

# The Best Days of Our Lives

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QUERCUS

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## Prologue

Everything could change so much in a year. Twelve months ago today, on her thirty-fourth birthday, Leni had woken up to the sound of Adam clattering around in the kitchen of their Ealing flat, making her a surprise breakfast. Things weren't perfect between them, sure – they were rowing on and off, both stressing about whether or not their final round of IVF would work – but he'd put in the effort with poached eggs, coffee and orange juice at least. He'd even gone out to the garden in his boxers to snip a couple of white shrub roses to slot into a glass of water, their velvety perfumed heads nodding from the tray as he re-entered the bedroom with a cheery 'Happy birthday!' He was trying, in other words – they both were – and as she saw him there in the doorway, giving it his best shot in the role of loving husband, she thought, *Okay, we can do this. We're going to be all right.*

A year on, and she was starting the day in a different bedroom, in a smaller, cheaper flat all alone, unless you included her ginger rescue cat, Hamish. So far his sum contribution to festivities had been a dead mouse on the kitchen floor that

morning, a gift she could have done without. 'I appreciate the effort, Haymo,' she said, picking up the stiff little corpse with a piece of kitchen roll, feeling a pang for its delicate pink feet. 'But, you know, sometimes less is more, mate, do you hear me?'

She pushed open the back door; mid-May and it was unseasonably warm. A cabbage-white butterfly fluttered in jerky zigzags across the garden and the sight of its papery wings beating felt like an encouragement. Keep going, she reminded herself, the sunshine falling benevolent and golden against her bare legs. Keep flying. Her family were coming to celebrate with her today, and they would fill the place with laughter and chat; they would eat and drink and reminisce. The comforting weight of familiarity and belonging would settle upon her, the layers of so many other birthdays and good times from years gone by. Here you are. These are your people. They've got your back, remember?

'This is where it all turns around,' she pep-talked herself, heading for the shower. 'Life begins at thirty-five.' And who knew, by this time next year, she could be madly in love with a handsome prince, radiant with a surprise pregnancy ('It was meant to be!') and looking forward to a whole new wonderful chapter. There was a happy-ever-after out there somewhere, Leni was certain of it.

'Ta-dah! Have you got any candles, Len?'

It was a few hours later and Alice was in the kitchen holding a plate where she'd arranged the mini brownies into a chocolate rockery. They looked about as dry and hard as real rocks, Leni thought, glancing round from where she was

carving the roast chicken. *I'll bring cake, obviously!* Alice had said during the week, because she was the best baker in the family and prided herself on her birthday bakes. Last year, for example, she'd appeared with an incredible chocolate and hazelnut meringue creation, and the year before, the most heavenly devil's food cake with a praline topping. The vision of her sister, apron on, whipping up some new chocolatey masterpiece for her had sparked a little match inside Leni, the small act of love a welcome light in the darkness. But then Alice had arrived with a plastic box of supermarket-branded brownies and excuses about being *just so insanely busy at work*, and the bright flickering flame inside her had promptly been snuffed out.

It didn't matter, she told herself. There were more important things than cake. Anyway – silver lining – at least Alice hadn't brought Noah with her. Apparently he'd come down with another of his migraines; it was uncanny how they always struck whenever he had to do something on Alice's behalf.

'Cake candles? No, sorry,' she replied, dismembering the bronzed chicken legs. When she and Adam split up, he'd stayed on in the Ealing flat and she'd been the one to move out, which meant that all of the vaguely useless detritus you accumulated through years of marriage – spare batteries and cake candles and Sellotape – had stayed put in the bottom kitchen drawer of their old place. For Leni to have packed and taken any of it would have seemed petty, but now, as a consequence, she kept being reminded of all that she'd once had and then lost.

'Uh-oh,' came Molly's voice from across the room. *A*

*compact through-plan living space*, the estate agent had called it, when Leni was trailing around west London looking at the scant few one-bedroom flats affordable on a divorced teacher's budget. Translated, this meant the kitchen had a sofa and telly at one end, which was where Will, her brother, was currently sitting with his giggling, hair-flicking girlfriend, Molly. It was the first time Leni had met her – Will seemed to operate a revolving-door policy with his love life – but the couple were apparently at the surgically attached stage. Molly had been perched on Will's lap since they arrived, while he looked permanently dazed with lust. 'Is that a *chicken*?' the hair-flicker asked now in a slightly too loud whisper. 'Babe, you did tell your sister I was vegetarian, didn't you?'

Leni's jaw clenched, her hand tightening on the knife because no, obviously Will hadn't told her anything of the sort. 'There are plenty of vegetables,' she said brightly without turning round. It was the voice she used with her class of nine-year-olds – cheery but firm. *We're not going to make a silly fuss about this, are we?* She tried to catch Alice's eye – the two of them had form when it came to post-match analyses of Will's girlfriends, and she could already imagine her sister's wicked, wide-eyed 'Is that a *chicken*?' impression, complete with all the mannerisms – but Alice was preoccupied, peering into cupboards. 'How about some icing sugar?' she was asking. 'Edible glitter?'

