



Turning 15 was a time to focus on the latest hair trends, new clothes, best friends, and her sophomore year, instead it was shattered by violence and sex trafficking.

Corena was intrigued when the message from a recently graduated senior popped up on her Instagram. "School is starting next week, sad I won't be there." Corena always thought Tyler was cute; he had remedial math class with her last year. As the night went on, they chatted back and forth about upcoming classes, shared friends, and even hopes for the future. Corena climbed into bed and before she closed her eyes that night she thought, "this will be the best year yet."

Over the next few weeks, Tyler continued to message Corena building a foundation of trust that she had not felt in a long time. Tyler seemed to understand everything about her, even when it seemed no one else did. One night Tyler texted Corena and let her know that he was leaving town for a few months, his parents were divorced and his mom could no longer afford their small apartment. Tyler is almost 19 so he needed to figure out how to get some money and help his Mom out. Corena's heart dropped she could not lose Tyler, there had to be another way. As her mind raced, she recalled some conversations Tyler and her had had about another former classmate, Tameka. Tameka had started her senior year this year with a new car, a new guy, and a new attitude. Tyler had shared that he greatly respected Tameka and that she, "knew how to hustle and get money, she would be unstoppable one day." Corena quickly texts Tyler, "what about Tameka?" "I heard she is sugaring on the weekend, maybe I could try it?" Tyler responded, "yeah but she turned 18 over the summer, that won't work for you. But if you really want to help I may have another idea to get bigger money much quicker." As Tyler describes his plan, her stomach turns, something does not feel right, but she just cannot lose Tyler. This conversation would take Corena to a place that she could not return from. She would soon enter the world of sex trafficking. What she would realize too little too late was that this life carried a price tag she would never be able to repay.

Tyler grew cold even physically abusive. It seemed like when she tried to convince him that she wanted to stop, it only made him angrier. She was ashamed and confused, how could everything change so quickly? She could not tell her parents, she could not tell anyone, it was just too embarrassing, and this was all initially her decision, right? Several months later, she answered an online ad Tyler sent to her, she showed up at a house and was met by law enforcement and a survivor advocate from Breaking the Chains. As she spoke with the advocate something inside of her broke, and she suddenly felt a small spark of hope again.

Stories like Corena's are all too familiar. Traffickers are skilled gas lighters. Gaslighting is **a form of psychological manipulation in which the abuser attempts to sow self-doubt and confusion in their victim's mind**. Traffickers are seeking to gain power and control over the other person, by distorting reality and forcing them to question their own judgment and intuition. Tyler had planned to traffick Corena from the beginning. He strategically interjected conversations to introduce the sex trade to Corena as a safe, glamorous and empowering choice. Then later he reminded Corena over and over again that this was all her decision, he was just helping to, "guide her and keep her safe."

At BTC we have committed to helping Corena to unravel the psychological manipulation and to learn how to cope with the trauma she has endured because of it. She is now receiving educational support to finish high school, peer support to rebuild trust and confidence, as well as long-term therapy and case management services to ensure it does not happen again.