

The Trial
by S. R. Masters

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The Trial, Day 14

Please use this diary to record how you have felt during the day, thinking of your physical health, mental health and overall wellbeing.

This morning, when the pretty doctor gave me today's pill with that patronising little smile of hers, I was caught between an urge to run far away from her, to protect her, and an urge to smash her face into pieces so you would send me home.

Does that help you? Is this the sort of thing you want to hear about?

Because you should hear about this stuff. It's your pills doing this to me.

I hadn't been entirely sure before, partly because of the headaches, which have left me feeling weak and unsure of myself, but also because of the whole opulent package, too. The private jet, the island setting, the beautiful room with the sea view in front of me now... It beguiled me. Surely anyone with this much money must know what they're doing. They wouldn't be giving people a drug with side effects this bad?

But I can't stop these thoughts, these alien thoughts, which worm into my head every day. New perspectives. New connections. New opinions. They're making me want to do things

that I'd never do. Like what happened this morning when I took my pill. And this maddening disorientation I feel when I consider what I've been doing with my life.

And the headaches aren't getting better. You promised they would, but they're getting worse. So much worse.

How am I? Let me be honest with you. Let me really help your research and earn my fee.

You want to know about my physical health? How about: it's like I have another person inside here with me. An awful, animal person, with weak, animal appetites, and they're taking over my body.

And my mental health? Well, I want to run around your fancy complex scratching a warning into every surface so that any other idiot who comes here won't believe you when you tell them they won't feel a thing.

I want to warn them that you're going to take their souls.

And how about my overall wellbeing? It feels like you've opened a door in my head that can never be closed. That I've seen the world in a way that I can't ever unsee. And the worst part is I want to run headlong into this new darkness. Because I know once it consumes me, the light I'm running from won't matter.

Yet right now I'm in the doorway, being yanked both ways by two powerful opposites.

In the last few days I've found myself on my balcony here, or on the patio high above the beach, and I think about how the damage might already be permanent. And I think about falling. Obliterating myself beneath this blazing sun to spite the darkness.

And there have been times where I've wanted to go to the kitchen, find myself a knife, and stain your white coats red. Then I'd gather up those pills of yours, take them out to the cliffs, and cast them into the sea before burning this place to the ground.

PART I – Recruitment

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Chapter 1

1.

Elle pretended to be absorbed by the glossy holiday brochure open on her lap below the reception desk while just metres away a giant man paced in the lobby muttering to himself and kicking the chocolate-coloured sofas.

“I told them,” he said to the vending machine on the back wall, “you have to watch closely.”

He returned to the sofa. *Smack. Smack.*

Terry was one of the regulars. It had been weeks since she'd seen him around the hospital, and she'd been worried about what might have happened to him. Now, with every *sock* of the leather upholstery, Elle flinched. She wanted to push her chair away from the desk and into the back office, where she could escape upstairs and get help. But she didn't want to draw his attention. So instead, she looked at her holiday brochure and tried to keep still. Palm trees. White sand. A crimson cocktail.

“Do they listen though? *Do they?*”

Smack. Smack. Smack.

Terry mostly appeared at reception to access the hospital Contemplation Room, a space set aside for patients' spiritual needs. Elle would push the little red button on the wall to let him through and he always thanked her. Quiet and shy, something of the local-ale uncle about him, he could barely make eye-contact, let alone trouble.

Elle wasn't privy to the details of his mental health history—her job was strictly non-clinical—but Terry had been doing well enough to walk around without a chaperone. A common story at Parkwood though was patients being discharged too early—especially since Core Solutions took over some of the NHS contracts two years ago. They struggled, and sometimes returned unannounced--often in a bad way. She'd had two incidents in the last six months, one of which had needed police involvement because there was no longer any on-site security.

Something clattered in the lobby. Terry was shaking the vending machine.

She couldn't ignore it now. He was going to hurt himself. Elle stood, leaned over the desk, and called through the open glass hatch. "Terry, are you okay? Do you need me to call anyone for you?"

He turned to look at her, recognition briefly in his eyes. Then he yelled, "They look at you like goats. You want to watch out." He kicked one sofa hard enough to lift it from the ground.

"Okay, Terry," she said, "I'll get someone to help you. Just wait there, okay?"

She slid the glass window closed, locked it, and turned to the phone. After the second incident she'd asked for more training and guidance from Core Solutions. Nothing had been forthcoming, so recently she'd invented her own protocol: Ward, PCSO, police.

Guessing Terry wasn't likely to be under hospital care anymore, she called the neighbourhood PCSO. It went to voicemail.

Elle glanced up to check the lobby again and startled. Terry stood just centimetres from the glass. Despite the November cold, he wore only a food-stained Iron Man t-shirt tucked into a pair of shorts. He slammed his palms against the glass, which shook in its rails.

“Can I get through? I need to get upstairs.”

Elle took a step back. “Okay, let me get you help, Terry.” She tried sounding assertive yet compassionate. She didn't want to agitate him further.

He palmed the glass twice again. “I need to see him.”

Elle could see the illness at work on the surface, his tense posture and dancing eyes. Yet it was in those eyes she could see the other Terry, too, imprisoned and afraid, and almost apologetic.

Terry spat on the glass. He yelled. He struck again, harder. Then seemingly defeated, he walked away muttering.

Elle took a deep breath, reached for the phone and tried the number for the PCSO again.

The reception window shattered, and Elle covered her face as glass shards rained around her. A round coffee table struck the desk, briefly lodging in the hatch before the weight of its legs pulled it back out. The remaining frame of jagged glass didn't stop Terry from attempting to climb through, and Elle darted into the back office, footsteps crunching. She turned, ready to shut herself in.

Terry had one bleeding knee on the desk and was stretching for the red button on the wall. If he pressed the one for the conference facility door he would be free to walk around amongst the fifty or so guests on site. Elle thrust out her arm and got there first, pulling the plastic lever below the switch to disable it. His hand swatted the button a moment after. He didn't know what she'd done, and retreated through the opening to try the double doors. Elle stepped back and slammed the door.

