



*Take one single thirty-one-year-old female,
add one teaspoon of uncertainty and whisk*

It is the afternoon of Friday 9 June and I am making scones. Usually I find baking therapeutic and soothing but today an inner feeling tells me something is wrong. I have nagging pains and although I do not feel ill, I have the feeling that all is not well. I wait for the scones to cook: fifteen minutes go by and the feeling remains. I remove the scones from the oven and put them to cool on a wire rack knowing they will go uneaten because I know, before I go to the toilet, before I go to the hospital, before the doctor confirms it, I am losing my baby.

Two months later, Moo had given birth to The Bear, Freya had given birth to The Princess, and I had fallen apart.

My sister Moo knows this more than anyone. As she feeds her six-month-old son, The Bear, I put the finishing touches to our sister-in-law Freya's birthday cake. It is a Victoria sandwich with a buttercream and jam filling.

Hopefully, the pale pink icing will be expertly drizzled on top and the sugar-frosted rose petals will be applied without mishap. Icing is not my strong point. Give me a wooden spoon and I can beat the hell out of some butter and sugar, but anything that requires long-term concentration and a delicate hand just highlights the point at which the God of all creation got distracted by Reese Witherspoon and left me wanting.

‘Are you really okay?’ Moo asks.

‘I’m okay,’ I answer, smiling at her.

‘I just worry that Christmas may have been hard for you . . . with the babies and everything.’

‘It was fine, stop worrying.’

Her concern weighs heavily. I wish everyone would believe me. It happened, it was horrid, but now it has to be fine.

‘It’s all good,’ I say, and smile.

‘Mmmmm . . . So, when do you go back to work?’

‘Monday. God, another year just fills me with dread.’

Actually, if I’m truthful, it makes me feel sick to the stomach. My shiny career doesn’t quite hold the sparkle it once did and unless I do something about it, I will spend the rest of my days working for people like Jessica North, Vampire Queen of the Home Counties. My January issue of *Red* didn’t help. There they are, the women who walked away from the rat race and now make millions from making chilli jam or vintage tablecloths. They are smiling and telling me how they gave it all up and found happiness. Look at my beautiful house with its quirky accessories brought back from trips abroad (style tips over the page), my gorgeous children and stylish friends who are laughing whilst eating balsamic-drenched vegetables from my organic garden (recipes overleaf). God, I hate

them! Every New Year I look at these women and I want what they have; except the irritatingly smugly beautiful friends. Every New Year I get the feeling that I have been living someone else's life and some bastard has hijacked mine. Would the real Maddy Brown please step forward? Please! Preferably before she reaches her thirty-second birthday.

'Wouldn't it be lovely to do this for a living?' I muse, adjusting a rose petal.

'What, make cakes?'

'We could have a little bakery like the one in *Sex and the City*, selling fairy cakes and big slices of Victoria sandwich, like Mum used to make,' I say. I am transported back again to Mum's kitchen, flour gently falling on my head like snow while I wait to lick the spoon.

It was the first cake that Mum taught me how to make: soft, fluffy, golden sponge oozing with raspberry jam, the indents of the cooling rack forming lines of caster sugar that would stick to our lips and fingers. She helped me whisk the sugar and butter when my arm got tired, and taught me to be gentle when folding in the flour. Afterwards, Moo and my younger brother Ben would miraculously appear and we would all sit on the kitchen floor with the mixing bowl and argue over the leftover mixture. I soon graduated to the complicated procedure of weighing the ingredients and, by the age of twelve, baking the cake for Sunday tea was my responsibility.

Moo responds with a mmmmm . . .

This is a different mmmmm from the rest. This is a mmmmm based on a delicious memory. Our other mmmmms are frequently used when we are thinking, playing for time or unwilling to say something that will offend or commit to an opinion. Mmmmm is a very useful

device, especially when dealing with a sensitive family.

‘None of that heavily iced rubbish. Nobody likes the icing anyway.’

‘God, no. Anyway, neither of us know how . . . so no icing and all of our cakes would be made to traditional recipes, like marmalade cake or lemon drizzle cake.’

‘Banana cake . . .’

‘Organic ingredients, no preservatives and handmade. None of this mass-produced rubbish. What was it Mum used to say? The secret ingredient for the perfect cake is a teaspoon of love and kisses.’

‘Made with a teaspoon of love and kisses! That could be our tag line; our what do you call it, UPS?’

‘USP.’

‘We could call ourselves The Three o’clock Bakery.’

‘Or Teatime Treats.’

‘Sisters are Baking it for Themselves?’

We both dissolve into peals of laughter. Well, when I say peals, I don’t mean the delicate Jane Austen kind that our gender would suggest. It’s the loud, raucous kind that’s frowned upon in restaurants. It’s the one thing we have in common; other than that we couldn’t be more opposite. Moo has thick, dark brown hair like Mum, but her pale skin, personality and, much to her disappointment, a set of sausage fingers, all come from our father. I got his freckles and the reddish hair, so I think she got off lightly. Moo is exactly like her favourite cake, raspberry, blueberry and lime cake, light and golden, interspersed with jewel-like colours and a zest that kicks ass. She is vivacious, gorgeous and funny with eyes that sparkle with life, a large, expressive mouth, and an honesty that can sometimes appear quite brutal to the uninitiated. Some people are born to shine and my sister is one of them. She

lights up the room with her larger-than-life personality and wardrobe to match of vibrant colours, bold, one-off pieces of jewellery and her signature deep-plum lipstick. I, on the other hand, am the quiet one, the one who is always in the kitchen at parties usually wearing something simple and anonymous like a pair of jeans. (I have twelve pairs and profess to being a bit of an aficionado on what makes a good boot cut.) I would like to be more Sienna Miller but whenever I attempt to be, with a colourful scarf thrown nonchalantly around my neck or wearing an embroidered peasant top, it always ends in disaster and I look like a fifty-year-old eccentric let out from the institution for the day.

