



KILL ANA

A memoir written by
Charlotte Bailey & Ella Grimwade



When I googled my best friend's BMI, search results said 'death imminent'."

Kill Ana is a story based on a diary I kept during our year living together at University, when we took a DIY approach to her mental health.

Kill Ana: a memoir

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Chapter 1: How Strong

When Ella invited me to her boxing match, I couldn't wait to share the news with friends and family.

"Ella? Little Ella? Your friend Ella?" They were aghast.

They were thinking of Ella from ten years ago, back when I had googled her BMI and search results said 'Death Imminent'. Back when she would walk for miles without eating for days and would have a panic attack at the thought of digesting a mince pie.

I met her at University, and for the first few years of our friendship this was how I'd known her. On nights out, we'd form a protective circle around her so that she wouldn't break an arm or a rib in the jostling crowd. If I heard an ambulance siren I'd track it's direction, hoping it wasn't Ella it was heading towards. Her anorexia was a huge part of our lives back then.

"I just don't want to see her get hurt," her Dad said. He was standing beside me with Ella's husband and other friends who'd come for moral support.

They were worried. But as I looked up at her in the boxing ring, facing an opponent taller and bigger than her, I recognised the determined look on her face and knew, as I'd always known, what she was capable of. I wasn't afraid that she would lose.

Because seeing someone as self aware and desperate to get better as Ella, struggling with her own mind, so hard for so long, made me see how difficult it truly was. And how strong you needed to be. How strong she had always been.

Chapter 2: How bad are we talking?

I didn't know anyone at Uni. Like all freshers, I started off in a sort of friendship frenzy, with a heart wide open to meeting new people. Especially at pre-drinks.

A girl in my English class had forgotten her notebook, so she shared mine and invited me round her place. Later that same day I found myself in a cramped kitchen, buzzing with unfamiliar faces getting ready for a night out.

It was on a night like that, over a card game and a glass of Amaretto with coke, when I first met Ella.

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One year later, 6th January

"I'm so not looking forward to classes." Liz, my housemate, mused aloud as she poured herself a cup of Yorkshire tea. We'd recently returned to the house share after Christmas break. "Final year is so much harder, you'll see. You and Ella don't know how good you have it."

She settled at the kitchen table opposite me and cradled the mug for warmth. "Speaking of Ella, when does she get here?"

"Not sure, it's an eight hour journey up by coach for her."

"Eight hours! Jeez." There was a moment where we both thought the same thing: "Do you think she's eaten?"

I thought back to the last conversation we'd had around New Years. "She was in a good place when we last spoke," I said, optimistic. "I think she'll be okay."

At that moment we heard keys in the door. "Oh, speak of the devil!" Liz said as I got up to greet her at the door.

I figured she'd probably need help carrying bags from the taxi...only to witness her trip over a large suitcase as it fell with a heavy thud into the hallway.

I helped her up, "Flippin' 'ell, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, it's okay! I've got this."

I watched her heave the suitcase upright and close the door. She smelt of the cold and her nose and cheeks were red raw with it.

I felt a familiar feeling of frustration well up in my stomach which I tried to keep out of my tone of voice when I said: "You dragged this thing all the way from the station again, didn't you?"

"It's not that far," Ella said, and even more ominously, "...besides, it's good exercise."

She smiled and I thought: *is she thinner?*

As we hugged, I could feel the bones in her back move. They were very pronounced.

"Happy New Year, Charlotte," she said.

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Later in my room, I did a Google search on the time it would have taken to walk from the coach station to our house. One hour and eight minutes, said the map.

After eight hours of sitting still on that coach, I thought to myself, *she probably felt she needed to burn the calories.*

What is she made of?

I heard a knock on the door and Ella's voice said quietly "Can I come in?"

"Of course! Just clear some space on the bed. Sorry about the mess."

"You should see my room. I bought way too much stuff up with me."

"Yeah, I saw. Why do you insist on carrying all that weight by yourself?" I thought, *You're struggling right now, aren't you?*

"It's not that heavy," Ella said, and what I heard was: *Please don't see how ill I am.*

What was unsaid hung between us for a moment. "I'm sorry I didn't visit you for New Year like I promised." Ella said guiltily.

"You said you were sick."

"Well, I was in a way."

"You were afraid that my family would make you eat."

Ella nodded her head.

"It's okay." It really was. "I kind of knew," and playfully I added: "You owe me a visit now."

"Yes," Ella said, smiling sadly. "I promise. Are you angry with me?" She looked like an admonished puppy.

"Of course not." *And even if I was, I would never take my anger out on you.*

*

A year ago, when I met Ella for the second time, it was at a presentation about travelling the world on a bicycle. She was the only face I recognised so we sat together dreaming about our own potential adventures.

We hung out later to watch the film *Into the Wild*.

“I love this part,” she said, as the character wrote in a book ‘Happiness is only real when shared’.

“I’m conflicted. Happiness feels real to me even when I’m alone,” I commented.

“I always thought that, too,” she said. “Maybe it’s because he’s not just alone, he’s lonely.”

We talked late into the night. Needless to say, it turned out we had a hell of a lot in common. It was a conversation punctuated with “me too!”

It was the night of the Tohoku tsunami. The death toll was climbing into the 15k mark and I was regularly checking my phone for news on my favourite mangaka, Eichiro Oda.

“Oh, I love that manga!” She said.

I’d never met another fan before then. “You read One Piece?!” And that was the moment. I knew I’d made an ally.

Ella and I can talk for hours. It’s a rare gem to find someone who accepts you, challenges you and connects with you, so quickly and completely.

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“It’s bad, isn’t it.”

Ella was lying next to me on the bed, facing the ceiling as she nodded her head. “Are you getting professional help?”

Ella shook her head.. “Not right now. It’s bad enough that they’d...They’d section me again. I would have to miss another year of uni. I can’t go through that again. It was hell.”

“How bad are we talking?”

Ella told me her body mass index. The number went over my head at the time, but I stored it for later.

“Okay,” I said, keeping it light. “We’ll figure something out.”

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Later that night, I googled her BMI to gauge the seriousness of the situation. The search result was pretty ominous. I knew that the measurement was pretty flawed though, so I called a helpline for those with eating disorders.

Her condition is life threatening, they said. Seek professional help.

Getting help felt like a betrayal of trust. She'd told me about her stints in hospital wards before. The time lost, the isolation and the humiliation of it all. I didn't want that for Ella. I believed her when she said that she wanted to get well.

On the other hand, her life could be in danger...

Was it my responsibility to make decisions for her own well being? I felt, at this point, like the rational one in the relationship.

I needed a second opinion, so I waited for Ella to leave for class and knocked on Liz's door.

Ella clearly wasn't in her right mind and I was no doctor.

I was her friend.

Chapter 3: Confiding in someone

7th January, 11am

I confided in Liz, baring all. "She's fallen off the radar with her doctors," I said.

Part of me knew I was sharing secrets that weren't mine to share. I worried about that, but I knew that Liz was just as empathetic as I was to Ella's situation. Besides, it was a huge relief to share the burden of knowledge with another party.

"She's having heart palpitations and body aches and recently she cracked a rib. She's out of anxiety pills and she's scared and tired, all of the time."

"Can't we just tell her doctor?" Liz said, worriedly.

"She says they'd section her again. And she won't go willingly." In my imagination I saw men in white coats dragging Ella kicking and screaming into the back of a van. "It would be messy, painful and crap. I can see why she sees it as her worst case scenario."

"But it's not that true for us, is it?" Liz pointed out. "There are worse things."

