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Opening extract from

The Baking Life of Amelie Day

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Chapter One

There was this poem Mum used to read to me when I was six.

Boys were made up of slugs, snails and puppy-dog tails.

Girls were made up of sugar, spice and all things nice.

You would have thought that I'd given Mum the evil eye when she read that bit out. I'm famous at school for having attitude and ranting on about how girls are just as good as boys. I play in the girls' football team and we thrashed the boys only last week so you can see what I mean.

But that poem must have somehow stuck in my head or got through my skin and into my body.

If you cut my arm I reckon it's not blood you'll see pouring out, but pure cane sugar.

If you look into the whites of my eyes you'll see that they're the tiniest bit yellow. Like the palest, freshest sponge cake made with plenty of free-range eggs.

Even my hair is the colour of dark melted chocolate swirling around a glass bowl on a pan of hot water which is gently simmering beneath.

I am so made up of sugar and spice.

I live to bake. My life would be empty without it.

Most of the time there's only one thing on my mind: Flour Power.

Mum's got used to her kitchen being a complete mess.

'If it keeps you happy,' she says through tight lips, casting a horrified eye over her stainless steel surfaces, or what's left of them underneath the smears of flour, egg and butter which mark my residency in the kitchen.

'Mm,' I say, but I'm never really listening. I'm greasing a couple of cake tins with a slip of buttery paper and lining them with silver foil.

'What is it today?' says Mum, checking her lipstick in the mirror and pressing her lips together. Mum works for a solicitor and always has to wear a suit and full make-up by eight each morning.

'Orange polenta muffins,' I say, creaming sugar and butter together in Mum's brown pottery bowl and then pouring white flour into my grandmother's Victorian weighing scales. I reckon they're pretty neat. Mum was going to chuck them into a skip, but I rescued them and polished them up until they gleamed as black and shiny as treacle.

'Wow, very twenty-first century,' says Mum. 'I'm not sure I even know what to do with polenta.' She picks up her black handbag with the gold chain and takes one last

look in the mirror. There's a hoot from outside. Mum's friend Yvonne always drives her into work. They share an office and do an awful lot of boring women's stuff, like sharing bottles of wine together over lunch and going shopping for shoes.

'It's a grain,' I say. 'You get it in the supermarket. Adds a moist texture so that you can add less flour. It should soak up the orange juice. If you undercook it you get too much crunch, though.'

'Oh, right,' says Mum, but she's halfway out of the door. I can see Yvonne squirting gallons of perfume on at the wheel. She's always running slightly late. 'Don't forget to go to school, Amelie! And don't forget to take all your stuff, you know?'

I frown.

I do know.

I'm not likely to forget.

Then she slams the door and clicks off in her heels. I hear the screech of her greeting Yvonne, then another slam and the sound of the car disappearing off into the distance.

I wipe my hands on a tea towel and crank up the volume on the radio. Then I glance at the kitchen clock.

Forty minutes before I need to leave for school. Perfect timing.

I pour the juice of four freshly squeezed oranges into my mixture and add the grated orange peel. Then I raise the dripping wooden spoon to my mouth and allow the raw mix to swish around my mouth a bit.

My tongue comes alive with zingy orange and rich,

buttery sponge mix.

'Awesome,' I say, reaching for a metal spoon. I spoon the mixture into two greased muffin tins and slide them into the oven.

Then I bolt upstairs to get ready for school.

I leave a tray of muffins cooling on the rack for Mum to see when she gets home. She works part-time so she's always home before me. I put the rest into a Tupperware box and shove it into my schoolbag.

Then I pick up the plumpest one from the rack, dollop a spoonful of rich, creamy Greek yoghurt on the top and stuff it into my mouth as I run for the school bus. Crumbs and yoghurt go all over my school uniform but I don't care. School is only of secondary importance. I spend the whole day in class dreaming up recipes that I can try out when I get home. I've even got a job in the local grocer's shop in town. I asked to be paid in ingredients which made Karim, the owner of the shop, look closely at me over the top of his black glasses and scowl until his hairy eyebrows met in the middle, like two confused beetles.

'You want me to pay you in eggs and flour?' he said. 'This is most unusual. Girls your age like money for make-up and boys, no?'

His shoulders moved up and down when he laughed. Then he stopped because I wasn't laughing back. I mean – I do like clothes and make-up and stuff as much as the next thirteen-year-old girl, but I'm not obsessed with them like I am with baking.

'Flour, eggs, sugar and butter with other ingredients thrown in according to season,' I say in my best business-like voice. 'That's the deal. Take it or leave it.'

Karim rubbed his brow in astonishment and shook his head.

'You are one crazy English girl,' he said. 'But OK. I pay you in stuff. Not too much, mind.'

I skipped all the way home on the day I got the job at Karim's shop.

School's OK.

I sit next to Gemma Smith, my best friend and guinea pig.

She's not actually a guinea pig. What I mean is that I test out all my new recipes on her before I write them into *The Amelie Day Book of Baking*. The book is going to be published one day and be a mega-best-seller.

Gemma and I are total opposites which I guess is why we've been best friends for nearly three years. She's tall, blonde and pink-cheeked. She loves clothes, jewellery and animals. I'm short, dark and sallow-skinned and animals make me cough.

At break-time I get out my plastic box and hoist myself up onto the desk next to Gemma. I waft the box under her nose until she caves in and takes one of the fat muffins out of the box.

'Orangey,' she says, sniffing. 'Yum. Did you make these today?'

I nod and take another one for myself.

'Yeah, course,' I say. 'You know me.'

Gemma stuffs in the muffin with a faraway look in her eyes.

'These are the best muffins ever,' she says, all loyal.

