

The Edge

Dove Harper

Cover

The Edge — A Dove Harper Free Book

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The Edge

Dove Harper

Chapter 1

I stood at the base of the ten-meter platform, my fingers wrapped around the cold metal railing, and stared up. The ladder stretched above me like a challenge I wasn't sure I could meet anymore. My left leg ached—phantom pain, the doctor called it, though the injury had healed months ago. The real problem I think was in my head.

“Tessa, you ready?” Coach Martinez’s voice cut through the echo of the natatorium. He stood by the pool’s edge, clipboard in hand, his dark eyes fixed on me.

“Yeah,” I lied, my voice bouncing off the tiles.

Sterling University’s diving well was empty except for us. Morning practice had ended an hour ago, but Coach had asked me to stay. Special session, he’d said. Just the two of us. The scholarship review was in three weeks, and if I couldn’t get back to competition level, I’d lose everything. Full ride gone. Third year tuition? On me. My parents couldn’t cover it. I’d have to drop out.

I started climbing. One rung. Two. My palms were already sweating, the metal slick under my grip. At the halfway point, I paused, my curly hair sticking to my neck despite being tied back and tucked into my swim cap. I’d thrown it up in a messy bun this morning, not caring about the frizz. Same way I didn’t care about the dark hair peeking out from my swimsuit’s edges—no energy for that kind of maintenance when you’re trying to salvage your entire fucking future.

“Keep going,” Coach called up. “Don’t think. Just move.”

Easy for him to say. He wasn’t the one who’d felt her knee buckle mid-rotation a year ago, who’d hit the water wrong and spent six months in physical therapy. I climbed higher, my breathing shallow, my chest tight.

At the top, I stepped onto the platform. The pool below looked impossibly small, the water a distant rectangle of blue. My hands trembled as I walked to the edge, my toes curling over the rough surface. This used to be home. Now it felt like standing on the ledge of a building.

“Tessa.” Coach’s voice again, firmer. “What’s the block?”

“I don’t know,” I shouted down, my voice cracking.

“Yes, you do.”

I closed my eyes, trying to summon the muscle memory. Back walkout, one and a half somersaults, pike position. I’d done it a thousand times before the injury. But when I opened my eyes and looked down, my body refused to move forward. My leg throbbed, and my stomach twisted into knots.

“I can’t,” I said, stepping back from the edge.

“Then come down.”

I climbed down faster than I'd gone up, my legs shaking by the time I reached the deck. Coach was waiting, his arms crossed over his Sterling Athletics polo. He was maybe forty, fit in that wiry runner's way, with graying temples and a face that could shift from stern to encouraging in a heartbeat. Right now, it was somewhere in between.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to the bleachers.

I sat, my damp suit clinging to my skin, and hugged my knees to my chest. The cold from the metal bench seeped through, but I didn't care.

Coach sat beside me, setting his clipboard down. "Talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about. I get to the edge and I freeze."

"Why?"

"Because I'm scared I'll mess up again. That my leg won't hold. That I'll—" I stopped, swallowing hard. "That I'll fail."

He nodded slowly. "Fear's not the enemy, Tessa. It's the lack of trust. In your body. In yourself."

"Easy to say."

"Not easy to fix." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "But we've got three weeks. And I'm not letting you lose that scholarship without a fight."

"What if fighting isn't enough?"

"Then we try something different."

A Note from Dove

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Chapter 2

That night, I lay in my dorm bed, staring at the ceiling. My roommate was out—some party off-campus—and the room was silent except for the hum of the mini fridge. I should've been studying, but all I could think about was the platform. The edge. The way my body had locked up.

I'd been avoiding something else too. Not just diving.

My hand drifted down my stomach, under the waistband of my shorts. I'd been trying to get off for weeks now, alone in this room, but every time I got close, the same thing happened. I'd be right there, on the verge, and then my mind would

spiral. My body would tense. The release I craved would slip away, leaving me frustrated and aching.

I tried again, my fingers moving in slow circles. My breath quickened, my hips shifting against the mattress. The heat built, spreading through my thighs, and I pressed harder, chasing the feeling. Almost. Almost.

And then it was gone.

I yanked my hand away, groaning into my pillow. What the hell was wrong with me? I couldn't dive. I couldn't come. My body had betrayed me in every way that mattered.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. A text from Coach Martinez: *Meet me at the pool tomorrow. 6 AM. We're trying something new.*

I stared at the message, my pulse still racing from the failed attempt. Something new. I didn't know what that meant, but I was desperate enough to try anything.

Okay, I typed back.

I set the phone down and rolled onto my side, pulling the blanket over my head. Tomorrow, I'd figure out how to get past the edge. One way or another.