I have never been good in the life-and-soul-of-the-party department, preferring instead to bask in the glow of those that are. Throughout my life, I have always been drawn to the brilliant stars, probably with the hope that some of their glitter and sparkle would settle on me like fairy dust, and they perversely have been drawn to me, perhaps in the knowledge that I will never outshine them. Moo tells me this is no bad thing. Some people, she says, feel sick after a cream slice, wishing instead they had gone for the marble cake with its mixture of vanilla and chocolate sponge. Why marble cake? You tell me. And why haven't I met a man who likes marble cake? Anyway, as much as I would have liked a little more of my sister's sparkle and confidence, being me hasn't really been a problem. Until now, that is! Now I have a curious yearning to shine like Kylie and shake my arse to the camera. Well, maybe not, but you know what I mean.

The Bear, a big boy with an even bigger appetite, senses a shift in concentration. He is a soft, squidgy doughnut that makes you lick your fingers every time.

From behind he resembles a rugby-playing Pooh Bear, hence the name. He sits there with orange gloopy stuff all around his mouth, up his nose and in his hair, just like a plump baby owl, with white fluffydown on his head and mouth wide open. Moo resumes shovelling. Her top is covered in the remnants of The Bear's lunch and she looks like she needs a good hose down. This is not the sister I am used to. Even her lipstick is missing, which is a little disconcerting; I could have sworn she had it tattooed on. Without it, she looks pale and not like Moo at all. I have a horrid feeling that aliens have robbed me of my sister and replaced her with someone I'm not sure of any more; someone who doesn't wash her hair every day.

'Bringing old-fashioned baking back into people's lives!' Moo declares.

'Perfect for when relatives come round for tea, a gift for a friend . . . delivered to the door; like flowers?' I suggest.

'Wrapped in cellophane with a ribbon and a gift message?'

'In a gift box. You open the box and there it is.'

'Sugar and Spice?'

'I like it!'

'We would have to have a website.'

'In pale pinks, creams and browns.'

'Classy, romantic, with great photos of the cakes.'

'And maybe some recipes?'

We visualise it and sigh.

Interview in *Red* magazine

'So, Maddy, how did you come up with the idea of Sugar and Spice?'

'Well, we commissioned a huge amount of

market research; there was an analysis of current trends, demographics and lots of brainstorming sessions. We really left nothing to chance.'

'You've had quite a year: been voted business-woman of the year, become Chairman of the National Cake Council, the new face of Chanel, and celebrated the opening of your fifth cake shop in New York.'

'Well, it's been hard but I was committed to our vision from the start.'

'You've recently written a book based on your experiences?'

'Yes, and I couldn't believe it when my agent phoned to say it knocked Harry Potter off the best-seller lists this week. It's all very exciting.'

'What an inspiration you are to women everywhere.'

'There would have to be a chocolate cake in the range,' I announce, placing Freya's cake carefully in my pastel-blue cake tin.

'Naturally.'

'But what kind?'

The perfect chocolate cake recipe is as elusive as the perfect man. If I could find it, then I am pretty sure the other would follow. It is the holy grail of cakes and my sister and I have been searching for it for years. Not that she needs to. She seems to have done perfectly well without it and has been happily married to Bob for six years.

'Talking of men, we need to find you one.'

'I don't need a man!'

'I don't need chocolate cake, but it doesn't stop me

from wanting another piece. It's been too long, Maddy. You need a big slice of something in your life.'

'Dark, strong, bitter-sweet . . . not too sweet . . . the taste of seduction and comfort . . . of being loved.'

'See, talking like that you definitely need a shag!'

World domination by cake and a double spread in *Red* magazine are forgotten as we make our way to Ben and Freya's. Ben is the baby of the family. He wants to be the eldest but I won't let him and I am hanging on to the position by the skin of my teeth. As time goes by though, I think he may be better qualified for the job. We arrive to find Mum already there. Dad and his second wife, Susan, are thankfully on holiday. The other person missing is Bob, Moo's husband, who has remained at home to look after their three dogs, Hamlet, Ophelia and Macbeth, and the six white rabbits that form part of his magic act. That's his excuse, anyway, but we all know it has more to do with a rare opportunity to attend one of his Magic Circle meetings. By day Bob is a maths teacher but every weekend he dons his black suit and silver bow tie to become The Magic Man; available for parties, weddings and bar mitzvahs.

'I've told him, he is not to have any of those people in the house while I'm away,' Moo tells us, shovelling a mushroom vol-au-vent down in one go.

'Why, what's wrong with them?' I ask.

'I don't want middle-aged men who insist on being called The Big Kahuna and who get their wives to dress up in sequinned leotards to be role models for The Bear as he grows up.'

I think of Moo and her Tuesday-night spirit circle but decide not to mention this. It's another thing we don't have in common; talking to dead people.

Ben wanders over carrying his daughter and places a glass of champagne in my hand. Since putting on a few extra pounds, he has become the spitting image of Dad, with thickset features, a wide nose that looks as if it has been fashioned from putty, and broad shoulders. His hair, cut close to his rather large head, is dark, almost black in colour like Mum's and Moo's. He has always maintained that I am adopted.

'Great cake,' he says.

'Thanks,' I reply and kiss the tiny fingers of The Princess. Three weeks younger than The Bear, she is the spitting image of Ben when he was her age, with Pink Lady apple cheeks, a mop of wayward black hair, long eyelashes, and a pretty red rosebud mouth. Today she is dressed in striped pink and lilac leggings, like a fairy cake covered in pink icing and multicoloured sprinkles. A cheeky smile rarely leaves her face, promising a lifetime of mischievousness and a trail of broken hearts. Just like her father.

