

cookingthebooks

KERRY GREENWOOD

A Corinna Chapman mystery


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The paper in this book is FSC certified.
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For David Greagg, an angel in wombat form . . .

With many thanks to Jenny Pausacker, Ika Willis,
Chip Granger, Jean Greenwood and the people who
send me intriguing emails in the middle of the night.
And to Belladonna, my constant companion while writing.

Please note that although there is a film studio at Docklands,
it is not called Harbour Studios and bears no resemblance
to my studio. This whole book is a work of fiction.

As is the city of Melbourne itself.

Satan finds some mischief still for busy hands to do.

—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

CHAPTER ONE

I was supposed to be on holiday. So what, you may ask—in fact, Daniel was actually asking—was I doing in the bakery? Apart from, self-evidently, baking?

‘Bosworth Jumbles,’ I explained.

He smiled at me. My heart did a complete flip-flop with pike. Beautiful Daniel, my Sabra turned private detective, who out of all women in the city picked me, an ample size 20 who worked too hard making bread at my bakery, Earthly Delights. Since the advent of Daniel I have become susceptible to the idea that miracles might really happen. He is tall, dark and gorgeous with a faint whiff of mystery. I am short and mousy and smell mostly of flour and honest labour. Not seductive.

‘Why jumbles and why Bosworth?’ he asked.

My apprentice, Jason, a recovering heroin addict, had taken his holiday pay and gone surfing. My shop was closed until the end of January and my two assistants had gone to an audition for a soap of some sort. I should have been relaxing, but I didn’t seem to have the knack.

‘The cook died rather than disclose the recipe,’ I said. ‘Mrs Dawson is giving an afternoon tea and she wanted some traditional English munchies. And as she is a famous retired society hostess I like to think that the fact that she chose me as her baker is a great compliment.’

‘How do you mean, died?’ Daniel sounded intrigued.

‘Was executed. He deserves to be remembered. He was Richard the Third’s confectioner, a highly paid position,’ I told him, forming the jumbles into little heaps on my baking sheet. ‘He went with Richard to the battle of Bosworth Field, where the King was defeated and the cook was captured. Henry VII offered him his life if he would give him the recipe for these sugary little treats. He refused, and after a week Henry VII had him executed. But the cook gave the recipe to one of his jailers and the local bakers made them for centuries, all through the Tudor period. Just to remind the rulers that there had been a good king who was usurped and murdered.’

‘Sedition by cookery. Impressive,’ he murmured. ‘What else do we have here? Isn’t that fruit mince?’

‘For Eccles cakes,’ I agreed. ‘When the parliamentarians banned Christmas, the bakers of Eccles made these little mince tarts instead of Christmas pudding. I don’t know if it was just because they had a stockpile of the main ingredient, or because they wanted to bring a little joy into people’s hearts in those joyless times.’

‘Possibly both. And these?’

‘You can have one. Or two,’ I conceded. ‘They’re singing hinnies. Like the song.’

‘*She can cook an Irish stew, aye, and singing hinnies too,*’ he sang, a pleasant tenor somewhat obscured by crumbs.

‘And otherwise there are some Bath buns and a sand cake.’

‘Sand cake,’ he said flatly. ‘Even for a superlative baker, sand

is not a good ingredient. I recall those childhood beach picnics. It grits the teeth. Love the singing hinnies, though.’

‘Sand cake is not made of sand,’ I informed him, opening the oven to insert the jumbles and remove the cake. ‘It’s made with cornflour so it’s sandy in texture, but no real sand is used in the construction, I promise. Otherwise she has potted shrimps, which I made yesterday, to eat with brown bread, and cucumber sandwiches, which also contain—’

‘No sand. I understand now,’ he assured me. ‘How much longer will these historical sweets detain you?’

‘Just have to get the jumbles out of the oven—ten minutes or so. Can’t ice the cake until it’s cold.’

‘I notice that none of the feline contingent have descended from the sun porch to supervise your labour,’ he observed.

‘Lazy creatures have been taking non-stop naps,’ I said, wiping flour off my forearms onto my strong green apron. ‘Though the Mouse Police are still catching rats down here at night. But they probably think that is sport, not work.’

‘Cats don’t do the “w” word,’ he agreed solemnly. ‘Even the maître d’hôtel Horatio only supervises.’

Horatio is my tabby and white gentleman and he does, indeed, oversee the moral and aesthetic standards of Earthly Delights. I sometimes feel that I cannot live up to him. He is an aristocat.

‘Have you heard from Jason?’ he asked, leaning a hip against a mixing tub.