Chapter 3

The natatorium was dark when I arrived, lit only by the emergency lights along the walls. I pushed through the double doors, my gym bag slung over my shoulder, and found Coach already in the water. He was swimming laps, his strokes smooth and efficient, cutting through the pool with barely a splash.

I set my bag on the bleachers and walked to the edge. "What are we doing?"

He stopped mid-lap, treading water. "Trust exercises."

"What kind?"

"Get in and I'll show you."

I hesitated, then stripped off my sweats. My one-piece was the same navy Sterling team suit I always wore, frayed at the seams from too many practices. I dove in, the water shockingly cold against my skin, and surfaced near him.

"Okay," he said, his voice echoing. "Lie on your back. Float."

"That's it?"

"Trust me."

I did, letting my body relax, my arms and legs spreading out. The water held me, and I stared up at the dark ceiling, the fluorescent strips running its length like pale veins.

Coach moved closer, his hands appearing under my shoulders, then my lower back. “I’m going to support you. Don’t tense up. Just float.”

His touch was firm but not invasive, his palms warm against my skin. I forced myself to breathe, to let the water take my weight.

“Good,” he said. “Now close your eyes.”

I did, and the world narrowed to the sound of water lapping against the pool’s edges, the faint hum of the ventilation system, and the warmth of his hands steadying me.

“This is about control,” Coach said, his voice low. “You’re scared of losing it. On the platform. In your body. But control isn’t about forcing things. It’s about knowing when to let go.”

“Let go of what?”

“The fear. The doubt. The need to be perfect.”

His hands shifted slightly, one moving to the small of my back, the other to my shoulder blade. I felt the pressure of his fingers, grounding me, and something inside me loosened.

“You’ve been holding on so tight, Tessa,” he continued. “To the scholarship. To proving you’re still good enough. But you can’t move forward if you’re clenched up like a fist.”

I opened my eyes, staring up at the ceiling again. “What if I let go and I fall?”

“Then I catch you.”

His words hung there, simple and solid. I wanted to believe him, but the part of me that had been stuck for months—on the platform, in my bed, in my own head—wasn’t sure I knew how.

“We’ll work on it,” Coach said, his hands still supporting me. “One step at a time. Starting here.”

I floated there, the water cool and weightless around me, and for the first time in a year, I thought maybe I actually could find my way back to the edge.

Chapter 4

Coach Martinez had been my anchor since freshman year. When I’d arrived at Sterling, terrified and homesick, he’d been the one to pull me aside after tryouts and say, “You’ve got something special, Ortiz. Don’t waste it.” He’d pushed me through plateaus, talked me down from panic attacks before big meets, even helped me navigate financial aid paperwork when my parents got confused by the forms. He wasn’t just my coach—he was the reason I’d made it this far.

So when he said we’d try something new, I trusted him completely.

We met three more times that week, always early morning when the natatorium was empty. The trust exercises evolved—floating became guided breathing, then visualization work where he'd have me close my eyes and walk through each phase of a dive while standing on the deck. His voice stayed calm, measured, the same tone he used during competitions when everything else was chaos.

By Friday, I'd graduated to the three-meter board. Not the ten-meter platform yet, but progress.

My regular practice suit had finally given out two days ago—the fabric so worn at the seams it had torn when I pulled it on. I'd ordered a replacement online, but shipping took a week, so I'd dug out an old bikini-style competition suit from freshman year. Navy blue with Sterling's logo across the back. It fit, technically, though it sat lower on my hips and showed more skin than I was used to during training.

I came out of the locker room already second-guessing the choice. The bikini bottom didn't cover much, and I definitely hadn't bothered shaving in weeks. Dark hair curled out from the edges, visible against my thighs. Whatever. Coach had seen a hundred athletes in a hundred different suits. This was about diving, not appearance.

He was already in the water, swimming warm-up laps. I set my bag on the bleachers and walked to the three-meter board, climbing up without waiting for instruction. My toes gripped the textured surface at the end, and I looked down at the water.

Better. My chest wasn't as tight, my hands weren't shaking.

"Good, Tessa," Coach called from the pool. He'd pulled himself out and was standing at the edge, water streaming off his shoulders. "Walk me through the approach."

I turned, took three steps back, then executed the hurdle—that little hop at the end that sets up the dive. My form was clean, muscle memory kicking in, and when I landed back on the board, something like pride flickered in my chest.

"Again," he said.

I did it five more times, each one smoother than the last. By the sixth repetition, I was breathing hard but smiling. The board felt solid under me. My leg didn't ache.

"Come down," Coach said. "Let's talk about what's next."

I climbed down, my legs steady, and grabbed my towel. As I walked toward the bleachers, I caught Coach adjusting his shorts—the loose mesh Sterling Athletics ones we all wore. He turned slightly away, his hand tugging at the waistband, and I saw why. He had an erection, obvious even through the fabric.