The talk flows easily as we recount our festive and New Year experiences. Mum seems to hover in the background, playing with the babies and not saying much. Well, she does say one thing, but we all choose to ignore it. Moo was telling Freya how hard she was finding it keeping up with The Bear's demands and Mum piped up with 'He's a man, and the need for food and clearing up after him will never end – then, you take your eyes off him for a minute, and he disappears to find someone who gives him more attention.'

As I said, we ignored it because sometimes it's just not worth getting into. Mum is a lemon cake. The light, fluffy sponge is the caring, nurturing part of her that administers hugs and kind words, but the woman who swears in

French and wants to stick a knife through my father's heart is the tartness of the lemon.

Before she met him, Mum studied and then worked as a hat designer in Paris. Her subsequent fondness for all things French meant that as children we were subjected to subtitled films we didn't understand and croissants for breakfast at the weekend. This particularly annoyed my father who wanted bacon and eggs like any 'normal bloody person'. We were also named accordingly; Ben's real name is Pierre but we have always called him by his middle name, Moo was christened Michelle and I am Madeleine after the shell-shaped cakes the French dip into their tea. Everyone calls me Maddy, although, with a surname like Brown, it was only a matter of time before I was called Muddy Brown at school.

After swapping Yves Saint Laurent and tiny pastries for a Barnsley lad and eating fish fingers, my father left her for Susan, a sales rep who was twenty years his junior. We didn't see him again until six months later. There were no explanations as to his disappearance from Mum, who resolutely refused to discuss it, and when he did eventually reappear with his future new wife in tow, I had convinced myself that he was either dead, or worse: he had left because he didn't love me. He has never contradicted me otherwise.

A bullish self-made man, he has high expectations of us all despite never having attended a parents' evening in his life. Moo and Ben seemed to have satisfied those expectations: Ben as a city financier, now working for the family business, and Moo as founder and artistic director of the youth theatre company, Real Time Theatre. Moo always knew what she wanted to do. Me? I drifted for ages until finally ending up in the marketing department of an

international pharmaceutical company. Pedalling drugs, Dad calls it. He thinks he's being funny.

I look at Mum and smile. Maybe that's why Dad and I don't get on: because I serve as a reminder.

I always thought Mum and I were complete opposites, although more and more these days, when I hear myself or catch sight of my reflection in the mirror, I find that the similarities become more obvious as I get older. I share her average-for-a-woman height of five feet four inches, greenish, hazel eyes that, according to one ex-boyfriend, resembled the colour of a muddy river (he was surprised when I got the hump), and those funny arched eyebrows that make me look as if I am constantly surprised. I have also inherited her lack of confidence, quick temper and the need to be reassured that everyone loves me every day. A few years ago, I would have been mortified at such a thought, but now I think it could be worse. She doesn't have a moustache, which is good, but she is shrinking at an alarming rate, which is not so good. But let's face it, in the grand scheme of things, short is always preferable to facial hair. I heard somewhere that after a certain age women lose their pubic hair. Perhaps it just jumps up to their top lip and chin. I make a mental note to ask Mum about it later.

Ben has a vol-au-vent case on his nose and is pretending to be a moose with The Princess and The Bear. He is the picture of contentment with his young family. Freya says that he and Dad clash; so alike physically, but so dissimilar in nature, their two big heads locked together like the stags you see in the mountains. Freya pops another vol-au-vent with the middle scooped out into his mouth. It provides us with the first opportunity to tease him.

The size of his head (he was born with the head he has now) and his weird hang-ups with food have always provided us with a great source of amusement, and both are subjects that do not deserve any mercy. Aside from a long list of no-no's which includes green food, noisy food and garlic within a fifty-mile radius, the most mystifying for me is his love of quiches and the like with the fillings removed, oh, and fried eggs, without the yolk. Freya has worked wonders over the last few years, transforming him from someone who lived on a diet of custard creams, Jammie Dodgers and alcohol, his skin permanently tinged yellow as his liver cried out for something nutritious, to someone who can even eat vegetables. Well, peas anyway, although they are green so I am not quite sure how that works. Freya thinks it's an endearing aspect of his personality. Aaah, the blindness of love. Personally, I think he needs a good slap!

Moo and I dissolve into laughter at Ben's expense as we remember a childhood of finding brussel sprouts in sleeves, pockets and plant pots. We laugh even louder when we are three. Our laughter comes from a shared sense of humour and, usually, at the expense of each other. Those around us become excluded and look on bemused as we tell stories, recall the past and tease each other mercilessly. We are members of the exclusive Sibling Comedy Club where there is a strict door policy (my attempts to impose a dress code have so far been unsuccessful) and a regular happy hour when we laugh at things other people just don't find funny, bouncing off one another until our sides ache.

My brother is very funny with his sharp, droll, sometimes cruel observations on life, especially those that involve us. My sister is funny in a different way; her sense

of humour comes from an intrinsic part of her character. Her bubbly nature, her laugh, her quick wit, all combine into a Victoria Wood of sorts. Me? I'm sometimes funny when I'm with them but only because they make me feel funny. Funny by default, I suppose. They are the ones who make me laugh the loudest and it feels good. It feels like me.

