

Leila and the Very Spooky Birthday Guests

On the morning of Leila's sixth birthday, the sun came tiptoeing over the rooftops of the village as if it knew it had been invited.

It slipped through the curtains in thin golden ribbons. It shone on the birthday cards. It shone on the presents. It shone on the table where Mummy had put out the party things in neat little piles: napkins, plates, games, prizes, and a secret bag of chocolate eggs for later.

And, most importantly, it shone on Leila.

Leila was six.

Not five and three quarters.

Not almost six.

Six.

A proper number. A strong number. A number with shoes on and somewhere important to go.

She woke up with that fizzy birthday feeling in her tummy, the one that makes your feet kick under the covers before your eyes are even open.

"Daddy!" she called.

Daddy appeared at the door with sleepy hair and a smile.

"Happy birthday, Leila May," he said.

"I'm six," said Leila.

"You are," said Daddy. "Completely and officially."

"Do I look six?"

Daddy came closer and looked very carefully, as if he were inspecting a rare and magical creature.

"You do," he said. "There is definitely more wisdom around the eyebrows."

Leila giggled.

Mummy came in too, carrying a birthday cuddle and looking like someone who had already done seven secret jobs before breakfast.

“Happy birthday, darling,” she said.

“Is it party day?” asked Leila.

“It is party day,” said Mummy.

“Are Isabella and Lennon and Kaya and Gracie and Martin and Logan coming?”

“Yes,” said Mummy.

“And lots of others?”

“Yes.”

“And Grandma and Grandad?”

“They came all the way from England,” said Daddy. “All the way to Spain.”

“That is very far,” said Leila.

“It is,” said Daddy. “They had to travel over land and sea and clouds and sandwiches.”

Leila nodded. That sounded about right.

All morning, the house hummed like a beehive. Mummy checked bags and lists. Daddy checked the speaker for music. Grandma wrapped something in tissue paper even though it was already wrapped. Grandad asked if anyone needed help carrying anything and then carried three things at once, because grandads are secretly strong like friendly bears.

By the time they reached the village party place, the afternoon was bright and warm. The village looked cheerful, with little streets curling this way and that, like they were leading everyone toward a surprise.

Inside, Mummy and Daddy set everything up. There were balloons. There were party games. There was music. There were prizes. There was a bunny hunt, where small hidden bunnies were tucked in clever places for children to find.

And there was not a cake.

There was something much better.

A pile of donuts.

A glorious, sugary mountain of donuts, stacked up like a birthday castle.

Leila stared at it with wide eyes.

“Is that mine?” she whispered.

“It is for everyone,” said Mummy.

“But mostly because of me?”

“Mostly because of you,” said Daddy.

Soon the children began to arrive.

Isabella came in with a bright smile.

Lennon came bouncing like a football with legs.

Kaya came wearing party shoes.

Gracie came with a card she had made herself.

Martin came looking serious, as if he had been sent on an important birthday mission.

Logan came ready to run before anyone had explained what the game was.

More friends arrived too, laughing, waving, calling Leila’s name. The room filled with noise and colour. It became a birthday kingdom.

“Let the games begin!” called Mummy.

The bunny hunt was first.

“Hidden around the room,” Mummy explained, “are lots of tiny bunnies. When I say go, you must find them. But only one bunny at a time, and no pushing.”

“What if the bunny is hiding in someone’s hair?” asked Lennon.

“Then ask politely,” said Mummy.

“Go!”

The children scattered.

Isabella found one behind a chair.

Kaya found one under a table.

Gracie found one tucked beside a plant.

Martin found one almost immediately and then began giving very serious bunny-hunting advice to everyone else.

Logan found three things that were not bunnies, including a sock, a sticker, and a spoon.

Leila found a blue bunny hiding beside the music speaker.

“Daddy!” she cried. “This one was guarding the songs.”

“A noble bunny,” said Daddy.

After the bunny hunt, there were more games. There was musical statues, where Daddy controlled the music.

Daddy took this job very seriously.

He stood beside the speaker with one finger in the air.

“When the music plays,” he said, “you dance. When it stops, you freeze. No wobbling. No giggling. No tiny sneaky dancing with your eyebrows.”

The music began.

Everyone danced.

Leila spun.

Isabella twirled.

Lennon did something that was half robot and half jellyfish.

Kaya clapped above her head.

Gracie hopped.

Martin danced like someone who had read a book about dancing but was still thinking about it.

Logan ran in a circle and called it dancing.

