

heavenlypleasures

KERRY GREENWOOD

A Corinna Chapman novel


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This book is dedicated to a very dear Sister-in-Crime, Carmel Shute. A woman of remarkable determination, charisma and kindness.

With many thanks to Jean Greenwood, the remarkable Annette Barlow and all at A and U, the Gen-X Support Group, Sarah-Jane Reeh for Lucifer, David and Dennis and all.

This book is a work of fiction. No character in this book is meant to represent a real person. The City of Melbourne is also an artefact of my imagination.

Oppress not the cubs of the stranger,
But hail them as Sister and Brother,
For though they be little and fussy,
It may be the Bear is their mother.

—Rudyard Kipling
'The Law of the Jungle'

CHAPTER ONE

Have I told you how I feel about four in the morning? Anguish, misery, existential dread, stubbing toe on cat?

Oh, I have. Right. Take it as read, then, that I rose, stretched, yawned, washed, and stuffed my XXL body into size XXXL trackies which have seen better years, as indeed have I. I made toast for myself and coffee, without which no early person or shiftworker can face the universe and its cold, dark emptiness. Four in the morning makes you contemplate your sins and count your blessings. So I contemplated and counted.

My name is Corinna Chapman, and I am a baker. I run a little shop called Earthly Delights on the corner of Flinders Lane and Calico Alley in the city of Melbourne. You've probably eaten my bread if you work anywhere near Flinders Street Station. I once was an accountant in a power suit, working grotesque hours doing accountant things: trying to get the balances to balance, arguing with the data entry persons about the implacability of the RIRO principle, wearing out my knees begging the Tax Office for more time, worrying about the state of the

dollar. I don't worry about that now. I worry about yeast, which, unlike the dollar, is predictable and appreciates loving care.

So, one day I found I didn't care about accounts, and I did care about bread, and here I am. The ovens come on with a whoosh at four, which always wakes me. I lost my ex, James, along with the accountancy. As losses go, he wasn't one. I moved into this eccentric building, *Insula*, a Roman apartment house in the city, built by an architect whose mother, Professor Monk insists, was frightened by a copy of *Suetonius*. We have mosaics. We have Roman names for all of the apartments, though the shops on the street have Greek names. The Prof thinks this has to do with Roman jokes about Greek business methods. However it was, I am a baker and live in *Hebe*, Waitress of the Gods, the Lone Gunmen of *Nerds Inc* live in *Hephaestus*, Smith of the Gods, the excellent cooks of the *Pandamus* family live in *Hestia*, Goddess of the Hearth, and my best friend *Meroe*, the witch, lives in *Leucothea*, the White Goddess, otherwise known as *Hecate*, Queen of Witches. We're the ones who have shops on the street, in the Roman manner, and the luxury of living upstairs from the job is magnificent, though it does tend to mean that until the shop is open I am not a sight to be seen by the fashion conscious.

Lately *Insula* has been busier than usual. In the space of a week in which I didn't get time to do much more than gasp with surprise, I acquired a gorgeous, ex-Israeli soldier called *Daniel*, a returned daughter *Cherie* for poor *Andy Holliday* in *4A*, discovered that it was horrible old *Mr Pemberthy* who had been scaring the life out of all the women in the building, and walked out of a Goth club in full dominatrix gear with a murderer. A vampire murderer. It was a week I do not want to forget but have no mind to repeat and just now a little tedium would be nice. Just baking and selling and maybe a nice gin and tonic on

the roof garden while all the other workers are hard at it ... ah, schadenfreude, a reliable pleasure. Since there is nothing to be got from the newspapers but despair and misery and Iraq, and there are only a certain number of times one can say 'I told you so, you idiots!', I need a little schadenfreude sometimes.

A gentle paw on my knee reminded me that my partner, Horatio, had finished his ration of kitty dins and would now find a bowl of milk acceptable. Horatio is a tabby and white gentleman with impeccable manners and grooming. If cats have religions, he belongs to the one which venerates milk. I poured him a suitable amount and he folded down, paw by paw, disposed his tail prayerfully, and began his devotions.