I laugh. She says that about every single batch that I make. The laugh turns into a cough. Gemma rubs my back.

'OK?' she says. I take a deep steadying breath and nod.

'Polenta,' I choke. 'That's what gives them the moist texture.'

'Mmm,' says Gemma. 'Could I have another one for lunch?'

I let her take two and then I eat another one myself, straight down in three bites.

Most people wouldn't stay as slim as I am if they ate all the cake and calories I stuff down every day.

Most people would get fat and spotty and probably die.

But then again, as Mum is always reminding me, I am not Most People.

I snap the lid of my box shut.

'French,' I say, as the bell goes.

I link arms with Gemma and head off towards class.

At lunchtime I hang out with Harry. I think we might be going out. Harry's brilliant. He just accepts me for who I am. I can't even remember my life without Harry in it, because I've grown up with him since we were six years old. At one point, his parents lived next door to mine so he truly was the 'boy next door.' He's in the year above me at school.

And he's a big fan of my baking.

'Awesome,' he says, biting down on one of my orange muffins with a glint in his dark brown eyes. I reckon a lot of the other girls wish they were going out with Harry. He's handsome, but not in an arrogant way, more a sporty, fit kind of way.

And he's kind.

'You OK today?' he's saying.

I flush a little. Wish people wouldn't keep asking me that. I know it's only because he cares but it makes me feel like some charity case sometimes.

'Fine,' I say. I wave the plastic box of muffins under his nose and Harry doesn't take much persuading to help himself to another one.

Then I head off to my next class in order to disguise another bout of coughing.

I leave Harry stuffing his face and waving.

When I get home Mum is pacing up and down by the window.

She's still wearing her black suit but she's taken off her high pointy shoes and replaced them with pink slippers, which is a bit of an odd look, kind of like two mothers rolled into one.

'This might be it!' she says, waving a bit of paper in the air just out of my reach and whisking it away every time I try to grab it.

I frown. I'm really tired and I want to get my homework done fast so that I can invent some more recipes. All day

in school I've been seeing chocolate sauce and pink mini-marshmallows in my head and now I want to try out an idea for cupcakes.

'Mother,' I say, pulling my long hair back from my hot face, 'just stop clowning around and give me the letter, will you?'

Mum looks at my flushed face and her teasing smile becomes one of concern.

'You look a bit wiped out, love,' she says. 'Sit down. I'll get you a drink.'

She tosses the letter onto my lap and goes into the kitchen.

I look down at the envelope with my name on it and my heart does lots of flips and jumps and pains like little stitches.

It's only a letter, I tell myself. It's not going to bite me.

And even if it doesn't contain the news that I want, it's not like my whole life is going to be ruined, is it?

Well – no more than it already has been by other stuff.

I tell myself lots more comforting and reassuring things but the other bit of me isn't listening.

The other bit of me is dead ambitious. It's jumping up and down and screaming, 'You've got to get this, you've got to get this!' over and over again.

I pick up the narrow white envelope and slit it open with my fingernails.

I pull out the folded piece of A4 paper and skim it with one eye shut. Like that's going to make any difference.

Then I clutch at my heart and yell for Mum.



Tangy Orange Polenta Muffins

To make 16 of these nice, orangey little muffins you will need:

250g (9 oz) of unsalted butter

250g (9 oz) of golden caster sugar

4 large eggs

140g (5oz) of polenta (this is a maize flour that you can find in the supermarket in the rice/pasta/foreign foods aisles)

200g (7oz) of plain flour

2 teaspoons of baking powder

The zest and juice of two large oranges (you need to hold back 100ml (½ a cup) for the glaze)

For the glaze:

100ml (½ a cup) orange juice

100g (3 ½ oz) golden caster sugar

So you need to heat the oven up first before you put anything in it. Heat it to 160°C/320°F/gas mark 3 (140°C/280°F/gas mark 1 if you are using a fan oven). If the butter is hard as a block of ice, put it in the oven in a bowl for a few minutes to soften it up, because there's nothing worse than trying to mix hard butter with sugar – it will make you grumpy and cross.

You'll also need a muffin tin (or possibly two if you only have 12 holes in each) and some muffin baking cases. You can get all this stuff in the supermarket. Put a cake case in each of the holes in the tins and set this all aside.

When your butter is melted, cream it together with the 250g of golden caster sugar. When I say 'cream' I mean beat together with a wooden spoon, if you happen to have one. When it's all light and fluffy then add in one large egg at a time, beating hard in between.

Once that's all done, mix in all the dry ingredients (flour, baking powder, polenta) and add in the zest (which is the outside of the peel – you can 'zest' with a special gadget which your mum or dad probably has in their kitchen, or with a grater) and the juice of the two large oranges (you can either squeeze them to death or use a special juicing gadget, which, again, you might have in a kitchen drawer somewhere). Remember to keep back 100ml of the juice for your glaze later.

OK, so by now you probably have one of the most gloopiest and delicious cake mixes on the planet – it should be pale

orange and tasty. Time to dollop it into the muffin cases using a spoon – fill them nearly to the top but not quite. Then put them into the middle shelf of your hot oven and set the timer for about 25 minutes, or until they're all nice and golden on top and risen.

While they're baking you could make the orange syrup, which is really easy. Just boil up 100ml of your orange juice with 100g of golden caster sugar and then let it simmer (on a lower heat) for only five minutes. When you've taken your cakes out of the oven and removed the paper cases, stick a spoon in the syrup and dribble a load of it over the top of the cakes.

Allow them to cool down and then serve them with a luscious dollop of crème fraiche or natural yoghurt, or you could even try adding some ice cream. They taste even better the next day. Don't ask me why, but they do.