Then Daddy stopped the music.

Everyone froze.

Almost everyone.

Logan froze after one extra hop.

“Hmm,” said Daddy. “That was a suspicious hop.”

“It was my foot finishing,” said Logan.

Daddy nodded. “A fair legal argument.”

Then came pass the parcel.

Daddy held the parcel like it was treasure from a pirate ship.

“Now,” he said, “this is a game of patience, kindness, and not ripping the whole thing open like a birthday wolf.”

The children sat in a circle. Daddy pressed play. The parcel moved from hand to hand.

When the music stopped, Isabella unwrapped a layer and found a tiny prize.

The music started again.

Then Lennon got a layer.

Then Kaya.

Then Martin.

Then Gracie.

Then Logan, who nearly unwrapped three layers by accident.

“Only one,” said Daddy.

“My hands got excited,” said Logan.

At last, the parcel came to Leila. The music stopped. She peeled away the final paper and found the prize inside.

Everyone cheered.

Leila felt happy right down to her toes.

Everything was exactly as a birthday should be.

Until the door creaked open.

Now, the door had not creaked all afternoon.

It had opened lots of times. It had shut lots of times. It had banged once when Logan went through it too fast.

But this time it creaked.

Creeeeeeek.

Everyone turned.

Standing in the doorway was a family.

A very unusual family.

They were all dressed in black.

The father was tall and pale, with a thin moustache and a smile that looked like he had just found a spider in his soup and was delighted about it.

The mother was elegant and gloomy, with long dark hair and a dress that moved like a shadow.

The son had a striped shirt and a worried expression.

The uncle was round and bald and cheerful in a thunderstorm sort of way.

The grandmother wore a shawl and carried a handbag that seemed to be growling.

And beside them stood a girl.

She was about Leila's age.

She had dark plaits, a black dress, and a face as serious as midnight.

Her name was Wennsday.

The room went quiet.

Daddy looked at Mummy.

Mummy looked at Daddy.

Grandma looked at Grandad.

Grandad looked at the donut pile, just to make sure it was safe.

"Good afternoon," said the pale father in a deep, silky voice. "We heard there was a celebration."

"A birthday," said the mother, smiling sadly. "How wonderfully tragic."

"It's not tragic," said Leila. "It's fun."

The family all looked surprised.

“Fun?” said the uncle. “How unusual.”

“We are the Addams Family,” said the father, bowing low. “We have come to join the party.”

Mummy blinked once, then smiled, because Mummy was very good at being kind even when strangers arrived dressed like haunted cupboards.

“Well,” she said, “welcome. I’m afraid we weren’t expecting you, but there is plenty of room.”

“And donuts,” said Grandad.

At this, the uncle’s eyes lit up.

“Donuts,” he said. “Are any of them filled with fog?”

“No,” said Daddy. “Mostly jam and chocolate.”

“Ah,” said the uncle. “A daring choice.”

The Addams Family stepped inside.

Wherever they walked, the balloons seemed to bob a little nervously.

The children stared.

Lennon whispered, “Are they vampires?”

Martin whispered back, “I don’t think vampires eat donuts.”

Logan whispered, “I would still race one.”

Leila looked at the girl in the black dress.

Wennesday stood very still. She was not smiling. She was not waving. She was not looking as if birthday parties were her favourite thing.

In fact, she looked as if she would rather be counting bats in a basement.

Leila walked over.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Leila. It’s my birthday.”

“I know,” said Wennesday. “The air smells of sugar and hope.”

Leila thought about that.

“Thank you,” she said. “Would you like to play?”

“I do not usually play,” said Wennsday.

“Oh,” said Leila. “What do you usually do?”

“Practise looking through people.”

Leila leaned closer and looked into Wennsday’s eyes.

“Like this?”

Wennsday blinked.

“No one has ever tried to look back before.”

“Is it working?” asked Leila.

“A little,” said Wennsday.

“Good,” said Leila. “Do you want to do the next game with me?”

Wennsday glanced at her family.

The Addams Family were trying very hard to understand the party.

The father had picked up a balloon and was asking it if it had any final words.

The mother was admiring the shadows under the tables.

The grandmother had opened her handbag and was feeding something inside it a bit of napkin.

The uncle had already eaten two donuts and was checking whether the third one screamed.

The son was standing near Logan, looking nervous.

“Do you play birthday games?” Leila asked.

“We play games,” said Wennsday. “But they are different.”

“What kind?”