On the other side of one of the wall Terry began to kick out again.

“Terry, please calm down.” Her voice was so weak he probably couldn't hear it.

Elle looked down at the lock. The key wasn't there. It was in the reception drawer.

She grabbed the handle again, could retrieve the key if she was quick. But the thumping ceased. His frustrated grumbling grew louder, followed by the sound of glass and other objects tumbling to the floor. He was entering the reception again.

Elle turned to flee. Once out in the corridor she could lock him inside, stop him getting upstairs. But at the back door she hesitated. What if he hurt himself in the office? She scanned the room. The stapler, the guillotine, a letter opener.

Terry kicked the door between reception and the office; he hadn't yet realised it was unlocked. The thin partition walls shook.

Was there time to clear the danger? She wouldn't be able to live with herself if—

The handle of the reception door squeaked and moved downwards. Before Elle could get out Terry stepped inside, shoulders heaving, a bull about to charge.

“Terry, you shouldn't be in here.”

“I need to see him.”

The people upstairs today were on a local authority training course, not clinicians experienced with seriously unwell patients. She had no idea what Terry would do given his aggressive state, and she was the last line of defence.

He came towards her, and because the door swung inward she would have to step into him to open it. So instead she stepped away, moving deeper into the office. Only Terry wasn't interested in the door. He changed his direction and came for her instead.

Panicking, she grabbed one of the fire extinguishers on the wall, snapped out the safety plastic and pointed the nozzle at him.

Embarrassed and scared, she said, “Terry, please step back. I don't want to hurt you.”

He kept coming, shaking his head, muttering about how she didn't understand. His eyes were so very sad. She readied herself to squeeze the handle, but... she couldn't do it. He was unwell. He didn't deserve to be assaulted.

She threw the extinguisher at his feet to put it between them, turned, and yanked open the door to the stationery cupboard. She shut herself in, darkness blanketing her. She snapped a lock that she'd only half-believed might be there and reached for the light switch, finding only cool brickwork. The stupid thing was on the outside wall, wasn't it? Now her only illumination poked beneath the crack at the base.

She sat with her back pressed to the door, trying to catch her breath. Trying to stop shaking.

“Terry, listen to me--”

Kick.

The force jostled her.

“Terry--”

Kick.

She tapped the pocket of her trousers. Her phone was still in her bag under the table.

“You need to go outside before I call the police. I'm frightened, Terry.”

The kicking stopped. Elle waited, listening intently, her eyes teary and her head involuntarily shaking from side-to-side.

“Terry,” she said.

After what was probably only five minutes but might as well have been an hour, she heard rustling at the door's base and scooted away. Her brochure picked up that morning on her cycle to work from an actual travel agent's, slid into the cupboard with her.

A moment later the light came on.

She breathed. She listened. Outside a door opened and closed. Silence.

She stared at the brochure. Huffed a bitter laugh.

On the cover a sun-kissed couple held hands on white sand beach, gazing at one another like they'd just been granted immortality in paradise. God, she really needed a holiday.

2.

Elle's manager insisted she go home. The Learning and Development Centre had been closed for repair and cleaning anyway, and Elle needed time to recover. But Terry was now over at Marlstone Hospital having suffered deep lacerations on his arms and legs, and Elle wanted to stick around for updates. She'd been right about Terry's recent discharge, and those in the know confirmed he'd suffered a psychotic episode having abandoned his medication. She wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if she didn't know he was going to be okay.

She found a desk in the staff library, motes of dust soaring above her in the grey light from the high windows. Mostly she had the room to herself, but each time the door opened she startled. Her hands shook when she raised them to the keyboard, and she struggled to concentrate on the incident report on the screen. What happened was replaying once again in her mind when a soft voice to her right said, "What are you still doing here?"

It was the head librarian, Winston, a greying man with striking blue eyes and a penchant for attractive waistcoats. He was one of her few work friends—largely down to their shared interest in books. He'd brought Patricia Highsmith and James M. Cain into her life, while into his she'd bought Gillian Flynn and Anne Tyler. He'd heard about what happened downstairs, and looked at her with the pity usually reserved for a sick relative.

"Cup of tea?"

She nodded, and in his office she recounted her version while the kettle boiled.

"I should have handled it better," she said to him when she'd finished, her cheeks hot with shame. "I probably aggravated him."

Winston looked amused. "Is this you being serious? It sounds like you handled everything extremely well under a lot of pressure."

“I shouldn't have engaged him. It was stupid, sticking my head out and telling him off. I should have just run for help.”

“And what would you be saying now had he tipped that machine on himself?” He handed her a tea and they sat across from one another at Winston's desk. “Or if a visitor had been hurt in the reception. Terry'll get the support he needs now, he'll be okay. Now, what about you? How are *you* feeling?”

“Guilty.” She sipped her drink. “I pointed a fire extinguisher at him, Winston. I nearly fired it. I could have really--”

“Soaked him? Elle... you didn't know what was happening. He was in an aggressive and violent state.”

“He probably wouldn't have hurt me. And what if he'd bled to death?”

“That front hatch should have been upgraded to shatter proof glass a decade ago.”

“If I'd stayed quiet in the first place he might have just... walked off.”

“You think?”

Elle didn't know. It certainly hadn't felt like he was close to walking away at any point.

“Well... I just hope he's okay.”

Winston shook his head and his expression darkened. “Why do I feel like we've had this conversation before?”

“What do you mean?”

“You're very charitable, Elle.”

“Thank you.”

“Well... I didn't entirely mean it as a compliment.”

She formed her mouth into an exaggerated O. “I didn't realise.”

He laughed. “Don't take this the wrong way.... But do you remember I told you about that gentlemen on Ash Ward I befriended, the bookworm?”

“The psychopath?”