Downstairs to the bakery, once Horatio had decided to take a little after-breakfast nap to prepare him for his afternoon sleep. I clattered on the stone stairs in my Birkenstocks. Every baker who wants to make it to thirty-eight uncrippled needs good shoes. I reminded myself that I ought to get Jason to buy himself another pair of proper shoes. You really need two pairs, worn alternately, but he still clings affectionately to sneakers. If you see what I mean.

As I hit the last step the Mouse Police collided with my ankles in a furry scrum, eager to demonstrate that they had been hard at work all night and deserved extra kitty dins. Heckle and Jekyll, two black and white cats, named after the cartoon crows. I noticed that Heckle, who is a retired street fighter, had a torn ear which Jekyll, a retired female, has been licking. I applied some disinfectant the vet gave me—rat bites are very dirty—and he didn't even seem to notice. Old campaigner, this Heckle. His ears have more holes punched in them than a punk nipple. He bounced up and down, directing my attention to a pile of dead rodents. Now that Horatio is no longer pinching them to feed a stray female cat on the roof—

and that was a strange story in itself—the corpses have begun to mount up like an American election campaign.

I disposed of the six rats and four mice, washed my hands, fed the Mouse Police, and opened the back door into Calico Alley. Morning. Cool and fresh, before the car exhaust. Just the faintest scent of ozone from the trams.

The Mouse Police ran out and down the alley, convinced by previous experience that Kiko or Ian, the proprietors of the Japanese restaurant, will have fish scraps for a hard-working feline. Even Heckle, normally a cat you would not like to meet down a dark alley if you were between him and his predestined rat, can achieve fluffiness for tuna.

Jason, my fifteen-year-old apprentice, was waiting on the step. I gave him my early morning glare, which checked his pupils for dilation and his fingernails for cleanliness. The eyes were bright and the hands cleaner than mine.

‘Ginger muffins today,’ he said bracingly as we poured the first flour and yeast mixture into the tub. ‘I feel like something spicy.’

‘As long as you make them, muffin man,’ I growled. Jason makes much better muffins than I do, even though we use the same recipe, the same flour and the same oven. And him a recovering heroin addict. There is no justice. ‘I’ve got rye bread, then seed bread, then pasta douro for the Greek restaurant and Cafe Delicious.’

‘Then we can have breakfast,’ he said hungrily. My need to feed people may have met its match in Jason’s appetite. Then again, he is still as thin as an election promise. Since he gave up heroin his hair has thickened and I can no longer count all of his ribs. But he would still clock in as a flyweight and needs more covering, especially now that winter is coming on.

‘Haven’t you eaten?’ I asked, measuring out seeds for my

seed bread, which is a speciality and superb stuff, especially with blue cheese.

‘A baguette or two,’ he admitted. ‘Some of that cheese and the leftover ham, and the rest of the herb rolls and a couple bottles of Coke. Nothing really.’

I got on with the bread and Jason started cutting up crystallised ginger to top his muffins. The Mouse Police returned, licking fishy whiskers, engulfed their kitty dins with gobbling enthusiasm, and settled down for a nice day-long nap on their favoured mattress, a pile of empty flour sacks. I know that animals are strictly forbidden in any place where food is prepared. But I’m not having poisons and traps in my bakery. The Mouse Police are neat, efficient, and work for peanuts—or kitty dins. To hell with Health Regulations. We are as clean as we can possibly be.

The mixers were all mixing and the dough was growing—you can practically hear it rising—and Jason and I had another cup of coffee. I bought a coffee maker for the bakery, now I have a helper. He helped himself to whatever leftovers he could find in the rack.

‘Daniel been in?’ he asked, surveying the remains of yesterday’s baking.