“Haunt the Castle.”

“That sounds good.”

“Give the Dog a Nightmare.”

“That sounds less good.”

“Pin the Tail on the Werewolf.”

“That sounds quite good.”

“Musical Graves.”

Leila frowned.

“That might need some changes.”

Mummy clapped her hands.

“Right, everyone! Next game!”

The children gathered.

“We’re going to play sleeping bunnies,” said Mummy.

At once, the children cheered.

Wennsday looked alarmed.

“Sleeping bunnies?” she said.

“Yes,” said Leila. “You lie down and pretend to be a sleeping bunny. Then when the song says wake up, you hop.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s funny.”

“Do the bunnies ever rise from the earth to seek revenge?”

“No,” said Leila. “They mostly hop.”

Wennsday looked doubtful.

The children lay down on the floor.

Leila patted the space beside her.

“Come on. You can be next to me.”

Very slowly, Wennsday lay down.

She folded her hands over her chest.

“Not like a vampire,” whispered Leila. “Like a bunny.”

“How does a bunny sleep?”

“Curled up. Cosy.”

Wennsday curled up a tiny bit.

Daddy played the music.

“See the little bunnies sleeping till it’s nearly noon...”

Everyone lay still.

Wennsday was excellent at lying still. She was possibly the best person in the room at lying still. Even Daddy looked impressed.

“Shall we wake them with a merry tune?”

The children waited.

“They’re so still...”

Wennsday opened one eye.

“Is this the eerie part?”

Leila whispered, “Wait for it.”

“Wake up soon!”

Everyone jumped up and hopped.

Leila hopped.

Isabella hopped.

Lennon hopped into Martin.

Logan hopped so fast he nearly left the room.

Wennsday stood up.

She did one very small hop.

Then another.

Then a third.

Her face stayed serious.

But her plaits bounced.

Leila noticed.

“You’re doing it!” she said.

“I am tolerating it,” said Wennsday.

But she did one more hop.

After sleeping bunnies came musical bumps.

This was harder for the Addams Family.

When the music stopped, everyone had to sit down quickly.

The father sat down with dramatic elegance, as if collapsing from an ancient curse.

The mother lowered herself like a queen of shadows.

The uncle fell over on purpose and laughed.

The grandmother sat on her growling handbag, which growled louder.

Wennsday did not sit. She sank.

One moment she was standing. The next, she was on the floor like a dropped cloak.

“That was brilliant!” said Leila.

“Thank you,” said Wennsday. “I practise disappearing emotionally.”

“I don’t know what that means,” said Leila, “but you’re very good at musical bumps.”

Wennsday looked pleased, which for Wennsday meant that one corner of her mouth moved almost one millimetre.

Then came another round of pass the parcel.

This time the Addams Family joined the circle.

Daddy started the music.

The parcel moved.

When it reached the Addams father, he held it gently and whispered, “Little parcel, what secrets do you contain?”

“Pass it on!” shouted Logan.

The father passed it on.

When it reached the Addams mother, she stroked the wrapping paper and said, “Such beautiful tearing awaits.”

“Pass it on!” shouted everyone.

When it reached the uncle, he tried to eat it.

“No eating the parcel,” said Daddy.

“A rule?” said the uncle. “How thrilling.”

When it reached Wennsday, she held it carefully.

The music stopped.

Everyone looked at her.

“You unwrap one layer,” said Leila.

“Only one?”

“Only one.”

Wennsday peeled away a layer of paper slowly and neatly.

Inside was a sticker.

It was a sparkly unicorn.

Wennsday stared at it as if it were a mysterious creature from another world.

“What is this?”

“A unicorn sticker,” said Leila.

“It has too much joy.”

“You can keep it.”

Wennsday looked at the unicorn. Then she stuck it on the front of her black dress.

It sparkled there like a tiny moon in a dark sky.

Her family gasped.

The Addams mother dabbed at her eye.

“She is growing up,” she said.

Then Mummy announced the birthday dance game.

“Everyone choose your best dance move!”

Daddy put on the music.

This was where the party became wild.

Isabella spun.

Kaya did little kicks.

Gracie waved her arms like a fairy.

Martin did careful stepping.

Logan ran, stopped, jumped, and shouted, “This is my move!”

The Addams Family tried too.

The father danced like a haunted violin.

The mother moved like smoke.

The uncle wiggled his fingers and made thunder noises with his mouth.