“Not officially, they didn't like that term. But they ran the clinical checklist off-books and... well, yes. And you remember, he seemed nice face-to-face, very charming. But he'd actually done all these terrible things, and had not a jot of remorse about them. In fact, he was pathologically predisposed to blaming other people for his crimes. He once beat a man to death for laughing at his jacket, and when the police asked him about it he calmly explained it was the victims fault because he shouldn't have wound him up. That sort of thing.”

“I remember. But Terry wasn't psychopathic.”

“No. No, I'm talking about you still. You are pathologically prone to blaming the wrong person, like him. But in your case, you always blame yourself instead of the actual culprit. You and he are almost perfect opposites in that respect.”

She appraised him sceptically. “I don't think that's true.”

“Elle... I watched you apologise to that oaf who knocked your laptop off the desk the other week. You even said you shouldn't have put it so close to the edge.”

“Oh, come on. I was just being polite. And maybe I should have been more... aware of him.”

“It was his fault. I saw the whole thing. He was too busy fiddling with his phone.”

Unable to hold his gaze, Elle turned to the painting on the wall behind Winston, Chagall's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The two of them talked often, so his candour wasn't inappropriate. But still, how could it be wrong to be considerate? You *had* to think hard about the people around you. Because deep down we were all the same, weren't we? Not identical, of course, but on the Venn diagram of humanity all the circles would almost entirely overlap. Even the largest differences were still slight when compared with the similarities. Quirks of the environment, maybe, or perhaps one or two genetic switches flicked the other way. That underpinned do unto others, the golden rule.

In fact, you *needed* to believe it. Because how else could you cope in the vast, mostly empty stadium of space, unless you had a team? A team meant you could find a consensus, and build things according to your shared needs and wants, your shared values. Without those, well, you might as well just not bother with anything and follow every selfish impulse you had. Forget about caring for others. Forget about the vulnerable, like those they both saw day in and day out at the hospital. They were some frightening other, not part of any shared reality occasionally intruded on by illness. Forget everyone, in fact, because for all you knew their wants, needs, and values, were as different from yours as... as a goat's.

She said none of this to Winston though. Instead, she sighed and said, "Well... I don't think there's anything wrong with trying to put yourself in other people's shoes."

"No, there's not," Winston said, his voice softening. "Just don't forget to put on your own, your feet'll get cut."

She paused. "So you think I need to... what, embrace my inner psychopath?"

"The world would be a wonderful place if more people were like you. But there'd be a lot of martyrs, too, burning in other people's fires." His smile softened. "Just look after yourself, Elle, as well as everyone else. Sometimes in life, you know, you have to shoot a fire extinguisher at someone."

She knew he meant well, but they'd have to agree to disagree. She was about to say something else but stopped herself, realising the whole conversation had been entirely about her. Core Solutions had put Winston's whole library service in review, as they didn't understand why staff needed a library in the digital age. His actual job was at stake, and here she was bending his ear with her insignificant problems.

"So," she said, leaning forward, "never mind me. How are you?"

Winston broke into laughter.

At home Mum sat at the desktop computer in the lounge facing away from the front door.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said, without turning around. She scrolled Facebook, an activity which took up a good few hours of her day when she wasn't watching television. Their tenancy forbade smoking in the house, yet the air was redolent with another skirmish between incense and cigarettes. “You're back early.”

“There was an incident at work. They sent me home.”

“Yeah?” She spun on the office chair to face Elle. Her nails were done, and she was in full make up and lipstick. It had just gone 4pm, and she still wore her dressing gown and slippers.

“You'll never guess what, Elle?”

“What?”

“That bloke I saw last week.”

“Mike?”

“No, not him. That was just a likkle drink. No, I mean Phil.”

“Oh, yeah. What about him?”

“Turns out his brother's wife's nephew, right, well, his mate is the brother of that bloke from *Love Island* last year, the tiny one. Can you get your head around that? *Love Island*.”

Elle set her expression to impressed. “How weird is that?”

“Weird. Like, I'm actually connected to *Love Island* now.”

“Six degrees of Deborah Ronson.”

“You what?”

“Nothing, Mum. Do you want a cup of tea?”

“Oooh, yeppies.”

Last night Elle had cleaned the kitchen while Mum was out. Now, the surfaces were cluttered with her breakfast detritus. Trails of tea droplets scored the floor tiles between the bin and the kettle. The milk sat out warm in a beam of low winter sun.

Elle tidied and cleaned again, made Mum her tea, and hid from the ever-blaring telly in her room. She lay on her bed, flicking through the collection of holiday brochures she'd been collecting over the last year. The travel agent had looked puzzled when she'd requested one that morning, as usually only the older customers liked them. But Elle liked physical objects.

She'd be thirty next year, and was of an age where the vestigial traces of the analogue past had still ornamented her youth. Cassette players, VHS tapes, filing cabinets: these things all carried warm associations with better times and places, specifically Granny Alice's villa in Spain during her late teens. They were bridges across time and space, and with the right object you could travel anywhere.

Where the brochures were concerned, they were bridges to some vague future where she'd finally have time to crack all the uncreased spines up on her bookshelf. Be able to eat a meal she hadn't cooked to Mum's specific taste requirements. To get some sun. Some vitamin D.

Only it was a fantasy, wasn't it? Because she couldn't really abandon Mum for three weeks. There'd be too many questions, and God knew what she might get up to in Elle's absence. Plus she'd have to take money out of her secret savings pot, the one that she was filling to eventually buy a place of her own. Mum would become suspicious, want to know where the cash had come from.

Then again, if she didn't go now, especially after what happened today, when would she do it? In late-January she was due to start the first few modules of a part-time forensic psychology masters—her way out of the menial world of learning and development administration. Working *and* studying. She barely had any time now. After that there would be the early years

of an actual career, scrapping it out in a competitive field to prove her worth. Between now and Christmas was really the closest thing she would ever have to free time.

