

LAURA'S 72-HOUR HOLD
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Part 2: Thursday Evening

Once the hospital van turned onto the main road outside the exam center, Laura took a closer look at her surroundings. The van cabin was decently lit, and completely closed off from the driver and passenger seats. There was a pinhole camera in one of the corners of the cabin, linked to a video monitor in the passenger-side dashboard, so the orderlies could observe the newly labeled mental patients.

The harness straps extending from behind her shoulders down to her lap kept her pressed into the vinyl cushioning. She tried to lean forward just an inch or so, to remove some of the pressure on her back from all the straitjacket buckles, but it was to no avail. All she could do was turn her head and observe the remaining five sets of restraints on the two benches running the length of the van cabin, and wonder about the women who might occupy those spaces.

Less than two hours ago, Laura Granger had a charmed life: young, intelligent, athletic, confident, and gorgeous. Now, due to a computerized test and one man's opinion, she found herself remanded to the County Mental Hospital for 72 hours of further testing and observation. She felt branded as a dangerous mental patient, a raving lunatic, unhinged and hysterical, unable to be taken seriously as an adult. In fact, that's exactly how she felt, like a little child or a baby who had to be swaddled and bundled, and protected from herself and her surroundings.

Under the two heavy canvas straitjackets, her shoulders began to ache, and she was unable to take deep breaths due to the tightness of the jackets and the fact that both of her arms were pressed against her upper abdomen, unable to move due to the large hoop they were inserted into on the inner straitjacket and the two straps holding the sleeves closed behind her. The brown leather muzzle was pressed securely against her face and head, holding a foam ball which filled her mouth so completely she was glad she didn't have a stuffed nose. The padded leather cuffs locked around her ankles, connected by two leather leashes, prevented Laura's long, strong legs from any strides longer than 18 inches.

The van came to stop, and Laura could only faintly hear the front doors open and close, due to the thick insulation of the cabin. Several minutes went by before the cabin door was flung open, and Laura could see several large orderlies doing their best to keep a grip on the grunting, growling bundle in their hands. Laura could only see glimpses of the woman thrashing about: a boot heel here, a flash of black hair there. The orderlies shoved the woman into the middle seat of the bench across from Laura, using their bulk to keep her in place as they attached the restraints. After a few minutes, all the straps were locked on, and the sweating orderlies piled out the cabin and slammed the door shut as soon as they could.

After the van started up again, Laura took her first good look at the woman. She saw a dark-skinned, exotic beauty with shiny black hair, wearing a straitjacket made out of heavy black leather, with a brown leather yoke riveted around the high neck and extending in a circular pattern around the shoulders and chest of the jacket, tapering down to a four-inch-wide section running vertically down the front of the jacket, ending in a two-inch-wide crotch strap. There were also brown leather reinforcing the elbows and the ends of the sleeves, with two wide leather belts holding the wrists in the sleeves, and wide leather loops attached to the front and sides of the jacket for her arms to go through, similar to those on Laura's jacket. Overall, Laura thought the woman's restraint made her own look like a thin T-shirt in comparison.

The woman had a three-inch wide, white rubber ball gag jammed deeply past her teeth, held in place by a 1-1/2 inch leather strap which buckled behind her head, and a smaller strap extending from the main strap around her chin and attaching to the other side, as if she could possibly have opened her mouth any wider. The woman was wearing tight blue jeans tucked into black leather knee boots with stacked heels, and she had not one, but two sets of leather cuffs locked on her ankles and lower shins.

Despite the layers and layers of oppressive fabric, the other woman continued to fight and thrash away as best as she could. She repeatedly tested the harness and seat straps, and harmlessly banged her head

against the high back cushions. It took several moments before she even noticed Laura's presence in the cabin, and as their eyes locked, Laura felt an overwhelming panic, despite all the restraints. For some reason, perhaps due to the sight of another woman in similar straits, the other woman stopped struggling, and the rage shooting out of her brown eyes dissipated and turned into compassion. Laura did her best to return the favor, nodding towards the woman.