My face went hot. I looked away quickly, wrapping the towel around my waist. The bikini suit. Of course. I'd just spent twenty minutes bending, jumping,

my body on full display in something way more revealing than usual. He was human. It happened. I felt mortified anyway.

Coach cleared his throat and sat on the bench, setting his clipboard across his lap. Covering it. His face was carefully neutral when I sat a few feet away.

“So,” he said, his voice perfectly normal. “The platform. We need to work up to it systematically. But there’s something I’ve noticed this week.”

“What?”

“Tension. In your shoulders when you climb the ladder. In your hips during the approach. Even in your jaw when you’re standing at the edge.” He gestured vaguely at me. “Your whole body’s still locked up, Tessa. The breathing helps, the visualization helps, but you need to find ways to release that tension outside of practice too.”

“Like what?”

“Whatever works for you. Some athletes run. Some do yoga. Some do progressive muscle relaxation before bed—you tense and release each muscle group, starting at your feet and working up.” He paused, his eyes on his clipboard. “The point is, if you’re carrying stress everywhere else in your life, it’s going to show up here. You need to find ways to let go.”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure what he meant exactly. Let go how?

“We’ll keep working on the trust exercises,” Coach continued. “But I want you to think about where else you’re holding on too tight. Fear doesn’t just live in your diving. It lives in your body. In your habits. You need to practice release in every part of your life.”

“Okay,” I said, though the word felt uncertain.

He stood, the clipboard still strategically positioned. “Same time Monday. And Tessa? You did good work today.”

I watched him walk toward his office, his gait slightly stiff, and tried not to think about what had just happened. It was nothing. A biological response to visual stimuli. Mortifying, sure, but not personal.

Still, my face burned the entire walk back to the locker room.

Chapter 5

That night, alone in my dorm room, I lay in bed and tried to make sense of Coach’s words. Release the tension. Let go. Practice it everywhere.

My roommate was out—some party off-campus again—and the room was silent except for the hum of the mini fridge. I should’ve been studying, but all I could

think about was the platform. The edge. The way my body locked up every time I got close.

And the other edge. The one I'd been avoiding thinking about.

I'd been trying to get off for weeks now, alone in this room, but every time I got close, the same thing happened. I'd be right there, on the verge, and then my mind would spiral. My body would tense. The release I craved would slip away.

Maybe that was what Coach meant. Not just diving. Everything.

I slid my hand down my stomach, under the waistband of my shorts. My fingers found the coarse hair I'd stopped bothering to trim, then moved lower. I was already wet—had been since the pool, if I was honest with myself.

I circled my clit slowly, my breath quickening. The heat built, spreading through my thighs, and I pressed harder, chasing the feeling. My hips lifted slightly off the mattress, my free hand gripping the sheets.

Almost. Almost.

My body tensed, every muscle pulling tight, and then—nothing. The same wall I always hit. The pleasure plateaued and faded, leaving me frustrated and aching.

I tried again, slower this time. Then faster. Then switching angles, pressure, rhythm. Nothing worked. The release stayed just out of reach, taunting me.

I yanked my hand away and groaned into my pillow. What the hell was wrong with me? I couldn't dive. I couldn't cum. My body had betrayed me in every way that mattered.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. A text from Coach Martinez: *Progress today. Monday we'll start work on the five-meter. Get some rest.*

I stared at the message, my pulse still racing from the failed attempt. Five meters. Halfway to the platform. I should've been excited, but all I could think about was how many edges I was stuck on.

Thanks, I typed back. *See you Monday.*

I set the phone down and rolled onto my side, pulling the blanket over my head. Monday felt very far away.

Chapter 6

By Monday, I'd thought about Coach's words a hundred times. Release. Let go. Practice it everywhere. I still didn't know what that meant, but I was desperate enough to ask.

I arrived at the natatorium early, before our scheduled session, and found Coach in his office. The door was open, and he was hunched over his desk, reviewing dive scores on his computer.

I knocked on the doorframe. “Coach?”

He spun around in his chair and looked up, his face brightening. “Tessa. You’re early.”

“I wanted to ask you something.” I stepped inside, my gym bag still slung over my shoulder. “About what you said Friday. The tension thing. I tried the muscle relaxation stuff, but I don’t think I’m doing it right. I still feel... stuck.”

Coach leaned back in his chair, studying me. “Stuck how?”

“Everywhere. On the board. In my body. I can’t—” I stopped, my face heating. How did I explain this without sounding fucking insane? “I can’t get past the edge. Any edge.”

His expression shifted, something I couldn’t read passing over his face. Understanding, maybe. Or concern.

“Okay,” he said finally. “Shut the door.”

I hesitated for half a second, then reached behind me and pushed the door closed. The latch clicked, loud in the small space, and suddenly the room felt much smaller.

Chapter 7

Coach Martinez gestured to the chair across from his desk. “Sit.”