"Isn't that a bit dramatic?" I said, dismissing the thought before it could articulate itself into a possibility. "She's been getting better by herself. Sending her off could be for nothing."

"Hasn't she gotten worse since last semester?"

"She was getting better until she went home for Christmas." The familiar feeling of frustration sprang up again. She'd been putting on weight in the first semester of Uni, when it was just the three of us. We'd endured months of overcoming emotional storms around mealtimes,

battles of will and hours of careful listening and conversation. All that hard work was undone in a matter of weeks over the holiday period. And now she was worse than ever.

Then Liz said something that hadn't occurred to me. "If you keep doing what you're doing for her already, you'll start to resent her."

"That won't happen," I said, on autopilot. "I'm a very tolerant person."

"I know you are, but you have to admit it's a lot to deal with." I didn't want to admit it then, but she had a point.

After hours of deliberation and a few more calls to helplines, we decided to seek professional help. Then the practicality of that sank in.

Who do we confide in?

I could just tell her parents.

Would she resent me for it? Would it make her situation worse?

How utterly alone would she feel with no one on her side?

Would I lose something rare and precious?

It felt like an ambush.

We had it all planned out. We would do it as soon as she came home from class.

And so, we waited.

I felt sick with nerves the whole time. It was a cloud-covered sky on the cusp of night time.

"She's due, any time now." I said, pacing Liz's room.

"I'm so anxious." Liz said, sitting at her desk with her tea.

We heard the keys in the front door and Ella's voice calling "Hello? Hey, guys? Is anyone home?"

I answered, "We're in Lizzie's room!"

We heard Ella's footsteps on the stairs. She peeked her head around the door and I saw on her face. It was clear she'd immediately assessed the situation.

Time for an intervention.

Chapter 4: Intervention

8th January, 4pm

I don't remember exactly who said what that night, only that for the next few hours, Ella was effectively pleading for her life.

"If you commit me I won't go willingly. Having that on my mental records could kill my future career prospects." Ella said.

I suspected she was being overly dramatic but I had no way to confirm or deny it, so I ignored it.

"Hospital is a good thing," I said, unable to escape how patronising I sounded. "We'll visit and write. It will make you strong enough to come back..."

Ella, of course, was having none of it. "If you put me back there I'll be right back to square one. Any motivation I have to get better will be crushed. Hospital is only good for keeping me alive, not for sorting my head."

Would it really do her more harm than good? Who could really say? She'd been in and out of hospitals for years.

"Maybe we could just tell someone that can help," Liz suggested. I was so relieved to have her here for this. "It doesn't have to be as extreme as hospitalisation."

"I've tried that before. I was sectioned, remember?" Ella snapped. She'd been living with Liz and other housemates at the time. "I lost a whole year."

"I'm just going to get us some tea," Liz said. "Do you want anything?"

I cut in. "Keeping this a secret while you quietly starve to death is not really an option for us."

Ella looked away and said quietly, "I feel fine."

I immediately felt guilty. But I didn't want this exhausting conversation to be for nothing, so I pressed on.

"Do you understand where we're coming from?" I pleaded. "Think of this situation from our point of view. None of us are medical professionals. We called a few helplines and they said you're on death's door. What if you get worse and die?"

There, I said it.

Liz fidgeted in her seat. "Maybe we should have some dinner, it's getting late..."

At that Ella left the room, leaving us to believe we'd gone too far. "Well, that could have gone better." Liz said.

Ella returned with a letter in her hands.

“This is from my doctor,” she said, holding it up as proof. “My next appointment is in three weeks time. Give me until then to get to a weight that won't put me at risk of being sectioned.”

Liz and I looked at each other. Three weeks wasn't long at all.

“I want to get well.” Ella said. “I just need your help.”

We needed a break so we stopped around 9.. We weren't sure how long we'd been debating but it had been dark for hours. Ella would only eat dinner and dessert if we were watching something together so we decided to do that.

We took up our usual position in my room, with pillows for tables and my laptop propped up on books at the end of the bed. We were halfway through watching a light-hearted episode of *Girls* when we noticed the snowstorm outside.

“It's the sort that sticks!” Liz announced, “It's incredible, look!” And sure enough, the nighttime streets had been transformed into a winter wonderland.

Ella leapt into action. She put on her boots and donned her coat, leading the way into the blizzard. We went out to play feeling like kids, loving the absurdity of it, feeling the necessity of it.

We trekked to the park. The snow was satisfying to crunch beneath our boots and make snow angels in. “I'm too old for this!” Liz laughed.

“I love snow,” Ella said. “It makes the horrid cold of winter worthwhile.”

“And inspires creativity just by existing!” I added, gesturing at an impossibly tall snowman about ten feet tall.

The dense trees, usually pitch black and ominous, looked enchanted and bright with snow. We called friends to join us as we explored the area in the middle of the night.

The conversation from a few hours ago was left frozen around us like the snow.

Chapter 5: A Promise

9th January

“South Africa!?”

Ella and I were walking to University together when she surprised me with the latest announcement. “You're studying abroad next year?”

“Yeah, it's either South Africa or Columbia.”

“That would be wicked!” My mind went to hot weather and adventure, “I'm jealous!” I admitted. I really was.

“Well, this won't be easy for me. What with my weight.”

I knew immediately what she meant. “They won't let you go as you are, I bet.”

Ella nodded. “There's doctors, insurance companies...heck, if I even make it through Uni.”

I knew she was thinking about the intervention we'd had the other night. We hadn't discussed it since, and had carried on like everything was normal.

“Ella, I'm going to help you. But you have to let me.”

Ella was visibly relieved. “Thank-”

“And!” I said, “there needs to be rules.”

In order to buy my silence, Ella had to adhere to an agreed set of boundaries.

i) Thou shalt not lie. Nor tell untruths.

This way, we could both prevent being blind to how bad it was. And we could face it. I promised I wouldn't judge her no matter what she said, so that she would be free of fear.

It took the intimidation out of simple questions like ‘did you eat breakfast’. She'd say no, I'd say okay better luck next time and we'd move on to the next round.

ii) If she didn't put on the weight on her own schedule, then we'd have the right to grass her up.

“We're already putting you at risk” I elaborated. “If we make you worse, that's unbearable.”

And finally,

iii) She had to go to her scheduled doctor's appointment in three weeks time.

We didn't want to be responsible for her for too long.

I imagined being at her funeral and facing her family's questions of “Why didn't you get help sooner?”

With the promise of a doctors appointment in three weeks time, I felt more secure that we were doing the right thing.

Once I'd listed the terms of our agreement. Ella chimed in with, "Is that all?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "I guess so." *Lean on me for a bit until you're in a better headspace.* That is what I wanted her to do. If she was going to do this, we would do it together.

"Fancy watching *Thelma & Louise* tonight?"

Chapter 6: Ella's Journey

How did it happen?

How did I become anorexic?

Honestly, I don't know for sure.

There is no one answer.

It's a combination of genetics and environmental influences.

There are a few personality traits common in those with eating disorders. I am a perfectionist and I want people to like me. I always wanted to meet everyone's expectations of me.

The diet was only ever meant to be a part of a strategy to become better. And I was very good at it. I reached my perfect weight and decided to give myself a little buffer.

Then the buffer became the perfect weight and so on. The diet went from being part of my efforts to be perfect to what was most important.

And when things got stressful it was something to hold on to.

Anorexia is a constant performance. It's like the red shoes that make you dance until you die.

You can't stop. You can no longer judge your own feelings and thoughts from the ones that have taken root.

I tried everything to get better again to get over the eating disorder: drugs, no drugs therapy, meditation, Yoga, journaling, Caffeine, magic stones, Volunteering, natural remedies, Harry Potter, friends.