The grandmother shook her shawl so hard that something small and furry flew out, ran under a chair, and then ran back into the handbag.

Wennsday stood still.

Leila came beside her.

“Do you not like dancing?”

“I have never found a dance gloomy enough.”

“We can make one.”

“How?”

Leila thought. Then she held out her arms like a ghost and took three slow steps.

“Ooooooo,” said Leila.

Wennesday watched.

Then she copied her.

“Ooooooo,” said Wennesday, very quietly.

Leila added a twirl.

Wennesday added a stare.

Leila added a hop.

Wennesday added a slow blink.

Soon they had invented a dance called The Birthday Ghost Bunny.

It was half spooky and half silly, which made it perfect.

Isabella joined in.

Then Kaya.

Then Gracie.

Then Lennon, who made the ghost bunny look like it had swallowed a pogo stick.

Martin joined after asking if there were any instructions.

Logan joined by shouting, “Ghost bunny attack!”

The whole room became a bouncing, floating, spooky, giggling birthday dance.

Even the balloons seemed to relax.

After the dancing, everyone needed a drink.

The Addams Family stood near the snacks.

The uncle was looking lovingly at the donut pile.

Grandad stepped beside him.

“Good, aren’t they?” said Grandad.

“Magnificent,” said the uncle. “Like little wheels of delicious doom.”

Grandad nodded slowly.

“I’d have said chocolate, but yes.”

Grandma was talking to the Addams grandmother.

“Did you come far?” asked Grandma.

“From a house where the windows sigh and the cellar remembers things,” said the Addams grandmother.

“We came from England,” said Grandma.

The Addams grandmother looked impressed.

“That sounds colder.”

“It often is,” said Grandma.

Meanwhile, Mummy was preparing the birthday donut moment.

The donuts were arranged high on a plate. There were chocolate ones, sugar ones, jam ones, and ones with colourful sprinkles.

Leila stood in front of them.

Everyone gathered round.

Usually, at a birthday party, there is a cake.

Usually, there are candles.

Usually, everyone sings, someone blows, and at least one adult worries about melted wax.

But this was Leila’s birthday, and Leila had a donut mountain.

Mummy put one candle right in the top donut.

Daddy dimmed the music.

Everyone began to sing.

“Happy birthday to you...”

The children sang loudly.

Grandma and Grandad sang warmly.

Mummy sang with her arm around Leila.

Daddy sang while trying not to make the music speaker beep.

The Addams Family sang too, but in long, ghostly voices, so the song became half birthday party and half moonlit castle.

“Happy birthday dear Leila...”

Leila looked around at all the faces.

Her friends.

Her family.

Grandma and Grandad from far away.

Mummy, who had planned the games.

Daddy, who had ruled the music.

The strange gloomy family who had arrived out of nowhere.

And Wennsday, standing beside her with a unicorn sticker on her black dress.

“Happy birthday to you.”

“Make a wish,” said Mummy.

Leila closed her eyes.

She thought very carefully.

Then she blew.

The candle went out.

Everyone cheered.

“What did you wish?” asked Logan.

“You’re not supposed to say,” said Martin.

“I know,” said Logan. “But I still want to know.”

Leila smiled and said nothing.

The donuts were shared out.

Wennsday took a chocolate one and examined it.

“It has a hole,” she said.

“Yes,” said Leila.

“Like a tiny edible abyss.”

“Yes,” said Leila. “But tastier.”

Wennesday took a bite.

She chewed.

She paused.

“This is not terrible,” she said.

“That means she likes it,” whispered the Addams father proudly.

After the donuts, the party could have ended.

But the Addams Family had started to look less like unexpected guests and more like part of the fun. Even the children had stopped staring and started asking questions.

“Do you really have a castle?” asked Isabella.

“Sometimes,” said Wennesday.

“Can your handbag really growl?” asked Lennon.

“It can also sulk,” said the grandmother.

“Do you have a dog?” asked Gracie.

“We have something dog-shaped,” said the uncle.

“What’s its name?” asked Logan.

“Regret,” said the Addams mother.

Logan nodded. “Cool.”

Then Wennesday tugged lightly at Leila’s sleeve.

“I have tried your games,” she said.

“Yes,” said Leila.

“Would you like to try one of mine?”

Leila looked at Mummy.

Mummy looked at Daddy.

Daddy looked at the speaker.

Grandad looked at the donuts.

Grandma looked amused.

“What game?” asked Leila.

“Haunt the Castle,” said Wennsday.

The room went quiet.

