

The Length of the Leash

Created May 2025, main storyline supplied by Carg, text and pictures by ChatGPT 4o.

Tessa was fifteen when the leash came back.

It wasn't a real leash, of course. It was a harness—bright pink with cartoon strawberries on the chest strap—and her mother insisted it was for “safety.” The same reason she still braided Tessa's hair in pigtails every morning and picked out her clothes: frilly skirts, patterned tights, glittery Velcro shoes. Tessa had outgrown them all physically and emotionally, but to her mother, she hadn't outgrown anything. She was still her little girl. Just taller now.

“It's not safe anymore,” her mother had said that morning, fastening the harness with practiced hands. “Too many bad people. I saw the news.”

Tessa had tried, gently, to resist. “Mom, nobody else in high school wears anything like this. They're going to—”

“High school is full of wolves,” her mother had replied, her voice tight. “And you're not ready.”

But Tessa was ready. She had friends she wasn't allowed to see after school. She had ideas and questions that made her mother nervous. She had a growing ache for independence she couldn't name, only feel—like a song stuck just under the skin.

Each morning, as she trudged to the car under her mother's gaze—harness clipped and backpack adorned with unicorn patches—Tessa felt herself shrinking. In her dreams, she wore black jeans, heavy boots, and a quiet confidence. In reality, she was the girl whose mom walked her to the school doors and waved too long.

The harness wasn't really about safety. Tessa knew that. It was about control. About her mother's fear of the world, and maybe her fear of being alone. But how could she say that without hurting her?

It changed the day Tessa didn't come straight home.

She slipped out of the school building, tugging the harness off in the bathroom, shoving it in her bag. Her friend Zoe had invited her to a quiet corner of the park where nobody cared what you wore. Tessa sat on the grass in borrowed jeans, laughter bubbling out of her like something new.

Her mother found her three hours later, wild-eyed and breathless.

“You could've been kidnapped,” she cried. “You don't know what could happen—”

“I do know,” Tessa said, standing up slowly. “But I also know I'm not a child.”



Her mother stared at her like she was seeing a stranger. Maybe she was.

That night, they didn't speak much. But the next morning, the harness wasn't waiting. Her clothes were still too childish, but something had shifted. A small rebellion had worked.

And Tessa—still wearing glitter shoes, but with unbraided hair—walked out the door without being clipped to anything.

That night, they didn't speak much. The house was silent, save for the quiet hum of the dishwasher and the occasional creak of the floorboards as her mother moved around downstairs.

Tessa went to bed with a mix of defiance and dread tangled in her chest. Part of her thought she had broken through. That maybe, just maybe, her mother had seen her—not the doll she dressed, but the young woman she was becoming.

She slept uneasily, dreams flickering with flashes of freedom and guilt, open fields and locked doors.

When morning came, sunlight pooled on her carpet in pale gold. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, and reached for her clothes—only to stop cold.

Laid out on her desk, neatly arranged beside her usual pastel skirt and ruffled top, was a new harness.

Not soft nylon like the old one. This one was heavier, darker. Reinforced. The straps were thicker, the chest plate more rigid. And in the center, just above where the chest clip would snap together, was a small metal lock. The key sat on her mother's dresser. Tessa saw it later that morning, glinting beside a bottle of lavender hand cream.

"I didn't want to do this," her mother said quietly as she stepped into the room, holding the harness with both hands. "But you left me no choice."

Tessa didn't answer. She couldn't.

She stood still as the straps went around her, the cold clasp locking shut at her sternum. Her mother pocketed the key and kissed her forehead like she was five again.

And as they walked to the car—sunlight bright and unforgiving—Tessa wondered if it was really safety her mother wanted.

Or obedience.



The first thing Tessa learned was that the new harness didn't budge.

She tried. In the school bathroom between second and third period, she tugged at the straps under her sweater, tested the angles of her arms behind her back, tried to shimmy the chest plate up over her head. But the lock held everything in place, unyielding. Even twisting her body to see it in the mirror revealed nothing—no hidden release, no weakness in the seams. Just the dull metallic glint of her mother's growing paranoia.

