

One Moment at a Time

by Stuart Finegan

The police station was quieter than Cara expected.

She sat on a hard plastic chair, staring at the dirty floor while her mother stood across the room. She looked pale and exhausted. Rain tapped against the windows. Neither of them spoke. The serious issue wasn't the stolen motorbike found abandoned behind the shopping centre. It wasn't the broken shop window or the gang of teenagers who had run when the police arrived. Those things could be investigated later. The real problem sat between mother and daughter like an unmoveable object. Trust.

Cara had lied for months, and now her mother no longer knew what to believe. The custody sergeant lifted his head slowly and glanced at Cara's mother.

"Before she leaves, we need to establish exactly what happened tonight. One witness says Cara tried to stop the others. Another says she was involved from the start. Do you want a cup of tea love while you wait?"

Cara inhaled a slow deep breath. For the first time in a long while, she knew she had to tell the truth. Twenty-four hours earlier, she would have laughed at the idea.

Cara was fifteen and tired of being ignored. She lived with her mother, Lisa, in a small flat above a takeaway on the edge of town. Money was always tight. Her mother worked long shifts and still struggled to cover the bills. Most evenings, they passed each other on the stairs like strangers. Lisa worried constantly. She worried about paying the rent, about work, about their future. Most of all, she worried about Cara.

"Choose your friends carefully," she regularly pleaded with her daughter

"Mom you're always saying that, it's so annoying," Cara replied one particular afternoon.

"Because I know where the wrong choices lead you love, I'm not stupid you know."

Cara rolled her eyes and put her headphones on. What Lisa never explained was that her warnings came from experience. Years ago, before Cara was born, Lisa had spent her teenage years hanging out with older kids who seemed exciting and fearless. She skipped school, got involved in petty crime and nearly ended up with a criminal record. It had taken years to rebuild her life. She feared her daughter was walking the same path. The trouble had started when Cara met Jay.

Jay was seventeen, confident and popular. He and his friends spent their evenings hanging around the town centre. They always seemed to have money, expensive trainers and stories that made ordinary life sound boring. At first, Cara only watched from afar. Then she started hanging out with them. The gang wasn't officially a gang. At least, that was what everyone told themselves. They were just friends, they said. Friends who occasionally stole things. Friends who intimidated the younger kids. Cara was desperate to be liked. For the first time, people noticed her. One evening after school, Jay asked her to act as a lookout while two older boys slipped into a storage yard. Nobody got caught or hurt. After that, saying yes became normal. Weeks passed. The lies multiplied.

"I'm at Emma's house."

"I'm studying at the library."

"I'm staying after school."

Then came the night everything changed. The group had gathered behind the shopping centre after dark. Jay was restless and excited.

"We've got a job," he boasted. Cara didn't like the sound of that.

"What sort of job?"

"Just a quick one."

The plan was simple. Too simple. One of the older boys had arranged to steal a motorbike. Another planned to distract security. They would meet near the precinct and disappear before anyone noticed.

"It's not a big deal," Jay said.

Cara hesitated. Something felt wrong. The others walked on, so she followed anyway. As they approached the meeting point, she suddenly remembered a strange memory. Years earlier, her mother had looked out of their kitchen window and said quietly,

"This is your life Cara and its ending one moment at a time."

Now the words echoed in her head. One moment at a time. Without warning the motorbike arrived and so did trouble. Peter lost control while speeding along the road. The bike crashed into a shopfront window, showering glass across the pavement. Panic exploded. Someone shouted, a security guard appeared, then police sirens screamed in the distance.

Jay disappeared almost immediately. The others followed. Cara stood frozen, then she noticed Peter wasn't moving. For a moment, she considered running. Instead, she knelt beside him and called for help. By the time the police arrived, she was still there. Witnesses saw only pieces of the story. Some saw a girl helping an injured teenager. Others recognised her from previous incidents and assumed she was involved. That was how Cara ended up in the police station. Sitting along in a cold empty holding room she suddenly realised why her mother had been afraid. The custody sergeant returned with a statement form.

"Ready to talk?"

Cara nodded. For the next hour she told the truth about everything. The lies, the gang, the stealing she had witnessed, the people involved. When she finished, she felt relieved. Her mother looked at her for a long moment.

"I was scared Cara, scared this would happen."

"I know mom."

"I made terrible mistakes when I was your age."

Cara lowered her head, she couldn't look her mother in the eye.

"Mom I thought you didn't understand."

Lisa laughed.

"That's exactly why I understood Cara."

Cara whispered the words she should have said months ago.

"I'm sorry."

Her mother stepped forward and pulled her into a tight embrace. Their serious issues wouldn't be solved instantly. Trust would take time to rebuild. There would be difficult conversations and hard choices ahead. As they left the station together just after midnight, something important had changed. Cara wasn't walking down a one-way street anymore. For once she had made the right choice.