

Chapter One

The Witching Hour

3 a.m.

I WAKE UP AT THE WITCHING HOUR. 3:30 a.m. According to folklore, it's the very moment when witches, demons, and ghosts are at their most potent. It's also when most bakers roll their flour-logged bodies out of bed.

My husband, Ray, sleeps through my alarm. I can't look at him, sleeping or awake, without getting a little weak in the knees. He's more handsome now than he was ten years ago when we first met in Hollywood, home to the prettiest boys and girls on the planet. My job was to develop films for those beautiful people. It was a miracle that I could find anyone attractive, I was

so anaesthetised by the constant parade of bleached smiles and spray-on tans. But there he was, sitting across from me at a conference table at a big studio meeting, an honest-to-god Man, handsome as all get out. And smart. And funny. And not an actor. An illustrator for film, in fact. An employed artist and a grown-up, something in rare supply in Los Angeles among the insecure, fame-hungry hordes of beefcake.

I sit up. Stretch. The dogs wake long enough to yawn and deliver a few sloppy kisses, and then all three jump into my still-warm side of the bed, burrow under the covers, and snuggle up to Ray.

I take a bath, brush my teeth, and pull back my hair. For this very brief moment I see what's become of my black mane. I'm in possession of Crystal Gayle-like, snake-handling, ankle-skimming hippie hair. Only a few years ago I'd drop major cash to get it permanently and perversely straight. To look at it now, you'd think I'd been scheduling regular appointments with a live power outlet.

I pad naked down the stairs, wanting so much to take a detour to the kitchen to make coffee but head instead to the laundry room and rummage for something clean to wear. I don't care that our clothes never make it from the intertwined dance of the dryer to the smooth folds of the dresser drawers anymore. If it's clean and comfortable, I'll pull it on.

Today I'm sporting a dryer-culled ensemble

consisting of an ancient Al ‘Big Daddy’ Roth T-shirt emblazoned with his signature hot-rod-straddling rat caricature flipping the bird. It’s unbelievably soft, manhandled by some grizzled biker into buttery suppleness and then graciously sold to me on eBay. At the moment, it’s both graphically offensive and soon to be encrusted with chocolate. It also sets off my growing collection of knife and burn wounds to great effect. My pants are ratty blue cords with a malfunctioning zipper circa 1978. They are number one on my queue of pants to wear to work, being both roomy in the thigh and so fantastically high-waisted that they don’t require a belt. My clogs are encrusted in flour and my socks don’t match. If my mother were alive, she’d be horrified that I’d half-consciously chosen this getup. She was, after all, the only mother at my elementary school who routinely wore leather pants and high heels. But if she knew my purpose, she’d forgive me any sartorial sin. She may have been a well-respected opera diva and an outrageously sexy and fashionable woman, but she was also our family’s resident master baker.

I was once a beautifully dressed woman. I have storage bins, tucked away in the attic of our barn, filled with ‘grown-up’ gear – smart pantsuits and death-defying heels, leather briefcases and tailored overcoats. I can’t bring myself to give the stuff away; I dragged every stitch from LA to rural Vermont. My beef was never with the clothes I had to wear to work

in Hollywood, it was with Hollywood itself. So I keep them because they were innocent bystanders in my past misery as a cog in the wheel of the entertainment industry. And many of them are from my sister, better known as ‘Sand-me-downs’. Luxurious, couture bits of fashion she gets for free for being a movie star. Every few months she weeds through her closet and sets aside things she’s never worn and will never wear. And since she’s a loving and generous big sister, she sends me the prime nuggets. So they have sentimental value as well.

Unlike me, my sister found her calling early in life. Sandy’s also gifted genetically. She inherited my mother’s razor-sharp jaw and mile-high cheekbones. Her thick black wavy hair came from our father, but she blessedly missed that family’s predilection to start greying as teenagers. She pulled the dimple in her chin from a source so distant that no one in living memory has possessed one, and her sweet nose comes from Germany by way of my grandfather Meyer. Her wit and winning personality surely come from the Bullocks; both our father and Aunt Luddy can spin a yarn and charm the pants off anyone. Her talent could have come from either side, artistry bursting from our DNA at every angle. My sister was also blessed with great humility and cultivated a habit of downplaying her attributes and rerouting any and all attention or praise on me. Usually she does this in my absence. She’ll meet someone and feel the need to tell him or

her I am brilliant. And she tells them I am beautiful and tall.