‘Not yet.’ I suppressed a pang. Daniel volunteers as the guard on the Soup Run, a bus which circumnavigates Melbourne every night, feeding the lost and strayed. I met him when a junkie OD’d on my grate. What does a soup van always need? Bread. Daniel had stayed to lie in my bed with me and tell me he loved me, and then vanished again. For the last three mornings, Jen the social worker had come for the bread, with Ma’ani as her carrier.

And there was Ma’ani again. New Zealand manufactures Maoris in two sizes, Large and Extra Large, and Ma’ani is Extra

Extra Large. He really must be about seven feet tall and about three feet wide and the most charming, gentle person that ever scared the hell out of a baker by appearing very quietly while she was thinking about something else. I jumped and swore. He grinned at me, his teeth making a perfect half-moon in the dark alley.

‘Must you loom?’ I snarled at him. Early morning is not my cheerful time.

‘Sorry,’ he said, stepping back from the door. I hauled the sack of bread out and he lifted it easily to his shoulders. He could have just as gracefully hefted anything up to and including a small car. I was snarling at a nice person and I called myself to order. I knew why I was snappy. I didn’t want to sound anxious, and I didn’t know whether I ought to ask, I didn’t want to seem to be hanging out after Daniel, but I wanted to know where he was, and why I hadn’t seen him for three days, and I bit my lip. Jason looked up from his muffins and saved me.

‘Hey, Ma’ani!’

‘Hey, Jase.’

‘Jason,’ said Jason severely. When he was an addict, he had been Jase. Now he was a baker, he was Jason.

Ma’ani grinned. ‘Jason.’

‘Where’s Daniel?’ asked Jason artlessly. ‘Haven’t seen the dude for days.’

I could have kissed the little ginger-scented omnivore.

‘Sister Mary sent him up country somewhere—Ballarat—to rescue a missing girl,’ said Ma’ani. ‘Gave me this note for you on Monday,’ he added, retrieving it from his pocket while holding the load of bread with one hand. ‘Forgot it, sorry. See you tomorrow,’ he said, and walked down Calico Alley with that soft tread which huge people sometimes have. I suppose it would have had a genetic advantage in the old warrior days.

I probably wouldn't have been able to sneak up behind him and bean him with a baguette, which is what I felt like doing. It was now Thursday.

'That's Ma'ani,' said Jason. 'And that Sister Mary, you do as she says.'

'True,' I agreed. Sister Mary was a very short, plump, charming nun with a heart full of Christian charity and love who had enough strength of will to drive a feather through a marble tombstone. Or keep the soup run bus running despite a residents' protest, a hostile council and a series of unimpressed police officers. There was literally nothing that Sister Mary would not attempt to ameliorate the lot of the poor. And if she had told Daniel to go to Ballarat, then to Ballarat he would have gone.

I unfolded the note: 'Ketschele, I have to go to Ballarat to find a girl. I already miss you, and I shall miss you more. I will be back and in your arms as soon as possible. Your Daniel.'

Now that was more like it. Suddenly the day improved. I picked up Jekyll and hugged her. I would have hugged Jason but he would not have liked it. Jekyll didn't like it much either but it was in her job description and she bore it pretty well.

Then Jason and I got on with the baking. In the course of which he ate four leftover rolls and a slightly failed attempt at a frangipani cake (too moist), and drank three cups of coffee and the rest of the milk.

Kitten, that was what Daniel called me. Ketschele is Yiddish for kitten. No one had ever called me kitten before. Fat women don't attract diminutives. My ex, James, used to call me—I retch to admit it—butterball. And that was when he liked me. Lately he has been calling me 'that fat bitch'. He has reasons. I messed up a deal he had with a Singaporean bank. He has the delicate sense of ethics that one expects of a

merchant banker of his type—bold, risk-taking, testosterone-fuelled—and I waited eagerly for the day when I read his name under bankruptcies in the court list.

First loaves in the oven, next all mixed and waiting, and time was ticking on. I went into the shop to take down the shutters, wondering why either Kylie or Goss had not come down. A long hard night on the fluffy ducks, I assumed. No, perhaps I do them an injustice. A long hard night on the cosmopolitans and the Long Island teas.