I took my GCSEs in hospital.

I started college late.

At university I was okay at first, but then in second year my weight dropped uncontrollably.

I went to bed each night thinking I might not wake up, and I was okay with that.

It wasn't so much that I wanted to die.

I just didn't have the energy to care, either way.

I felt bad about the thought of my housemates being the ones to find me there, though.

So, that year, I went home for Christmas. I admitted that I was in a bad way and spent months in intensive care and eating disorder units.

Then I returned to Uni for my second year for the second time.

For some reason my old housemates welcomed me back. They thought I would be better this time. They didn't know how many times I'd been back in the same place before.

I was first diagnosed with an eating disorder when I was 15. I had kind of given up on the idea of ever being healthy again. I was so dependent on my condition that large parts of me didn't want to get better. I'd made it to an island where I felt content and safe.

But I didn't want to be alone anymore. I didn't want to die, or keep living this ghost life.

I thought this time, like I did every time that I would be better.

Luckily, this time, I had Charlotte.

Part 2: **Before Christmas**

A few months into living together, I started a journal.

Primarily to make sense of thoughts and feelings but also to track our progress as Ella tried to get well.

Chapter 7: Self-Discovery

12th October, the previous year

The professional procrastinators that we were, we would often put off essays and assignments to do online personality tests. Which daemon are you? What type of wand would you have? What Disney princess would you be?

Today it was Myers-Briggs and it was Ella's turn to take the test.

"You enjoy vibrant social events with lots of people," I read.

"Um..."

"Don't overthink. What came first?"

"Yes, I do, but not all the time."

"Okay, next. Your travel plans are more likely to look at a rough list of ideas than a detailed itinerary."

"Well, yes, but not in terms of food."

"We'll just say yes, the food bit is the anorexia talking. Okay, next one. You rarely worry if you made a good impression on someone you met."

"No, I need everyone to like me."

"Haha, yeah, I could have answered that one for you. Okay. You have a careful and methodical approach to life."

"Well, again, I'm really not a careful or methodical person. I mostly just go with the flow. But with calories...this is the thing with anorexia...it's not just me. I'm a totally different person. It's like I'm two people."

I knew what she meant. There was Ella and then there was not-Ella.

We had many names for it. The Voice. Anorexic-head. Ana.

If I didn't measure every ingredient I used in a pancake, Not-Ella would suddenly scream "USE A SPOON!" before Ella could catch herself.

If Ella added cheese to a meal, Not-Ella would dash it into the bin in the blink of an eye.

If Ella promised to have lunch with you that day, Not-Ella would come up with a dozen reasons why she can't.

And when Ella decided to eat a Cornish Pasty for the first time in a decade, Definitely-Not-Ella would throw herself to the ground in a ball of sheer panic and terror, leaving the poor pasty to go cold.

I wasn't the only one who swore that her eyes changed colour when Ana took over.

So it was easy to think of anorexia as a separate entity. A malevolent presence. The dark passenger.

We analysed it's demands so that we could resist it. For example:

Ana wanted control.

I asked her once at dinner time, "why don't you add a bit more cheese to your roasted pepper? You're motivated to put on weight. Why not get it over with?"

Ella thought about that for a minute. "You know those old taps that you have to twist? We had one at my old house. You could get a steady stream if you turned it *just* right. Any further and it would burst from the tap like a jet stream," she illustrated. "It's like that old tap. I have to be careful. Otherwise I'll lose control."

I thought that seeing Ana as 'Other' - a villain trying to dominate - meant that Ella would be more motivated to rebel against an 'oppressor'.

Whenever she said something self destructive, I would question whether it was an original Ella thought, or Ana trying to 'control' her.

Another observation we made:

Ana thrives under secrecy.

Feelings of shame or guilt festered in the dark. It was natural for Ella to hide 'bad' thoughts with lies, from "I'm full" to "I've already eaten".

Whenever Ella said that she didn't want to eat a meal because she was afraid she'd put on weight, the confession would summon the demon we were facing into the light of day.

What we could both see and accept, we could fight. She could defy it.

She would eat the pancake. Add extra cheese to a meal. She'd sit down for lunch.

She'd even eat cold cornish pasty.

She could do things she thought she'd never do. She could say 'no' to something, then overcome.

This brings me onto my next point:

Ana wants her to forget.

A large part of my job was simply to remind Ella of things. Like what she was capable of and what she was working towards. Sometimes we even made recordings of her talking to her future self that she would listen to in a moment of weakness.

“It’s like forget-me-nots,” Ella said. “My dad and I would pick them. They’re technically weeds. No matter how many times he picked them, the roots would still be there. They’d grow right back again. The thoughts are like that, they keep coming back. I keep forgetting why it’s so important for me to get well at all.”

I thought about that for a while. We brush our hair, clean our teeth and do all sorts of self-maintenance tasks on a regular basis, so it made sense to me that course-correcting self-destructive thought patterns should be part of the routine. It was self-maintenance for the brain.

So, we’d write post-it as reminders that read ‘What Ella wants’:

- To stay at university.
- To study abroad.
- To not die.
- To not be cold all the time.
- To say yes to experiences.
- To be able to help others.
- To have more brain space.
- To not be afraid all the time.

Ella was trapped in an alternative reality, where the demon *Ana* made her think and see things only she could make sense of.

I knew I was unqualified to *cure* Ella.

But I knew that I was in a unique position to help her, too. We were the same age and height, so she aspired to be my size. We liked and thought similar things and we spent most of our time together.

If we weren’t studying or eating, we’d get the night bus into town for a night out or we’d watch films for a night in.

Often we’d spend a good chunk of the evening talking about Ana.

I wanted to say the right thing, but it was so complex.

I would never figure it out on my own because all I had was logic, which was useless against an illness that defied all logic.

I needed to understand how she felt.

I once asked Ella: “When it’s time to eat, what does it feel like? Is it like being at the edge of a cliff and you’re afraid to take the leap?”

“No,” she replied, “I've already fallen off the cliff. I'm just about hanging on by my bare hands. You're trying to tell me that there's a ledge, and it's okay to let go. But I can't. I just can't. I shouldn't. I won't!”

Reassurance.

The thing that she needed from me the most was to be reminded that she was safe.

I read that if you're caring for someone with an illness, inevitably your behaviour will react and adapt to different situations. The team at Maudsley Hospital in London came up with a few visual representations of these styles of caring.

I've been every one of those animal guides, at some point or another. I've pretended not to notice when she had a bad day, like the Ostrich sticking its head in the sand. I've lost my temper and stung her with my words, like the Jellyfish. I've even demanded that she depend on me, like the Kangaroo protecting the child in its pouch. I've argued with logic, badly, like a Rhino determined to get their way. I would use logic to get desired results, put in hours of effort, only to win in a small ineffective way. And sometimes it meant that she'd compensate in other ways, later on.

Overall, I did the best that I knew how to do at the time. Mistakes were inevitable. Even if you do get everything right, it may not have any effect.

Because you will be one factor out of many.

The right thing to say in one situation isn't the right thing to say in all situations. But to quote Tesco: *every little helps.*

Chapter 8: Getting Better?

2nd November

“There are so many clothes in your room.”

“The irony is that I haven't been clothes shopping in years. It's all old or secondhand stuff.”

“Yeah, I hate clothes shopping. Nothing ever fits properly. And I leave feeling like crap. It's a waste of time.”

“I hate the fashion industry.”

I was well versed in this song. “Because of the whole ‘thin is beautiful’ obsession? Or because of the slave wages in manufacturing countries?”