In the face of someone as beautiful as my sister, they come to think that I must be an otherworldly beauty if she describes me that way. Bless her; I think she really thinks all these wonderful things of me.

To be honest, I'm bright but not brilliant. Bookish and being a smart-ass really don't add up to genius, though I wish they did. And the words most often used to describe me physically – exotic or striking or stunning – all translate to tall, pretty girl with black hair and a prominent nose. On more than one occasion, someone has pointed at me as evidence that my sister has had 'work done'. I'm the 'before' to her 'after'. But more often, I'm asked why it is that I don't look more like her, to which I reply, 'So sorry to disappoint you, you ass.'

She also forgets to add to her long list of superlatives for me that I am a socially retarded misanthrope, awkward on the best of occasions and completely witless and offensive on the worst. So my chosen profession, one in which I am required to work behind closed doors in the darkest hours of the morning with very little contact with other humans, is quite fitting.

On this black morning, dressed in 'baker's casual' with my still-wet hair in a sloppy ponytail, I'm searching for my car keys and I look out the kitchen

window to see where the moon hangs. If it's just above our first ridge of pine, lighting my path to the barn door, I'm making good time. Any hint of daybreak and I'm screwed. In the winter, the path is a slippery white corridor. Pearly walls reaching up to our chins, small arterial tunnels dug by the dogs breaking off from the main throughway and leading into places unknown.

In the summer, moonlight permitting, I greet the toads that linger at the side door, tales of soggy midnight rainstorms and dewy grass clinging to their skin. Apple green luna moths, as big as my palm, loiter on the glass of the kitchen door. I see their fuzzy bellies first and carefully open the door to admire their handsome wings before they fly away.

My headlights flood the ghostly dark dirt roads twisting from our house to the paved street that leads to Montpelier. I have fifteen minutes of uncorrupted driving ahead of me. Not one luxury car cutting me off in the narrow canyons of the Hollywood Hills. Not a single Harley shattering my solitude on Sunset Boulevard. No road rage, no cell phones, no fake tits or tans, no prestige handbags, no billboards, no stoplights, no braking, no traffic, no nothing. Welcome to Vermont. Just heaven.

Golden Eggs

I HAVE THOUSANDS of great recipes but only one magic recipe. It's vanilla cake, really just an ordinary yellow cake. Plain old humdrum yellow cake. Big deal. So where's the magic?

Made simply, with pure vanilla extract and vanilla beans, this cake is hands-down the best thing ever. It's moist and dense but still effortlessly springy. The vanilla lives deep in this batter; it permeates every molecule of butter and imparts a richness of flavour that trumps every other yellow cake out there.

But you can take out the vanilla and still make grown men cry. Add lemon extract and fresh blueberries and you've just made a groundbreaking muffin. Add sour cherries and orange extract, sprinkle a buttery streusel on top before baking, and you've made every other coffee cake obsolete.

But if you really want to mess with people, if you want to make something that is both confusing and outrageously delicious, make a Golden Egg.

I created the Golden Egg for Easter. I make hot cross buns too, but I wanted to offer something else.

Something special. I consulted my magic recipe. And I remembered reading about a technique that made ordinary cake taste like doughnuts, without all the deep-frying. That's pretty special.

I make Golden Eggs year-round now; they're not just for Easter anymore. And they are coveted as if they were indeed genuine 14-carat gold.

MAKES 12 EGGS OR ABOUT 12 MUFFIN-SIZED CAKES

For the cake

Nonstick baking spray
3 cups all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon nutmeg
½ pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
2 cups sugar
5 large eggs, at room temperature
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1¼ cups nonfat buttermilk

For dipping the eggs

8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
1 cup sugar and 1 teaspoon cinnamon mixed together in a small shallow bowl

Preheat the oven to 325°F/170°C. Spray your moulds with nonstick spray. (I, obviously, use egg-shaped moulds. You can use a muffin pan or any other small baking moulds.)

Sift together the flour, baking powder, salt, and nutmeg. Set aside.

In an electric mixer fitted with either the paddle or the whisk attachment, whip the butter and sugar together until light and fluffy. This can take up to 10 minutes, depending on the temperature of your butter. As you're whipping away, stop and scrape down the sides of the bowl to make sure all the butter is incorporated into the sugar. You can't make magic without a lot of patience. So keep whipping and keep scraping.

Add the eggs one at a time, whipping after each one until the egg is fully incorporated into the batter. Scrape down the bowl every now and again as well. Add the vanilla.