She turned to the page in the brochure with a particular all-inclusive package deal in the Canary Islands. She liked the hotel in the picture, poking out into the sea on stilts and reminiscent of a cruise ship. It brought to mind Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile*. She liked the look of the male model in the beach photo, his unusually pointy nose, and that his arms and legs weren't shaved like the other models. Mostly she liked guarantee of sun in the winter and the relatively short flight.

Elle picked up her phone and stared at the number at the bottom of the page.

She could have been killed today. Or at least seriously injured. Didn't Winston have a point about her needing to look after herself sometimes? And it wasn't as if she threw money around the place. Her last real holiday had been in her early twenties, a trip to Robin Hood's Bay with some old uni friends that had long since moved on to bigger and better things. High-powered jobs in big cities. Marriages and kids. And the last time she'd been on a plane was to Granny Alice's funeral almost a decade ago. Ever since finishing her English degree, she'd been working to keep her and Mum afloat, putting right their many set-backs, trying to get her own life started. Really she hadn't had a moment just to take a step back and think.

"Elle," Mum yelled above the television. "Have you moved my fucking cigarettes again?"

Her footsteps thumped through the flat. Elle typed the number into the phone and said nothing. Eventually, the front door slammed. She was convinced Elle hid them, but she always found them where she left them eventually.

Her finger hovered over the green call button. Her plan had always been to spend hours researching the cheapest deals and best destinations online should it ever get to this point; the brochure had just been about layering her fantasy. But now she wanted to plunge not glide. And it felt good helping a bricks-and-mortar business, the sort of thing Granny Alice would do

if she were still alive. Like only eating fair trade chocolate and buying her eggs from a local farm.

She made the call in a nervous fever, cold and slightly out of breath. She spoke quickly, never giving herself a chance to change her mind. And when it was over, she threw the phone down on the bed and covered her mouth. She'd done it. Three weeks in Fuerteventura. Three bloody weeks in the bloody Canary Islands.

When she came into the lounge to retrieve her bag, Mum was back at the computer, the smell of smoke still about her. She flicked from Plenty of Fish to Facebook on her tabs. "Who you been talking to?"

Not wanting her to know just yet, she said, "Just work stuff," and smiled to herself.

All inclusive. Five-stars. The bloody Canaries.

4.

After a second day spent in the staff library, the reception restoration well underway, Elle came home to find a letter from the travel company sitting prominently on the kitchen counter. She froze. The logo and company name had been printed in red on the front. She'd asked for an email confirmation. Why was this even here? Mum sat at the computer, guiltily closing tabs before turning to beam at Elle.

"Nice day, sweetheart?"

"Yes, thanks."

Mum stood and joined Elle at the counter. "You going on holiday, love?" She nodded at the letter.

Elle's mouth dried up. She suspected Mum had opened her post in the past, which meant if this was a confirmation letter, and she'd read it, Elle couldn't lie. "I was thinking about it."

Mum nodded and narrowed her eyes. "Good for you."

"Would you be okay with it, do you think?"

“Crack on, love,” she said with a shrug, “you fill your boots. They're expensive though, them lot, aren't they?”

Wary of Mum's reaction, Elle said, “Well, I'm usually pretty frugal. And I have some money I always keep for emergencies. You know.”

“A holiday emergency. Very nice.”

Mum didn't break eye-contact, and Elle's heart began to race. She felt as if she might drop her mug. “I didn't think it would be your sort of thing. You could have the place to yourself for once.” Mum said nothing, and Elle that full force of the silence. “But if you did want to—”

“Would have nice to have been invited, but we all need our space.”

Elle didn't know how to respond now. Whether Mum was cross or being cool. “Nothing's set yet, if you want to do something together—”

“No, I think it'll be good for you. You're a good girl, Elle. Don't I always tell you? You deserve a treat.”

Elle wanted to believe her, and smiled with shaky gratitude. Yet she couldn't break Mum's gaze. It pinned her like a lab frog.

5.

Her doubts about spending the money, about her mortgage fund and Mum, mattered little ultimately. The universe had its own brutal way of settling life's difficult moral conundrums.

“Oh, darling,” Mum said, no sooner had Elle walked through the door three nights after booking her trip. “I'm in such a state. Listen to this.”

She held up her mobile phone, already on loud speaker.

“I want my fucking money,” said a male voice. “You get it me this week, Deb, or I'm coming to get it from you.”

“Who's that?” Elle said.

“That Mike I been seeing. He's saying I owe him this money, and now he's properly lost it with me.”

She pressed play for a third time, dropping her face into her free hand.

“Hey,” Elle said, crossing the room and crouching to hug her. “We'll sort it. We'll sort it.”

It wasn't what she wanted to say. What she wanted to say was, “Not again.” What she wanted to say was, “Why do you fall in with these people?”

She rubbed Mum's back and felt the rise and fall of her shoulders. “We'll sort it, Mum.”

“Yeah?” Mum looked up, hopeful. She had a funny way of crying without tears, and her makeup remained untroubled by her sadness.

“What happened? Why does he need money?”

“He offered it me. Gave me a few grand to get the car mended. You know, because of the engine.”

“What happened to the engine?”

“And it costs that much to get it done, and he said not to worry. I didn't think he wanted it back?”

“I didn't know the car was broken.”

“I didn't want you offering to help. I know what you're like.”

“Oh, Mum,” she said, beginning to feel a little bit sadness already about the inevitability of this conversation. Knowing how difficult Mum found it to get work and earn money due to her lack of confidence. Knowing how often she'd had to help her out in the past, often with very large sums. “How much does he want?”

“Three grand,” she said. Something must have shown on her face, because Mum added, “But I think two would be enough to get rid of him. It's because I broke it off with him, Elle. He didn't take it well.”

Elle nodded. It was just over the amount she had spent on the holiday. “Do you think we should just call the police, maybe?”

Mum shook her head, widening her eyes. “I can't do that, love. He's one of those people that's *got* people, you know? He was in prison before. And, besides, I'm not like that. I can't grass. No, I'll just have to take what's coming, won't I? I shouldn't have been so stupid. It's not like either of us have that sort of money.”

