

“Thanks!” I said, a huge grin plastered across my face.

As soon as they left my room, I started making my invitation list. I included every friend I had.

I started to feel better about my parents. I knew Dad didn’t want to move any more than the rest of us. He was just trying his best to provide a good living for us. Now opportunity was having us knock on a different door.

My dad had been involved in sports all his life. He’d graduated from the University of North Carolina with a degree in physical education, and then he became an all-pro wide receiver for the Washington Redskins.

For the last five years, he had been a coach at the University of Virginia. I remembered him telling me that it took more than his abilities and qualifications to land that job. I was only five years old at the time, so I didn’t understand what he meant. I still didn’t get it. What team wouldn’t want a man who’d played three years in the National Football League? People love being around pro players. All I knew was that my dad wanted a promotion, and he didn’t get it. I prayed that maybe one day the blanks of the story would be filled in.



The days passed slowly, and yet every time I thought about moving day, it didn’t feel like I had enough time.

When the day of my party finally arrived, Jillian came over to help set up. Hanging pink and yellow balloons and streamers all over the family room reminded us of all the parties we'd had together over the years. Even though I was the only black girl in our class, Jillian never made me feel different.

"Jillian," I said as we put paper plates and cups on the table, "I prayed to God last night that you and I will always be friends. I know we won't be able to talk every day on the phone, have slumber parties all the time, or walk down the hallways together at school. It would just be nice to have a friend like you in my life forever."

"Well, Miss Serious, as long as I have breath you'll have me as a friend," she said jokingly, letting loose into my face the air of a balloon she'd just blown up.

My guests started arriving right at five o'clock. Clay and Cassie got to invite a few of their friends too. When Mom said I had to share the party with my brother and sister, I started to protest. Then I realized it wasn't just my birthday party. The three of us were celebrating things that would never be, at least not here in Charlottesville. No going to the skating rinks with these people. No spring breaks to fill with fun, and no more summers together.

Everybody had a fun time. Music and laughter filled our house one last time. I walked over to Mom and brushed a tear from her flushed cheeks.

"Pumpkin," she said to me, "I'm so glad you're having

a wonderful time. It's good to see a smile on your face. I know you still have reservations about moving, but I promise you . . . I'll do whatever I can to help make your adjustment easy."

I hugged her, and as I watched her walk away, I kept her last words with me. I wasn't ready to move, but I now realized there was no way I could stay someplace without my family. My home was wherever my dad, mom, Clay, and Cassie lived. Home wasn't only a city or a house. Home—my home—was in love. I was just thankful the Lord let me see; I no longer had lost vision.

CARMEN BROWNE SERIES #2

Sweet Honesty

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CHICAGO

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Soft Tone

This 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.

CARMEN BROWNE SERIES #3

Golden Spirit

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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."

CARMEN BROWNE SERIES #4

Perfect Joy

Stephanie Perry Moore

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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Flawless Jewel

Wow,” I said, looking into the mirror on the first day of school. “I look good. I can’t wait until everybody sees me.” I couldn’t believe I was in sixth grade. Good-bye, elementary school. Carmen Browne was headed to middle school. I loved my look. I had on a slammin’ new outfit, and my hair was in dope spiral curls, shaking from side to side every time I moved my head. Though I liked my look on the outside, I was even more pumped about my inner self.

Being a Christian, I knew that I truly had it going on. Not because of me, but because the Holy Spirit lived inside of me, and He is da’ bomb.

The morning went smoothly, my sister Cassie didn't give me any problems, and my brother Clay wasn't trippin'. He was actually very cool.

"I'ma show you around, sis, when we get to school," Clay told me as he gobbled down his pancakes.

Even though I'd gone to orientation a week before, I was still nervous about being late for class. But with Clay's help I wasn't sweatin' anything.

I devoured the pancakes, extra crispy bacon, and eggs with cheese that my mom cooked for us. They were delicious. After finishing breakfast, brushing my teeth, and getting my lunch money, I put on my new, hot pink backpack and headed to the door to catch my bus. My mom was dropping Cassie at school, and Clay and I would ride the bus.

"Let your dad give you a ride this morning, princess," my father said as he gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah, Carmen, let's catch a ride with Dad. I'll even let you sit in the front," Clay said.

Though I was growing up, I knew my dad still considered me as his little girl. Actually, getting a ride with him made me smile.

I didn't know why my dad started lecturing me about what he expected of me. Now I understood why Clay gladly took the backseat, and I didn't feel so privileged anymore. Then I thought about it. My dad cared about his oldest daughter, and he wanted me to know that he expected me to make him proud.

“I’m not sending you to school to socialize, nor is this fashion-show time. You’re not there to be popular. I’m sending you to Matoaca Middle School to get a good education. Understand?”