I dropped into the seat, my gym bag sliding to the floor. The office was cramped, barely big enough for the desk, filing cabinet, and two chairs. Diving ribbons and team photos covered the walls—years of Sterling athletes frozen mid-flight.

He closed his laptop and folded his hands on the desk. “Tessa, I’m going to be straight with you. What you’re describing—this feeling of being stuck everywhere—that’s beyond what we can fix with dive drills.”

My stomach dropped. “So I’m screwed.”

“No. But I think you need additional support.” He leaned back in his chair. “There’s a grad student in the kinesiology program who works with the athletic department. Does physical therapy, body mechanics, that kind of thing. He’s been helping some of the gymnasts with similar issues—athletes who’ve had injuries and developed mental blocks.”

“Another therapist?”

“Not exactly. More like body work. He focuses on releasing tension patterns, retraining your nervous system to trust movement again.” Coach pulled out

his phone, scrolling. “His name’s Alex Reyes. He’s doing his PhD research on somatic responses to athletic trauma. The department gives athletes free sessions with him as part of his study.”

“Free?”

“Completely. And confidential—it’s research, so it’s protected.” He turned his phone toward me, showing a Sterling directory page. Alex Reyes, third-year PhD candidate, Kinesiology. The photo showed a guy maybe mid-twenties, Latino like me, with dark hair and an easy smile. “He’s not faculty, not a coach. Just a grad student who’s really good at what he does.”

I studied the photo. “What would he actually do?”

“Bodywork. Myofascial release, breathwork, movement therapy. He’d help you figure out where you’re holding the trauma physically and teach you how to let it go.” Coach pocketed his phone. “Look, I can get you back on the platform mechanically. But the fear you’re carrying? That’s living in your muscles, your fascia, your nervous system. Alex knows how to work with that in ways I don’t.”

“And you think this would help? With diving?”

“I think it would help with everything. The gymnasts who’ve worked with him say he’s almost magic.” Coach’s expression turned serious. “You’ve got less than three weeks, Tessa. We need to try everything.”

I chewed my lip. Another person to explain my mess to. Another admission that I was broken. But if it meant keeping my scholarship...

“Okay. Can you get me his info?”

Coach was already typing on his phone. “I’ll text you his number. Tell him I referred you. He usually responds fast.”

Chapter 8

Alex Reyes texted back within an hour: *Hey Tessa. Coach M told me about your situation. I’ve got a slot tonight at 7 if you want it. My lab space is in the Kinesiology building, room 214.*

I stared at the message. Tonight. No time to overthink it.

I’ll be there, I typed back.

The Kinesiology building was across campus from the athletics center, all modern glass and steel. I found room 214 on the second floor—a large space with padded mats on the floor, a massage table in one corner, and anatomical charts covering the walls. It smelled like eucalyptus and something else, maybe lavender.

Alex was waiting, wearing athletic pants and a Sterling Kinesiology t-shirt that showed off lean, muscled arms. He was taller than his photo suggested, with warm brown eyes and that same easy smile.

“Tessa, right?” He extended a hand. “Thanks for coming on short notice.”

His handshake was firm, his palm warm and slightly calloused. I noticed his forearms—defined, strong, the kind you got from hands-on work, not just gym time.

“Thanks for fitting me in,” I said.

“Of course. Coach Martinez said you’re dealing with some blocks after an injury.” He gestured to the mats. “Want to tell me about it?”

I went through the story again—the knee injury, the year off, the freezing on the platform. Alex listened without interrupting, his eyes attentive, nodding occasionally.

“And Coach mentioned you’re having trouble with tension release in general,” he said when I finished. “Not just diving.”

My face heated. “Yeah. I don’t know why.”

“I do.” He stood and walked to the anatomical charts, pointing to one showing the nervous system. “When you experience trauma—physical or emotional—your body goes into protective mode. It locks down, holds tension, tries to keep you safe. That pattern gets stuck in your nervous system, and suddenly you can’t release anywhere. Not in diving, not in sleep, not even sexually.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that some of my embarrassment faded.

“So how do I unstick it?”

“We teach your body that it’s safe again. Through touch, through movement, through breath.” He turned back to me. “It’s hands-on work, Tessa. I’ll be touching you—your shoulders, your back, your hips—wherever you’re holding tension. It’s therapeutic, but it can feel intense. You need to tell me if anything feels wrong or if you want to stop. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. Go ahead and take off your shoes and lie face-down on the mat. You can keep your clothes on.”

I kicked off my sneakers and lay down, my cheek against the soft mat. The room was warm, the lighting low. I heard Alex moving around, then the sound of him settling beside me.

“I’m going to start with your shoulders,” he said. “Just breathe.”

His hands pressed into my upper back, firm and sure, finding knots I didn’t know were there. I winced.