Elle swallowed. She already knew what was being asked of her. “Mum—” She was about to tell her that she'd already bought the holiday. That she couldn't help her even if she wanted to, which she really did. She always did. Mum had never had it easy, especially having lost Dad when Elle was so young. But she couldn't lie. Hadn't she known the holiday was excessive really? This was just the universe restoring balance.

“I've got savings,” she said. “We can use that, if you really think it'll make him go away.”

“No, Elle, not your holiday money.”

Elle hugged her again. She didn't necessarily have to use the holiday pot. She could dip into her house-deposit pot instead... The problem there was that Mum would then know that it existed. And even though it didn't always sit well with her, she didn't ever want Mum to know about it. Not only because Mum would be upset by her plans to one day leave. No, that was part of it, but, if she was honest, it was also because Mum had a tendency to spend money when she knew it was there. That was just her nature, nothing good or bad about it inherently. But it needed managing. And given Elle already paid the rent, most of the bills, and bought the shopping—which was only fair because she was the one with the degree, the one that *could* find work—her ignorance really helped them both. Mum had lost track of the cost of living.

“I haven't booked the holiday yet,” Elle said. “So... let's just give him what he wants. Get him off your back and worry about the rest later.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Mum grabbed Elle and pushed her face to her chest. “I can't ask you to do that. No.”

“It's fine, Mum,” she said. “You haven't asked. I offered.”

6.

The travel agent sounded upset when Elle cancelled. Had she sensed Elle's heartbreak, or was she just on commission? Afterwards, Elle took out the cash from the bank, and that night Mike, a tattooed brick-wall who insisted on doing the swap in-person, took the money from Elle at the front door while Mum hid in her bedroom.

After he'd gone, Mum kissed her and went to the pub to drown her sorrows. “Going to the Bull” was one of the few joys in Mum's life, so she couldn't question the decision—even if she did worry that Mum might run into Mike there so soon after he'd been in the area. After all, it was where they'd met.

Alone in the flat, Elle watched television and flicked to her favourite page in the brochure. She traced her finger idly around the shape of the island in the photograph, taken from out at sea. She'd spent a year amassing her holiday pot while still having enough to put aside in the other pot. A whole year.

Still, maybe it wasn't such a disaster. What if she got a second weekend job over Christmas? Maybe this set-back could spur her on to do that, and she could use that extra money to go away somewhere cheaper. A little DIY thing on AirBnb, perhaps. She didn't need a fancy hotel and champagne breakfast anyway. She wasn't the flipping queen. There might be time in the last week of December or early January before her course started.

On her phone she checked out prices in the Canary Islands, but her battery died. She sat down at Mum's desktop, clearing the screen saver with a swipe of the mouse. Mum's Facebook page was up, and staring back at her was a picture of Mike and Mum, their cheeks pressed together, posted two weeks ago.

She opened a new tab, which joined the ten, and typed “Canary Island Home Rentals” into the search bar.

The first hit was a sponsored link, and on reading it Elle cocked her head.

**18-40? PAID CLINICAL TRIAL IN THE CANARY ISLANDS – UP TO £20,000
TAX FREE**

She hovered the cursor over it, but didn't click. Too good to be true, surely?

Take Part in Our Drug Trial! Benefits: Healthy Financial Package and Month-Long All-Inclusive Island Break. Become A Volunteer. Apply Online. Steps: Application, Eligibility Questionnaire, Screening, Consultation, The Trial.

Elle shook her head. She didn't know how advertising algorithms worked, but if they'd worked out the precarious state of their home finances, it could well be a scam. She had heard about clinical trials paying good money, though, and had even seen them advertised around the hospital. But she hadn't realised the amounts involved could be so large.

She mentally bookmarked the advert, despite not clicking on it. And she was surprised a little later that night when, unable to sleep, she entered the same search on her phone and couldn't find it. She tried other combinations of words, actually searched for “clinical trials in the Canary Islands”, but the only adverts that appeared on her phone were for flu trials or canary island holidays.

Exhausted but curious, she tried Mum's computer again, typing in Canary Island Home Rentals as she had done earlier. The advert appeared again. This time, she clicked it, cut out a lengthy web address that looked like someone had fallen asleep on the keyboard, and emailed it to herself, intending nothing more than to see if it worked on her phone.

But she didn't leave the computer. Instead, she examined the landing page. If it was a scam, it was a slick-looking one. The backdrop wasn't unlike a brochure photograph. A glittering

swimming pool surrounded by empty sun loungers. The copy was identical to that she'd seen on the advert. But there was here a mission statement, too:

We are Apollo Wellbeing, a biopharmaceutical start-up developing innovative solutions in the field of medicine. Our view is that health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

The last line had been stolen. Elle recognised from her course pre-reading as being the World Health Organisation's definition of health. Which was interesting, because modern drug-companies didn't usually acknowledge the existence of non-clinical models of care in such an up-front way. What was this trial then?

Elle clicked a large green box marked, APPLY.

The screen turned white, and shortly black text faded into view.

PLEASE CLICK AN ANSWER FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS AS THEY APPLY TO YOU.

The statement faded away, and was replaced by a question:

I have robbed someone.

Elle laughed. Four option boxes appeared, True, A Little True, A Little False, False. She clicked False.

“Can you be a little true?” she said.

This question faded and was replaced by another:

I don't mind queueing.

Well, no one really liked queueing, but Elle didn't get irritated the way she'd seen some people do. A little true then.

Next up was:

Honesty is the best policy.

Which of course, it was.

She answered forty questions in total, each one seeming to mine her personality and values, and, after twenty minutes she was finally asked to enter her email address and name. If she had to guess, the questions were likely designed to weed out the sort of people you wouldn't want to have on a month-long clinical trial on an island, and based on her answers she suspected she had a good chance of at least making the next stage.