As we pulled up to the parking lot, I said, “I hear you Dad. I got you.” I waved at him, jumped out of the car, and rushed to catch up with my friends. Clay had already taken off.

It was hard to find Layah and Riana. I turned around and looked at the car and noticed my dad was still in the parking lot. I guess he wanted to watch me to make sure I was okay. I had to make him proud.

Lord, I prayed silently, I’m nervous. Please be with me and help my dad know that You’ve got me.

“There you are!” Layah said, running into me.

“Oww,” I said as she grabbed my arm and interrupted my prayer.

Layah backed away. “Sorry, I don’t want to mess up your gear. I got you, Miss Pretty; let me step to the side.”

“It’s nothing like that, Layah, you hurt my arm,” I said as I inched closer to her.

“Yeah, right, you just too cute today and don’t wanna get dirty.”

“That’s not true,” I told her. “You seen Riana?”

“Yeah, she’s over there, mad at you,” Layah said as she pointed at Riana.

Layah and I started walking toward Riana. I couldn’t believe that my friend would be mad at me for any reason.

This was our first day of middle school. Things were supposed to be perfect. I looked at Layah, perplexed. My tough girlfriend knew she needed to tell me why Riana had issues with me.

“She said that you were too good to ride the bus this morning, and that you should have at least told her so she could have ridden with you.” Layah then nodded her head after giving me the 411, like she was on Riana’s side.

Setting her straight, I said, “In the first place, I didn’t even know that my dad was giving me a ride. He lectured me about how to act in middle school, so trust me, she wouldn’t have wanted to ride in my car anyway.”

When Layah and I walked up to Riana, before I could even give her a hug and explain that I didn’t mean to make her feel bad, Clay walked up to us. He had some of his eighth grade classmates with him. They happened to all be girls.

“Oh, your little sister looks so cute,” one of them said to Clay.

The other girls had similar responses. I thought my friends and I giggled a lot. These girls had us beat. I was feeling good again and wanted to introduce the girls to my friends. But when I turned around, Layah and Riana were gone. So I kept talking to the eighth graders.

The bell rang for us to enter the building. Since my two buddies were gone, I walked in with my brother’s crowd. Though I hated that I couldn’t find Layah and Riana, it felt good “rolling with the big dogs,” as my brother

would sometimes say. I had no idea how popular Clay was. Everywhere we walked someone else spoke to us. I loved the hype. I guess with him being the school quarterback, and a kinda cute guy, I should have expected it.

When I went down the sixth grade hall to find my locker, I was excited when I saw Layah and Riana.

“Hey y’all!”

“Oh, now you got time for us,” Layah said angrily.

“Why are y’all trippin’?” I asked Layah.

Layah rolled her eyes and turned her back to me.

I looked at Riana and said, “I know you’re not still mad, right?”

She quickly turned her back to me too, and started fiddling with her combination lock. I felt so frustrated; steam was practically coming out of my ears. *How dare they be mad at me*, I thought. *I looked for them; they left me, so I hung out with Clay and the other eighth graders. What in the world was the big deal?*

Breaking it down, I said, “What’s really the problem? That I was getting compliments and hanging with eighth graders? Are you mad because I didn’t catch up with you guys until now? If you’re my friends you can’t be jealous of petty stuff.”

Riana looked away. Layah had a smirk on her face, like nothing I said made sense to her. I didn’t care though. They were gonna hear what I had to say.

I continued, “I don’t want to feel like you guys are going to get mad because I’m talking to other people or you

feel like I'm not paying attention to you. I don't want friends like that."

I didn't know how they would take it. Part of me wanted to take my strong words back. However, I'd said it already, and I meant it. I tried to open my locker and had a hard time with the combination. I tried about five times before I finally got it open, put some books inside, slammed it really hard, and left the two of them standing there looking silly.

Yeah, they were my friends and I loved them a lot, but they were just hatin'. This summer we'd just learned what true friendship really was. I held my head high and went on to my first class, English. I thought to myself, *They are not going to ruin Carmen Browne's first day!*



Thankfully, the next day I didn't have to go to school, because it was Saturday. It was the first home game for my dad's Virginia State Trojans team. My whole family was really excited. My dad and his team had worked hard all summer. He said that his team was ready with football fundamentals and mentally up for the challenge to win as well. Sitting in the president's box, we awaited game time.

I prayed silently, *Lord, please let my father stay calm, give him strength to be the best head coach Virginia State has ever had, and if it's Your will, let them win. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

From the opening kickoff, we were all on our feet. The Trojans ran for a touchdown. My dad's team was so dominant.