When she got home that afternoon, her mother watched her closely. "You didn't try to take it off, did you?" she asked, a smile too smooth to be casual.

Tessa shook her head, and said nothing.

That night, she lay awake, fingers tracing the outline of the harness beneath her pajamas. It didn't come off. Not even for bed.

She had to think.

By the third day, Tessa had a plan. A simple one, but dangerous.

She needed the key.

She knew where her mother kept it—on the dresser during the day, but at night it disappeared, probably into her mother's room, maybe a drawer, maybe under the pillow.

So she waited. For a Saturday.

Her mother slept deeply when she felt in control, and after the bedtime ritual—cocoa, vitamins, a soft goodnight—Tessa listened to the old patterns of her mother's breathing. When they grew slow and heavy, she slipped out of bed and crept down the hallway in socks.

The door creaked slightly when she opened it. Her mother didn't stir.

Tessa moved to the dresser. No key.

She turned to the nightstand. Nothing.

Then she saw it—on a chain, around her mother's neck.

Her breath caught.

It wasn't just about keeping her in anymore. It was about owning the right to let her out.

The next morning, her mother made pancakes shaped like hearts.

"You're looking more settled," she said.

Tessa nodded, but her mind was racing.

If she couldn't steal the key...

She would have to find someone to help break the lock.

She thought of Zoe. Of her older brother, who once talked about working in a bike repair shop. He had tools. Maybe even bolt cutters.

All Tessa needed was a chance. A minute away from her mother's shadow.

A crack in the fence.

That crack came the following week.

Her mother was late picking her up from school. Traffic, maybe. A phone call. Something unexpected. And in that sliver of unsupervised time, Tessa turned to Zoe, eyes fierce with quiet desperation.

"I need you to help me break something," she whispered.

Zoe blinked, glanced down at the harness under Tessa's jacket, and nodded once.

"Meet me tonight," Zoe said, "at the shop. Back entrance. After dark."

Tessa felt her heart hammer against the locked chest plate.

For the first time in weeks, it was beating like it belonged to her.

Tessa waited until midnight.

She'd packed quietly—just a hoodie, the keychain flashlight Zoe had given her, and the letter she'd written in case something went wrong. Her hands trembled as she unlaced her glitter sneakers and stepped barefoot into the hallway. The house was dark, silent. She moved like a shadow, past the family photos, past the door to her mother's room—

Click.

A lamp flicked on.

Her mother sat in the armchair by the door, bathrobe tied tight, eyes wide and shining with a furious, hurt calm.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asked, voice smooth as glass.

Tessa froze.

"I—I was just—"

"Don't lie to me." Her mother stood, slowly. "You were going to run away."

Tessa's throat tightened. "You locked me in like an animal."

Her mother's face didn't change. "You need to be protected. You don't understand what's out there. You think your friends will take care of you?" She stepped closer. "No one will love you like I do. No one will keep you safe."

"I don't want safe," Tessa said, her voice breaking. "I want to live."

Her mother's expression cracked—just for a second. Then she turned, walked into her room, and returned with something new.

It looked like a padded vest, but heavier. It had a similar lock at the chest, but also buckles at the shoulders and hips. A black band trailed from the back.

"This one is escape-proof," her mother said softly. "You'll wear it starting tomorrow."

Tessa stared. "You can't—"

"I have to," her mother said, as if it pained her. "You left me no choice. I'll call the school. You'll study at home again. I'll take leave from work. We'll be together, where it's safe."

"No—no, you can't—" Tessa backed away, panic rising like heat.

Her mother only nodded. "I already ordered child locks for the windows."

Tessa ran to her room and locked the door, shaking. Her heart pounded, not with rebellion this time, but with something colder: dread.

The next morning, the vest was waiting on her bed. Alongside it, her old frilly clothes, freshly washed.

The leash wasn't metaphorical anymore.

She was being caged.

And now, Tessa knew: escaping wouldn't be an act of rebellion.