After the site thanked her, the browser closed itself down. Curious. She opened it again, and looked for the site in her mum's internet history. It wasn't there. Elle entered the search again to bring up the advert, only now it was showing exactly what she'd seen on her phone the other night.

Before she could investigate further, her phone chimed. She opened her lock screen and the entire text of the email she'd just been sent was visible.

Dear Elle Ronson,

Thank you for applying to join one of our clinical trials. We are extremely grateful that you took the time to complete our questionnaire, however on this occasion you have been unsuccessful.

“Oh,” Elle said, the small amount of hope that had built in the last ten minutes forcibly displaced.

That was that then, never mind. She put her phone away, poured herself a large glass of white wine, and read a book until her eyes grew heavy. And for a week at least, the trial never entered her head.

7.

Saturday morning a parcel arrived for Mum. She was still out from the night before, so Elle signed for it, noticing the *New Look* logo—one of Mum's favourites.

Later, Mum found the package and said, “Great, my prezzies have arrived.”

“Prezzies?”

“Yeah. Just some stuff I've got for friends. Birthday things.”

Perhaps if Mum hadn't taken the trouble to explain that, Elle might have been able to ignore the brand new dress Mum stepped out in that night.

But then came a new car a week later, a neat little box Mum claimed she'd part-exed for her rusty KA with a mate down the pub.

“Honestly, bab, I couldn't turn him down. It was too good an opportunity to miss.”

Mum wasn't averse to wheeling and dealing; she had form. But the timing... Mixed with the unshakeable disappointment from her cancelled holiday, it was poison. Elle, so practised at rationalising and absorbing Mum's lies, didn't believe her.

When Mum went out to the pub on Friday night, Elle went out for a walk. The local area wasn't exactly the most scenic--never mind safe--place to get some air. And more often than not a Friday night jaunt meant enduring at least a wolf whistle, if not a full-on verbal assault. White-shirted aftershave clouds, drunk before even getting the bus to town, lurked at bus stops and against pub walls. But Elle needed to move, was possessed by a desire to get out and make something happen.

And was she really that surprised when she ended up passing the Bull, and, just on the off chance Mum might want a pint with her, walked inside? She was there of course, because outside of the basics, like food, shelter, and sex, Mum craved the novelty of company on offer at the Bull. You could usually count on a mix of regulars and passing strangers most nights. She was sitting in the far corner on a table with six other people, many of them as young as Mum liked to pretend she was on her Plenty of Fish profile. Laughing her head off, wine glass in hand, free arm around of all people, Mike. Mike the voice-message violator. Leaning over now and kissing Mum on the head. The two of them laughing together. Laughing at Elle, even though they hadn't seen her yet.

“You alright, love?” a man behind the bar asked.

Elle turned, close to tears, and ran home.

8.

She ambled around the flat getting drunk, piecing all the evidence together. Had Mum made Mike say those things on the phone to convince Elle? Made up a threat to her life to steal from her own daughter. Elle ran to the toilet and threw up. She mopped her mouth on a damp towel and went back to finish her wine.

Even for Mum, this was a new low. And she'd just let it happen again, like she always did. Like the time Mum used Elle's credit card for three months without telling her. Or when she borrowed a chunk of Elle's savings to go on a sciatica retreat that turned out to be a spa holiday. She'd lost count of the times Mum forged her identity to take out various loans. And she'd just let it go each time. Found a way to see it from Mum's perspective, forgive her and move on.

Then there had been the ordeal with the will, when Granny Alice had left Mum's share entirely to Elle. Granny Alice had explained her reasoning in Spain during the final weeks of her life. She'd leaned over from her hospital bed, and in a hushed voice told her Mum was broken in some fundamental way, and that Elle would need every penny of the money to stand half a chance against her.

"I believe honesty is the best policy," Granny Alice said, "and you need to understand she's not like you and me. Don't let her ruin you. Because she will if you let her."

To be left something hadn't been such a shock, after all Granny Alice had occupied much of the parental space left by her late father, not to mention, if she were being truthful, a fair chunk of motherly territory, too. In her childhood, Elle spent the greater portion of most weeks at Granny Alice's terrace in the outer suburbs of Birmingham—sometimes spending months there without ever seeing Mum. But cutting out Mum entirely, and in such a cold fashion, left Elle upset and shocked at a woman she practically worshipped.

Even though she knew then, at just nineteen, that Mum wasn't perfect, the sorrow she felt for Mum at having her own mother say such things made her want to help Mum even more than she'd already been trying to do. Mum hadn't had it easy since Dad died, and she found the basics of life--friendships, work, love--difficult. Was it any wonder when her own mother spoke about her as if she belonged to a different species?

After she passed, Elle decided to use Granny Alice's money to better Mum's situation. She transferred the whole amount to her, on the promise it would be used to build a new life for them both. Mum had cried. Promised things would be different. She'd buy a new house. Get some qualifications and a job. Maybe buy a holiday for them both, perhaps.

"You really are my angel," she'd said.

But Granny Alice had been right. Mum burned through the money in three years of long-haul travelling and high-end living—all behind Elle's back while she was at university. Once she'd been given access to the money, she was unstoppable. And due to Mum technically being rich during her university application, Elle had ended up paying a much larger proportion of her fees at university, and came home with debts that could no longer be settled.

Elle opened a second bottle of wine and looked around the flat. She was a captive here, a hostage for Mum's ends. And the more she drank the more that revelation felt like a secret power that could see through walls and break down doors. All this time she'd assumed that deep down Mum was like her, and just needed her love to correct the course her life had taken. What rubbish. What shit. Just because there hadn't been any "incidents" in the past year didn't mean Mum was getting better. That she was slowly learning the value of being an honest person, or, at the very least, coming to respect Elle enough not to exploit her.

No, she was just getting better and better at hiding her deceit. And Elle just kept gobbling it all up. Well, no more. She had to get out of this flat, out of her Mum's life. This time had to be the last.

