

# CHAPTER ONE

It was one of the most horrible noises I had ever heard. A thud, then a sick, wet crack, as though the victim's skull had been cloven, spurting blood and brains as liberally as a Patricia Cornwell first chapter. I sat up straight in bed, grabbing for my lover Daniel. He wasn't there. Then I grabbed for my cat Horatio, but he wasn't there either. So lacking anything else to grab, I grabbed my furry boots, dragged them on — all the while the dreadful noise was making the hair on the back of my neck stand up like a yard broom — took hold of my remaining courage in both unoccupied hands, and started downstairs.

I live over my bakery in Calico Alley, in the city of Melbourne, generally not a place haunted by head-chopping fiends. Not historically, anyway. I knew I shouldn't have watched that old Hammer horror movie before going to bed at my usual early time, ready to rise at the bloody awful hour of four am to make bread. My bakery is called Earthly Delights and up to this moment early mornings had been the only thing to fear in it. Or maybe it was that They Might Be Giants song 'Dead' echoing in my head. Or memories of the French

Revolution as delivered by Mr Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. He had described exactly how the severed head fell from the guillotine. I briefly wondered how he knew. Jesus, I was scared. But nothing was to be gained by staying where I was and being terrified. Meroe always said that the important thing about witches is that they didn't run away from what they were afraid of. Where was Horatio, my gentlemanly cat and attendant of my bedchamber? Had he, God forbid, been a victim?

That idea pushed me down another ten steps. Anyone who attacked my cats was asking for a Grimm fairytale fate, baked in an oven. Another sickening thud — how many people were being executed in my premises? — and I unlocked the bakery door with all the caution of a compassionate person opening the morning paper, the world being what it is at the moment.

The noise became louder and ever more disgustingly fleshy, and under it a male voice was muttering, 'Got you, you cunt!' The Mouse Police slunk to my feet and gave me that look which cats reserve for moments when they are finding the human world unbelievably trying and are about to call their union. Usually nothing worries the Rodent Operatives but this was clearly more than even they, ex-alley cats with very flexible standards, were willing to tolerate.

I relaxed a little because I knew the voice. Jason Lewis, my almost-apprentice, maker of the most glorious muffins to be unleashed on a morning tea hungry world. But I wasn't entirely comforted, because Jason used to be a heroin addict and he did appear to be dismembering some unfortunate soul on my bakery floor. Which was also to the point, because bakery floors have to be really clean and how were we going to get the bloodstains off?

I found myself short of breath and cold as I pushed the door fully open to reveal the murder scene in all its horror.

Body parts, indeed, were spread wide. Dark splashes decorated one of my pristine mixing tubs. Jason, dressed in his old trackie, was brandishing a short handled hatchet. His face was stained and distressingly organic fluids dripped from his adolescent cheeks and — erk — the blade.

‘Oh,’ he said, seeing me at the head of the stairs, dressed in furry boots, a heavy blue gown, and an expression of growing amazement. ‘Corinna,’ he added, as my expression hardened into anger. He decided it would be best to explain. ‘I wanted to make some soup for the shop, see, to go with the herb muffins, and I thought I’d make some as a surprise, you know, to show you, and then ...’

‘Enough,’ I said, holding up a hand. I could see it all. Jason, poor innocent, had decided on a simple soup, which was sensible as his reading skills still weren’t too flash and he had never made soup before. Pumpkin seemed obvious, only two ingredients, one of which was pumpkin. And knowing nothing about the vegetable, he had gone and bought a Queensland blue pumpkin. These are covered with a hide which, like a saltwater crocodile (another Queensland native), repels bullets. If the navy ever cracked the secret of the Queensland Blue, they would have a true unsinkable.

Which explained the series of blunted cooking knives, the shards of destroyed pumpkin on a clean garbage bag, the axe, and the embarrassment. Also the noise of cracking skulls.

Somehow it is hard to stay cross with Jason. No one else would have done this. Make soup to show me it was a good idea, I mean, and when foiled by the thickness of the obdurate veg, have had enough initiative to use the fire axe.

‘And no harm done, really,’ I concluded. ‘So if you will agree to take some advice on pumpkins in future, clean up the mess, and take all my knives down the the sharpener’s at

Maison before you knock off, we'll say no more about it. What time is it?' I asked. It was black dark outside and felt far too early to be early morning.

'Getting on for four,' said Jason, dragging in a deep breath of relief. He has failed so often in his fifteen years of life that he still expects every mistake to lead to instant expulsion.