“That’s it. That’s where you’re holding it.” His thumbs worked in slow circles, applying pressure that hurt in a good way. “Breathe into it. Don’t fight it.”

I tried, dragging air into my lungs. His hands moved lower, down my spine, across my shoulder blades. Everywhere he touched, my muscles screamed and then softened.

“You carry a lot here,” he murmured. “In your mid-back. That’s fear. Anxiety.”

“How can you tell?”

“Everyone holds emotion somewhere. Athletes tend to store it in their bodies more than other people because you live so much in the physical.” His hands reached my lower back, just above my hips, and I gasped. “There. That’s the big one.”

The pressure was almost unbearable, a deep ache that made my eyes water. But underneath it was something else—a strange, warm sensation spreading through my pelvis.

“This is where sexual tension lives,” Alex said, his voice low and calm. “And creative energy. You’ve been locked down here, Tessa. Your body’s trying to protect you from getting hurt again, but it’s also cutting you off from everything good.”

“How do I fix it?”

“We release it. Slowly. Over a few sessions.” His hands worked in slow, deliberate movements, pressing and releasing, coaxing my muscles to let go. “For tonight, just focus on breathing. On feeling where you’re tight and imagining that tightness melting.”

I tried. His hands moved to my hips, my outer thighs, places no one had touched in months. The sensation was weird—therapeutic but also intimate in a way that made my skin feel too sensitive.

“Roll over,” Alex said after what felt like hours.

I flipped onto my back, blinking up at the ceiling. My body felt loose and heavy, like I’d just finished a hard workout.

Alex knelt beside me, his hands moving to my shoulders again, then down my arms. “How do you feel?”

“Strange. Good, but strange.”

“That’s normal. You’re releasing things you’ve been holding for a long time.” His hands moved to my ribs, pressing gently. “Breathe deep. Let your belly expand.”

I did, and his palms followed the movement, warm and steady against my sides. When he reached my hip bones, his thumbs pressing into the muscle just inside them, I bit back a sound.

“Sensitive?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“That’s your psoas. It’s connected to your fight-or-flight response. When you’re stressed, it contracts to protect your vital organs. Yours is like steel.” His thumbs worked deeper, and I couldn’t stop the small whimper that escaped. “I know. Just breathe through it.”

The pressure was intense, bordering on painful, but underneath it was that same warm spreading sensation. My hips shifted involuntarily, and I felt heat rising in my face.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Alex said, his voice gentle. “That’s a normal response. You’re waking up parts of your body that have been shut down.”

“It feels...”

“Sexual?” He didn’t look fazed. “Like I said, it’s all connected. When we release trauma in this area, it can trigger arousal. That’s your nervous system coming back online.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

Alex sat back, giving me space. “That’s enough for tonight. You did good work.”

I sat up slowly, my body feeling foreign and too alive. “What now?”

“You’ll probably feel emotional over the next day or two. Maybe cry, maybe get angry. That’s part of the release. Just let it happen.” He stood and offered me a hand up. “And we should meet again before your scholarship review. Twice more, at least. This isn’t a one-session fix.”

His hand was warm and strong in mine as he pulled me to my feet. I stood too close to him for a moment, catching a hint of his scent—clean sweat and something woody.

“When?” I asked.

“How about Friday? Same time?”

“Okay.”

I left the building feeling like my skin didn’t quite fit right, my body humming with something I couldn’t name. When I got back to my dorm, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, Alex’s hands still vivid in my memory.

That night, I tried touching myself again. The warmth came faster this time, the pleasure building in waves. I thought about his thumbs pressing into my hips, his voice low and calm, the way my body had responded under his hands.

I got close—closer than I’d been in weeks—but the release still slipped away at the last second.

Not yet. But almost.

Chapter 9

Coach Martinez called me into his office Monday morning with news I didn't expect: the athletic department had granted me a medical extension on my scholarship review. Six more months to get back to competition level, no questions asked.

"How?" I asked, still processing.

"I made the case that you've shown consistent progress, that the injury wasn't your fault, and that you're working with specialists to address the psychological component." He smiled. "They agreed. You've got breathing room, Tessa."

I should've been relieved. Ecstatic, even. And part of me was. But another part—the part that had been clawing its way back to the platform, that had finally started to feel something shift in my body—that part wasn't satisfied.

"I still want to dive," I said. "I still want to fix this."

"I know. And we will. But now you can do it without the clock ticking." Coach leaned back in his chair. "Keep working with Alex if it's helping. Keep working with me. We'll get you there."

I nodded, but my mind was already elsewhere. On Friday. On Alex's hands pressing into my hips, the strange warmth that had spread through me, the way I'd gotten so close that night alone in bed.

When I texted Alex about the scholarship extension, his response came quickly: *That's great news. Does that mean you want to stop the sessions?*

I stared at my phone, my thumb hovering over the keyboard. I could stop. The pressure was off. But I didn't want to.