She found herself sitting at Mum's computer, staring at the picture of Mike and Mum on Facebook. Her rage burned with thrilling intensity, yet close by prowled a smothering sadness. Because Elle knew enough about herself that by morning, when she'd sobered up, all this anger might be gone. Simmered down by reasonableness into bitter, manageable crystals that would lodge in her cells and form a life-ending tumour some time in her future. So while she had this power, she would nourish it. Keep the drink coming, journey far past the point of regret, and into a realm where even memory couldn't reach.

9.

She awoke slumped on the beanbag in her room. A hangover pinched her head and neck in a hot vice, and Elle squinted from the bright sunlight coming in through the window. She gradually rose to her feet, drew the curtains and lay on her bed, flattening her goose bumps beneath the duvet.

What time was it? Her phone was on the bedside table. She reached over, but it was beyond her grasp. With a feat of Olympian heroism she rolled onto her side, the room swimming with the effort, and managed to wrap her hand around it.

It was only 10.30am. Her condition required at least another five hours in bed. She couldn't remember what time she'd even fallen asleep, nor what she'd done after opening a third bottle of wine during a binge-watch of *Friends*. But there on her phone screen was a clue, and with half-open eyes Elle re-read the start of an email sent to the secondary address she used for her YouTube account. She clicked to open the message, and sat up.

Dear Elle,

Thank you for applying to join our clinical trial. We're pleased to inform you that we would like you to undertake a further application and screening questionnaire, with a view to you joining up with us in the Canary Islands. The link can be found below, and must be completed in the next 24 hours to be eligible.

Yours sincerely,

The Apollo Wellbeing Team.

It came back to her then, that she'd tried to beat their questionnaire last night. She groaned. Obviously she'd succeeded, but how? A vague memory of answering the first statement came to her, *Have you ever robbed someone?*

Yes. She'd put yes, hadn't she? She couldn't recall much more than that, but she knew that much with certainty. Because she recalled telling herself it's what Mum would have put if she were answering. Had sort of put on a Mum character as part of a cathartic mickey take. She grimaced at the memory. Thank God she'd been alone. Was it possible, then, that she'd lied on the other questions, too?

She let out another groan, pushing her face into the pillow. And if it hadn't risked aggravating her hangover, she would have laughed.

10.

By the time she felt well enough to get out of bed she'd received another email reminding her to fill in the second questionnaire. Reminding her that a free holiday and up to £20,000 was potentially hers. They were really laying the holiday stuff on thick, with the trial itself more of an afterthought.

Had the emails contained contact details beyond the bafflingly long no-reply address she would have told them there'd been a mistake. That she'd just been playing around to see how far she could get. But there was no way to get in touch with Apollo Wellbeing despite her looking online. Other than the advert, their web presence was non-existent. So the best she could do was try to forget the whole thing. It had probably just been a scam anyway.

Over a tea-time bowl of cereal, washed down by paracetamol and ibuprofen, Elle tried to decide what to do about Mum. Confronting her never went well. Mum was built with the emotional equivalent of a crumple zone, and could take the most withering criticisms without it

even touching her core. She would apologise, maybe even cry, and days, weeks, sometimes months later, she'd return to her usual self.

And to what end such a confrontation? She couldn't kick Mum out. For a start she simply wouldn't leave. Elle would have to be the one to move, and right now where would she go exactly? She was the last of her childhood friends still in the West Midlands, her uni friends were more like acquaintances these days, and the Mum-shaped sun at the centre of her life had been too hot for the few meaningful romances she'd had since Uni to flourish. Winston then?

The idea made her laugh out loud. Besides, she had no idea how Mum would cope without someone organising her life. Once Granny Alice moved to Spain, Elle had gradually taken over that role. There was a chance Mum might end up homeless? Or turning to one of the more undesirable types that frequented The Bull for help. As angry as Elle was, she still loved Mum. Could never truly give up on her changing her ways.

Which was the problem with "that's it" moments: they were only as powerful as your range of alternatives. And while she'd put aside all that money to one day move out, she'd never really put her imagination to the task of detailing with how that might work. Was she going to keep paying for Mum's rent and living-costs while also having her own place? That didn't seem sensible or possible. So what then?

What she needed was simply space. A break from Mum to rest her mind and get a fresh perspective. Perhaps, just perhaps, something might come to her, a way out that wouldn't destroy Mum. Something she couldn't see for all the other things competing for her attention. But now she was back to square one, because hadn't her holiday been about doing just that?

She opened her email on her phone and re-read the invitation from Apollo Wellbeing. She shook her head. It was really no better than buying a lottery ticket or putting on a bet. Even if she did fill out the second questionnaire, they would weed her out eventually, and she'd be back where she started, time poorer and still stuck with Mum.

Anyway, lying to get on a trial was wrong. It would skew all the results, render them worthless. Assuming it was a small trial, of course. It might not actually make much difference to a larger one, would it? And that was assuming she had lied. Last night was a bit unclear.

Wasn't it theoretically possible that the answers she'd given initially had nothing to do with why she'd been turned down? Might it have been a gatekeeping device to make sure she wasn't a robot? Her rejection could have been the result of bad timing, Elle victim to a random-selection algorithm. Might it even have been a glitch? Surely the second questionnaire, and any afterwards, would know if she wasn't a good fit?

That didn't feel right. Felt like the sort of slippery reasoning that got you into trouble.

It didn't feel *entirely* wrong either. It felt sort of like something Anne Shirley might do if Green Gables had Wi-Fi. More scampish than malicious. Suppose she did end up getting through and getting paid £20,000. Or even half of that. Added to her savings she'd be in a position to buy next year. She could graduate in summer and start looking for work outside the West Midlands straight away. She'd definitely be able to afford to keep paying for the flat, give Mum time to adjust, to find an alternative.

Moreover, would a pharma company *really* miss the money when it came to it? Would science *really* suffer that much based on one participant being able to trick a weak recruitment tool?

That notion didn't feel quite as scampish, and so again she tried to recall any other lies she'd told on the questionnaire last night, and coming up short, she nodded, confident that it was possible she *might* have told the truth on the remaining questions.