'All right, I'm going to make coffee. You want to have a shower, get the pumpkin juice out of your hair.' He ruffled his fair hair with his free hand and said, 'Gross.'

'And feed the Mouse Police extra munchies, they've had a fright. Get on with it,' I instructed. Then I came closer and held out my hand. 'And, Jason?'

'Yeah?' he asked, tensing again.

'I think you might give me that axe.'

He gave me the axe. I let out a breath I had been holding and went upstairs to prepare to face the day, which meant that while I was dressing my coffee would be brewing. You may keep your energy drinks with their strange over-scent of curried grass. I am faithful to the superlative bean. No coffee, no baking. It's a simple rule.

I caught the alarm before it went off, put on the life-giving fluid, made my bed, dragged on some tracksuit pants in size Extremely Huge and a top in Forget It No Human Is This Big, my very own sizes. I am fat in the way that Kate Moss is thin. Definitely. Even defiantly. The only diet I am ever going to undertake is the one which says stop eating when you are full, and I always do. Except for raspberries.

There is always an exception to every rule.

Horatio emerged from under my bed. He sat down in the kitchen, paws folded, tail carefully disposed, the picture of a cat who has been far too deeply asleep to come to the aid of his human, even though no one expects cats to do that stuff

anyway, it being the province of pack animals of low intelligence, like, as it may be, dogs. Had he been aware of my need, he would naturally have given the matter some thought.

Perfidious beast. His shirt front was so beautifully groomed, however, that I forgave him and handed over his breakfast as I was toasting my own. A good solid rye sourdough with raspberry preserve, for what was probably going to be a trying day.

Small rain scattered across the windows like handfuls of sand. The indestructible plants which Trudi has placed on my balcony in big blue glazed pots bowed their heads before the gale. Not a nice day. But here with the pleasant sound of a cat absorbing milk and the coffee tasting fine and the heat coming up from the ovens, my kitchen is not a bad place to be, especially since the bakery isn't infested with serial killers after all. I wriggled my toes in my sheepskin boots and drank and ate and got my mind around the day's tasks.

It was Monday. I had no Daniel because he had been out on some surveillance task and said he would sleep at his apartment. Daniel is a gorgeous Israeli, dark, with a mouth as sweet as honey. He thinks I am beautiful. He's a private detective, specialising in finding lost children. Grandmother Chapman, who brought me up, would have said that he was a gift from heaven and not to be too closely examined. Once she'd gotten over him being Jewish, of course, which might have taken a while. My own parents, shown up as incapable of raising a child, still lived in a hippie holdout enclave somewhere near Sunbury. I hadn't seen them for years, not since Grandma died and left me enough money to abandon my career as an accountant and start a new one as a baker.

I had bought this bakery, and the apartment which went with it, in Insula, an eccentric building erected at the wishes of a man who Professor Monk suggested had been beaten once too

often for mistakes in his Latin homework. And had fallen and hit his head. Insula was eight storeys high, had a collection of fascinating tenants, and was a charming place to live. Here I had my best friend, Meroe, a jobbing witch who ran a shop called the Sybil's Cave. Here was the delightful Professor, getting on a bit but sharp as a tack. Our newest arrival had brought forth complaints from Mrs Pemberthy, who lives to complain, because she had a big loom and if you listened very hard with your ear planted on a glass held against the wall, you might have heard it clacking to and fro. I never had and said so. No one else complained. Therese White had taken Arachne, the spinner of the gods, a very suitable choice for her profession, which was spinning and weaving. I had bought a length of her fine dark charcoal tweed to make a winter coat, and it was very good, strongly woven without puckering, though from the look of the weather outside I might have left my coat-making run just a tad too late.

Breakfast over, I took a platter of toast down to Jason, to stay his stomach until he could get some real food from Cafe Delicious. The Pandamus family offered very good odds on Jason's speedy consumption of their Trucker's Special and he never let them down, finishing mostly just over his record time of three minutes and seventeen seconds. Which isn't long for three eggs, toast, bacon, tomatoes, mushrooms and potato pancakes or hash browns, depending on who had drawn the early roster, Yai yai Pandamus or Hungarian Kristina.

