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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.

With Imperfections

I had only been in school for two weeks and things weren't going so great. Yeah, I was still sort of popular, as popular as any sixth grader could be. I was cool with Clay's eighth grade friends, but I really missed my own friends.

Layah and Riana hadn't spoken to me since the first day in the hall when I left the two of them. And since we didn't have any classes together, or didn't speak at lunch-time, my connection with them was very distant. I asked my Social Studies teacher if I could be excused to go to the restroom and was surprised when I saw the two of them in there. They were huddled together. I

wondered what they were talking about. I was so excited to see them.

“Hey, y’all!” I said excitedly. When they looked up at me, I saw Layah’s eyes filled with tears.

“What do you want?” Layah snapped, sadness in her voice.

“What’s wrong, Layah? Riana, what’s going on with her?”

Though I asked with deep concern, I don’t think they wanted me in on their conversation. But I couldn’t just turn and walk away. I couldn’t leave my friend in tears. I had to stay. In my head, Layah was my girl for life.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

Layah pushed herself up from the corner, got all up in my face, and said in a mean way, “My grandmother has cancer and is in the hospital, fighting for her life. She might not make it. Okay! There, you happy? Now you know.”

Layah wasn’t the only one crying at that point. My eyes began to water as she quickly dashed out of the bathroom and Riana followed her, leaving me alone. All of this was so hard to take. Even though my friends weren’t treating me right, I was still sad for Layah.

What in the world was cancer anyway? Why was it so devastating? All I knew was that it was a bad disease. I wanted more information. Until then I just asked God for a miracle.

I prayed a quick prayer. *Lord, please heal Layah’s*

grandmother. Layah is scared of losing her, and I don't want my friend to feel that pain. Amen.



Soon I was home and not in a good mood. Clay and Cassie quickly left me alone with my attitude. I didn't even want the snack my mom had fixed for me.

She came into my room and asked, "Young lady, why are you slamming doors around here? What's going on, Carmen? Talk."

The tears flowed again, faster than a waterfall. I was overcome with emotion. At that point I felt no sixth grader in the world had a tougher start in school than me.

"Sweetheart," she said as she sat on my bed with her arms outstretched toward me. "Talk to me."

"It's so much, Mom. Life is so messed up. Now it's Layah's grandmother. She might die."

"What?" my mom asked me with a puzzled look on her face.

"Well, I don't know for sure, Mom, if she's going to die or whatever, but her breast cancer is worse. Layah told me today and she was really upset. Mom, what is cancer? Why does it mess people up so bad?"

My mom told me there are different kinds of cancers. She said, "In every body, our cells divide and grow in a controlled manner. But sometimes cells grow and divide wildly."

“Is that cancer?” I asked. “When cells grow too fast?”

“Cells can grow a mass of tissue,” Mom told me.

“These can be called lesions or tumors. But not all tumors are cancerous.”

“They’re not?” I asked.

“Some tumors are what we call *benign*. That means they’re not cancerous, and they can often be removed by surgery and usually won’t come back. But the word for cancerous tumors is *malignant*.”

“Then what happens?”

“Malignant tumors can travel to other parts of the body. That’s what it means when you hear that someone’s cancer has spread.”

Mom explained that in most cases the cause of a cancer is unknown, but some people have certain risk factors that seem to make them more likely to develop it. She also told me that there is no typical way to feel when a person learns that they have cancer. Everyone feels and responds in different ways. People experience different emotions—ranging from being scared, sad, mad, to being motivated to beat it. She said it’s best to learn as much as possible about cancer and treatment options so that the person can pursue what is best for her.

To encourage me Mom said, “But don’t sulk and cry, Carmen. I want Layah’s grandma to be well too. We’re going to trust God for the outcome. We believe that His will is what’s best for us. Also, I want you to remember that this earth is not our home. We’re traveling through here

and we can't get to heaven if we don't die. And I certainly want to go to heaven, don't you?"

"Yeah, Mom, I do, and because my life is so messed up I wish I was there now, so things would be perfect," I said honestly.

She giggled. "Some days I feel the same way, baby, but God wants us to be content with where we are. Life will get better. Hold on. This life will never be 100 percent perfect, but remember God is always with you, even now. He can make you have joy. So you're covered."



Later on that night, my mom came into my room again. "Are you feeling better, sweetie?" she asked as she tucked me into bed.

"Oh, Mom," I said in despair, "middle school is so hard."

"Baby, earlier when you told me how messed up your life felt, I couldn't get it out of my mind. I wanted to give you some space, and see if you would come and talk to me. I thought maybe there was something else going on besides the situation with Layah's grandmother. I don't want my daughter going to bed feeling like stuff is too hard to bear. You've got God. You have Dad and me. What else is going on?"

I told my mom how my two best friends in the whole world, Layah and Riana, were mad at me, even though we

vowed over the summer not to let anything come between us. My heart was broken into a million pieces because they refused to talk to me.

“Why are they mad at you?” my mom asked, stroking my hair.