Voices drifted from down the hall outside the flat, one of them Mum's. She didn't want a run-in with her yet, so she gathered her things to return to her room. But the key turned in the lock and Mum was inside before Elle could scurry away. And she'd brought company.

“Oh, hello lazy bones,” Mum said, “have a good one last night, did we? Don't mind us, just grabbing that little charger thingy for the car. You remember Mike?”

Elle gawped. “Hi, again, Mike,” she said eventually. He grunted, unable to meet her gaze, stroking the stubble on his face.

“It's all fine,” Mum said. “We're all mates again now. All sorted.”

“Well,” Elle said, “That's good. Glad to hear it.”

She retreated to her room. A bottle of wine she'd been working on when she'd fallen asleep last night still had a third in it. She swallowed a mouthful from the bottle, took out her phone, and began work on the next questionnaire.

Copyright of One More Chapter

Chapter 2

1.

A taxi dropped Elle at the front of Oxford Airport on the first Friday in January, just over a month after she'd found out about Mike and Mum's scam. Her guilt about her drunken deception kept company and swapped stories with the low-level imposter syndrome she always felt when entering a new social situation.

Once inside the empty main building, she carried her bulging suitcase to the front while trying not to panic about the quiet. She hoped she hadn't got the wrong date. Hoped it hadn't all been a wicked trick. It was almost 7pm. Right on time.

She took a deep breath and rolled her shoulders. No, she'd got the right date. It had been on the paperwork she'd already checked twice in the taxi. And it wasn't a trick. This was just her conscience working hard to ruin things for her, as usual, and she had no time for that gullible old fool any more. She was Holiday Elle now, fiery and free, had been the moment she said goodbye to Mum.

Finally, a man peered out from the back office.

“Are you here for the Apollo flight?”

“I don't think I'm going to space.”

The man gave a weak smile and she wished the joke back. “Apollo Wellbeing?” When she nodded, he said, “They'll come and get you,” before going back to whatever he was doing.

Hearing the name of the company out loud had set her nerves squirming again. It would be fine though, she'd been over it a million times in the last four weeks. The regret. The urges to come clean and do the right thing. Thing was, as the application process had gone on, it became increasingly clear that the questionnaire Elle took initially was far less significant than she'd first assumed. So even if she had lied on every question, from the second questionnaire on she'd been completely truthful. Her medical history. Her life story. Her reasons for wanting to apply for the trial. In fact, she'd practically come clean in her phone interview with a researcher from the company, a serious-sounding American woman called Jess.

“I wasn't sure how to answer some of those things in the questionnaires,” she'd said, “so I just chose ones sort of... impulsively sometimes. I'm a bit worried they might not... reflect me fully.”

“Well, I think that's okay,” Jess had said. “There's a lot of factors that come into play when we make our final selection, but impulsive answers are fine. And they might be more accurate than you think.”

Who knew, maybe that was right? Maybe drunk Elle was the real Elle. Or at least who she was becoming now. Because standing here in this small airport, she certainly didn't want be Elle Ronson anymore. What had that ever gotten her? She'd been played time and time again, and all she had to show for it was her Norman-Bates life--only without even a nice motel to show for it. And what better time, what better situation, to reinvent herself.

Five minutes passed, and she actively suppressed the rising conviction that the punchline she'd been dreading was about to land. Then, from around the corner came quick footsteps, and

a slim, clean-shaven black guy in a dark-blue polo shirt bearing the Apollo Wellbeing logo appeared, smiling apologetically. She put him somewhere in his mid-to-late twenties, although he strode with the confidence of someone older.

“Are you Elle?”

“Yes,” she said, her relief erupting unbidden.

“Hi, Elle. Benji.” He shook her hand. “Sorry, we've had people coming one-by-one and you're our last. I just got a little behind. Have you been here long?”

“No, a few minutes.”

“Oh, great.” He blew out a breath and gestured she should follow. They started walking. “On behalf of Apollo Wellbeing, thank you so much for agreeing help us with our trial. I'm going to take you to the jet now and then we'll get straight off. Where have you had to come from, Elle?”

“Well, I got a cab in from the city centre, but I came up on the train this morning from a place called Marlstone.”

They turned a corner and arrived at a single scanning machine operated by two security personnel. Once her bags had been checked, she walked straight through to an empty departures lounge. Oxford Airport didn't handle commercial airlines, and a fair amount of its business was handling the private jets of the rich and famous. Having looked this up beforehand, Elle still hadn't quite expected things to be *this* smooth. This exclusive.

“So Marlstone,” Benji said, picking up their conversation. “Near Birmingham, yeah? I know it well.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I did a degree at Birmingham Uni, sociology. We used to go out in Marlstone. Posh, isn't it?”

“Not the bit I'm from.”

He laughed. "I feel you there."

He led her through to a set of double doors and outside onto the brightly lit tarmac apron. They walked along a coned-off path towards one of the jets, the largest of the many parked nearby. It wasn't much smaller than the commercial plane she'd taken to Spain all those years before.

She ascended steps built into the door, and once inside a female flight attendant handed her a glass of champagne with a textbook welcome-grin. Benji showed her to a seat at the front of the cabin, the faces and gazes of other passengers, other *participants*, overwhelming her. A long-haired rocker type in an Anthrax t-shirt. A blond He-Man in white jeans. A punky woman in an oversized Hawaiian shirt. Everyone sitting alone. Then she noticed the plane's interior. White and minimalist. Hardwood floors. Chunky leather recliners. And was that a bloody lounge area with sofas?

She sat down, a little tipsy already without having taken a sip of bubbly. This was the real deal, wasn't it? This was money. This was important.

They would *absolutely* find her out.

"We've had a few no-shows," Benji said, taking her bag and storing it above her head, "so there's plenty of room if you want to change seats."

"This is so... swanky."

Benji raised his eyebrows, as if to say, You've seen nothing yet.