No, I typed. I still want to work on it. The diving. And the other stuff.

Three dots appeared, disappeared, appeared again. *Okay. But if we continue, I need to be clear about something. The research study was tied to your scholarship timeline. Now that that's resolved, you're technically released as a research subject.*

My pulse quickened. *What does that mean?*

It means I'm not your therapist anymore. We can still work together if you want, but it would be as... friends, I guess. Peers. No official capacity.

I read the message three times, my heart doing something complicated in my chest.

I'd like that, I sent back.

Friday still work?

Yes.

Chapter 10

Practice that week was different. I wore the bikini suit again—my replacement still hadn’t arrived—and worked my way up the platforms without the desperate edge I’d carried before. Five meters, seven meters, back to ten. I still couldn’t make myself dive from the top, but I could stand there now. Look down. Breathe.

Coach noticed. “You’re looser,” he said after I climbed down from the ten-meter for the third time that session. “Whatever you’re doing, it’s working.”

“I’m trying,” I said.

That night, alone in my room, I tried again. Touching myself, chasing the edge I’d been stuck behind for months. I got close—so close my thighs shook and my breath came in gasps—but the release still slipped away at the last second.

I wanted to scream.

By Friday, I was wound tight with frustration and something else. Anticipation, maybe. Curiosity. When I showed up at Alex’s lab space, he was setting up the mats, but the clinical atmosphere felt different now. Less like a medical appointment, more like meeting a friend.

“Hey,” he said, smiling. “How was the week?”

“Good. Frustrating.” I set my bag down. “I’m getting closer to diving from ten meters. But the other thing...” I trailed off, my face heating.

“Still stuck?”

“Yeah.”

Alex nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. “Okay. I’ve been thinking about that. About what might help.” He gestured to the mat. “Sit with me for a minute. Let’s just talk.”

I sat cross-legged across from him, my hands twisting in my lap.

“Here’s the thing,” Alex said. “You’ve made huge progress physically. Your body’s releasing the trauma, coming back online. But there’s still a control issue. You get close and then your brain kicks in, starts overthinking, analyzing, trying to force it.”

“So what do I do?”

“You have to take your brain out of the equation.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Look, this isn’t research anymore. I’m not your therapist. I’m just a

guy who knows some techniques that might help. But they're... intense. And intimate. I need to know you're comfortable with that."

My mouth went dry. "What kind of techniques?"

"Sensory deprivation. It's used in trauma therapy sometimes—you remove external stimuli so the person can focus entirely on internal sensation. No thinking, no analyzing. Just feeling." He met my eyes. "For you, that would mean I'd guide you through bodywork while you couldn't see or hear. Just touch and breath."

"You mean like blindfolded?"

"Essentially. And wearing headphones with white noise or music. The goal is to overwhelm your other senses so you can't overthink. Your body takes over." He paused. "But Tessa, I need you to understand—this isn't therapy anymore. If we do this, it's because you're asking me as a friend. As someone who wants to help. Not as a researcher or therapist."

"I get it."

"And you can stop me anytime. Take off the headphones, the eye covering, tell me to back off. This only works if you feel completely safe." His voice was serious, his eyes searching mine. "Do you feel safe with me?"

I thought about his hands on my back, my hips, the way he'd been careful and steady through everything. "Yes."

"Okay. Then let's try it. But only if you want to."

I took a breath. "I want to. I need to get past this."

Chapter 11

Alex had me lie face-down on the mat again, my cheek against the soft padding. He brought over headphones—big, over-ear ones—and a sleep mask.

"I'm going to put these on you," he said. "The headphones have ambient music. Not loud, just enough to blur out external sound. The mask blocks out light. Once they're on, it's just you and whatever you're feeling. Okay?"

"Okay."

He slipped the mask over my eyes first. The world went dark, my other senses immediately sharpening. I heard him moving, felt the air shift as he settled beside me. Then the headphones went on, and sound became muffled, distant, replaced by soft instrumental music that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

My heart raced. I couldn't see. Couldn't hear clearly. My body tensed automatically.

Then Alex's hands pressed into my shoulders, firm and grounding, and something in me remembered: safe. He's safe.

His hands moved slowly, methodically, working down my spine. Without sight, every touch felt magnified—the warmth of his palms, the pressure of his thumbs, the way my muscles responded. I couldn't anticipate where he'd touch next, couldn't brace myself. I could only feel.

His hands reached my lower back, pressing into the muscles there. I gasped—the sound strange and muffled to my own ears. The pressure was intense, almost too much, but I breathed into it the way he'd taught me.

Then his hands moved lower, to my hips, and I felt my body react in ways I couldn't control. Heat spread through my pelvis, pooling low in my belly. His thumbs worked into the muscles just above my hip bones, and I bit my lip to keep from making a sound.