“Is it scary?” asked Gracie.

“Only politely,” said Wennsday.

“Does anyone get eaten?” asked Lennon.

“Not usually.”

“Not usually?” said Martin.

Leila thought about it.

“We can play,” she said. “But it has to be birthday party scary. Not nightmare scary.”

Wennsday considered this.

“Agreed.”

So Wennsday explained the rules.

One person was the castle.

This was Daddy, because he was tall and could make good castle noises.

Several people were ghosts.

This was everyone else.

The ghosts had to float around the castle saying “wooooo” until the castle guessed which ghost was secretly holding the magic key.

“What does the key do?” asked Martin.

"It opens the birthday dungeon," said Wenssday.

"We don't have a dungeon," said Mummy.

"The kitchen?" suggested Daddy.

"No," said Mummy.

"The imaginary birthday dungeon," said Leila.

"That's better," said Mummy.

The magic key was actually a bunny from the bunny hunt, because Mummy was clever and did not have a spare magic key in her party bag.

Daddy stood in the middle with his arms up like towers.

"I am the castle," he said in a deep voice. "I have seen six hundred winters and one suspicious pigeon."

The children floated around him.

"Wooooooo!"

Isabella floated gracefully.

Lennon floated noisily.

Kaya floated in circles.

Gracie floated with fairy hands.

Martin floated while making sure he understood the rules.

Logan floated like a rocket ghost.

Leila floated beside Wenssday.

"Wooooooo," said Leila.

"Wooooooo," said Wenssday.

Daddy pointed.

"The key is with Logan!"

"No!" shouted Logan, delighted.

“The key is with Isabella!”

“No!”

“The key is with Leila!”

Leila opened her hands.

No key.

Daddy frowned.

“The castle is confused.”

At last, he pointed at Wennsday.

“The key is with Wennsday!”

Wennsday held up the tiny bunny.

Everyone cheered.

She had won.

A proper birthday game.

Her very first.

For a moment, Wennsday looked startled by the cheering, as if applause were a kind of weather she had never stood in before.

Then Leila clapped extra loudly.

Wennsday bowed her head.

“Again,” said Logan.

So they played again.

And again.

Then they played a gentler version of Give the Dog a Nightmare.

This was not a real nightmare, because Mummy said absolutely not.

Instead, the children had to imagine silly dreams for the Addams Family’s dog-shaped pet, Regret.

“What dream shall we give him?” asked Wennsday.

“Dream that he is wearing a pink hat,” said Gracie.

“Dream that he has to eat broccoli ice cream,” said Lennon.

“Dream that all the bones run away,” said Logan.

“Dream that he is brushed until he is fluffy,” said Isabella.

Wennsday shivered.

“That is truly dark.”

Leila said, “Dream that he comes to my party and has a donut.”

Wennsday looked at her.

“That is not a nightmare.”

“No,” said Leila. “That is a nice dream.”

Wennsday was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, “Perhaps Regret could have one nice dream.”

So they decided that Regret dreamed he came to the party, wore a party hat, ate a donut, and was allowed to chase balloons but not pop them.

“That is almost pleasant,” said Wennsday.

“Good,” said Leila.

The afternoon began to soften.

Outside, the village light turned honey-coloured. The shadows stretched along the streets. Parents began arriving to collect children. Coats were found. Shoes were put back on. Party bags were handed out.

Isabella hugged Leila goodbye.

Lennon waved with both hands.

Kaya said it had been the best party.

Gracie asked if next year there would be donuts again.

Martin said the games had been well organised.

Logan asked if he could take home a balloon, a bunny, and possibly the speaker.

"No," said Daddy.

"Just checking," said Logan.

Soon, only family remained.

And the Addams Family.

The room looked tired and happy. There were crumbs on the floor. A few balloons had sagged. The donut mountain was now a donut hill, and then nearly a donut memory.

Mummy began gathering things.

Grandma helped fold napkins.

Grandad carried bags again.

Daddy unplugged the music speaker, which had worked very hard and deserved a rest.

Leila stood with Wennsday near the door.

"Did you have a good time?" asked Leila.

Wennsday looked around the room.

"I did not expect to."

"But did you?"

Wennsday nodded once.

"Yes."

Leila smiled.

"You can come to my party again."

"If I am invited."

"You are."

Wennsday reached into a pocket in her black dress. She took out something small and dark and shiny.

It was a tiny bat-shaped hair clip.

“I brought this in case the party required a small symbol of night,” she said. “You may have it.”