The doorbell rang at that moment, thankfully, and Leni escaped the room, head jangling, feeling as if everything was out of kilter today, as if she couldn't quite align herself with the happy mood of togetherness previously envisaged. It had

only been a few months since her divorce and she still felt so depleted and fragile; she wasn't sure she could remember how to behave like the person they expected her to be any more. Was she acting too uptight? Should she try harder to care about the edible glitter situation? Yesterday's strange encounter flashed back into her head – the man who'd done a double take on hearing her name. *Coincidence!* he'd said, blinking and staring at her in an unnervingly intent way. *I used to know a Leni McKenzie.*

*Yeah, tell me about it,* she thought to herself now. *I wish she'd hurry up and come back.*

'Happy birthday, darling! So sorry we're late. Traffic was appalling and then it took us forever to find a parking space. But here we are at last!'

Here they were indeed, nearly two hours late – Leni's mum, Belinda, and her partner, Ray. Wearing a yellow silk shirt with lots of necklaces, Belinda had brought cellophane-wrapped peonies that rustled against Leni's back as she enfolded her in a perfumed hug. Despite everything, Leni sank gratefully into her mum's warmth, already looking forward to telling her about yesterday's unexpected twist. *You'll never guess who turned up at work!* she imagined herself saying, anticipating the way her mum's eyes would flick open a little wider, the laugh that would bubble up in her throat. Belinda loved surprises.

That could wait though; right now her mum was disentangling herself, necklaces jingling, with the air of a woman who wanted to get on with the day. 'Any word from your dad? Is he joining us?' she asked, giving Leni a beady look.

‘Nope, nothing.’ Leni hugged Ray, who, as usual, was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt with some obscure band name on the front, plus jeans. Years ago, he’d worked in the music industry, getting himself into all kinds of trouble in the process. He’d left the business and retrained as a landscape architect, but still dressed as if he were on his way to a gig. These days he got his kicks through more acceptable hazardous activities: hang-gliding and snowboarding – sometimes even persuading Belinda to join him, much to Leni and Alice’s hilarity. (Belinda trussed up in a bungee harness was an image that Leni still returned to if ever she needed cheering up; she would probably still be cackling about her mother’s expression of deep discomfort on her deathbed.)

‘I invited him but I’m assuming he’s forgotten,’ she went on, deliberately airy so as to prevent any actual feelings slipping out. Her dad, honestly: there was a therapist’s case study in human form if ever you needed one. You’d think after all these years, with one new wife after another briefly appearing as bit parts in the Tony McKenzie show, the rest of the family would be immune to his abominable disregard for them, but the lapses still stung. *Do you think you have daddy issues?* Adam had once asked her and she’d laughed her head off, before pretending to frown. ‘Daddy . . . Wait, I’m sure I’ve heard that word somewhere before. Remind me what it means again?’

‘Not even a text?’ Belinda looked exasperated as they went through to join the others. There was an immediate clatter as Hamish took one look at Ray and scuttled through the cat



flap, ears back. Having been brought to the animal shelter as an underweight stray, he took against some men on sight.

'No,' she confirmed curtly, and the edge in her voice must have cut through to Alice, mid glitter-mission, because her sister promptly darted her a quick sidelong glance and came to the rescue.

'Mum! Ray! We were starting to think you'd been abducted,' she said. Crossing the room to hug them both, she touched Leni's arm in passing to let her know she was taking this one on. 'Shall I dish up the veg, Len?'

'Oh darling, you've already cooked!' Belinda cried, seeing the chicken on the side, the pans of vegetables bubbling on the hob. 'I thought I was going to do that for you?'

'Well, yeah, so did I, two hours ago, Mum,' Leni said, hoping she sounded jokey rather than plain old annoyed. Belinda was the most generous person in the world with her offers but you couldn't always guarantee them actually coming good on the day. *Plan B for Belinda!* she and Alice often said to one another. 'I thought I should get on with it.'

'On your birthday, though – oh, now I feel awful!' Belinda said, putting a hand up to her face.

A year ago, Leni might have assured her that it didn't matter, but do you know what? Today, it was starting to feel as if it did. It mattered that she'd heard Molly murmur pityingly to Will, 'She's thirty-five and still single? In this poky flat? I think I'd rather kill myself,' when they thought Leni couldn't hear. The crap brownies mattered, as did her dad's disinterest. Any minute now, Belinda would announce news of her latest friend to become a grandmother and Leni wouldn't be able

to stop herself from screaming. Watch out, everyone, if the carving knife was in her hand at the time. That yellow silk shirt of her mum's would need some specialist attention at the dry-cleaners for starters.