Shutters down, early morning Flinders Lane light flooded in. It's a nice shop, just a little slice out of the bakery, with a counter, space for people to queue and a lot of racks which will shortly be filled with bread. Muffins, rolls, loaves, knots, French twists; Cornish seed bread, Italian almond bread, Welsh bara brith. Wonderful stuff, bread. The staff of life. Jason came in with the first load for the shop. Ginger muffins. I took one, sniffed, broke a piece off to check the crumb, then bit. A strong taste without being overwhelming.

'Gorgeous,' I told him in answer to his anxious look. Jason isn't sure of himself yet. 'The girls aren't in,' I commented. 'Did they say anything to you about being late?'

'Nah,' he said over his shoulder. 'But they don't talk to me much. They're pretty pissed that their soap got delayed.'

I agreed with him. Kylie and Gossamer share an apartment and work in my shop until they can break into a TV soap. They thought they had made it with parts in an anorexic epic called 'Catwalk', but it had been delayed due to lack of funding. I hoped that this meant that they might dare to put on a few pounds before they died of malnutrition.

I dead-heated with Kylie as she rushed not into the shop but the bakery, holding a scrap of what looked like fun fur and sobbing.

‘He fell into the sink!’ she shrieked, thrusting the wet thing at me. ‘Is he dead?’

It wasn’t a scrap of fun fur, it was in fact Kylie’s kitten Lucifer. The other two kittens, Soot and Tori, and the mother, Calico, were gentle sober creatures who posed prettily, ate daintily, and slept on the most expensive available surface in a photogenic group. Lucifer was an orange and white tom kitten with a splotch of ginger on his little head which would be flaming red later on, if he ever got to grow up, which at the moment seemed doubtful. This resemblance to a match had caused Meroe to call him Lucifer. His high-risk lifestyle bore out her theory that there had been some kind of diabolic intervention in his conception. He had begun his daredevil career by scaling the curtains and then staying there, crying pitifully, until Daniel climbed up and rescued him and had been scratched thoroughly for his kindness. Lucifer had been so glad to put paw to ground that he had dived into a kitchen cupboard and a lot of pots had fallen on him. He had then vanished until Goss found him packed neatly into her underwear drawer, bedded on pre-holed lycra and thoughtfully shredding pantyhose.

I had suggested buying him a cat cage but Kylie and Goss couldn’t bear the idea. Now it looked like he had used up the last of his nine lives. He was soaking wet and so small in my hands. Poor little creature. I held him up by his hind legs and some water ran out of his mouth. Then I put him to my lips and puffed a tiny breath of air into the miniature lungs.

Nothing happened. I rubbed him in the handtowel to try to get some of the wet out of his valiantly orange fur. The little body rolled unresponsively between my hands. ‘I’m sorry, Kylie,’ I said. She burst into explosive tears.

‘Too bad,’ said Jason.

We were all standing looking at the kitten when the most amazing thing happened. Jekyll rose from the flour sacks and made an odd noise, almost a grunt. It was a demand. If it had been in words it would have been 'mine'. I put the towel down on the floor and said, 'Sorry, Jekyll, I don't think ...'

Jekyll gave me an irritated look. She grabbed Lucifer by the back of the neck and shook him violently, then began to wash his face very roughly, pinning him down under her hard paw. Heckle had not stirred. Nurturing instinct was something that happened to other cats, he clearly felt. I was thinking how very sad it was that Jekyll should be trying so devotedly to resuscitate a dead kitten when the little orange scrap of fur sneezed, squirmed out from under the loving paw, sneezed again and wobbled to his feet. Wet but unbowed.

'That was fun,' he seemed to be saying. 'What else shall we do?'

Kylie grabbed him up and stroked him, heedless of the water on her stretch top. Wet cats hold more water than a sponge. Jekyll walked back to the sacks and resumed her nap. She seemed to have no further interest in him. Cats are very mysterious creatures. Thinking about them too much can give you a migraine.