Once all the eggs are incorporated, alternate adding the flour mixture and the buttermilk, mixing slowly. After they are well incorporated but not overbeaten, take a rubber spatula and fold the batter a few times to make sure everything is evenly distributed and the batter is smooth.

Distribute the batter into your moulds, filling each cavity a little less than halfway. Bake for about

15 minutes. Baking time varies depending on the size of your mould, so check for a very light golden brown colour and make sure the cake springs back when you touch it.

Unmould your little cakes and while they are still warm, dunk them quickly in the melted butter, then dredge them in the cinnamon and sugar. One warning: people are going to call you a stinking liar. They will not believe that these precious morsels aren't fried like a doughnut. But that's the cost of making magic.

Chapter Two

To Thine Own Baking Self Be True

4 a.m.

GETTING CLOSER TO TOWN, small farms give way to neat rows of wood-clad Cape Cods, built in the 1800s, some kept as fastidiously now as they were back then by their Dutch builders. Others are a little the worse for wear, Tibetan prayer flags spanning the front porches and marking the homes as communal breeding grounds for modern-day hippies. My shop is just around the corner, as you enter the city limits of Montpelier in a neighbourhood we call the ‘Meadow’. Our sign jumps out first, a gold owl set against a black background. My mother never got to see my life revolution from Hollywood cog to baker, but she’s always with me. Since

she was a young girl her nickname had been Eule, owl in German. So our store logo, our protector and my totem, is a horned owl that Ray hand-drew on a scrap of paper, inspired by our new life and by her memory.

We're across from Terry Shannon's convenience store, the eponymously named Meadow Mart, and still a few blocks away from the city centre that houses the administrative works of the state of Vermont, a gold-domed capitol building, the DMV, a post office, five locally owned pizza joints, and two streets: State and Main. This is Montpelier, Vermont, population 8,035, the smallest state capital in the United States and the only one without a McDonald's.

I unlock the front door to my pastry shop; it's still black outside. Terry's is shuttered, a Miller Light sign glowing in the front picture window. Only a few times a year is there evidence that someone else has been up in the wee hours of the morning. A local legend, the Valentines Phantom, plasters thousands of $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ colour photocopies of big juicy hearts all over town. Every year on February 14th the front of our store is beautifully festooned, top to bottom, with a riot of red. I take it as a matter of greedy pride that we get the most hearts. I've counted. Or on December 13th, Santa Lucia Day, there may be a blazing lantern sitting on the front stoop, left by our resident saint, Larry, to bring me light at the darkest and coldest time of the year. In return, I make him cardamom-infused Saint Lucia buns.

I push open the front door and enter at a full sprint. I have thirty seconds from the front of the shop to the alarm panel to stop the ominous beeping. Surfing across the ancient pine planks that run the length of the store, shimmying past the pastry case with index finger at the ready, I punch in the code with twenty seconds to spare.

I take a deep breath, blood pumping, and turn reverently to the tall metal repository that contains inky black beans, on the right side decaffeinated and on the left, rocket fuel. As the coffee brews, I stand a while and take in that opulent smell of freshly ground beans. How could I have dismissed the smell as a child? There's so much now that I savour that would have repulsed me as a kid. Like the aroma of yeast, the scent that greets me when I slide open the glass doors of the pastry case and pull out trays of croissants that have been resting overnight, the yeast slowly blooming and coming to life so that when I arrive at 4 a.m., they are plump and aching for the blast of a hot oven. Balancing sheet pans loaded with plain, chocolate, raspberry, almond, and savoury croissants, I kick open the door to the kitchen and power up the huge convection double ovens, 400 degrees for the top and 300 for the bottom. The fans come to life and fill the room with a constant low moan that continues until we close at 5 p.m.

I pray at the altar of the two great comestible goddesses, pastry and coffee. And while I have taken the veil as a servant of the almighty baked good, devoting my

life to unearthing her secrets and guarding the sanctity of butter, sugar, and flour, I am no less in awe of the great mysteries of her holiness, java. As a matter of fact, I have only two truisms that I apply to humanity. Never trust anyone who drives an Astro van. And never trust anyone who doesn't drink beer or coffee unless they have a doctor's note.