The afternoon is a pleasant one and the perfect way to end my extended festive holiday. Time to go home is signalled by another round of nappy changing, tears, bottle sterilising and milk making, which means we all have to be quiet so that Moo and Freya don't lose count of the scoops they need. I stay on the periphery, suddenly feeling awkward with no part to play in this daily ritual. Sensing my unhappiness, Moo hands me The Bear to look after. This is her way of making me feel included, but sometimes it just makes me feel worse. Nuzzle in, close your eyes, and drown in summer pink peonies, soft ripe peaches, cherry blossom, and tiny cupcakes of rose-water sponge with the lightest vanilla buttercream, topped with delicate pale pink rose petals and sprinkled with caster sugar. I feel the familiar constriction in my throat and my eyes fill up with tears. Mum, always sensitive, walks over and squeezes my arm before taking The Bear. I make my goodbyes and find a quiet space where I cannot smell the soft, sweet fragrance of babies.

With a return to work looming, I decide to clear my head and make another Victoria sandwich for the girls in the office. Baking is good for soothing the soul. To say I am dreading going back is an understatement. I turn the mixer to full blast. The thought of returning to the treadmill of a multimillion-pound corporation that barely

registers my existence, and dealing with my control freak of a boss brings me back to the question I have been asking myself for the last few months. There must be more to life . . . ? Okay, there is the expense account, my Audi with sports interior in the driveway, the international travel and the salary to buy not one, but two pairs of Manolos; there is that . . . But does it make me happy? Really happy? As I lick the spoon of cake mixture I ponder this question, but I already know the answer. Once upon a time, it did, but that was before the miscarriage, that was before what I am now calling my epiphany. Could I do something else? Could I bake cakes instead of marketing drugs that have had millions of pounds spent on their research and further millions spent on ruthlessly persuading doctors to prescribe them? No, because that would be stupid and my Manolos would look ridiculous with an apron. There must be a health and safety clause about not wearing them in the kitchen anyway, and those hair nets . . . urgh. I turn my attention back to the cake slowly rising in the oven. I love this part: the waiting, the expectation that something beautiful and delicious is about to happen. It is like giving birth every time except without the pain and the prospect of pooing in front of your loved one.

With the cake cooling I plump up the cream fluffy cushions that complement my beige sofa, light some coordinating candles and settle down to the *Strictly Come Dancing* results with a glass of wine. I have developed a little crush on the *Blue Peter* presenter and he looks particularly good in lycra and sequins, which is not something you can say that often about a man. When I moved in I had a trendy New York loft/*Sex and the City*-type interior in mind, but in reality, I suspect it looks more

like an IKEA showroom. No matter, it's mine and it looks good through a wine-induced glow.

The usual forty-minute journey to the outskirts of Oxford takes longer than normal and I panic as I run in nearly twenty minutes late. Thankfully, my boss Jessica is nowhere to be seen and I slip into the Primary Care Sales and Marketing department of Pharmagenica International almost unnoticed. Everyone is finding it hard to get back into the swing of things after the Christmas break. Nursing double-shot Americanos, the talk is of Christmas, exploits over the New Year and resolutions of losing twenty pounds in three months by eating two bowls of cereal a day. As project manager for a new arthritic drug that will soon be launched on to the market, I should find it an exciting time, but, with my files in front of me and a screen full of emails, I cannot summon up the passion and drive I once felt. The adrenalin high that once upon a time accompanied the sign-off deadlines, the training of the sales reps and the presentations to the board (although that is more akin to terror than adrenalin) has gone. As everyone orders another coffee, I nervously produce my cake tin. The oohs, aahs and general surprise that I have been responsible for making something so melt-in-the-mouth, so delicious and so wonderful causes me to blush and my heart fills ready to burst with pride.

The chatter and laughter is short-lived as Jessica emerges from her office. It is as if the oxygen has been cut off from the room. Everyone holds their breath and looks down for fear of eye contact, praying that today they are not the target of her impossible deadlines. She is like a vampire, sucking the life-blood of everyone who encounters her and using it as her own.

‘Maddy, I need those projections by eleven,’ she barks at me.

‘Did you have a nice Christmas?’ I ask and she is momentarily taken aback.

‘Yes . . . thank you,’ she replies suspiciously. With her expertly layered, shoulder-length black hair, the whitest skin I have ever seen, razor-sharp cheekbones and narrow black slits that pass for eyes, I always feel the urge to put my hands over my neck when she comes close.

‘I’m still waiting for the data from the Medical team to come through, so eleven might be a bit ambitious,’ I reply as non-confrontationally as I can.

‘Have you spoken to them today?’

‘Er, no.’ I have been here barely twenty minutes after the festive break! What is the matter with the woman?

‘By eleven.’ She looks at me for a moment, daring me to answer and my coffee freezes over. Suddenly her mouth breaks into a smile and I look around feeling a little unnerved. The reason appears at my desk: tall, dark and smelling of expensive cologne.

‘Morning, ladies,’ Don Truro, the head of Communication, says, beaming.

‘Don. What a lovely surprise,’ Jessica gushes.

Liar, Liar, pants on fire! Jessica hates surprises.

‘Good Christmas?’ she simpers and I want to vomit.

‘Good, good. Always nice to be back, though? Aah, Maddy, just the girl I want to speak to. I need your feedback on the results of the Phase Four that came in before Christmas.’ Don is his usual energetic self, barely taking a breath between each thought process. I open my mouth to speak, but Jessica is there like a terrier down a rabbit hole.

‘Don, I can fill you in. The results are in my office.’ She indicates for him to follow her and I am left gaping as they walk off. I spent hours on that! I worked until six on Christmas Eve on that sodding feedback! Bitch! As I look at everyone with their heads down and brows furrowed, I get an urge to swipe all my paperwork to one side, stand up on my desk and shout out: ‘Bollocks to this!’

I don’t, because the worry that Jessica would push me off without a backward glance is a real one, so instead I click through the mountain of emails that all seem to have that annoying little red priority exclamation mark next to them.