“Yeah, exactly. Both. The fashion industry, as it is, is pretty much evil.”

“It has a lot to answer for,” I nodded. I thought about the damage campaigns like ‘pretty little things’ did to the minds and self esteem of kids growing up. How much power did it give to mental illnesses like anorexia? What share of the blame did it have?

“-there are charity shops, of course,” Ella went on. “Maybe a carbon tax on big polluting factories. Something like a universal basic income could work. We’d have more money to buy ethically and workers wouldn’t have to accept horrible working conditions just to survive.”

“Free money? That would never happen.”

“It could! President Nixon nearly rolled it out in the 70s, and he was a Republican. Google UBI, you’ll see what I mean. It’s the logical next step for all of us. It’s just a matter of time.”

“I don’t need to Google it, you know everything already.”

“Huh. Hardly.”

I found something I liked. “This is a nice belt.”

“Yeah it suits you. I used to use that one to make myself feel full on a bad day.”

“Oh really? That makes sense. I know what to watch out for in the future now.”

Ella was obviously conflicted about sharing that information. “You know,” she admitted, “when I tell you about my tricks, it’s like I’m robbing Ana of one of its tools. Mental illness will make a liar and a cheat out of an honest soul, building up barriers between me and all the people I love. Telling the truth, even about small things, starts to pave the way back to myself.”

I nodded, feeling happy that she saw it that way. That was how I saw it too.

I brought my attention back to the task at hand and noticed a dress that was out of place.

“Is this yours?”

“Yes it is. It’s a few sizes too big. I bought it with the idea of growing into it. It’s a goal of mine.”

It can take years to overcome an eating disorder. Though it felt like I was spending a large chunk of time making sure she ate, I actually had it easy. By the time that I met Ella she was already highly motivated to get well. She had served her time in hell.

When I saw the dress, it struck me that she was preparing to be a healthy weight.

Great, I thought. She’s really going to do it.

We'd be able to go on hikes and runs together. We could eat out without any worry or woe.

And what would she look like, at my weight?

I was excited.

Chapter 9: Barcelona

15th November

For Ella's birthday weekend we went to Barcelona and had a magical time.

The thing is, when you know someone well enough, you no longer register the unique features that had struck you when you first saw them. It's so familiar to you now. Part of who they are. You don't notice anything out of the ordinary.

Even though it was mid-November, it was warm enough to take our jackets off.

It was like seeing Ella for the first time. Whether indoors or out, she was always bundled up in jumpers and arm warmers, especially at this time of year.

I'd never seen her like this. She had pale skin anyway, so being as thin as she was, she really did look like a halloween prop.

People in the crowds noticed, too. I could see them staring and pointing in her direction as she strolled obliviously through the tourist packed streets.

And I started to worry.

Am I doing this right? Was I actually helping her? How could she be eating whenever we're together and still be this thin?

Her positive energy distracted me from my reverie, though. She ate almost like a normal person.

We ate Pesto pasta, which she hadn't permitted herself to have since she was fifteen. It only took a bit of convincing and free vouchers gifted to us for that particular dish. "It's a sign!" She said. I can still remember how amazing it tasted.

We ran through the cobbled streets at night time, going round full circle to find the perfect gelato place. It would have been more fun if part of us didn't know that it was one of Ana's delay tactics. But the tiramisu and pistachio cones were satisfying rewards.

When we visited the Basilica de Santa Maria del Pi, the protruding ribs of Jesus slumped on the cross made me think of Ella. For the first time, the depiction of the emancipated body that everyone worshipped made me feel a bit sick.

“You know,” Ella said thoughtfully, “this eating disorder is kind of like a religious cult. There are rituals, ceremonies, sacrifice.” I thought about the calorie counting. The weighing. The compensation between meals. The eternal fasting.

“There's good food and bad food,” she continued, and I thought about the *Weight Watchers* permitted ‘sins’. The halos and devil horns associated with treats. How had I not seen the connection to religion before?

“And,” she concluded, “there's the promise of something better in the end.”

Chapter 10: Christmas

2nd December

It's nearly Christmas. It's the time she struggles with the most.

Family dinner is something she usually compensates for by starving herself on the run up to Christmas break.

I wasn't the only one who noticed.

Liz and I were alone in the kitchen one night. She looked to check that no one was in the hallway before leaning over to me as I cooked.

“I know we've been eating dinner with her,” she said quietly, “but I never see her eat much breakfast or lunch. What if she only eats to impress us?”

We wasted no time in asking Ella directly. There was no point in delaying it.

“Do you feel like you're getting better?” I asked, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

“I want to say the honest thing,” Ella said shyly, “but it keeps changing.”

And then she said something...

“Rather than improving-”

...kind of scary.

“- it feels like it's evolving.”

Chapter 11: Don't do this

10th December Whatsapp Chat

Charlotte: Ella. I don't think you should go home for Christmas break. Come back with me. You're better with me around, you're getting better.

Ella: Obviously, I will visit you

Charlotte: I don't think you've been winning your battles recently.

Your portions are noticeably smaller.

Now you're going to the place you say you're always at your worst at the time of year that triggers you most.

Ella: I know. I'm sorry.

Charlotte: I know you'll be with family, so please let them help you. Talk and listen to them.

If you're feeling anxious text or phone me whenever.

Don't punish yourself.

Go through the post-its we've made every morning.

You're stronger than you feel.

Part 3: **AFTER CHRISTMAS BREAK**

It was after that phone call when I started writing in my diary for a few hours every day.

I was feeling frustrated that Ella chose to go back to a place where I thought she'd get worse and I was angry that she cancelled on visiting for New Year. I needed an outlet.

Once I started writing, I couldn't stop. It was a way for me to vent in private. By then, anorexia was my number one concern.

We'd invested so much time and effort into getting her healthy that her eating habits had become more critically important to me than my degree.

I felt a lot of responsibility for Ella because although I was close enough to support Ella more holistically, it became mortifyingly apparent that I was also able to do a lot of damage to her, too.

The diary I kept picks up from when she arrived back at the house in the new year. She came back to us both highly motivated because she had the dream of a year of study abroad in South Africa to aim for. She was compromised by her weight, the lowest it had ever been.

I don't know whether we were doing the right thing or not by trying to DIY her recovery. But we did.

I've read that starving the body forces it to take the brain's fat reserves, which can literally make you stupider.

That's Ella's excuse for what comes next. I'm not sure what mine is!

12th January: Ana on the Brain

Since Ella got back from Christmas, she can no longer make decisions about her food. It's normal for me to choose for her now.

She doesn't trust herself to make the right choice. And it helps her feel like she doesn't have any choice.

"This one." I pointed, knowing that she would have already carefully selected those with equivalence calorie intake.

After our intervention, even though I've promised to help her for the next few weeks, I am on hyper alert.

I almost slipped on some melted ice once and it occurred to me that the snow was an extra danger for her. She'd cracked a rib from falling out of bed very recently.

On a windy day I feel the urge to text her to make sure she was okay walking home.

In fact it has become normal for me to text her several times throughout the day anyway, just to check in. Or to make sure she gets a taxi or a bus instead of walking the hour back from town in the freezing, dark nights. She doesn't always reply straight away, what with lectures and study and volunteer work. I try to keep calm and not think about it, but it leaks into my dreams.

Last night for example I dreamt that I was talking to Ella and she started to turn bright yellow and blue and skinless, like one of those models in science books. Muscles became exposed until she was a diagram of a skeleton on a page.

After breakfast I asked her “are we still okay to meet for lunch?”