Ten minutes elapsed before the van stopped again. This time, the door opened slowly, and the orderlies brought in two women: a cute, blue-eyed blonde of average height and a petite girl with wavy brown hair and large, almost-anime-style brown eyes. The orderlies strapped them in the two remaining seats on Laura's side of the cabin with some difficulty, but far from the trouble they had with the first woman. Both women were wearing standard Posey straitjackets and leather leg cuffs; neither had the extra reinforcements Laura and the first woman sported. Both women also had prod gags strapped into their mouths. The brown-haired girl wore light blue skinny jeans tucked into light brown high-heeled boots. The blonde just had dark pantyhose on her legs and a set of four-inch-heels strapped on her feet; Laura guessed her skirt was on its way to her parents, too.

The four women looked at each other in astonishment at their shared predicament, and began to grunt and moan through their gags, in an attempt at communication. After a while, though, they began to avoid each other's gaze and withdrew into themselves as the van headed to the County Mental Hospital, on the far outskirts of town.

The County Mental Hospital consisted on two tall buildings, segregated by gender, surrounded by a 10-foot-high concrete wall and a few acres of heavy forest. The orderlies in the van showed their IDs to the guard on duty, along with a list of the involuntary passengers. After a cursory study, the guard pressed a button which opened the heavy iron gate, the only public access onto the grounds of the hospital. The van drove past the well-groomed lawns surrounding the hospital, and went around the back of the women's building. The driver backed the van up to a low loading dock, which was flush with the bottom of the door to the cabin.

The van door was opened, and the male orderlies removed the restraints on the women, one at a time. As each woman as freed from her seat, she was handed off to two female orderlies, who held her on each side and slowly led her to a freight elevator inside the loading dock. Laura was the last one to leave the van; when she and the two orderlies holding her transport jacket handles got to the large elevator, she saw the other three women each facing one of the corners of the elevator, held firmly in place by the orderlies. Laura herself was led to the remaining corner, the one closest to the floor buttons, and one of her orderlies pressed the button for the top floor.

There had been a gradual decrease in the number of female mental patients at the County Mental Hospital for the past decade and a half, and the top two floors of the womens' building were gradually abandoned and used for storage. When the new mental health laws were passed, the powers that be decided to refurbish the top floor for the women committed with temporary holds, to keep them as isolated from the long-term mental patients on the lower floors as possible.

The elevator finally reached the top floor, and Laura was the first patient led out into the temporary holds ward. She noticed a few benches to the left of and in front of the elevator doors, and a locked door labeled "PATIENTS' WAITING ROOM" next to them. To the right of the elevator was the main desk, and the orderlies led Laura to the two nurses working behind the desk.

"Laura Granger, 19," the orderly on Laura's left announced.

"Granger, Granger," the head nurse, a kindly-looking woman in her 50s, said to herself as she ran her fingers across the admissions files. "Ah, here she is." She grabbed a thin manila folder and scanned through the medical information, which had been faxed to the hospital directly from the exam center. The head nurse looked up and noticed Laura's high-collared, step-in transport jacket. "Were there any

violence notes about her?"

The orderly on Laura's right removed a small scanner from her pocket and pressed a few buttons. "No, the transport orderlies didn't record anything special," she said to the head nurse.

"All right, then, you can take her back to room B," the head nurse replied, pointing to a door behind the desk. The orderlies led Laura inside a small, standard hospital examination room, guided her into a chair, and stood next to her with a hand on each of her shoulders. Laura heard the head nurse instructing the junior nurse on duty to process the other patients, as she entered the room and closed the door. She pulled up a chair a few feet in front of Laura and sat down.

"Laura, my name is Nurse Jodie," she started, in gentle, measured tones. "I'd like to talk with you a little, if you're calm enough. If we removed your gag, would you promise not to scream, spit, or bite?" Laura nodded vigorously, and at Nurse Jodie's signal, the orderlies began to unbuckle the leather muzzle. Nurse Jodie took this time to put on a pair of rubber gloves, and as the orderlies pulled the web of unbuckled leather straps out from behind Laura's head, the nurse put her hands behind the harness and began to work the gag out of Laura's mouth. The orderlies each grabbed one of the transport handles with one hand to hold Laura back, and used their free hand to grab a handful of Laura's glossy red hair. Laura felt the rubber-covered fingers of Nurse Jodie squirm along the roof of her mouth, trying to press down the foam and pull it forward. After about 30 seconds of struggle, the saliva-sodden foam mass was completely removed from Laura's mouth, as she let out a groan of relief. Laura painfully worked her jaw muscles as the orderlies removed their grip on her hair and shoulders. Nurse Jodie removed the soggy ball from the muzzle and tossed it in the biohazard trash container, and placed the muzzle in a large plastic bin marked "RETURN TO EXAM CENTER" with the number 12 written in marker next to it.