The week doesn’t get any better and by the weekend I am as stressed as I was before the Christmas break. With tea and toast I ponder alternatives as I sit at the desk in my spare bedroom-cum-office. Spurred on by the thought of chocolate cake, or as Moo so eloquently put it, a shag, I flick through my recipe books and vast collection of saved magazine cut-outs for a recipe to try. I am obsessive about ripping pages out of magazines: articles about travel, recipes, gift ideas; I have files for them all. I just know that one day I will need that important information regarding the hottest hotel in Barcelona or those chocolate shoes that will make the perfect gift for someone.

Not only do I have a perfect view of my own tiny garden but also the garden of the house across the road. And there he is, Edmund. I don’t know what his real name is but he reminds me of Blackadder, with his spindly thin, pale body, rather large head and prominent features. Every morning Edmund chops wood in his underpants. I don’t know why, but he does. He chops away, sometimes stopping to hike up the underpants that match

his body – grey and slightly baggy – until his four-foot-nothing and at least sixteen-stone wife comes out in her floor-length quilted dressing gown and drags him back in.

The doorbell rings and I drag myself away from Edmund – he must be freezing! I answer the door and James, my soon-to-be-ex-husband, walks in, followed obediently by our dog, Frog. James is going away with six friends on a stag weekend somewhere in Manchester and Frog is staying with me. Heaven help Manchester. Heaven help me! Frog is a Staffordshire bull terrier and so named because he looks like a frog when he lies down with his back legs splayed out behind him. Brindle coloured with a little white-bibbed chest and an increasing amount of grey around his whiskers, Frog is one of the links that bind James and me, despite having been separated for what seems an eternity. We met at a mutual friend's twenty-first birthday party. He was the only one who wasn't in fancy dress and I remember thinking that I had to have him and knowing I would. Oh the certainty of youth! James is a farmhouse fruit cake, light and golden in colour, with a smattering of plump sultanas, raisins and cherries and a delicious crunchy sugar topping. The sort of cake that is perfect for a cup of tea with your grandma and, like all good fruit cakes, James has got better with age. With hair the colour of demerara sugar and skin the colour of caramel from working outside, the extra weight and muscle he has gained over the years suits him. I honestly thought we would stay together for ever, but somewhere along the way we changed and evolved into friends. Like my parents, I had failed to make my marriage work and that pissed me off more than anything; it also meant starting all over again

without someone holding my hand. Now, in between a succession of blondes that appear in his life, James comes round for something to eat, sometimes we go out for a meal or settle down to watch a DVD. Like friends and family, we have stopped trying to understand our relationship and have just accepted that this is the way it is. Perhaps it will always be this way and at ninety we will be sharing puréed food and saving each other a seat in front of the TV in the old people's home. There has only been one little glitch in this otherwise perfect separation and the following morning we agreed it was a one-off and best forgotten, not knowing that the forces of nature had other plans for us.

'You be good for your mum.' James strokes the top of Frog's head and Frog replies that he will in a voice that sounds remarkably like James but a little more high pitched.

With a perfunctory kiss, James heads off, leaving me and the Frog alone to begin our usual battle of wills. Despite now being ninety-one years of age in dog years, deaf, almost blind and with rheumatism in his back legs, which means he sways rather than walks, the urge to stick two fingers up at me while doing something I have told him not to has unfortunately never left him. He sniffs around, whines for twenty minutes, pees in the kitchen and then, bored, insists on dragging various knickers from the dirty washing bag around the house. I win the fight to get them back, although some of my prettiest, tiniest knickers are now ripped. Round one to Frog. A long drawn-out walk uses up his energy and I leave him snuggled up on a blanket by the radiator, snoring loudly. I, on the other hand, have some therapeutic shopping to do with my friend Lou. I have found that buying something I

don't need makes me feel better about wasting my life away working for someone like Jessica.

I stare into my cappucino and listen to Lou's plans for 'getting me out there'. Urgh, just the phrase makes my blood run cold.

'You can't wait for someone to just turn up, Maddy,' she says, and I wonder why not.

'I am actually quite happy without a man.' Which is one of those truth/lie things that anyone who knows me well enough chooses to ignore. I believe it most of the time, but sometimes, yes, I admit, I do have a little fantasy about falling in love with someone kind, funny, tall and delicious . . . my perfect chocolate cake. If I'm honest, though, I don't know what I would do if someone came along. I can't remember the last time I went on a date. No, that's a lie. I can, but I would rather forget it, so it doesn't count. I certainly can't imagine ever falling in love again. My success in the romance department leaves a lot to be desired, and as much as I hold on to the belief that the fairy-tale happy ending I cry over in films really does exist, it seems to have eluded me so far. At some point in the past year I have filed the L word away in a file marked 'Archive' and the S word is in a dust-covered file marked 'Forgotten what it's like'.

Lou has been my friend for nearly twenty years, which, when I think about it, is a miracle, because we have absolutely nothing in common. Don't they say opposites attract? I don't know what it is, but I do know that my life would be dull without the bling effect she brings to it. She is glamour personified, our very own local Posh: always immaculately dressed in up-to-the-minute trends, beautifully French-manicured nails, with a diamond the

size of Asia on her finger. Unlike Posh, though, her long glossy brunette locks, with carefully added golden highlights, are her own and not some Russian peasant's, and she doesn't mind admitting that her magnificent breasts are a miracle of modern cosmetic surgery. She is a real Black Forest Gateau of a girl: rich, gorgeously extravagant and absolutely delicious.

When I first met Lou, I was more than a little in awe of her. She seemed so confident and grown up compared to anyone else I knew at university, and as I tried to blend into the background she walked around as if she owned the place. Everyone was in love with her, including the tutors, but a mutual passion for Blondie meant we became the most unlikely of friends. A marketing manager for a national brewery company that specialises in trendy bars, Lou is still a force to be reckoned with and not one to mince her words.