‘Postcard,’ I said. I ducked my head at the missive on the counter, which boasted the single line: *luv the beech but its hotte*.

Daniel read it. ‘His spelling is very Middle English, isn’t it?’

‘The picture is of Lorne. Surely he can’t get into too much trouble in Lorne.’

‘I don’t know—can he swim?’ asked Daniel.

‘No idea,’ I replied.

‘And where are the girls?’

‘At an audition for a pilot episode of a soap called *Kiss the Bride*,’ I said. ‘This is their second call back so they might even get parts. I do hope so. Might even make them put on a little weight.’ The girls are fervent devotees of the Goddess Anorexia. I live to see a little more flesh on their bones.

The jumbles announced by scent that they were cooked. I took them out of the oven and tumbled them gently onto a cake cooler. Then I mixed and drizzled the lemon icing over my sand cake.

‘All finished. You want to help me carry them up?’

‘What about scones? Afternoon tea ought to have scones,’ he objected, taking up the large tin tray loaded with food.

‘She’s making her own, of course,’ I told him. ‘Up to the roof, Madame is entertaining in the garden.’

I can’t imagine how the roof garden at Insula escaped unscathed when the building was allowed to run down in the sixties. A lot of Melbourne was trashed at the time. The elevator goes right there so they can’t have missed it. Intervention of fate, I expect. Fate likes a good garden as much as anyone else. There is a statue of Ceres with her arms full of corn, copy of a Roman original, in the glassed-in temple, but there is also a rose bower, a lot of wisteria, and even Trudi’s linden tree. Mrs Dawson’s table was laid out under the wisteria. There were no blossoms on it, of course, it being January, but delightful pale green leaves and a lot of diffused light. She had lovely china, gold and blue, and a massive samovar which Trudi was even now wheeling up to the right of the hostess.

Trudi is Dutch and sixty and wears blue and is the only person whom the freight elevator obeys. Her appearance is only unusual in that she wears a ginger kitten of fiendish aspect on her shoulder. Meroe, our witch, says he is not really diabolical;

only humans have the spiritual software to be devilish. He just has a small kink in his feline soul which renders him mischievous. That's why he is called Lucifer. He's getting bigger, which is a sobering prospect . . .

He made a wild dive for the cake—Lucifer will try to eat anything—and was hauled back by his harness. That harness has been the thwarting of a lot of potential adventures, especially those involving Lucifer and the fish pond in the atrium. For Insula is a Roman building, and what is a Roman building without its impluvium?

We don't know much about the lunatic who built Insula like a Roman tenement. There was a fashion then for exotic buildings—Moorish, Arabic, Old English Gothick. It has some deco features but when Professor Dion ordered his apartment decorated after designs from Pompeii, they fitted beautifully. He is, for instance, the owner of the only Ancient Roman TV/DVD cabinet in the world. We are a jolly collection, except for Mrs Pemberthy, who is there to curdle the milk of human kindness and make one desire state-sponsored seclusion of everyone over eighty-five with a small rotten doggie called Traddles.

Mrs Dawson, urbane and elegant, was wearing what my grandmother would call a hostess gown in swirly shades of rust and apricot. She is an example to us all. She surveyed the provender as Daniel and I laid it out next to her cucumber sandwiches, the potted shrimps and their thin-sliced brown bread, and a mound of scones with concomitant jam and cream. Her scones looked very good. I would have guessed as much.

'A feast,' she told me. 'Thank you so much, Corinna dear. The ladies ought to be arriving. I've stationed Dion in the atrium to welcome the early birds. I shall now descend and join him.'

She flung a cobweb-fine muslin cloth over the feast and departed in a flourish of skirts.

‘What a woman,’ sighed Daniel.

‘She is indeed. How about a tiny snack of our own?’ I asked, with deep political cunning. I hoped to decoy him into my apartment for a little afternoon delight. I don’t think I fooled him for a moment, but he fell in beside me willingly. In the interests of truth, I did intend to offer him tea. And cakes. As well.

All was going according to plan. He drank my Earl Grey, he ate a jumble and a slice of sand cake (I had made double, for my kitchen as well as Mrs D’s tea) and was about to kiss me with the kisses of his mouth in proper biblical fashion when the doorbell rang shrilly.

Damn.

The door was answered—however grudgingly—and Kylie and Goss danced into the room, waving bits of paper and laughing. I was not in the mood for laughing and dancing, but I tried. The whole building is sort of in loco parentis (as the Professor calls it) to the girls. They are so young and on their own.

‘What?’ asked Daniel, also uncomfortably halted in mid-kiss.