Nurse Jodie returned to her seat. "Now, Laura, I'd like to ask you a few questions. Are you able to talk now, or do you need a few minutes?"

Laura moved her jaw a few more times as she felt the warm flush of blood returning to her lower face. "No, ma'am, I'm fine now."

"Good. Do you know your full name?"

"Laura Maryanne Granger."

"And how old are you?"

"I turned 19 yesterday."

"Do you have a job, or are you still in school?"

"I just got back from my first semester in college."

"Do you have a major yet?"

"Yes, ma'am; mathematics."

"Smart girl." Laura smiled; it was nice to be seen as a human being and not as a headcase.

"Now then, do you know where you are right now?"

"I think I'm at the County Mental Hospital."

"That's correct. You're in the women's' building. Do you know why you're here?"

Laura sighed. "Well, the psychiatrist who talked to me at the exam center said that I was supposedly

developing emotional problems due to the pressures at college, so he wanted me held here for 72 hours."

Nurse Jodie nodded. "You say 'supposedly'; I take it you don't agree with the doctor's diagnosis?"

Laura squirmed a bit and looked down at her restraints. "I just think this is all a little extreme, that's all."

"Let me assure you, Laura, that none of us are here to hurt you. We know how stressful this situation must be for you, and everyone here on the ward wants to help you get through this. Now the psychiatrist was just doing his job in seeking out early warning signs of possible neuroses, so they could be nipped in the bud. We'll need to keep you here for a few days, so we can give you more advanced tests and observe your behavior. Believe me, if you don't need to be here, we don't want you here. Just work diligently with the therapists here and your stay will be as painless as possible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, nurse, I do."

"Great! Now, seeing as neither the nurse at the exam center nor the transport orderlies identified you as being violent or resisting, I'm not sure why they have you in two straitjackets. Probably because you're a tall, strong girl. I'd like to remove your transport jacket and ankle cuffs and get you as comfortable as possible before the psychiatrist on duty here meets with you. We would have to keep the straitjacket on you, for safety's sake. Would you like that?"

A relieved Laura replied, "Yes, ma'am! I won't lash out or be violent at all."

"Super!" Nurse Jodie replied, as she rose out of her chair. She looked to the orderlies and said, "Place her in the waiting room when you're done." The nurse turned back to Laura and smiled. "Now, it's important that we keep things as calm as possible on the ward, so I must ask you not to talk to the other women. We don't want the patients getting excited and out of hand."

"I understand, ma'am."

Nurse Jodie smiled. "It was very nice talking to you, Laura. Just work with the staff and stay calm, and you'll get through this just fine. Take care, Laura." Nurse Jodie took Laura's ID card out of the pocket on the transport jacket, placed it in the folder, and left the room.

The orderlies stood Laura up off of the chair and quickly unlocked the buckles on the transport jacket and hobble. As they peeled the transport jacket off of Laura's straitjacketed torso, she immediately felt several degrees cooler. The orderlies dumped the restraints in the bin with the muzzle, and grabbed Laura's straitjacket. "Now, walk slowly and keep your feet close to the ground, and we'll take you to the waiting room to relax for a bit," one orderly said.

"How long will it take for the psychiatrist to see me?"

"Well, we've got three other girls here, but it probably won't be more than an hour. Then you can get out of this jacket and into a patient uniform. Now, let's go."

The three of them slowly made their way out of Room B, stepping in front of the main desk and walking towards the waiting room door. One of the orderlies unlocked it, and they led Laura inside and released her. "Just take a seat, and wait for the psychiatrist." They left the room and locked the door behind them.

The patients' waiting room was about 12 by 20 feet, with a large picture window at one end and an HDTV at the other, showing a nature program on the local PBS station. The walls were painted off-white, with two large signs stating "NO TALKING PLEASE", and four rows of chairs were bolted to the floor, facing the TV. Laura didn't see the woman in the black leather straitjacket in the room; perhaps she was such a

threat that she had to be kept in a separate location, she thought. The other two women were there, sitting in different rows, and noticed that they also had their gags and hobbles removed. However, they too still had their straitjackets strapped on. Laura and the blonde silently nodded to each other, while the other girl rested her head on the seat back in front of her and kept her eyes towards the floor.