My German grandmother, Omi, was a Grand Master in the art of the brew. At three o'clock, the sacred hour of *kaffee und kuchen* (cake and coffee), she would set about carefully rinsing out her paper-thin porcelain coffee decanter with blistering-hot water. She measured the whole beans precisely and ground them to perfect consistency in her tiny tabletop grinder. She set the water to boil and poured a steady stream over the resting beans, patiently, so that every ground was saturated with scalding water and contributed to the chocolate brown elixir that dripped from the coffee filter. Ray has taken up the mantle of Coffee Guru and can extract the most beautiful essence from a bean using one of the most complicated pieces of engineering I've ever been terrified of, the professional fully manual espresso machine. I respect his rectory of coffee and don't get near the espresso station, just as he respects my dominion over the ovens and all things pastry. But I won't be denied this ritual, the simple act of slowly dripping water over ground bean. And I need a gentle caffeinated push into wakefulness to aid me in my very long day of communing with butter and sugar.

In my former life, I'd still be asleep at this hour. I'd eventually roll out of bed around seven and drive through an endless landscape of graffitied concrete, sleazy billboards, and row after row of McMansions. Drag myself into the gym chock full of out-of-work starlets and fuel myself with dread at the thought of facing another soul-sucking day in Hollywood. Get to the office by nine. Work a full eight hours putting together the infinite pieces that get movies made, fielding thousands of calls from faceless humans, all of them swearing to be in possession of the perfect script and wouldn't Sandy be just perfect in it. And I'd come home feeling empty and useless.

I first arrived in LA, just out of college, to hang out with my sister and go to law school. Sandy got ridiculously famous by my second year there. I was driving to class, listening to mindless drive-time radio. The DJs were babbling; I was tailgating and futzing with the lid to my coffee. They were chatting for what seemed to be an eternity about this adorable girl in this cute romantic comedy their girlfriends had dragged them to and they ended up liking the movie and loving the actress in it. And then I caught on. Holy shit! They were talking about *While You Were Sleeping*. They were talking about Sandy! I became privy to these kinds of conversations all over the place – in line for coffee, at the dentist, at the dog park. At first I was delighted that she had made such a rousing success, but pretty quickly it got creepy.

I'd get home and find the answering machine full.

Messages from hundreds of fixated strangers who took the obsessive time to track down the unlisted number of a woman they didn't know, whom they had seen play a fictitious character in their local Cineplex and for whom they suddenly had a deep and meaningful attachment. Some messages were full of longing and despair. Some were eerily casual and familiar. Others were thick with menace and confusion, from poor souls who should have been heavily medicated and hospitalised, internal voices commanding them to find this woman and bring her home. But they all contained a sense of ownership, as if they'd seen a product advertised in a catalogue and were putting in their order: I saw it, I want it, I deserve it, and it's mine.

About the same time, I graduated from law school, passed the bar, and went on exactly two interviews at law firms.

'Miss Bullock, our firm is dedicated to boring the hell out of you and ensuring you have no life. Pray at the altar of billable hours!'

Comparatively, Hollywood was looking positively alluring. And as luck would have it, my sister was starting up a production company. It took me a nanosecond to say, 'Sign me up!' We were going to make movies, me armed with my nebbish book smarts to look over contracts and nitpick over inaccuracies in historical biopics. And Sandy had her boundless creative energy. I'd also be able to keep an eye out

for those crazies who were calling her and she'd be able to boss around her little sister. The work wasn't particularly fulfilling, but I hadn't taken much time to figure out what would be. So for the time being it was a win-win situation. And I met Ray.

At our newly minted company, I'd get as many calls from stalkers as I got from studio executives. I had two piles on my desk. On the one side, a tidy mountain of scripts and contracts. And on the other, a freakish cumulus of creepy fan letters and items I'm reluctant to label as presents because they were really more like pagan offerings: collages composed of human hair and photos torn from trade magazines, a box of Halloween candy and razor blades. Once we got a proposal of marriage accompanied by a dozen roses and a live Dalmatian puppy. Every week I'd bundle up the freak show and ship it off to the police for cataloguing.

I read abominable scripts, lifeless books, and uninspired pitches in the morning. In the afternoon I'd have meetings with writers, studio executives, and producers in our upstairs conference room, wherein I devoted the hours between three and five trying my damndest not to scream bloody murder whenever I heard the words *cute*, *quirky*, and *romantic comedy*.

And my friends, they started to call to 'do' lunch, to read their scripts, to hear their ideas, to confirm a bit of gossip. No big deal, really. Even an ex had something to sell, shamelessly sidestepping that little piece of our

history where he stomped my heart to bits. After a few months, it dawned on me that I had stopped being a confidante and had become a contact. They had an ‘in’ and it was me. And every lunch, every dinner party, had become an opportunity to kiss my ass and sell me ideas. I’d never felt so lonely.