'I have to be brutal though, sweetie, we really need to improve the packaging. You need to get your nails done, buy a push up bra and get some cleavage on show.' She demonstrates by pushing her own lovelies up. The chap next to us cannot believe his luck and nearly chokes on his coffee. The thought of getting my non-existent cleavage out on show fills me with horror.

'Okay, let's not waste any time. I'm having a little dinner party on the fourteenth of next month and I think you should come.'

'I think I have something on then,' I respond in a panic, wondering what she has up her sleeve.

'What are you doing?' Lou immediately fires back at me because we both know I'm not doing anything.

'Oh, I don't know, Lou; I have a thousand things to do.'

‘Like what?’ Her mind is already working overtime and she taps into her phone. ‘Look, it will be a group of nice, harmless, friendly people, and there is someone I want you to meet. He is single, friendly, quite good-looking. In fact, he is just your type.’ Lou bites into the almond croissant we are sharing. She is the only person I know who doesn’t get a flake of pastry or icing sugar stuck on her lip. I inwardly groan, the words ‘he is just your type’ ringing in my ears. This is always a recipe for disaster and, although my experience is limited, I have always found that friends and family are not to be trusted with this kind of decision, because in reality their idea of what my type should be is very different to mine.

‘Darling, can you phone Dave and make sure he is definitely coming on the fourteenth, and we need an extra chair, and remember to order those white lilies. Not the ones with the pink bits, the trumpet ones.’ Lou snaps her phone shut and turns to me, smiling.

‘So that’s settled then,’ she confirms more to herself than me, and I find myself nodding.

Friday Night with Jonathan Ross

‘So, Maddy, why is a gorgeous successful woman like you single?’

‘Ah, that’s a good question. I guess I’m just too busy right now. I never have time to go out on dates.’

‘But you have been linked with a number of eligible men including Robert Downey Jnr, Robbie Williams and George Clooney?’

‘Oh, Jonathan, you should know better than to believe everything you read in the papers,’ I tell

him, but as always he is not to be swayed.

‘So what of the latest rumours of you and George? Come on, you can tell me,’ he laughs.

‘George and I are just very good friends.’ I smile enigmatically.

With a Benefit Hollywood Glo to give me a bit of colour, a new pair of jeans (I know!) and a black wraparound dress Lou persuaded me to buy, and not wear over my jeans (spoilsport), I head back home to a Saturday evening spent with a smelly dog.

The next day I try the first of my perfect chocolate cake recipes. Chocolate loaf cake is a recipe that uses boiling water, which seems a bit strange, but I go with it anyway. Me and the Frog are soon waiting in anticipation of its loveliness as it bakes away in the oven.

Waiting for a cake to cool down has to be one of the hardest things to do and I’m not sure who is dribbling the most. It’s the moment when delicious aromas of still-warm ingredients fill the air. After twenty minutes I’m so hungry I want to eat my own arm and I cut the first slice. Still warm, it falls away in my hand. Not bad; it’s nice and moist, which is always good for a chocolate cake but, disappointingly, it’s not that chocolatey and just a little too dense for my liking. Nope, this is not the one and I cross it off my list.

‘Sorry, Mr Loaf, but the panel have decided that it’s not you that will go through to the next round.’

‘But I can also be a great alternative to sponge fingers in a trifle.’

‘Sorry, no.’

‘But, but—’

‘Security, would you kindly remove this loaf.’

Frog, however, has no such reservations and doesn’t

even notice when James arrives back. He is looking a little worse for wear. I make some restorative pasta to soak some of the alcohol up and we spend the evening watching a DVD. After we both cry at the ending he takes Frog home and I get ready for work tomorrow. The familiar dread returns even before I have gone to bed.

After an early morning meeting at an ad agency, I arrive back at the office mid morning to a room full of miserable people. I wonder what path of destruction the Vampire Queen has taken today. I ask Donna what the problem is and it seems the rumours of redundancies that have plagued the offices of Pharmagenica for the last six months have finally turned into reality. I hadn't really taken any notice; talk of takeovers and redundancies are all par for the course of working in the pharmaceutical industry.

'But our department is okay,' I tell her.

'Apparently not. Chris has already been told he is going.' Donna looks as if she is about to cry. I attempt to reassure her that with the product launch only weeks away we will be safe.

'They can't get rid of us now,' I tell her as I check my emails. There is one from Jessica asking me to see her in her office at 3.30 p.m. Oh God, what does she want now? A change of strap line? The latest marketing analysis I have promised to have on her desk by the end of the day? To make me redundant? No, that's one thing I know she won't do; she needs me for this launch, and I have been working on it since the beginning.

'Of course, we shall be sorry to lose you,' June from HR says as Jessica nods in agreement. I stare at her in amazement, but her look of concern remains like her

foundation: expertly applied and not shifting for anything.

So how wrong can you be? It is 4.05 p.m., and I am out of a job. I still cannot quite believe it. Near to tears, I switch off my computer and pick up my bag, trying to avoid the pitying looks from my fellow workers. The pharmaceutical business is a paranoid one and fears that I may pass confidential launch strategies and study results to competitors means I don't even get to work a notice; I am not even allowed to tidy up my emails or files. I remove the rotting banana from my top drawer and then put it back again in a vain attempt at revenge. Donna attempts to console me and I reassure her I'm okay, although she and everyone else can see I'm clearly not as I stumble out towards my soon-to-be-taken-away car. I don't remember the drive home and suddenly find myself standing in the middle of my living room feeling lost. What the hell happened? I try to erase the sight of Jessica's attempts to look sad and concerned for the benefit of June. Unavoidable, a valuable member of the team, essential streamlining, an impossible choice, a good reference, redundancy; the words are jumbled and I try to make sense of them as they float in and out of view.