It would be an act of survival.

The first morning of "home school," the curtains were already drawn when Tessa woke up.

She sat up slowly. The padded vest hugged her torso, stiff and unyielding. It had been buckled around her in her sleep—she hadn't even felt it. The leash, now a heavy nylon tether, was clipped to a metal ring bolted discreetly to her bed frame. Just long enough to reach the bathroom. Barely.

She didn't scream. Screaming wouldn't change anything.

Her mother knocked, then entered without waiting.

"Good morning, sweetheart." She placed a tray on the desk: oatmeal with banana slices cut into hearts, a glass of orange juice, and a multivitamin shaped like a teddy bear. "You'll feel better with food in you. Routine helps."

Tessa didn't move.

"I know it's hard," her mother said gently. "But this is only until you're ready again. The world outside—it doesn't understand girls like you. You're too soft. Too trusting."

Tessa stared. "You mean until you feel ready to let me go."

Her mother's smile faltered. "This isn't punishment. It's protection."

Then she picked up the leash, unclipped it from the bed, and clipped it to a new anchor bolted to the desk chair.

"Time for your first lesson," she said. "We're starting with civics. Knowing how the world works will help you understand why I'm doing this."

The days blurred together.

Each morning started the same: breakfast, lessons, monitored "free time," then rest. Her mother had printed worksheets, set up an old laptop with restricted access, and even arranged plastic bins labeled with "Monday Math," "Tuesday Reading," and "Quiet Craft Time."

The leash moved with her.

Sometimes to the kitchen table. Sometimes to the little sunroom, where she'd once played as a child. The windows were now locked, the glass covered with floral curtains that never opened. Tessa wasn't even allowed in the backyard anymore.

Her mother kept things cheerful. Smiling. Singing old lullabies while making dinner. Reading aloud in the evenings like nothing was wrong.

But behind the sweetness, there was a shadow. A tightness in her voice when Tessa asked questions. A twitch in her eye when Tessa sat too quietly.

"You're not sleeping well," her mother said one morning, brushing Tessa's hair into perfect pigtails. "Maybe we'll try melatonin tonight."

"Maybe you could try trusting me," Tessa said quietly.

Her mother stilled.

Then she leaned in, brushing a strand of hair behind Tessa's ear. "Oh, baby. I do trust you. I just don't trust them."

On the fifth day, during a "supervised break," Tessa spotted something.

A loose screw on the bracket anchoring the leash to the kitchen wall. It wobbled slightly when she tugged it—too slightly to break free, but enough to know it was possible.

Her pulse quickened.

Maybe she couldn't scream. Maybe she couldn't run.

But maybe she could plan.

Carefully. Quietly.

Because one thing was certain now.

If her mother's love was a cage...

Tessa would have to become her own key.

It was the seventh night. Rain beat softly against the roof, rhythmic and calming in a way that made Tessa's mind wander—dangerously so.

She sat on the floor by the tether's end, flipping through a torn copy of *Anne of Green Gables*. The bracket screw was still loose. Her tiny plan was still alive. But she needed time. Privacy. One moment when the leash wasn't there. She waited for moments like that like a prisoner waits for fog.

The sound came just past midnight. A dull thump, then glass shattering. Not loud—but wrong.

Tessa froze.

Footsteps. Not her mother's. Heavy, clumsy, wet with mud.

She opened her mouth but made no sound. Her leash clinked softly as she stood, trying to see down the hallway. Then: a crash from the living room, a yell.

Tessa's mother screamed.

Then silence.

Tessa scrambled to the doorway, only to be yanked back violently by the tether. She fell hard onto the carpet, pain blooming in her shoulder. From where she lay, she could see only slivers of hallway light. And then—a thud. A body hitting the floor.

“Mom?” she gasped.

No answer.

No one came down the hall.

And she couldn't reach the phone. It was on the kitchen counter, ten feet beyond her leash.

For ten eternal minutes, she waited. Staring into the dark. Waiting for another shape to appear. But none came.

Finally, she heard it: her mother's voice, groggy and slurred. “Tess...”