Every once in a while, an actual movie production would break out in between all the schmoozing. And by a movie production, I mean sitting on a set for two months waiting for something to happen.

But I had Sandy, and eventually I had Ray. So I had a buffer of comfort that tended to dull the pervasive ick that was work. And there were private jets and improbably luxurious European trips that Ray and I enjoyed as Sandy’s tiny entourage on film press tours. She spent the entire day working, spruced up within an inch of her life and answering the same five questions from reporters every day for two weeks while Ray and I gallivanted around ancient Rome in a hired car, took long, wine-soaked lunches at the Café Marly overlooking the glass Egyptian pyramid of the Louvre in Gay Paree, and ate bouillabaisse on the beach at Cannes. So as you can see, it wasn’t all bad.

Then there were the movie premieres. Red carpets! Shiny, tacky limos! The disco sparkle of flashing cameras! Beautiful people in inappropriately revealing ensembles! Sadly, those spectacles were only a small part of the affair. For those of us manning our little production

office off the Sunset Strip, the days before a big premiere were spent fielding calls from the ‘entitled set,’ those people who, while having had nothing at all to do with the making of the film in question, felt that by virtue of their elevated standing in Hollywood they deserved a ticket and a space in the coveted reserved sanctum in the middle of the theatre, where plush seats were cordoned off for the movie’s stars, director, and producer. And my comrades and I – Bryan, our wisecracking and kind office manager; Lillian, our thoughtful and lovely VP of development; Maggie, our svelte and multitasking VP of physical production; and Dori, the mistress of all things that needed to be done in Sandy’s personal and business life – the five of us spent those days leading up to the premiere explaining to the arrogant shits on the other end of the line that Sandy had the audacity to give away all her reserved tickets to crew members who actually worked their asses off on the film and never got invited to these kinds of events. By the time I walked up the red carpet, I was cranky and not at all in the mood for flashing lights, pretty people, and small talk.

It was during this time that my mother got sick. Colon cancer. Colon cancer after she lived her life doing everything right. She ate organic and ran marathons. She never dyed her hair; it was still shiny nutmeg brown. She had no wrinkles and she could beat me cold in a push-up contest. In a few short years she was gone, and it got me wondering – what was the point again?

During those sad days after she died, I turned to the universal standby for combating melancholy. Sugar. Preferably sugar combined with majestically high volumes of butterfat and chocolate. Despite LA's bounty of type-2 diabetes-inducing snack havens, the Krispy Kremes and the glorious In-and-Out Burger, nothing I was shoving into my mouth was making me cheery. I cracked open my long-neglected cookbooks, weathered German baking tomes with recipes ripped from the *Washington Post* stuck in between the pages, loopy notes scribbled in the margins by my mother. I was craving something comforting and warm, something like an American cinnamon bun but without the full frontal sweetness. A mix between the elegant bittersweet chocolate my grandmother savoured in Germany, the doughy brightness of the jam-filled *krapfen* my mother bought at the corner bakery in her hometown of Nürnberg, and the chewy sweet yeast bomb peddled by the noxious Pillsbury Doughboy.

Back then in Hollywood, I was resentful of healthy living and becoming so emotionally guarded that I didn't trust the sincerity of anyone's motives, so I baked in search of balance and hope. And when I baked, the gentle sweetness and soft sponge of a well-made sticky bun soothed my growing bitterness at God and humanity. At the end of the day at work, I'd open a new document on my computer. Instead of detailed notes on the latest script, I'd lovingly list the ingredients

I needed from the grocery store. I'd choose a snappy font, writing each ingredient in **bold**, increasing the font size to distinguish this particular document as something apart from the other piles of paper on my desk. This piece of paper had my undivided attention.

All-Purpose Flour

Baker's Sugar

Granny Smith Apples (at least 8)

Butter

Yeast

I'd print the list and the recipe. I'd staple the two together and find that I was momentarily relaxed and optimistic.

The more I baked, the more I conjured the long-dormant goofy kid who lived, schemed, and debauched for sweets.

I baked for friends who wanted nothing from me but my company and my pastries. This made me happy and left me feeling like a productive human. Apple pie, scones, croissants, chocolate cake, fruit tarts. Gorgeous doughs that filled our kitchen with the tangy, living smell of yeast, Danish and sticky buns doubling in size in the heat of our little oven. I baked because it made me content and fulfilled and it brought happiness to others. And along the way I became a master baker.