“I’m popular.”

“You’re popular? Stop! Tell me about it.”

“It’s not a good thing. I mean, I was excited at first because everybody liked me. Clay hooked me up, Mom. All the older girls talk to me. They think I wear really cute clothes. It’s not like Layah and Riana don’t have cute school clothes, but for some reason I’ve been getting all of the attention. How am I supposed to deal with that, Mom? How can I get my friends back?”

As always, she asked me tough questions, like did I rub their noses in the fact that I had new clothes. Maybe I did. However, that wasn’t what I meant to do. Plus, I had apologized a lot for that in the last couple of weeks. But none of that made any difference with the two of them. “They decided not to like me and that’s just been that,” I explained.

“I know it hurts, baby, but all you can do is pray. They’re your best friends. They’ll come around. Just keep praying, being open, and willing to give them the grace that you thought they didn’t give you. Show them what true friendship is by hanging in there.”

“Yeah, okay, Mom, I’m always showing them what real friendship is. What did they ever do for me?”

“That’s just it. Friends shouldn’t have to do anything to prove their worthiness to gain favor with you. And if I recall correctly, I remember you begging Riana to forgive you last year when we first moved here. You treated her badly and she forgave you. And you already said Layah’s going through a tough time with her grandmother not doing well. Cut them both some slack. You’re a big girl. You’re in sixth grade. Be your own best friend. Remember, you’re never alone; the Holy Spirit’s with you.”

The next day of school Mom’s advice worked. I didn’t need anyone. I was content with God. The day after that it worked a little less. By the third day it didn’t work at all. When I saw Layah and Riana huddled together talking and then turning the other way when they saw me, it was just too much to take. I went into fourth period with my head down. That was the class that Spence and I had together.

He came up to me and said, “What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re a boy. You wouldn’t care. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Yeah, boys don’t stress like you girls do, but you’re my friend. What’s up?”

Because we had a substitute teacher, it was easy for us to pair up and talk when we got our assignments. I didn’t want to tell him what was really hurting me, but because he kept asking me in a way that made me think he really cared, I finally told him that Layah and Riana had cut me out of the friendship.

“So get other friends,” he said, like it wasn’t a big deal. That was an excellent idea. Why hadn’t I thought of that? Wow, boys could make sense sometimes.



I guess I had high standards because I searched for almost a week for candidates worthy of being my friends, all the while hoping Layah and Riana would come around and let me back in the circle. When that didn’t happen, I knew I had to find somebody else. I had a lot to offer, but how could I be so popular and so alone at the same time? This wasn’t going to be easy.

In second period there was this girl, Christina. She was tough and she reminded me of Layah. And I thought, *Hmm, here is somebody*. But when we had a pop quiz and she asked to cheat off my test, I knew being friends with her was the last thing I needed to do.

I eased out of it by saying, “I didn’t study so I wouldn’t want to mess you up and give you the wrong answers. Anyway, Christina, I don’t cheat.”

“Oh, so you too good to do stuff like that, huh? Fine.”

Lord, I thought to myself, please help me find a good friend.

In fifth period there was a shy girl who seemed sort of sweet. She reminded me of Riana. She told me that she liked my shirt. Maybe she was the one. Her name was Shasta. But when class was over and we walked down the

hall, I knew she wasn't going to work out either. She got so nervous she had to walk behind me. Shasta didn't want anyone to laugh at her; I realized she was too paranoid, and I didn't want to get involved with someone more insecure than me.

I didn't know how to tell her we couldn't be friends, but I knew God would give me the words to say to her, if she still wanted to hang with me.



The next day at lunch I didn't know where I was going to sit. I was tired of sitting all by myself. I just had to go for it, and trust that there was someone else in the sixth grade who could be my friend.

I noticed a girl sitting by herself. She sort of looked familiar, and then I realized that I recognized her. She was in a couple of my classes.

"Anyone sitting here?" I asked.

"No," she responded in a friendly tone. "Your name is Carmen, right?"

"Yeah," I said, puzzled.

"We have third and fourth period together. I'm good with names."

"Oh, yeah, I've seen you before, but I'm sorry; I don't know your name."

"No problem. I'm Imani Bastien."

"Bass-teen?"

“Yeah, that’s how you say it. I’m from New York. I moved to Virginia last year with my mom. I didn’t make many friends in fifth grade. So I’m sitting here alone.”

“I know how you feel. I moved here last year too. I have some friends, but we don’t have any classes together. I usually sit alone, so thanks.”

Imani and I had a lot in common. We both were new to Virginia, and she wanted to be a journalist and I loved writing too. Both of us loved music and, most of all, were in search of a good friend. I wasn’t sure if I’d like her as much as Layah or Riana, but I felt like she was the new buddy I’d asked God for.

I couldn’t expect someone perfect. That wasn’t realistic. I wasn’t perfect and like my mom always said, “Carmen, if you want a perfect friend then be one, and since that’s impossible, don’t expect someone else to be.”

So I had to appreciate people, even with imperfections.