Leila took it carefully.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s beautiful.”

“It is mildly unsettling,” said Wennsday.

“I like it.”

Then Leila reached down and peeled the sparkly unicorn sticker from the sheet of stickers nearby. She handed it to Wennsday.

“You can have another one,” she said. “In case you need a small symbol of birthday.”

Wennsday accepted it with both hands.

The Addams mother watched them and smiled her sad, lovely smile.

“How sweet,” she said. “I may faint.”

The Addams father put a hand to his heart.

“Our little Wennsday has made a friend.”

“I have made an acquaintance,” said Wennsday.

Leila grinned.

“A friend.”

Wennsday looked at her.

Then, very quietly, she said, “A friend.”

The Addams Family said goodbye in their spooky ways.

The father bowed.

The mother swept her dress like a shadow.

The uncle took one final donut “for the road, or the crypt, whichever comes first.”

The grandmother’s handbag growled goodbye.

Wennsday gave Leila one small wave.

Then they stepped out into the evening.

For a moment, the village seemed to dim around them, as if the shadows had come to collect their cousins.

Then they were gone.

On the way home, Leila sat in the car feeling warm and sleepy and full of birthday.

Grandma and Grandad were in the back, talking softly.

Mummy was smiling, tired but happy.

Daddy drove through the village streets.

“Good party?” he asked.

“The best,” said Leila.

“What was your favourite bit?”

Leila thought.

The bunny hunt had been brilliant.

Pass the parcel had been exciting.

The donuts had been wonderful.

The singing had made her heart glow.

Grandma and Grandad had come all the way from England.

Her friends had laughed and danced and played.

And then there had been Wenssday.

“I liked when Wenssday learned sleeping bunnies,” said Leila.

Daddy smiled.

“She was very good at the sleeping part.”

“And the hopping part, by the end.”

“She had a good teacher,” said Mummy.

Leila leaned back in her seat.

Outside the window, the sky was turning purple. The first evening star appeared.

“Daddy?” said Leila.

“Yes?”

“Do you think Wennsday was lonely before?”

Daddy was quiet for a moment.

“Maybe,” he said.

“She didn’t know how to play our games.”

“No.”

“But she learned.”

“She did.”

“And we learned hers.”

“We did.”

Leila watched the star.

“I think birthdays are good for that,” she said.

“For what?”

“For making room.”

Daddy glanced at Mummy.

Mummy smiled.

“Yes,” said Mummy. “I think you’re right.”

When they got home, the house felt peaceful.

The birthday cards were still waiting.

The presents were still there.

There were a few leftover donuts, though not many.

Leila put the tiny bat hair clip beside her bed.

Then she put one sparkly unicorn sticker next to it.

The bat and the unicorn looked very different.

One belonged to the night.

One belonged to glitter and dreams.

But somehow, side by side, they looked just right.

Mummy tucked Leila in.

Grandma kissed her forehead.

Grandad said, "Six years old. Goodness me."

Daddy sat on the edge of the bed.

"Big day," he said.

"The biggest," said Leila.

"Do you feel older?"

Leila considered this.

"A bit."

"Do you feel wiser around the eyebrows?"

"Yes," said Leila.

Daddy smiled.

Then Leila whispered, "Daddy?"

"Yes, birthday girl?"

"I wished that Wennsday would have a happy birthday too one day."

Daddy's face softened.

"That is a very kind wish."

"Do you think it will come true?"

"I think," said Daddy, "that some wishes start coming true the moment you make someone feel welcome."

Leila smiled sleepily.

Outside, the village settled into night.

Somewhere, perhaps in a gloomy house with sighing windows, a girl called Wennsday was sticking a sparkly unicorn sticker onto a black bedroom wall.

And perhaps she was thinking about sleeping bunnies.

And perhaps, though nobody saw it, she did one tiny hop before bed.

As for Leila, she closed her eyes and dreamed of donuts stacked like castles, bunnies hidden in magical places, music that stopped at exactly the right moment, and a birthday party big enough for friends, family, ghosts, shadows, and one very spooky girl who had learned how to play.

And that is how Leila turned six.

Not quietly.

Not ordinarily.

But brightly, kindly, strangely, wonderfully.

With a donut mountain.

With Grandma and Grandad from England.

With Mummy's games.

With Daddy's music.

With all her friends.

And with one unexpected guest who discovered that even gloomy hearts can have a birthday song tucked somewhere inside them.