I always tried to align my meals with her, but it wasn't easy as we had different schedules.

For example, the last time we had lunch it went like this:

“Are you going to eat those?” a classmate said, gesturing to my sandwich and crisps.

“Yeah just waiting for Ella. She'll be here in a bit.”

Time passed. I ate slowly. Friends asked me if I was walking with them to class and I said I'd catch up. Checked my phone. Finally I heard a familiar, tired voice:

“Sorry I'm late. I'm only stopping by to say hi though, I need to get to my next lecture.” Ella said.

“When does it start?” I asked.

She knew she'd been caught. “1:30.”

“That's an hour away, you have plenty of time to eat.” I patted the seat beside mine.

I saw her eyes dart to my friend's lunch. She could only see a packet of crisps. She calmed down when that same friend pulled out a sandwich.

Before, it would have been enough eating with me. Now it doesn't matter what she sees me do. Ana is always searching for a way out of eating and making excuses.

The squeeze of my arm and a whispered “thank you” was all I needed as a reward, though. Then she left with lunch in her belly.

Mission complete.

13th January: They just don't get it

I flew at our housemate today.

“Stop stealing her snacks and announcing that you haven't eaten!” I said. “It makes Ella think it's okay for her not to eat, and you're making it difficult for her and me.”

“Fine,” he said, “I'll replace her snacks. But don't expect me to edit what I say around her. She lives in the real world. She'll have to learn to ignore this stuff.”

14th January: Grounded

Ana-Ella is currently pacing the kitchen, giving bullshit reasons to justify going for a nice long uphill walk to the supermarket.

“I'm lazy, unproductive, selfish” blah blah blah. The usual.

Liz has gone on another hike today, so she's feeling restless and probably a little jealous.

“Liz eats more than you, so she's got calories to spare.” I said. “Also your cheese toast is getting cold.”

“Eat yours first.”

“How about we eat at the same time?”

Ella's voice softened a little. “Can I listen to the recording first?”

Ella listened to the recording of herself that we'd made a few nights ago, reminding her of why she needed to gain weight.

She made one last attempt to find an excuse for her to leave by asking our housemate if he wanted to go shopping.

“No,” he said. Thankfully.

I'd never had to talk her into staying still before. It worried me.

And I had no idea if I did the right thing or not.

Because even if you think you've won a battle with Ana, it could just come back later when you're not looking.

She didn't go on an hour long walk, so sooner or later she might skip dinner. Or a day.

15th January: An Invitation

Ella has wanted to meet my sisters for months now.

She wants to see my room in my hometown, my life outside of University. She talked about it all the time.

Which is why I'm cancelling her salsa class for her next week.

"They were fine with it." I said. "You're good."

"Thanks for doing that for me. That's at least one worry down, but I still don't think I should go. I'm so boring. What if I ruin everyone's fun? Your poor parents have to pick me up from the station. I'm sorry, I can't-."

"Ella." I broke in, purposefully and slowly, "we both know that none of this is going to be a problem. What can I say to convince you to join me this weekend at my house?"

"You could promise not to make me eat."

And there it is. I'm not fighting to convince Ella to join me. I'm actually fighting *Ana* to *let Ella go*.

"I won't make you eat. I actually never do. I've never given you an ultimatum or anything like that." This is technically true, but I never let her off easily.

Ella was still stubborn about it. "I'll ask my dad to visit me while you're gone," she said.

"Okay. Let's call him now to check."

I know I sound controlling here, but if she had a better reason than 'I'm scared I'll have to eat', I wouldn't fight so hard.

*

So, Ella is coming to my house next weekend since her dad can't make it.

I'm pretty sure it's a good thing.

Though it could also go terribly wrong.

16th January: A Verbal Minefield

Today, Ella knocked on my door and said: "I'm not going to have any more conversations with you and I'm going to stop eating dessert from now on."

My first thought was: *your dessert is the only thing keeping me from grassing you up to your parents.*

My second thought was: *wait, what?*

As it turns out, it was something I had said to her last night.

I had said "I can see that you're trying, you're good with dessert."

So Ana interpreted it like this: *I'm good with desserts = I eat it too often = I enjoy it = I don't deserve dessert = no more desserts.*

As I processed the absurdity of that thought process, she pressed me again:

"And are you truly okay with long conversations?"

"Of course I am!" I said earnestly. "They're interesting for me and important for you-"

"Important for me?" She was triggered again. "So you only do it because you feel you have to, for my sake?"

It's easy to say the wrong thing.

It's impossible to tell, even if it's technically the right thing.

17th January: Coping mechanisms

Recently, I tried to prepare Ella for her appointment by getting her to accept that hospital is not a bad thing. I see it as a sort of an inevitability at this point. But she always comes up with great reasons as to why that's the worst thing that could happen to her.

"Whatever willpower I had to get better last time, the genuine desire was completely crushed within days of being in hospital."

Was I being played?

Was it really *that* bad?

We both knew that, on some level, despite what she said and what she was going through, part of her didn't really want to recover.

I usually said it was Ana that didn't want her to recover. Ana was the enemy, the demon, the great deceiver who couldn't be trusted. We referred to it constantly as if it had a mind of its own.

But we both knew that in reality it was merely a coping mechanism. A lifeline. An old friend that was helping her through some stressful times, that I was trying to take away. That made *me* the enemy.

Me, the hospital, the carer, her parents - anyone trying to take away her life support system had to be carefully avoided, managed, deceived.

Her eating disorder helped her cope with fear, anxiety and doubt in the way a log would save one's life in an endless flood.

When I thought about it this way, asking Ella to let go of her illness was akin letting her drown.

So part of me believed her when she said that hospital wasn't good for her.

I thought about the time we spent together as treading water. Regaining her confidence in her own ability, building up her strength, leaning on her own coping strategies.

One day, she won't need the log to keep afloat. Eventually, when she was ready, she would be able to let go.

18th January: Where does anger come from?

Ella was angry with me for some reason this morning. Or at least I think she was.

"Sorry I woke up late, that was pretty useless of me," I said groggily.

"It's okay, which one of these shall I eat?"

I gestured too hard and knocked a sachet of oats from her hand. I apologised and hoped it wouldn't be taken as an act of passive aggression.

"Next time if I'm late getting up, just make your own breakfast and start without me, okay? I'll catch up. I eat faster than you."

Seeing the look on her face I course corrected. "Or maybe eat in my room while I get ready? I'm fine with whatever."

"Please don't be upset with me," Ella said quietly.

"I'm not upset, I'm just trying to think of a solution to my laziness," but it was too late.

There was nothing I could say to convince her that I wasn't angry at her.

The thing is, I did feel angry in moments like this. But it was tricky to nail the real culprit.

Was it the health system for not trying hard enough? The missed calls on Ella's phone?

Was it the fact that I was failing? That Ella was 'choosing' Ana over me?

Ella was the last person I wanted to take it out on. She did a pretty good job of that all by herself.

I often felt a heady cocktail of guilt, impotence and uselessness. Was I just angry at myself?

19th January: Call an ambulance

A Complan a day keeps the doctor away, is our motto for the next week.

Ella needs to put on enough calories to pass her to our check up on Thursday, so she's increasing her daily calorie intake.

It's like cramming for an exam last minute, or writing an essay the night before it's due.

This is not going to work.

I've decided that if she passes her physical exam by tricking the scales, I will tell them the truth.

The other night, we were walking to pre-drinks but Ella was really struggling.

"Let's sit here for a bit," I said as we approached a hill. I perched on a wall and shuddered, it was freezing. Ella was bundled up in her usual multiple layers and was still shivering. "Are you okay?"