Time became strange, fluid. I didn't know if he'd been working on me for minutes or hours. My body felt heavy and electric at once, every nerve ending awake.

His hands moved to my outer thighs, then inner thighs, pressing into muscles I didn't know I'd been tensing. The touch was clinical—or should have been—but without sight or sound to ground me, it felt like nothing else existed except his hands and my body's response.

I felt him guide me to roll over. I did, my limbs loose and clumsy. The mask and headphones stayed on, keeping me in darkness and muffled sound.

His hands returned to my shoulders, then my ribs. Moved lower to my hips again. This time when his thumbs pressed into my hip flexors, I couldn't stop the sound that escaped—half gasp, half moan.

The pressure was perfect and terrible, releasing something deep and aching. My hips shifted involuntarily, lifting slightly off the mat, and I felt wetness between my thighs, impossible to hide in the thin fabric of my leggings.

Alex's hands stilled. Then slowly, deliberately, they moved to the top of my thighs—not touching intimately, but close enough that I could feel the heat of his palms radiating through the fabric.

My whole body was shaking. The sensation building in me wasn't just arousal—it was bigger than that, overwhelming, like something breaking open.

His hands moved back to my hips, holding them steady, grounding me while my body trembled. I couldn't think, couldn't analyze. I could only feel: his touch, my breath, the heat coursing through me.

And then—without him touching me anywhere sexual, without anything explicit happening—I felt it. The edge I'd been chasing for months. Not just close this time.

Right there.

My body arched, my breath catching, and I hovered on the precipice of release, closer than I'd ever been. So close it was almost painful.

Alex's hands pressed firmly into my hips, anchoring me, and his voice cut through the music in the headphones—low and steady: "Let go, Tessa. Stop fighting it."

But I couldn't. Even now, even here, some part of me held on. The release stayed just out of reach, shimmering at the edge of my awareness.

After a moment that felt like forever, Alex's hands lifted away. I felt the headphones slide off, then the mask, and light flooded my vision. I blinked up at him, my chest heaving, my body still trembling.

"How close?" he asked softly.

"So close." My voice came out ragged. "Right there. But I couldn't—"

"I know." He sat back, giving me space. "You're almost there, Tessa. Your body's ready. It's just your mind holding on."

I sat up slowly, my whole body feeling too sensitive, too raw. "What do I do?"

"Practice. What we just did—the sensory deprivation, the release work—do that yourself at home. Touch yourself the way I touched you. Don't think about the goal. Just feel." He met my eyes, something unreadable in his expression. "And if you need help... if you need to do this again with me... just ask."

My face burned, but I nodded.

That night, alone in my room, I tried. I lay in the dark, headphones on, and touched myself the way Alex had touched me—slow, firm, deliberate. I thought about his hands on my hips, his voice telling me to let go.

I got so close. Closer than ever. But still, the release wouldn't come.

I fell asleep frustrated and aching, Alex's last words echoing in my head: *If you need help... just ask.*

Chapter 12

Tuesday night, ten days after my last session with Alex, I lay in my dorm bed with the lights off and my roommate gone for the evening. I'd stopped trying so hard. Stopped chasing it like something I could force.

I started with breath, the way Alex had taught me. Long inhales, slow exhales. My hand moved down my stomach, under the waistband of my sleep shorts, finding warmth and wetness. I touched myself slowly, no goal in mind. Just sensation.

The heat built differently this time. Not frantic, not desperate. Just rising, spreading through my thighs and belly like water finding its level.

I thought about standing at the edge of the ten-meter platform that afternoon. How I'd looked down and my body hadn't locked up. How Coach had called up "whenever you're ready" and I'd almost jumped. Almost.

My fingers moved in steady circles, and I felt it building—that edge I'd been chasing for months. But instead of tensing, trying to force it, I breathed into it. Let it rise.

My hips lifted off the mattress. My free hand gripped the sheets. The pleasure crested, and this time—finally—I didn't stop it.

I let go.

The orgasm rolled through me in waves, my body arching, my mouth opening in a silent gasp. It went on and on, longer and deeper than I'd imagined, leaving me shaking and breathless.

When it finally faded, I lay there stunned. I'd done it. I'd gotten past the edge.

I grabbed my phone with trembling hands and texted Alex before I could overthink it: *I did it. Just now. By myself.*

His response came fast: *That's amazing, Tessa. I'm proud of you.*

I stared at the screen, my heart still racing. Then I typed: *I want to see you. Not for work. Just... to see you.*

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

When?

Now. Come to my dorm.

A longer pause this time. Then: *Are you sure?*

Yes. Room 412, Morrison Hall.

I'll be there in 20.