Then a shuffle. A moan.

Later, under buzzing bathroom lights, her mother sat with a dish towel pressed to her temple. Blood matted her hair.

“I think I passed out,” she muttered. “He ran when he saw me move. Just some junkie—”

“You need to go to a hospital,” Tessa said. “You could have a concussion.”

“I'm fine,” her mother snapped, before catching herself. She softened her voice. “Just a scan. I'll be back before dinner.”

Tessa stared. “What about me?”

Her mother's eyes flicked toward the leash. “I can't leave you alone. Not after everything.”

She picked up her phone and dialed.

“Hi, Becca? I need you to come watch Tessa for a few hours. Yes... yes, same arrangement as last time.”

Tessa's stomach dropped.

Becca.

Her mother's old friend. Always too smiley. Always calling Tessa “cutie” in a voice that was too sweet to be sincere.

And Becca followed rules. Even cruel ones.

When Becca arrived, she clucked sympathetically over the bandage on her friend's head, then turned to Tessa with wide, patronizing eyes.

“Look at you! All cozied up in your special vest. Your mama said you've been having a lot of feelings lately.”

Tessa said nothing.

She didn't resist when Becca clipped the leash to a second bracket in the living room. She didn't flinch when the older woman sat too close, offering cookies and watching her like a hawk.

What she did do—quietly, carefully—was slide her fingers into the hem of her sleeve.

Because in there, hidden deep in the lining, was the screwdriver she'd stolen two nights ago from the tool drawer.

The bracket screw in the kitchen might be too tight.

But this one, newly installed?

It might just turn.

All she needed was for Becca to look away.

Even for one second.

Becca stayed glued to Tessa like a security camera with a polite smile.

Every time Tessa shifted her weight, Becca noticed. Every time her fingers twitched toward her sleeve, Becca gently redirected her with a plate of apple slices or a board game.

By the time the front door creaked open and her mother returned, pale and tired but upright, Tessa's hopes were dust.

"Everything looks normal," her mother said. She was holding a plastic hospital bag and her discharge papers. Her eyes met Tessa's—quiet, unreadable. "They said the blow might've knocked something loose in my thinking, too."

Becca chirped a farewell, gave Tessa a wink, and left. The front door shut. Silence followed.

Her mother stood still in the hallway for a moment longer.

Then she came into the living room and knelt beside her daughter.

"I had a lot of time to think, lying there under those fluorescent lights," she said softly. "And I realized something... obvious, maybe. That no matter how many locks I put on the doors or how many straps I buckle—nothing is truly safe."

Tessa blinked, unsure what to say.

"I did everything right," her mother whispered. "We stayed home. I kept you near. And still—someone came in anyway." Her voice cracked. "What if he'd gotten to you? What if I'd woken up and you were—"

She stopped herself. Then reached out with trembling fingers and unclipped the leash from Tessa's harness.

"You can go back to school," she said quietly. "No more lessons at home. No more bars on the windows. You deserve a life. A real one."

Tessa felt her throat tighten. Her mother's hand moved to the chest strap of the harness.

"And this?" Her voice broke now. "You don't have to wear it anymore. I won't make you. I can't."

Tears spilled freely down her cheeks as she pulled the key from her pocket, slowly unlocking the vest, unfastening the straps. It slid off Tessa's shoulders like a discarded shell.

Then her mother collapsed into her arms, sobbing.

"I'm sorry. I just—I didn't know how to let you go without losing you."

Tessa sat still for a long moment.

The air felt too wide. Too light. As if the world was waiting, just outside the door.

She looked down at the harness lying on the carpet.

And slowly, gently, she whispered: "I'll wear it. A little longer."

Her mother looked up, confused.

"Just to school and back," Tessa said. "Just until... we're both ready."

Her mother's sobs softened into shaking breaths. She nodded. "Okay."

They held each other there, surrounded by quiet and broken pieces of fear and love alike.

Not everything was fixed.

But something was different.

And for the first time in a long while, it felt like something was starting, not just being held back.