'You wicked little thing!' cooed Kylie, kissing the top of his wet head so that Lucifer should know that he was in disgrace. He coughed up some more water and gratefully sank all his claws into her unformed bosom. You can always identify those with young kittens by the tattooing of little claws on all available skin surfaces.

'Ooh, the shop! I'm, like, sorry, Corinna! I was just doing the washing-up and I didn't see him on the shelf and then he took this extreme leap into the sink and the tap was running and ...'

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘If this kitten lives to grow up, it will be a miracle. Is Goss coming today?’

‘She’s got an ad, left at five for make-up,’ said Kylie. ‘I’ll just take him back and ...’

We both thought about the possibilities inherent in leaving Lucifer in an unattended flat.

‘Put him in the cat carrier,’ I said. ‘Just for the moment. At least he’ll be safe in there.’

Jason got the cat cage down from the closet. It is a commodious one, with a wire mesh door. We put Lucifer, the handtowel, and a selection of kitty treats in it and locked the front carefully. I put the cage down near Jekyll and she didn’t spare it a glance.

Meanwhile, there was bread to get out of the oven before it scorched and a shop to open. Kylie fled upstairs to change out of her kittened clothes and Jason opened the front door.

People were waiting. Poor overworked peons, required to get to the office before the boss and to stay until after he left, one of the most pernicious doctrines ever to waste the lives of its proponents. How much extra work really gets done by people who are exhausted, underslept, and longing to be home? Precious little, I bet. The Prof told me that when the spitfire factories worked round the clock with volunteers, they didn’t actually produce more planes despite their dedication and their hard work. People who are tired get slow and clumsy. They make mistakes. They get injured. Even in a war, the government found that they got more planes built by sending their employees home after an eight hour shift than by working them to death. If it didn’t work for a spitfire factory, it wasn’t going to work for a modern office. Let the people go home and have a drink and meet their families and watch Reality TV or the Naked News according to taste. What the

world needs, I am convinced, after more peace and charity and love and fresh water and food and literate women, is more time off to waste as the worker chooses. Everyone, at the moment, works too hard.

Including, I suppose, me. The scent of fresh baked bread—was dragging the famished hordes out of the cold street, where a nasty little Melbourne wind had whipped up, throwing dust into tired eyes. Like cigarettes or alcohol, but much better for the consumer, my bread is a special treat, an indulgence, a little warm mouthful just for that person alone. Although some of them buy enough for the whole office, bless them. Ginger muffins bounced off the shelves, everything sold well, and Jason was bringing in fresh supplies as the racks emptied.

Nine o'clock and there was always a lull until about ten, when morning tea became a priority. Jason was counting loaves into the racks for the carrier. I sell most of my bread to restaurants. I don't actually need a shop. But I like having one. I like to see people's eyes light up, I like to hear that sniff as they inhale the delicious scent. Horatio had descended and was occupying his usual place on the counter, between the glass case and the cash register. This central throne means that everyone has to pay him homage. Most of my customers know him and he greets the favoured few with a polite nudge of the nose, and the importunate are dismissed with a lifted eyebrow. Horatio would have made a wonderful diplomat.

I was just stowing some fifty dollar notes—don't people have any change?—under the tray in the till when I heard a soft thud from the bakery. Jason said, 'Shit!'

When I went to the back, I saw that a whole ten kilogram bag of superfine baker's flour had somehow fallen over, breaking open and spilling all over the floor. And as I was grabbing the paper sack to stand it up and save some of the flour, a strange

white object leaped out and headed for the door. I grabbed but missed and fell on my knees amongst the mess.

When I scrambled up, covered in flour and confusion, there was a tall, dark, leather-clad angel with trout-pool eyes holding a flour-coated creature at arm's length.

'Is this ours?' he asked dubiously.

'Yes,' I said, as a yowl announced that Lucifer had found that he couldn't get away from that firm grip on his scruff. 'Yes, Daniel, it's ours.'