'I'm sure you understand, Maddy,' Jessica had said, closing a file on her desk with a snap. 'Oh, and before you go, can you just email me those Cliquo files.'

I nodded, because the power of speech had been removed along with my security pass. This is not how it was meant to be, I wasn't ready to leave. Okay, I haven't enjoyed it over the past year, but I wasn't ready, not yet. I feel cheated; my moment of sticking two fingers up at Jessica as I handed in my resignation for a better job or a fantasy life making millions from cakes has now been taken away.

I can't quite believe that I'm out of a job. I deal with it

by pouring myself a large glass of wine, and cleaning the bathroom, because I don't know what else to do. Having not eaten all day, the wine goes straight to my head and I end up crying my eyes out and phoning everyone in a drunken state. They are all sympathetic, saying things like, 'It could be the best thing that has happened to you', to which I want to respond, 'Yeah, right, tell that to my mortgage company.' Mum offers to travel down to be with me and it takes all of my strength to say no. Ben promises not to tell Dad (I don't know why this is important, but it is) and invites me round to tea which I decline. Instead, I polish off the bottle of wine, eat a giant bag of Doritos, a bag of Maltesers and some chocolate ice cream.

The next morning I wake up with the king of hangovers. I gingerly pick up the phone, knowing that any sudden movement may tip me over the edge. I consider phoning in sick, and then I remember. I have nowhere to go. With a thumping head and waves of sickness, I spend the day watching myriad dreadful chat shows, daytime soaps and children's TV. I am now one of the million or so unemployed and I still can't quite believe it. Surely I will wake up soon and realise it's all been a horrible nightmare. Moo phones me to check that I am okay.

'Maddy, I know you feel like shit at the moment but try and think of all this as something positive.'

'How can losing my job be perceived as something positive?' I ask, sniffing away.

'Because maybe it's a sign that now is the time to create a new future for yourself. Sometimes we all need a push to do that and your push has come now. Didn't you say that you're getting some redundancy money?'

'Yes,' I mumble, curling a strand of hair round and round my fingers.

‘Well, what about the cake business? What about Sugar and Spice? You often hear of successful businesses coming into fruition following redundancy,’ Moo says enthusiastically. ‘You’ve been saying for long enough that you were at a crossroads. Well, now is your chance to take the road that goes the opposite way. Maybe now is the time for us to actually do it.’

‘Are you being serious?’

‘Yeah. I think I am. Let’s go for it.’

‘What, you and me starting our own business?’ I ask, laughing for the first time all day.

‘Why not? Obviously, with me still working, I won’t be able to commit one hundred per cent, but between the two of us I’m sure we could do something. Come on, Maddy, you have always talked about doing something like this.’

‘But I wouldn’t know where to start.’

‘Well, without sounding harsh, you have two months on full pay to get your arse in gear and find out! Bear, say hello to Auntie Maddy.’

I sing hello down the phone. A snuffling noise and heavy breathing followed by crying is my reward and the sound of Moo laughing.

‘His nose was running and now it’s all over the phone,’ she tells me. ‘I have to go. As you can hear, he’s now crying for no apparent reason at all. Love you, and think about what I’ve said. Ring me if you need me. Bye.’

The next few days I wander aimlessly around the house, watch rubbish TV and spend money I’m not earning any more. Knowing I have to do something, I look through job websites but the thought of returning to something similar just depresses me further. Do I really want to do the same

thing until I am too old to do anything else, and if not, what? Bake cakes? The prospect seems ridiculous and I send my CV through to agencies with a heavy heart. As I search through the Internet for something to ignite a sense of passion I find myself checking to see if the name Sugar and Spice has been registered. It hasn't, and for some ludicrous reason I register it under my name. More and more, as Lorraine Kelly chortles on about something and nothing, I find my mind wandering towards cakes and wondering how an ex-product manager for pharmaceuticals would market a sponge cake.

On the fifth day of being unemployed I am lying awake in the early hours of the morning, as has become my habit. I lie there and think about what Moo said. Do I want to get another job and continue on the treadmill, or do I want to take hold of my dream with both hands and see what happens? Should I suck it and see? I have a little redundancy money to keep me going for a while, and perhaps everyone is right and this is the best thing that could have happened to me.

I pull the covers tightly round me, and snuggle down like a little animal. I feel a calmness drift over me and sleep is not far behind. I dream of icing-sugar clouds, sticky fingers, anticipation, warm, enveloping, comforting. Melt-in-the-mouth, golden, light, dark, fluffy, dense, bitter, heavenly, luscious, scrumptious, pure, unadulterated pleasure, and laughter, sweet and delicious.

The next morning I wake up and feel a fluttering in the pit of my stomach. It is different from the big, black butterflies that have been there for the past few months, feeding from my fear and disappointment. These are different, a gentle fluttering with the most delicate of light blue wings; like someone tickling the palm of your hand.

It feels nice. I stand in front of the mirror and immediately wish I hadn't. Someone grey and tired stares back at me but I choose to ignore her.

Stand up straight.

Okay.

I am me, and I am wonderful.

I have the power within me.

I can do this.

I will be successful.

People love my cakes.

I think.

Is that cellulite?

I phone Moo. 'You're right. Let's do it!'

'What?' Moo asks.

'Sugar and Spice!'

'Hurray. That's fabulous news. So where do we start?'

'Well, I've registered the name but apart from that, I have no idea!' I respond, laughing.