Laura walked towards the picture window, to get a much-needed glimpse of the outside world. The window was on the side of the building furthest away from the men's building, so all Laura saw was the forest surrounding the hospital grounds. Laura saw a flock of geese flying across the setting sun, and sighed deeply as she leaned her straitjacketed frame against the window. She felt completely disoriented by the experiences of the past two hours. She should've been hanging out with her girlfriends, dancing at the hottest new clubs, and flirting with cute guys. But instead, she had been committed to a mental hospital, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey, and driven around in a windowless van, leaving her with no good idea where the hospital was in respect to the city. She felt totally isolated from her life, and trapped in this new identity of a female mental patient.

And what about her parents? She could imagine them at home, getting the call informing them that their only daughter, the light of their lives, was hauled off to the County Mental Hospital after taking her psychiatric exam. How would they react? Would they blame themselves? They had had misgivings about sending her to live at the university, even though it was a mere hour's drive from their home. Her mother had even floated the idea of her staying at home and attending the nearby community college for the first 2 years, but Laura and her father had quickly shot that down. She could see her mother sobbing, her worst fears coming true, as her father tried to comfort her and to quell his own rising fears . . .

"Hey, can you help me?"

A startled Laura turned away from the window to see the brown-haired girl standing by her side. "I'm sorry, I wasn't . . ."

"I'm really sorry to bother you, but I really need to get out of here," the girl quickly said. She seemed especially nervous and jittery, rocking back and forth on her feet and squirming inside her straitjacket. "This is all a big, BIG misunderstanding and I gotta get in touch with my parents and my boss and my cats and --"

"OK, OK, slow down, slow down," Laura responded, "be calm, all right? They told us not to talk, and if there's been a mistake, the doctor can --"

"Oh no no no no no no no noooooo," the girl interrupted, shaking her head. "I am NOT letting those head shrinkers rearrange my furniture. Once they track their muddy boots across the rug, no amount of feng shui can restore the balance, ya dig?"

"Ummmmmm, sure, I understand," said Laura uneasily.

"That's why I need you - 'cause *she's* not being much help," the girl said, nodding towards the blonde. She turned her back to Laura. "Here - untie me."

"What?!"

"Use your teeth. You look like you have good teeth. C'mon, hurry up!"

"Wait, wait, wait. This is a really bad idea."

"No, don't worry, I'll undo your jacket right after you get me out, and we can both escape the home wreckers!"

"How are you going to unlock that door, much less get out of the building and get over the concrete wall?"

We must be 10 stories up; someone's bound to grab us on the way down."

"I've got a secret plan for that. I can't tell you what it is, 'cause they'll torture it out of you. Now, come on, hurry up." The girl started jumping at Laura, and Laura began to back away.

"No, all right? I can't help you that way." Laura began to walk towards the front of the waiting room, but was followed by the anxious brown-haired girl. Laura crossed in front of the TV and glanced towards the blonde, who was sitting with her eyes closed and mouth slightly ajar; either she was genuinely asleep or she was trying to stay out of this mess.

Laura walked down the other side of the room, still pursued by the escape-bound girl, who was desperately chattering away. "You gotta help me, help me, help me, this place will suck your brains out and throw them in a fondue pot and serve it at the G-20 summit!" Laura quickened her pace and came towards the front again. "All those fascist dictators dipping bratwurst in your cerebellum! Don't forget Robot Obama! You think they'd let a real black man become President of -- "

Realizing that running away from the girl wasn't working, Laura suddenly stopped and drew herself to her full height to try to intimidate her. "Listen, you nutball," she began to yell as the girl backed away, "I'm not going to help someone as loony as you get out of here, so why don't you sit down, shut the hell up, and leave me alone!!"

Right as she finished bellowing, the waiting room door opened and four orderlies rushed in and surrounded Laura. "What's going on in here? Didn't the nurse tell you 'no talking'?"