At first, I was a closet baker. No one outside of my close-knit circle knew my dirty secret – that I spent

quality time in the kitchen. In Hollywood, I'd have had more street cred if I'd revealed that I was a crack-addled anorexic leper. But a baker? What kind of weak-minded, carb-consuming, domestically minded loser bakes? I should have been networking, attending screenings and cocaine-soaked after-parties in my free time. My mom, if she had been around, she'd have told me to be loud and proud, to not care what everyone thought. Her one wish for her daughters was that we never conform: 'Don't be normal. *Bitte.*' And Ray, my other great comfort during the dark years, he needed me to open the doors and distribute the wares of the bakeshop that had once been our kitchen. We were running out of room.

I was so consumed with passion for the flour arts that I was starting to slip at work. At meetings, I'd bring up baking at the strangest moments.

Studio Executive: 'I'm not buying this whole 'meet cute' scenario we've got in the current draft of the script. It feels contrived. Not the least bit romantic.'

Me: 'You're right. It's like making an apple pie. You start adding things to make it fancy and 'new' and it just tastes like crap. Instead of keeping it simple, letting the humble apple take centre stage.'

Executive: 'What?'

Since it was no longer a well-guarded secret, I started to bring the endless bounty of my baking to high-powered,

sleekly catered executive confabs. Instead of shelling out hundreds on Bordeaux for a hostess gift at a producer's holiday party, I baked little sugar cookies and painted them with icing in loving detail. I brought pies to movie sets and carrot cakes for birthdays at the major studios. And I started to get requests. One director hadn't had a homemade strawberry-rhubarb pie since he was a kid. A writer wanted a decent corn muffin; he just couldn't find one outside of New York City.

In the midst of my pastry revolution, I woke one night to find I couldn't move and couldn't speak. I experienced a bout of partial sleep paralysis, but I think the colloquial term for it, 'a witching riding your back,' describes the experience more accurately. Despite my inability to use my voice, I had no trouble hearing. And something was indeed speaking to me; chanting was more like it. It was some of the most obnoxious woo-woo, airy-fairy drivel.

'Goodness and kindness, together as one. Goodness and kindness, together as one. Goodness and kindness, together as one.'

It just wouldn't stop. And since I was awake but paralysed, I had to listen to this nonsense bombarding my brain; it was a new age 2 a.m. car alarm. I have weird things like this happen once in a while. But it's usually when my arm's fallen asleep, and I'll wake Ray in a panic. 'Ray, I can't find my arm! I've lost my arm!' And he'll massage my dead arm into tingling pain.

I'll be perfectly honest; I understood the message, whether it was self-generated or celestial programming. I'd been forever struggling with my crossed wiring since childhood. On the one hand, I was born pathologically shy with severe misanthropic tendencies. From day one, I wanted nothing to do with humanity. To explain my antisocial rudeness, my family apologised by constantly repeating, 'That's Gesine, she's shy. Very, *very* shy.'

But along with my general distaste for bipeds, I battled with an overwhelming need to live well, to live righteously. I'd ask my mother, 'When will I grow out of this? When will I mature?' I thought that when you got to a certain age you would experience a biologically induced state of enlightenment, where all petty insecurities and distastes would disappear and you'd live a life of generosity and kindness.

But she told me, quite sadly, 'Sina, most people never mature.'

And boy, was she right. There I was in Los Angeles, a place dedicated to the pursuit of economic happiness and grotesque exposure. Where it's de rigeur to drop \$2,000 on a prestige handbag that's meant to be utilised for a month and then forgotten in a growing pile of once-chic leather sacks. And the cycle begins again. More money, more animals sacrificed for a four-week spin on the bony arm of a fame-hungry bore. I wasn't witnessing any cathartic bouts of maturity. I was living at the epicentre of an ugly cesspool of mass

consumption. And I was a part of it, because although I complained about it and found it repulsive, I wasn't changing it. To quote a rare human who evolved into a mature being, Ghandi would have told me, 'Be the change you want to see in the world.'

I didn't want more stuff. I wanted to be *more happy*. I wanted to be good. I wanted to stop hating people and start understanding. And the only way I knew how to feel like a good and kind person was through baking.

It took a long while to truly wake up and realise that the job and the life I'd been looking for, the one that was fulfilling and that fed my sugar-laced soul, was pastry. Everyone else knew it before I did.