Chapter 13

I stood and looked around the small room—my roommate's side cluttered with textbooks and laundry, my side sparse and organized. I changed quickly, pulling on dark jeans that hugged my hips and a loose white tank top, no bra underneath. I left my hair down, the curls wild and untamed around my shoulders.

When the knock came, I opened the door to find Alex in athletic joggers and a hoodie, his hair slightly messy like he'd been running his hands through it.

"Hey," he said softly.

“Hey.” I stepped back to let him in, then closed and locked the door behind him.

He stood in the middle of the small room, his hands in his pockets. “Tessa, what is this?”

“I wanted to thank you. For helping me.” I moved closer, close enough to see the flecks of gold in his brown eyes. “And I wanted... I don’t know. To see what it feels like. With someone else. With you.”

His jaw tightened. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I know. This isn’t about owing.” I reached for the hem of my tank top. “This is about wanting.”

I pulled the shirt over my head, my curls falling back around my bare shoulders. Alex’s eyes darkened, his gaze moving over my small breasts, my lean stomach, the tan lines from my practice suit.

“Tessa—”

“Sensory deprivation,” I said, reaching for the button of my jeans. “That’s what worked, right? Taking my brain out of it. Just feeling.”

I pushed my jeans down over my hips, stepping out of them. I wore simple black underwear, cotton, practical. I hooked my thumbs in the waistband and slid them down too, standing naked in front of him.

His breathing changed, deepened. “You want to do that? Here?”

“Yes.” I walked to the light switch and flipped it off. The room plunged into darkness—no windows in this interior room, just complete blackness. “No sight. No thinking. Just this.”

I heard him move, heard the rustle of fabric as he pulled off his hoodie. His footsteps crossed the small space, and then his hands found my shoulders, warm and sure.

“Tell me to stop if you need to,” he said, his voice low and rough.

“I won’t need to.”

His hands slid down my arms, then back up to my neck, my jaw. He pulled me against him, and I felt his bare chest, the lean muscle, the heat of his skin. Lower, I felt his hardness through his joggers, pressing against my stomach.

He walked me backward until my legs hit the bed. I sat, then lay back, and he knelt beside me on the narrow mattress.

His hands moved over me in the darkness—my shoulders, my ribs, my stomach. Every touch magnified without sight, without any sense of what came next. His palms cupped my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples, and I gasped at the sensation.

“You’re shaking,” he murmured.

“Good shaking.”

His hands moved lower, over my hips, my thighs. He pressed into the muscles there the way he had in the lab, but this was different. No clinical distance. Just heat and want.

His fingers trailed up my inner thighs, and I opened for him instinctively. When he reached the apex, he paused.

“Wow,” he breathed. “You’re soaking wet.”

“I know.”

His fingers slid through my wetness, exploring, learning. I arched into his touch, my hands fisting in the sheets. He found my clit and circled it slowly, and pleasure shot through me like lightning.

I’d touched myself for months, chasing this feeling. But his hands were different—sure and skilled, reading every gasp and shiver. He varied pressure and speed, building me up in waves.

“Don’t think,” he said, his mouth close to my ear. “Just feel.”

I did. His fingers worked me steadily, and I felt the edge approaching faster than I expected. My hips lifted, chasing the sensation, and he used his other hand to press firmly into my lower belly, grounding me the way he had in the lab.

The dual pressure—inside and out—sent me spiraling. The orgasm built and built, bigger than the one I’d had alone, and when it finally broke, I cried out into the darkness.

My body convulsed around his fingers, wave after wave of pleasure crashing through me. Alex didn’t stop, didn’t let up, drawing it out until I was gasping and trembling beneath him.

When I finally stilled, he withdrew his hand slowly and lay down beside me, pulling me against his chest.

We stayed like that in the darkness, my body still humming, his heart beating steady against my back.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?”

“For helping me find my way back.”

His arm tightened around me. “You did that yourself, Tessa. You were never really lost.”

Epilogue

Three weeks later, I stood at the edge of the ten-meter platform at the Sterling Invitational. The pool stretched below me, blue and impossibly far. The crowd noise was muffled by distance and adrenaline.

I could see Coach Martinez at poolside, his clipboard forgotten in his hands. In the stands, I spotted Alex, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

I took three steps back. Inhaled. Exhaled.

Then I ran.

My feet hit the end of the platform, and I launched. For one breathless second, I hung suspended—weightless, fearless, free.

Then I tucked into the rotation. One and a half somersaults, pike position. My body remembered everything, muscle memory taking over. The water rushed up to meet me, and I straightened, entering clean and straight.

The cold shocked through me as I knifed into the pool. I kicked hard, surfaced, and heard the roar of applause.

When I pulled myself out, Coach was there, grinning. “That’s my diver.”

I looked up at the stands and found Alex. He was standing now, clapping, his smile visible even from here.

I’d made it over the edge. Both of them.

And I was finally flying.

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