I descended the stairs carefully, balancing the plate. The bakery was clean. Heckle and Jekyll were eating kitty treats before going out into the alley and standing over Kiko or Ian at the Japanese takeaway for raw fish scraps, their invariable morning practice. Jason had cut up the pumpkin and put it in the biggest pot to boil down to its constituents. No trace of

vegetable massacre was evident. He had even had time to put on the downstairs coffee machine and now fell on my toast with a cry of joy. My need to feed hungry things might have met its fulfilment in Jason. He is still very thin, though not the skeletal creature he had been. His hair has thickened and fluffed out into a blond curly halo strangely reminiscent of Harpo Marx. It is sternly confined under a cap during baking hours.

‘Rye,’ I said, scanning my list. ‘We need to make egg bread — did we get the eggs? Good. And the usual pasta douro. Have you decided on your muffins for today?’

‘Thought I’d try that rosewater one,’ he said, mouth full. ‘And apple and spice.’

I left the muffins to Jason. His are better than mine, even though we use the same flour, oven and method. Cookery is a form of magic, of course, and if there were specialised wizards, Jason would be the Muffin Mage.

Having demolished the toast, we began to measure, pour and bake. It was night outside, not a creature stirring except the Mouse Police, and it was very soothing, the swish of water, the bubble of rye-bread starter, the warm electric scent of yeast and the sweetness of Jason’s rosewater. Machines rumbled into life. The ‘snick-snick’ of the dough hooks. The roar as the ovens were opened. I stretched. The day which had started so unfavourably was improving by the minute.

Jason opened the alley door at seven and fielded a thrown newspaper. The Mouse Police stalked out to their predestined appointment with Endangered Species of the Southern Ocean. That was also the signal for Jason to go and pit himself against the clock at Cafe Delicious and me to sink down on my baker’s chair and drink my third cup of coffee. Dawn was breaking, muted grey with charcoal overtones. People were stirring. Lights, which in some cases had never gone off in those tall

buildings, were lit again if they had. Persons in suits with briefcases passed, heads glued to shoulders as they whispered urgently on mobile phones — what were they saying that was so important that it couldn't wait until they got to a desk? In my opinion only imminent war, shipwreck or heart attack ought to need the use of a mobile phone. Hadn't the poor bastards noticed that once they had one of the pestilential things they couldn't call a single moment their own? Not when sleeping or travelling or even in the previously safe refuge of the ladies' room could those sharply dressed women feel the giddy pleasure of being alone.

Still, I suppose it makes people feel important. Needed. I had enough things needing me, like Jason and bread and cats, without adding an importunate mobile phone. Sooner or later it would have to go out the window or down the sink, and that would be expensive. Though not as expensive as this season's fashion, pink and white checked boucle jackets cut out of what appeared to be horse blanket. With a spade. Recycling them would cost the wearers a packet once the glamour wore off. Still, in my old blue tracksuit I was hardly a feast for the eye.

First loaves out, next lot in, everything shipshape and Bristol fashion, as Grandpa Chapman had always remarked when Grandma and I finished cleaning up the kitchen. For remarking it once too often I had thrown a dishcloth at him on one rather overwrought day. But he was a sailor and when Grandma had to hand the kitchen over to him after breaking her arm, he just murmured, 'Out of the galley you go, old girl,' and shut her out while he cooked and dished up creditable meals. But she never forgave him for setting fire to her favourite tea towel.

I tend to free-associate at seven in the morning. But on with the dance. Loaves went into the oven pallid and came out

brown and shiny. The egg bread rose beautifully and smelt divine. It drew a wandering Jewish hunk in from the cold.

‘Challah,’ said Daniel on one hungry breath, reaching for a loaf. ‘But it’s Monday,’ he added, pausing for permission before tearing it apart.

‘Here every day is Friday,’ I said with a generous gesture which strewed flour all over the immediate area. ‘Hello, Daniel.’

He kissed me with the kisses of his mouth, which were agreeably flavoured with challah. Beautiful Daniel with his trout-pool dark eyes and his hair growing out from its short crop. Lord, I am not worthy, but speak the word only.

He hauled out the sack of bread which I donate every day to the Soup Run, said, ‘Later, Ketschele,’ and was gone, hoisting the sack easily onto his leather clad shoulder. I sighed and got on with taking Jason’s muffins out of the oven while he counted the loaves for various restaurants. I sell most of my bread to the trade, but I like having a shop as well.

I went into Earthly Delights to open the door and take down the shutters which defend my cashbox from all those people with tyre-irons who are supposed to haunt Flinders Lane after dark. I’ve never noticed any of them but they must be there or what is Neighbourhood Watch for? Except to keep Mrs Pemberthy glued to her window, binoculars in hand, searching for malefactors. And lovers. And dog walkers. And drunks who piss on walls.