"I don't see your boyfriend," Cassie teased. I punched her lightly on the arm, and pretended like what she said didn't matter to me at all. Like, who cared where Spencer Webb was. Spencer, or "Spence," as we called him, wasn't at school on the first day, or at least I didn't see him. Actually I looked really cute and I would have loved for him to have seen me. I needed to quit telling myself that it really didn't bother me when it did. He wasn't my boyfriend or anything like that, but sometimes I caught myself thinking about him . . . wondering what he was doing.

After eating some delicious buffalo wings, I put my plate down and decided to look for him. When I spotted him, he was on the football field, talking to Clay.

When the second half of the game started, Clay and Spence didn't stop talking to each other. "Uuhhh," I said in frustration.

Clay was my brother, and I was jealous of him kickin' it with my friend Spence. I didn't know why I felt that way. Sadly, I wanted it to be me having fun with Spence, not Clay, but that wasn't how it was, and that really bothered me. I couldn't enjoy the rest of the game. It seemed that even the food didn't taste good anymore. I was just miserable and all because I was envious.

Later, when we went home, Clay came into my room all excited about the game. The Trojans had beaten the

other team, thirty-five to zero. My excitement was gone.

“Did you see that game, man; Dad’s quarterback was flawless. I sure hope I can throw like that this year.”

I didn’t look over at my brother. I didn’t smile. I didn’t even respond, and finally he got the point that he was getting on my nerves.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked, irritated.

Again he got no response from me. I was mad at him. He needed to figure out what was wrong with me or leave me alone until I was over it. He took the pillow from my bed and swatted me with it. Usually I’d grab the other pillow and we’d have a knock-down, drag-out pillow fight, but not this time.

Clay quickly got my attention. “See, I was just about to tell you that your boy Spence asked about you today, but, nope, you’re acting all crazy. Bye.”

“Clay, wait! I can’t imagine him saying anything about me. You hogged all his time today. He’s my friend and I didn’t get to talk to him at all. I’m sure thinking about me was the last thing on his mind since he had you to hang out with.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is all about—you act like nobody can talk to lil’ Spence but you. It’s like that, huh? C’mon, sis. I’m keeping an eye on the dude that thinks my sister is cool. That’s why I started hanging out with him in the first place. Now I like him. He’s all right. You don’t have to be jealous when you think I got something you don’t have. I’ve been trying to introduce you to the

older girls to make you a little popular. I hooked you up yesterday. I'm sort of doin' the same thing with Spence. Hangin' out with an eighth grader makes him look good. Believe that. But you need to check yourself. I have to look out for you because you don't know what's up."

He didn't give me a chance to respond; he just turned and walked out. I sat there, picked up the pillow he dropped on the floor, and rocked back and forth, thinking, *I can't be jealous of Clay. He's right; it's just not cool.* I needed to get it together.

I was the first one to get ready for church the next day. It didn't matter what I put on; it wasn't about how I looked. It was about needing to hear something to make me better. My mom told me how proud she was of me, because I was taking my Christian walk seriously. And though I was excited about going to church, I knew I didn't deserve any praise.

Maybe I'd been a little harsh on my friends. When they became jealous of me, or felt insecure about the attention I got, was the same thing I felt the very next day when my brother was getting attention from someone I wanted to notice me. How could I not put myself in my buddies' shoes?

My pastor, Reverend Wright, was so on point with his message. He preached a sermon about the sisters Mary and Martha. He told us that Jesus was coming to visit them. Martha had been working all day to get the house ready for Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, sat at Jesus' feet

and listened to His every word. Sister Martha got really jealous that Jesus seemed to appreciate Mary's attention to Him. Reverend Wright said Jesus told Martha that she couldn't be mad at what her sister did for Him. Reverend Wright said that all of us are susceptible to envy and jealousy so we need to guard our hearts.

He preached, "We only see our own needs. We only see our own wants and we get confused. It's a daily struggle that we need to bring before the Lord. Martha had to realize that, yes, she had done a lot, but her sister had done the most important thing by just giving Jesus her undivided attention. Though Martha thought Mary's job wasn't important, to Jesus it was very important."

What a good lesson for me to learn. Life wasn't just about me. In order to please God, I had to care about others' feelings. But knowing that and doing it were two different things.

Reverend Wright continued and gave me the direction I needed. "When you become jealous of someone, just take it to Jesus. Tell Him, 'Thank You Lord,' for what He's given you, and learn how to rejoice when others rejoice. That's loving your neighbor as yourself."

Riding home, I thought about what Reverend Wright said. I didn't know why I acted the way I did sometimes, but he told us how to work on it. I wasn't going to be a perfect Christian. After all, I wasn't the King of Kings or Lord of Lords, but I would certainly strive to be a flawless jewel.

5
Carmen Browne Series

Happy Princess

Stephanie Perry Moore

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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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*.