"It's fine."

"We can go back. I fancy a night in, anyways."

"I just need a minute." I noticed her rubbing her chest and alarm bells starting ringing.

"Oi, is there something wrong with your heart?"

"I don't- I don't want to do this," she choked, "it's really, really cold. I don't know how much my body can take. My chest really, really hurts."

I pulled out my phone. "Is it 999 or 911?"

"Don't you dare!" Ella cried.

"Ella, aren't you terrified? Is your heart failing?"

"Do NOT call an ambulance."

"Well then, we're going home. Get on my back."

"No, I feel better now. Let's go."

And for the first time in my life, I actually shouted at her in the street.

"Why are you forcing yourself right now?"

"I want to enjoy my life, even if it's for a short while longer."

"Are you enjoying yourself right now? Are you happy?"

"Oh, god." It came out as a choked sob. She might not be happy all the time, but she was always trying really hard to be.

"I want you to tell your parents the truth," I said gently.

"They already know I'm underweight."

"But they don't know how bad it is. Do they?"

"You want me to go to hospital, don't you? Tell the truth!"

"I don't want you to go to hospital. I just don't want to find your body tomorrow."

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you."

"You say that your chest hurts. Aren't you scared?"

"I shouldn't have told you anything."

Eventually I got my way and we walked back to the house for a quiet night in.

"Look, I get it." I said, breaking the awkward silence between us. "You don't want to be a burden to anyone, right?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry. I really wanted to go out tonight like a normal person."

“I know. And when you're stronger, you can. So let's just focus on that, okay?” I didn't mean to talk to her as if she were a child, but sometimes it came out that way and she seemed to respond to it.

She waited a long time to tell me how much she was struggling. She must have been afraid that I would betray her.

What she didn't know was that as of that night, in my heart, I already had.

20th January, A Co-dependency Day Off

For a while now, Ella has needed to eat meals with me. Nights out are aborted if I don't go. And I feel guilty when I go out without her.

When I'm around, Ana needs to observe and judge my every move.

And when I give myself a break from it my time is limited by lunch and dinner times.

What are you eating?

Can you send pics?

When will you get back?

Are you walking back?

Text me exactly what you eat.

And when you eat.

Make sure that you do.

The amount of calories I expend, or take in, is closely monitored.

So today on a whim, I went AWOL.

I got an earful later, though.

“You should have just told me you wanted some space.”

“I didn't because I knew you would act like this. You think I was angry at you but I'm not. I just want some time to myself.”

“Yes. And I'm in the way. Of course you hate me for that.”

“I do not hate you.”

“Well, you've made me feel like you were avoiding me because you hate me. You should have just told me you wanted some space. You made it worse.”

The next day my housemate asked me why Ella was sticking to *her* like glue all day, and I had a day off.

21st January, Countdown: Two days left

Things have been weird between Ella and me. Then last night I got a knock on my bedroom door.

“Come in.”

“Are you going to sleep?”

“No. What's up?”

“...Nevermind!” She disappeared and closed the door.

I thought about letting it go, but I wanted things to go back to normal between us. Maybe she was ready to talk, the way we used to.

I gave her a little space while I made a cup of peppermint tea in the kitchen. Then I knocked on her bedroom.

“Kettle's boiled if you want anything.”

“I'm okay. Thank you.”

“Did you want something?”

Ella shook her head ‘no’.

“Okay, well, I'll only leave when you tell me why you just asked whether I'm going to sleep or not.”

It didn't take long for the flood gates to burst wide open:

“I don't want to complain. I'm afraid of the doctors. I don't want to put on any more weight. I put on a kilogram overnight. It scared me. My mom wants me home, but I'd have to see my

carer. I don't want to go to hospital. I've walked too much today. I don't want to be a burden. I don't want to be annoying. I don't want to be clingy. I'm not hungry anymore at meal times. My heart hurts. My bones ache. I'm cold all the time. But I don't want to go to hospital. I don't want to go to hospital. I really want to go to South Africa. I don't need the hospital. I feel strong. I feel fine. And I don't want to have these conversations with you anymore."

I reacted to that last one, but I couldn't tell you what I was feeling.

"I don't want to be dependent on you anymore. That's why I've been avoiding you."

We talked until late.

Ella knew I couldn't always be there for her. So she wanted to rely on her own strength.

I was suspicious at first afraid that she'd locked me out only to get worse. But her doctor's appointment was only two days away, so soon, we'd have their support.

She felt more like herself tonight.

And then things will be back to normal.

22nd January: Day before D-Day

Ella has decided that she's not going to her appointment tomorrow because it's pointless.

"They couldn't help me. It is too far out the way and the risk of them catching me is too great."

If I were in her position, I wouldn't go either.

So it took a lot of hours to change her mind.

"We just want the responsibility of your health out of our unprofessional hands. We made a deal a couple of chapters ago, remember?"

We finished up at 3am. It was a long, long night.

23rd January: Doctor's Appointment

In the morning Ella still refused to go to the doctors, so I cancelled my lectures and got on the bus with her.

It was a miserable silent trek. I felt like a prison guard marching her towards the execution block.

During the 40-minute bus ride she downed the two litre bottles of Diet Pepsi that she'd bought beforehand.

She stashed the empty evidence in a bush when we arrived because we couldn't find a bin.

Turns out we were an hour early, and Ella panicked.

Sure enough, she needed the toilet after 15-minutes of waiting. She was restless and held it for as long as she could. "Shit," she hissed, and after a good struggle she made a dash for the bathroom.

Part of me felt glad that she wasn't going to be able to trick the scales after all. But then she found a water tank and filled up on that instead.

It was the first time I'd ever seen her drink water before. She hated the stuff. My mind recalled countless nights out, passing the plastic cup of water around whenever we needed it as we danced in the club. I remembered her predictable "no" every time it was offered to her, no matter how thirsty she got.

She'd told me why, once. It bought back bad memories.

Now she was gulping it down by the cup full and my heart broke.

Her name was called soon after. She didn't say a word and left.

I was in that waiting room for a total of three hours.

I was nervous for Ella. I was afraid they'd catch her out.

I was also afraid that they wouldn't.

I was mostly relieved that finally, after all those weeks of worrying, a professional was taking responsibility.

I was surprised when I heard Ella's voice next to me.

"It was a waste of time," she said casually.

*

"Eight months!?"

"It's a long waiting list," Ella shrugged.

My eyes bulged. “So you can't get therapy for *eight months*? But what about your weight? What did they say?”

“Well, I'm over 18. So they asked if they could weigh me. And I said no.”

“They. They didn't even weigh you?”

After all that suffering I put her through. That we'd put *ourselves* through.

Nothing had changed.

I felt crushed. Helpless. Stupid. Enraged.

Why weren't they doing anything?

Why can't anyone do something!?

Chapter 24: Fall out

I was completely distracted in my final lecture of the day. I'd missed the rest of them so I felt the need to be at this one, but I took in nothing. I raged in doodles all over my work. Afterwards I ranted and raved at my bewildered classmates at the Library pub.

I got home late. Ella was sitting alone at the kitchen table, watching me with sad eyes.

“How was your last lecture?” She asked, unsure.

“It was fine. How are you feeling?”

“I'm okay,” she said. “Do you want dinner?”

“No, it's late. Haven't you eaten already?” I tried to keep the frustration out of my tone but Ella was sensitive to it.

“I was waiting for you,” she said quietly.

I started preparing dinner in silence.

“Also, my carer called.” She said. “It was sort of good news, actually. She's discharged me.”

I tried really hard to keep my tone level. “What does that mean?” I already knew what it meant.