Dead-heating the door opening was my shop assistant of the day, Gossamer Judge, known as Goss, and Sylvia Dawson, the best dressed retired hostess in the city. Goss was wearing a fluffy pink bolero thing with matching goosebumps on her bare navel, and Mrs Dawson was clad in a dark chocolate leisure suit, complete with scarlet leather gloves. And a very fetching cherry coloured woolly hat and scarf.

‘Good morning,’ I said to both of them, allowing Goss to slip past me into the warm. Mrs Dawson shook her head affectionately.

‘The young have centrally heated bodies,’ she said. ‘I would be too cold to expose my midriff, even if it was a midriff which would reward exposure. Which, at my time of life, it isn’t. Ah, well. Do I smell Sabbath bread, Corinna dear, and if so can I buy some?’

‘Wise of you to get in fast,’ I told her. ‘Daniel has already ripped off one loaf and most of it’s for a wedding. I don’t make it often because breaking all those eggs is very labour intensive. Here you are.’

The door slammed open and then shut. My second assistant had arrived. ‘How are you, Goss?’

‘All right,’ said Goss in a forlorn tone. I wondered if it was a heavy night on the town or another one of her sad little love affairs. Goss and her friend Kylie are eighteen and wannabe actresses. Because of their near-anorexic stature, they don’t eat if they drink, and this can lead to abrupt, violent mood swings to which which even the most premenstrual could not aspire. I have mentioned that it doesn’t do my reputation in the food industry any good to have shop assistants who look like they’re near starvation but it hasn’t done any bad. So far, at least. I hoped that if the newest fashions started covering up the navel I would work out some other system for telling Kylie and Goss apart. Labels, perhaps? Brooches spelling out their names? That would be too, too day-before-yesterday for those two.

I had gone into the bakery to welcome the Mouse Police back into the warmth (even for tuna they don’t hang around in a wind as cold and mean as this one) when I heard someone yelling in the shop. I sighed. Since the last government introduced ‘community care’ and shut most of the mental

hospitals, we have our share of wandering mad persons, mostly harmless, poor creatures. I have instructed Kylie and Goss to give them a roll or a muffin and escort them out of the shop gently but firmly. Usually this works. That day — of course — it wasn't having the right effect.

'I demand to see baker!' said an Eastern European voice raised in protest. Jason was measuring cardamom pods for his rosewater muffins so I opened the door and came into the shop. Horatio was sitting imperturbably on the counter in his usual place, which argued nothing very dangerous was going on, in view of his disappearing act that morning. A small bald man in a suit was having a screaming match with Goss.

'Good morning,' I said, and Goss flounced around to say, 'He wants to see the baker and I said you were busy and he yelled at me!'

'Yes, so he did,' I agreed, fixing the gentleman with an unimpressed glare. 'Well, here I am,' I said coldly. 'I'm the baker. Want to make something of it?' After all, I still had the axe upstairs.

Suddenly he was all smiles. His bald head gleamed and he flashed a mouthful, I swear, of gold teeth. 'Young lady,' he said to Goss with what was almost a bow, 'So sorry to raise voice, but I get so ...'

'Frustrated?' I asked, taking in the pantomime of grinding teeth and clenching fists. He was actually quite sane, it appeared. At least for this part of the city at this time of the morning.

He nodded emphatically. 'Frustrate, yes, yes. When no one understand. My English very bad, I regret. But need to see baker before buy bread!'

'Why?' I asked suspiciously.

He took my floury hand and kissed it. 'Your young lady,' he

said. 'So thin. I worried. Your bread seem good, yes. But. Saying in my country. Never trust thin baker. You baker. You not thin.' He kissed my hand again. 'Order, restaurant of my brother. Here.' He peeled off notes from a wad which might not have choked a horse but would have seriously inconvenienced it. This he stuffed into my floury hand, together with some sort of order form. 'Payment on account. Deliver tomorrow.' Then he vanished before I could write him a receipt.

Goss looked at me. I looked at Goss. We burst into a slightly hysterical fit of the giggles which lasted through two hours' trading, on and off. Jason's rosewater and cardamom muffins were exquisite, tasting of a Thousand and One Nights. Like Turkish delight without the glue. I was eating one with great pleasure before the hordes bought them out when I almost choked on a crumb and all thoughts of laughter fled out of my mind.

Standing in the doorway of my very own shop, a bundle of cloth at her feet and a look of resolute disgust on her face, was my mother.