Laura, her face flushed with anger, tried to calm down. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but that girl was ranting about fondue and muddy rugs and Barack Obama being a robot, and she was trying to get me to help her escape, and . . . "

Somehow, in the commotion, the brown-haired girl had snuck back to her seat, hanging her head down and appearing to be out of it. As the orderlies looked in her direction, she slowly raised her head and acted like she just woke up, squinting at them. "Wha..."

"OK, obviously you can't be trusted with the other patients at this time," one of the orderlies told Laura, "so we'll have to take you to a quiet room." Two of the orderlies grabbed the struggling Laura by the myriad straps holding the straitjacket closed, and the other two each grabbed a leg and lifted her off the floor. They folded her lower legs back across her hamstrings and used both arms to hold them closed and keep her from kicking. The four orderlies quickly carried the squirming, shouting Laura out of the waiting room and down a long hallway. A heavy metal door was already open at the very end of the hall; the door itself was four inches thick, with heavy sliding bolts at the top, middle, and bottom, and the interior was covered with foot-thick, pink vinyl cushioning. The orderlies entered the quiet room, unceremoniously dumped their human cargo on the thick padded floor, and quickly exited, locking the door.

Her face pressed into the padded floor, Laura cursed herself for letting that girl get to her; she wondered how some that nutty evaded commitment before. Still, she had to admit that girl was crazy like a fox, knowing when to play possum. Live and learn, Laura thought, as she raised her head of the floor. She rolled onto her back and used her powerful legs to swing herself up into a sitting position, and she surveyed her surroundings.

She was in a small padded cell, no more than eight by eight feet, and the padding was covered in thick vinyl, colored a soft pastel pink. The floor and each wall (excepting the one with the door) consisted of one large cushion, studded with large round buttons every two feet. The padding reached twelve feet high, but the wall continued up for another two feet. There were bright fluorescent lights on the ceiling, a video camera jutting out of one corner, and a large ventilated opening across from the camera. Laura

thought she could hear a fan running, and felt the coolness of air conditioning against her sweaty face.

Laura awkwardly got herself into a kneeling position, and tried to stand up. She got one of her booted feet "firmly" on the floor, but she lost her balance bringing her other foot up, and fell harmlessly back on the thickly cushioned floor. She decided instead to use her legs to push her against a wall and then push herself up to a standing position. She rested against the wall for a few seconds after standing, and then cautiously walked into the middle of the room. Her high-heeled feet seemed to sink several inches into the cushioning with every step, leaving her feeling a bit wobbly. It was curious to her how difficult it was to walk unescorted in a straitjacket, as she couldn't use her arms to balance her body out. She spread her booted legs out a bit to help her balance, stood up straight, and looked up towards the ceiling.

The unusual dimensions of the room gave Laura a feeling of being stuck in a pit. She wondered why the ceiling was so high; could anyone actually jump or climb that high? Being wrapped up in a straitjacket eliminated the latter option, so she decided to use her volleyball skills to see how high she could jump. After all, she didn't know when the doctor was going to show up, and it's not like she could do anything else in there.

Laura steadied herself as best as she could on the soft floor. She squatted down deeply on the balls of her feet, her rear end almost touching the floor, and used her muscular legs to leap off the ground. She kept her eye on the top edge of the door to estimate her jump height, and she thought she got about 9 feet up before crashing safely on the floor. Even in her current circumstances, Laura couldn't help but laugh; this was vastly preferable to a hard gym floor!

Laura realized that a leaping, laughing, straitjacketed woman was not what she wanted the psychiatrist to see, so she decided to try to get some sleep, as that seemed a guaranteed way of staying out of trouble in the hospital. She laid down on her back and closed her eyes, but she was irritated by the bright lights. She rolled over, but her crossed arms made that posture uncomfortable as well. She crawled over to a wall and it to prop her up on her left side, but her left arm began to get numb, and she couldn't find a way to keep her head aligned with her back, so she wound up sitting in a corner with her knees brought up to her chest, unable to sleep.

Laura wondered how much time had passed. Was the psychiatrist still seeing the other women? Was there an emergency elsewhere in the hospital? Or were they intentionally letting her stew in her own juices as punishment? She banged her head against the cushioned wall in frustration. Were they just going to leave her . . .