“It means I'm free. No more doctors. No one is chasing me anymore.” I couldn't respond to that without being obvious, so I nodded tightly, made an excuse and all but stormed off to my room.

Was everyone blind? Did no one give an actual fuck about her but me?

She followed me to my room and I thought great, now she's going to think that I'm angry at *her*.

"This is not your fault!" I said preemptively. "Please try to believe me. I'm allowed to feel angry at the shitty Mental Health System. It's useless. I can't believe they gave up that easily."

"But it's not their fault. It's mine. I'm doing everything in my power to avoid them. It's me you're angry at."

"No, I'm not angry at you. It's not your fucking fault. It's the stupid mental health centre and your stupid, useless carers fault for giving up and why can't your mom-"

"Don't you dare blame my mom! It's not her fault." Ella slammed the door behind her as she left.

I felt bad about that last part.

It was about time I gave her mother the chance to help her daughter.

But first I had to call mine.

Chapter 25: Parents

I'm usually very mild tempered. I get it from my dad. He is my model role model in that sense. When I Skyped him it was partly to confess my sin of losing my core just then.

"Hello, daughter of mine."

He understood what went down. Validated it. Said I was under a lot of pressure.

But then he asked me, "do you remember Kissy the cat?"

Sometimes I hated his stupid metaphors. Especially because he didn't seem to understand the concept of mental illness. He still believed Ella was making a choice, so I was wary of his advice.

"Please be sure that this isn't a pointless conversation because I am not in the mood right now."

"Do you remember about Kizzy the cat?"

"How is this relevant?"

"Just think about the cat."

Reluctantly, I recalled the memory of a cat me and my sister sort of adopted for a summer.

We knew she belonged to a family across the street, but we bought her cat food and played with her after school until one day she got sick and ran off.

“When the cat got sick, whose responsibility was it?”

“The owners. I know where you're going with this, but she's not a cat. She's a human. She has parents.”

“Exactly. She is not your responsibility. If you'd kept that cat and didn't take it to the vets and she was sick, her real owners would grab you and say what did you do to my cat? You stole my cat. You killed my cat!”

Laughter broke out of me. “Okay, I get it.”

I was holding the responsibility from her parents. And anyone who could help her. I was bringing it onto myself.

“Is that our Charlotte?”

“Yeah, mom. It's me.”

“How did Ella's appointment go?”

“It was crap.” I told mom everything.

Then she told me what I already knew.

“Hang up and call her mother. You're colluding with her. I see it all the time. She's got you around her little finger. You're a soft truck touch. I'm serious. She's too much responsibility for me in my capacity as a health visitor, let alone a 20 year old student. You've got your own work to deal with. She's off her rocker, my darling. She's off her rocker and you're colluding with her!”

I started to see a situation through the eyes of a parent. Telling them wouldn't automatically end with her being sectioned. They were on her side too.

They knew how much University meant to her.

The next day we gave Ella two choices.

If she didn't tell her mom the truth, we do it for her.

To Ella that translated to ‘we can't cope, you're a burden. We want you out of our lives for good.’

I felt guilty and I doubted myself.

But then I'd remember the relief I felt when I made the decision to just tell someone. I called her mom later that day.

The world didn't implode.

No bad men in white coats came to drag her away.

Nothing bad happened.

But nothing particularly good did either.

The truth was that Ella's mother had very little power over her. Because Ella was 21 she was not informed of her state of health. They couldn't set up a doctor's appointment and Ella was miles away out of reach.

All we can do is support her decisions.

At the time, I felt let down and back to square one. Nothing was any different.

But I was wrong. Everything had changed.

Chapter 26: Breakup

Around this time I had started looking for a house to live in for my final year at university. I'd already been invited to live with some friends.

Ella planned on studying in South Africa next year and Liz was graduating, so they didn't have to worry about it.

House hunting worked out to be a convenient reason to be out of the houseshare most of the time.

I knew that I was practically abandoning Ella, but I couldn't help myself.

Because of the distance we'd created recently, I no longer felt like I could ask simple questions, like 'how are you doing?' Or 'have you eaten?'

But I missed her. I still wanted to know.

"So," I tried to sound natural as we walked home together one evening. "How have you been eating recently?"

“What? Why?” She sounded cross.

“What do you mean, why? You usually tell me these things.”

“You haven't mentioned anything about anything at all recently. And now you suddenly asked me that?”

“Well, it's a normal question.”

“No, it's not. It's not a normal thing to have to ask”

“It is for us. You know what I mean.”

“Well, I don't want to talk about it.

“‘Anorexia thrives under secrecy’, remember?”

“It's no secret with you.”

“The only reason I even asked is because I saw your legs and worried about you.”

“Then you should have just told me straight instead of dancing around.”

“Dancing around what? I did ask you straight, I asked you a simple question.”

“No, you should have just said ‘Jesus, your legs are fucked up’ or something. You just skated around it like you usually do.”

“Fine!” I stormed off in the opposite direction.

“Thanks for the talk!”

Chapter 27: Ella's Journey II

Ana made me hate myself.

I was convinced of my horrible toxicity, that I poisoned relationships with anyone who cared for me.

It made it hard to be honest with them.

I could see how much my pain and lives confused her and saps them.

And I'd lie, I'd pull away and keep secrets.

Anorexia thrives under secrecy.

That was one of our golden rules.

Charlotte was understanding, kind and patient.

I wanted to believe that she could save me.

At the same time, I was always partly convinced that the weight of it all would eventually crush us.

Then she started to disappear without warning and her replies to my messages came later and shorter.

Was I imagining things?

Was Ana tricking me?

I didn't know what to do or think or feel.

I was confused, afraid.

I clung tighter.

I remember Charlotte was leaving to meet a friend in town one day.

"Can I come?"

And there it was. She hesitated.

She was always too polite to say no, but I could feel it.

Did she not want me there?

She didn't feel like talking. She didn't fancy meeting up later. Was that annoyance on her face?

I was terrified.

But I made my voice as cheerful as I could muster when I asked, "by the way, do you want some time to yourself today?" *Please say it's okay. Please say it's okay. Please say-*

"Is that okay?" Fuck.

"Of course, have fun." And as I walked away, the ground started crumbling beneath my feet. I started crumbling. Inside I shattered.

I knew this would happen. How could I have been so stupid.

But to start with, it had seemed like our friendship was always getting stronger.

She built this protective space for me and I felt safe with her. Secure in her care.

“Lean on me for a bit,” she had said, “Just until you're stronger.”

I deserved to lose her.

She deserved better than my toxic ways.

I needed to let her go.

So I pushed her away.

Our friendship, the best I had ever known, was over.

Chapter 28: Kill Ana

I remember when Ella first told me about her illness.

Nearly 3 years ago

“Your room is the same as mine but reversed.”

“I told you!”

She had the standard issue single bed, desk and shelves, complete with lackluster mirror, ugly curtains and a hard, scratchy emerald floor.

My eye caught sight of a photo on her bedside table.

“Oh, wow, is this you?”

“Me and my sister.” The photo was of two grinning children reaching for a horse in its stable.

“You look totally different.”

“Different, how?”

I sensed the worry in her tone and reassured her, “just different.”

I already privately suspected that she had an eating disorder from the first time I saw her. Her eyes were the most telling. She had never looked well.

But I didn't know for sure until I stumbled across the page in her notebook titled: *Ways to Kill Ana*.

Ella quickly took the notebook away.

"I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have turned the page without asking!"

"No, it's okay. I forgot it was there. But you should know, I have anorexia. That's what you just saw. I'm not trying to plot how to kill a poor girl called Ana or anything!"