Deep breaths, she ordered herself. Calm, kind thoughts. 'Who wants a drink?' she asked, opening the fridge to pull out a misted green bottle of Prosecco. The soft pop of the cork, the first cold mouthful could not come soon enough, she reflected darkly. She registered a momentary ache as she remembered previous birthdays where Adam had stepped up as entertainment manager, splashing out on champagne. He'd cook something flamboyant and showy that always drew admiration and compliments, mix cocktails (the more outrageous the better), and make everyone laugh, charming the room like the charisma-bomb he was. Although being married to a charisma-bomb had its downsides too, of course. You could quickly tire of having random women hanging on your husband's every word, for instance. She certainly didn't miss finding their phone numbers stuffed in his pocket, the paranoia that snaked in whenever he was unexpectedly late home. Also, while she was on the subject, show-off cooking was all well and good, but if Adam had bothered to check in with her first, she'd have chosen good old roast chicken every time.

But that was in the past now, she reminded herself. He had a new partner's family to dazzle these days, didn't he? Besides, that handsome prince who was due to appear in Leni's life any day now would not only be an absolute ace in the kitchen, he'd be modest about it too. Charming without being an egomaniac. Imagine!

'Anyone for fizz?' she said brightly.

'Bubbles!' cried Molly as if she were five. 'Yes, please!'

'Lovely,' added Belinda, bustling over to tend to the abandoned chicken. 'Let me get on with this while you pour.'

'Is everyone having a glass?' Leni asked, counting out flutes. Ray didn't drink these days, but Will, Molly and Belinda all replied yes. Alice, meanwhile, was at the sink, filling a tumbler with water.

'I'm fine with this, thanks,' she said, her long chestnut hair falling in front of her face, perhaps so that she didn't have to meet Leni's eye.

'Oh.' Leni's hand suddenly felt clammy on the bottle, her stomach turning over as her mind leapt ahead. The moment of solidarity she'd just felt with her sister seemed to blister, vanishing in the next second. Was Alice saying ... ? Did this mean ... ? The air seized in Leni's lungs as she tried to catch her breath. Alice was wearing pale blue cropped chino-type trousers with a black silky short-sleeved blouse, and Leni found herself peering covertly at her sister's body, wondering if her belly looked a bit rounder than usual, if her loose top was in fact hiding something.

Oh God. She didn't think she could bear it if Alice was having a baby. She might actually drop dead with envy and bitterness, after everything that had happened. She would cover up, of course, put on a good show – *oh wow! Exciting!* – because she knew all the right things to say by now. She'd be the best aunty-to-be ever too – she'd buy the cute little outfits and remember to check in after Alice's scans, conjuring up expressions of delight and wonder, clapping a hand to her

heart, and then she'd go home and weep into her sofa, bilious with jealousy.

Leni popped the cork from the bottleneck, but no longer felt so steady on her feet while such unsisterly thoughts were pushing to the forefront of her mind. Was Alice seriously going to have a baby with that idiot Noah? Back in the day, the two sisters had entertained a long-running narrative that they'd marry a prince and a baron and live in neighbouring castles. Prince Antonio, Leni had christened her imaginary future husband at the time, although he'd also been Prince Brad, Prince Keanu and Prince Idris in later conversations, depending on who she was into. 'And Baron . . . Darren,' Alice had quipped, only for the name to stick throughout the years that followed. Couldn't Alice hang out a *bit* longer for the dashing, castle-owning Baron Darren of her dreams, instead of settling for good-looking but shallow Noah?

Belinda, sawing at the chicken breast, did not seem to notice the unspoken frisson between her daughters. Leni was surprised she hadn't pounced upon Alice's uncharacteristic booze refusal with a hopeful gleam in her eye. She had knitted a small white baby hat when Leni and Adam started IVE, and crocheted a little yellow jacket second time around. Then their last attempt had come to nothing, and her woollen production line ground to a halt, along with their optimism. Maybe Alice could give their mother what she wanted, because Leni had failed and failed again.

*Come on. Keep it together. Happy families, remember.* Glad for an excuse to hide her face, she crouched at the cupboard to retrieve her nicest plates – the set that Adam had bought

her for Christmas three years ago, crackle-effect porcelain in turquoise, plum and emerald shades – but her fingers were trembling. Perhaps the glass of Prosecco she'd just thrown back in a single, despairing gulp had affected her coordination, or maybe her hands were a bit sweaty, but as she stood up, then attempted to squeeze around Ray, draining the peas at the sink, she lurched sideways and somehow lost her grip on the stack of plates, which went crashing to the floor.

'Oh God!' she wailed as they smashed into pieces. 'Oh *no*.'

It was only *crockery*, she scolded herself later on when the six of them were finally squeezed around the small table for lunch, the food dished out on to the four plain white plates she had bought for everyday use, plus a couple of plastic camping plates she'd unearthed to make up the numbers. Worse things could and did happen. She might be able to glue the pieces back together, she thought, drinking more wine and trying valiantly to engage with the conversation. Trying to smile. But in the moment after they'd fallen from her grasp, smashing into so many bright broken shards on her kitchen floor, she had sunk to her knees beside them and burst into tears – for the plates, for her marriage, for her whole life.

When so many things were broken, how on earth did you go about sticking them back together again?