Laura woke up with a start. She had slumped into a fetal position on the floor, and noted with disgust a small puddle of drool she left there. She tried to clear the sleep from her head, and wished there was a clock in the cell. It must be at least an hour or two since they tossed her in the cell. Were they going to let her rot in there overnight - or even longer? She got to her feet and began pacing around the small cell. From one corner to the next, to the next, over and over, her anxiousness increasing with each revolution. She tried to think about her upcoming semester at college, her favorite TV shows, anything, but she was unable to stop worrying about what was going to happen to her in the remainder of her 72 hours there. She stopped at one corner of the room and started ramming her knees into the wall, letting her frustration get the better of her. She started to cry with her face pressed against the padding.

A startled Laura spun around when the door opened and a middle-aged woman in a doctor's white coat entered the padded cell, flanked by two orderlies. "Good evening, Laura. My name is Dr. Blymire, and I will be your psychiatrist during your stay here."

Laura tried to keep her nervousness under control. "Um, hi. Is there any way I could call my parents now? I'm really worried about them now, with this whole situation."

"Your parents have been notified of your commitment. I'd like to talk to you about what you'll be going through here, the tests you - "

Suddenly, all the rage and helplessness that Laura was trying to suppress burst forth. "NO!" she yelled,

causing the orderlies to move between her and the doctor. "I've had enough of this! I'm not Hannibal freaking Lecter, all right? I'm tired and I'm hurting, and I want you to take this damn jacket off and let me call my parents!" Laura suddenly ran towards Dr. Blymire, but the orderlies grabbed her and shoved her backward to the padded floor.

Dr. Blymire looked sadly at Laura. "If you're going to be this hostile, I don't think we can get anything done tonight. I think a good night's sleep will do wonders for you." Turning to one of the orderlies, she said, "Overnight restraints for her." As she and the orderlies left the cell, the doctor turned back and said, "I'll see you in the morning, Laura. Try to get some rest tonight."

"No, wait!" Laura shouted as the door locked again. She crawled towards the door, stood up, and buried her whole body in the massive cushioning, kicking and banging her head in anger.

A couple of minutes later, the door opened, and four orderlies rushed into the cell. Two of them grabbed Laura by her straitjacket and slammed her down on the padded floor, momentarily stunning her. The first two orderlies held Laura on the ground as the other two unrolled a large canvas bag and started sliding it over Laura's legs. The bag had separate sleeves for each leg, with padding down the middle so her knees and ankles wouldn't press against each other uncomfortably. Laura tried to flex her legs, but the bag was tapered from the top down to her feet, holding her legs close to each other already, even before the straps were tightened.

The opening of the bag was brought up to Laura's torso, right under her straitjacketed arms. The orderlies then tightened two wide straps at the very top, and other straps across her upper thighs, above and below her knees, and two straps across her ankles. There was also a harness-like assortment of straps extending from the top of the bag. The orderlies rolled Laura up on one side as they took two straps from the back of the bag, looped them over each of her shoulders, and strapped them to the front. There were also two straps attached to the shoulder straps which looped around Laura's straitjacketed biceps, buckling in front of her. This arrangement would keep Laura from somehow sliding the bag off.

Laura was really panicking at this point. The straitjacket was bad enough, but now they were totally mummifying her for the night! She shook her head and yelled, "No, no, no, get me out of this! I don't deserve this! I - " Laura's complaints were abruptly silenced by a large white ballgag, jammed into her mouth by an orderly. One of the orderlies grabbed the wide leather straps extending from the ballgag and buckled them behind Laura's head. The orderly pulled the strap through the rolling buckle as hard as she could, as another orderly grabbed Laura's head and pushed the ball into Laura's gaping mouth with her thumbs.

The orderlies rolled an ambulance gurney into the cell, and lifted the gagged, canvas cocooned Laura onto the thin mattress. They then took a dozen bright orange straps and secured Laura to the stretcher, from shoulders to feet. One orderly retightened the straps, planting her knee on Laura's body as she yanked each strap with both hands. After that, she slipped a padded black blindfold over Laura's eyes and muttered "Nighty-night," as the orderlies filed out of the cell.

Laura tested her new bonds, but she could only wiggle her feet and move her head up a little. At least she was in a marginally more comfortable position for sleep, and after a few minutes, a physically and emotionally exhausted Laura drifted off to dreamland.