"Haha, if you say so."

To be honest, I didn't think much of it. I didn't see it as any sort of real threat at the time.

And when it became a dangerous entity threatening our bond, we did not consider that we would lose.

Chapter 29: Dad Arrives

I was in the kitchen when I heard the doorbell go, followed by the sound of Ella answering it.

"Hi, Dad!" She said cheerfully, "How was your trip?"

"It was long. Let's go get some dinner."

I got my bowl of cereal that I was planning to snack on when Ella's Dad spotted me.

"Oh, hey, Charlotte! Join us for pizza! I'm buying."

My mind was rejecting the potential awkward social situation, but my body cheered at free pizza.

His insistence won me over without much of a fuss.

I didn't miss the look Ella gave me. It said everything that I was feeling. *This is an opportunity to be friends again.* "Okay, I'll get my coat."

Even though we felt out of sorts I had tried to act normal around her dad. But there was a dissonance between us that leaked into the conversation.

"Well, I think that war isn't inevitable. We can be better than that." Ella said at one point.

Her happy-go-merry everything is sun-shiney and lovely attitude has started to irritate me lately. She'd taken to playing sickeningly sweet and upbeat songs in the mornings. While part of me knew that it was her way of coping with a deep well of sadness and anxiety,

another part of me was sick of the charade and wanted things to go back to how they used to be.

And now it was all coming out in passive-aggressive vitriol.

“There will always be someone that wants what they can't have.” There was a part of me that wanted to agree with her. And yet: “War will always decide who gets what.” *I don't really believe this.* “Human Nature won't change”. It's like I was purposely trying to upset her.

Her poor dad did his best to referee the debate. He wasn't the only one that was relieved when the pizza came.

As we ate I noticed that she was doing the thing where she only ate a piece when I ate.

I knew that she wanted to show us how hard she was trying.

I knew she would eat what I ate tonight to prove it.

So I ate as much as I could.

Even when I was full.

In hindsight, I can't tell if I did it for her own good, or as punishment.

“Wow, you guys did well. The pizza was great!” Ella's dad said. “I'll just get the bill.”

I'm pretty sure Ella hated me and herself in that moment. But secretly I was impressed.

On the walk home the niceties lasted for about five minutes. Ella hadn't said a word and was walking very slowly.

“Ella, are you okay?”

“It hurts.” She said. “I ate too much.”

And I thought: *Why am I such a bitch?*

“Haha, I'm stuffed, too.” I said, trying to keep it light.

“You're fine, Ella. You ate a normal amount.”

I could feel the storm brewing in Ella's head, the embarrassment creeping from her Dad, as well as my own guilt.

So I fled.

I pretended I desperately needed the toilet and ran off back to the house. I started getting dressed as if I was going to a houseparty. I even packed alcohol in the toothbrush as evidence. This is my excuse to leave. I wouldn't have to go and be an awkward go between.

And besides, they could have some quality father-daughter bonding time.

But I couldn't ignore the fallout happening in the other room as I tried to leave.

It was the usual rhetoric, between the crying and the frustration. "I shouldn't have done it! I'm GREEDY. I'm STUPID. You made me! I would only eat that much if I'd compensated. IT'S YOUR FAULT! Now I won't eat tomorrow. Leave me *alone*. I'm ruining everything."

"You've eaten this much before," I said. "Is it possible the pain is all in your head?"

"OF COURSE IT'S IN MY HEAD!" Ella cried.

Wow, I thought. *I fucked up big time today.*

I got up to leave and watched as Ella's dad attempted to calm her down. It must be hard to see your smart, adult daughter react like this over free pizza.

I made sure they were okay, then went to bed.

There wasn't much I could do right now. And besides, they'd been through this many times.

It had hit them before and would probably hit them again. Like wading through waves.

It was never about victory or defeat. It was about keeping afloat, every time.

Chapter 30: Easter Break

Ella's dad offered me a lift home for Easter break. We didn't get off to a great start.

I caught Ella struggling with her ridiculously oversized suitcase.

"Here, let me help."

"No!" She snapped. "Get off. Don't you dare touch it."

She hated being a burden. I knew that.

"Please, let me help." I said, as gently as possible. I slowly took the handle from her hand.

"It's okay. Please?"

We waved Liz good-bye. We'd see her soon.

In the car we listened to one of Ella's favourite CDs, and little by little she seemed to thaw. She even started singing along: *Woke up, it was a Chelsea morning and the first thing that I heard...*

We stopped for some sandwiches at a service station and sat on a bench on a grassy bank, enjoying the feeling of fresh air and sun.

Then Ella spoke. "I just want to say, I'm sorry for yesterday," she said. "I'm at peace with eating this. And I'm proud of myself. That's okay, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course it is!" I laughed.

I left university sitting next to Ana-Ella. By the time we waved goodbye, she was more like herself.

I've learnt that sometimes it feels like a balancing act. Like that you're the only thing holding it together for them. And maybe you are.

But in time the glue will set and you can pull away slowly, like a Jenga piece, to admire it still that left standing there.

That's what it felt like for us, at least.

In the end, Ella built the strength to make her own happiness.

We just needed the time to build it.

Chapter 31: A Letter from Ella

One year later

Dear Charlotte,

I feel like there was a lot of stuff left unsaid. That I hurt you, worried you. I'm sorry for that. I took you for granted.

You saved my life this year. To do this, you had to be more than a friend.

You've been my guardian care and stay at home therapist as well. It's not fair, it was too much to ask.

By comparison, our relationship may seem less intimate, less intense. It's bound to. And I'm sorry for the confusion.

It might take us a while for us to get used to this new kind of relationship and the geographical distance between us.

But I love you more than anyone.

And I know our friendship will endure.

All my love,

Ella.

P.S. my South African address is at the back of this letter.

Epilogue

“You were brilliant.”

Ella had won her boxing match. She carried her bundle of congratulatory flowers with a huge grin on her pink, beaming face. “Thank you so much for coming!” She gave everyone a hug as they parted ways.

We got the London Underground back to her apartment. The air was hot and humid on the platform, and I couldn't help but notice a bead of sweat on her temple.

I remembered a time, a time that didn't feel that long ago, when she said that one of the reasons she didn't want to put on weight was that she hated the feeling of body sweat. I wondered how she felt about it now. I knew that Ana wasn't gone completely.

The eating disorder is hard to ignore. It is always there, at every meal time and whenever I looked for it.

But giving Ana all my time and attention is what Ella does. My job is simply to be there for her, as a friend.

In the end, Ella had gotten healthy on her own, hundreds of miles away from her entire support network. I had nothing to do with it.

No matter how thoughtful, insightful or true my advice was at the time, Ana would not let her hear or act on any of it. In fact, I had to lose all expectation that I could save her. Lose the ego.

I was only one factor out of many.

Back at Ella's place her husband played video games while we caught up in the living room over tea and snacks.

“When I’m at my worst, my inner radio repeats the same old song: you don’t deserve any of this.” She said, smiling softly. “I often felt like I had sinned too badly to be redeemed. I’ve leaned on you a hundred times since. I probably always will.”

“Yeah well, you’ve always been there for me too. Adulting is *hard*.”

“What I realised was that I never had to ask for forgiveness,” she said. “I only ever had to forgive myself.”

I smiled. It was true. There was really nothing to forgive. We would always have tried to help her, just as she would have done the same for me. It was always going to be difficult. And our friendship was all the better for it.

“You know, someone asked me how I helped you through it,” I said.

“Really? What did you say?”

“Trial and bloomin’ error!” We laughed.