'Sugar and Spice dot com. It sounds good. So, when we have made our first million I can open the first of my performing arts schools for underprivileged children,' she says.

'Wow! I was thinking more of buying a Malibu beach-front home next door to Brad Pitt,' I respond. 'But I would donate to Children in Need,' I add, feeling guilty and thinking that I really should do that anyway. This year I will.

'But until then we carry on with our careers and build it up gradually.'

Deep down I don't think either of us really believes that it will actually come to anything. I mean, let's face it, we would be mad to start a business baking cakes. Wouldn't we?

*

I attempt to search the Internet for information on setting up your own business. I trawl through information, clicking on anything that is associated with starting up your own business, absorbing it all until my eyes are sore. I am amazed and more than a little scared by everything I need to consider before our business can begin in earnest: things like registering the company, setting up payment procedures, insurance, health and safety, food hygiene and company stationery. Baking the cakes, it would seem, is going to be the easy part.

First things first, though; I need to get my food hygiene certificate and I enrol on a course. It turns out to be as boring as I thought it might be and I spend the day trying to summon up some enthusiasm for spores, bacteria and anti-bacterial wipes. As with most courses it could have been condensed into a morning and by three o'clock I'm thinking about whether Gordon Ramsay would cook a better cake than me on *The F Word* instead of listening to Brenda talk about rotten eggs. There is a little exam at the end that asks questions like 'What would you do if you had a mouse?' Call it Mickey and tell him he will have to go and play somewhere else? I suddenly worry that I might not pass.

The weather is bleak and cold, the evenings are dark and there is nothing to look forward to except the promise of warmer days, when the sun streams through your bedroom window and it doesn't take heavy-lifting equipment to get you out of bed. I don't mind though, because I feel as if I'm in my own little secret world that's warm and full of golden sponge. I pore over recipes, research packaging companies and look into approaching a bank about a

business loan or overdraft to get things going. Moo and I spend what seems like hours on the phone talking about predictions, markets, costs, percentages and prospective cake recipes. Every now and then, the old fears return and I wonder if I really am living in la la land. It's all well and good making the odd cake for family and friends but to actually think about baking in quantities of more than two at a time, and then selling them to people, is another thing altogether. My habit of asking if the cake is okay at least fifteen times will have to be curbed. I can't imagine it will instil too much confidence in customers if I phone them with a barrage of: 'No, but is it really okay?' 'Are you sure I didn't use too much butter?' 'You don't have to say you like it if you don't. I won't be offended.'

A week later, Donna and the rest of the team have arranged a leaving lunch at the local pub. They are all enthusiastic and positive about my tentative plans and I want to hug everyone, cry, and generally make an emotional nuisance of myself.

'And these are for you.' Donna hands me a bouquet of flowers.

'Oh, how lovely,' I gush, and stick my nose into the middle of the arrangement. 'And they smell gorgeous, and oh, yellow roses are my favourite. Thank you, thank you. You are all so special and I am going to miss you. No, really I am.'

Everyone looks blankly at me, slightly embarrassed by my over-the-top, Gwyneth Paltrow at the Oscars moment. I react as I always do – by blushing.

What is it about me and blushing? I'm thirty-one, for heaven's sake, not fifteen! Whenever it happens, I cover my face with my hands so that nobody can see, but it

really only makes matters worse and people end up just standing around embarrassed whilst I talk behind my hands.

Donna gives me a warm hug.

‘I’m really going to miss you,’ she says. ‘But I think you’re better off out of it.’

I nod, and agree that it is going to be fabulous. Waving frantically I say goodbye to my career-driven colleagues with their ever-increasing emails, the unmanageable to-do lists, the obligatory late nights in the office and the Vampire Queen who is thankfully nowhere to be seen, before heading out into the wide, unstable world that awaits me.

Later at home, the higher plane I’m on shakes a little and then completely gives way.

I’m scared.

What if I don’t even sell ONE cake?

Interview in *Red* magazine

‘Maddy, you are famous for battling against the odds and a multimillion-pound slimming industry to persuade us all to eat cake and your second book has recently been published about your experiences. Were you always so confident that you would be successful?’

‘Well, there were a few doubts at the beginning but I can honestly say that I always had a belief that I could do it.’

‘But you gave up a successful career to follow a dream many said wouldn’t work . . . Most people would find that quite daunting.’

‘Yes, but whenever I had doubts I knew the alternative was something I couldn’t go back to. Look fear in the eyes and then tell her to bugger off.’

This would be edited out later.

I have to rush off quickly after the photo shot of me and Frog playing ball in my spring-flower-filled garden. The same flowers that produce the ingredient for my skin-care range. Did I not mention that? Anyway, Virgin is having a tough time and I promised I would help Richard out. Damn, I will have to ring and cancel lunch with Manolo. As his new muse, I am the inspiration for his new range of sexy shoes. He will be so upset.

VICTORIA SANDWICH

Simple to make and absolutely delicious. So, get your food processor out and forget those horrid little things in the supermarkets.

Ingredients

225g (9oz) unsalted butter	225g (9oz) caster sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract	4 large eggs
225g (9oz) self-raising flour	3–4 tablespoons milk
1 teaspoon baking powder	

(if using the processor method)

Method

Grease and line 2 × 18cm (7 inch) tins and preheat oven to 180°C/350°F/gas mark 4. Put all ingredients in food processor except the milk and process until you get a smooth batter. Pour the milk in gradually through the funnel until the mixture has soft dropping consistency. Pour into tins and bake for approximately 25 minutes or until the cakes are coming away at the edges or springy to touch. Leave in tins on wire rack for 10 minutes before turning out to cool completely. Spread lashings of jam in the middle and a sprinkle of caster sugar on the top. Mmmmm, delicious.