‘Contracts!’ they cried.

‘You got the job?’ he asked.

‘We got the job! We both got the job! Speaking parts! I’m the kooky girl, Goss is the loser one,’ cried Kylie. ‘It’s an office. Ooh, tea. Can we have some? We missed lunch.’

‘Certainly,’ I agreed, surprised. ‘Get yourselves a cup and a plate each—would you like one of my jumbles?’

‘Looks good,’ said Kylie, and they both tucked into jumbles in a way which would have made Richard III’s martyred cook glad. I was just wishing I had made some more when I was given a typescript to read. It was a mass of convoluted phrases but seemed to be a hiring agreement for the pilot episode of *Kiss the Bride*, binding them to what seemed like frightful hours—six am to

nine pm with extensions if necessary—and a condition that they didn't lose or gain weight. Or so much as breathe a word about the show to anyone at all, even their mothers, unless required to do so in supervised interviews. They could be sacked for a list of crimes, including persistent lateness, using drugs or alcohol, something which I had to read as moral turpitude, like getting in trouble with the law, and whenever the director felt like sacking them, he or she could. I would have protested but they had clearly already signed them—and the money was quite good. I nodded and handed the papers back to Kylie, or possibly Goss. They change their appearance so often that I get confused.

'I've got an appointment for my hair tomorrow,' breathed Goss, or possibly Kylie.

'Hair?' I asked, at a loss.

'Well, duh, Corinna, the kooky girl always has red hair and the loser's always a brunette. It's sort of the way things are,' explained the girl. 'I'm kooky so I'm going to be fire-engine red, and Goss is going to be brown for the future.'

The speaker was thus revealed to be Kylie and I realised that I would be able to tell them apart for the duration of the pilot. Goss, brown; Kylie, red. That would be a change.

Daniel was trying to catch my eye, making drinking motions. I briefly mourned my lost orgy. But yes, their triumph ought to have champagne. I got out the glasses. Daniel got out the emergency bottle of unexpected-good-news champagne from the fridge.

We all drank. After a glass each, the girls giggled and fled, saying that they had to get online to tell Facebook the good news—so much for their contracts, I almost said, but if the employers of modern young women don't know that every spare thought goes onto Facebook, they should not be employing them—and looked at Daniel.

‘Where were we?’ he purred, and filled my glass again.
Oh yes. That’s where we were . . .

I woke alone. Since the advent of Daniel, I had been finding my old bed a trifle constrained what with Daniel and Horatio and, of course, me, so I had bought a new bed roughly the size of a field, which easily fitted me and Horatio and Daniel with room left over for several haymakers and possibly a picnic. Horatio had tapped my cheek with an imperious paw, conveying that it was Cat Food Time and to look sharp about it. It further suggested that taking an impromptu nap was the province of the ruling species (i.e. cats) not the subservient (i.e. humans).

I can relate to that. I sat up, draped in my new blue sheets, and looked around for my lover. Gone, but there were noises suggestive of activity in the kitchen. I dragged on a silky robe and potted out to investigate.

Thumping noises indicated that Daniel was making chicken schnitzel, so I found the peeler and began on the potatoes. We had become so used to working together that I didn’t need to be told that mashed spuds were the accompaniment to Daniel’s excellent schnitzel, and the salad was already chilling in its iced water. Yum. Making love makes me hungry.

Horatio was also hungry and discussed his gourmet cat food eagerly. Potatoes on, I wandered down to the bakery to feed the Mouse Police, a rough and ready pair who secured the night hours against rodents with tooth and claw. I was just laying out the cat meat which they get as a treat once a week—they seem disinclined to eat their prey, which is fine with me—when someone rapped, quite hard, on the bakery door. Since there was a large polite sign which indicated to the enquirer that we

were closed until after Australia Day, I ignored it. Then they knocked again.

I was in a drowsy, pleasant mood. I opened the door to say, 'Sorry, no bread,' when a frantic hand seized me and dragged me into the street. I was about to deck my attacker—I do not allow myself to be dragged—when I recognised her. Almost. I had seen her before, somewhere . . . wearing a uniform . . . yes, of course, it was Thomasina, head girl and hockey fiend, from my very tough girls school. She had never been at all friendly towards me. But she hadn't actually mistreated me. I freed my arm from her anxious clutch.

'Corinna!' she cried. 'I thought it must be you! You've got to help me!'

This was a bit much for the hungry end of a delightful afternoon.

'Why?' I asked simply.

'Because we're old school mates,' she said. 'Because you're the best baker in town—everyone says so. Please!'

'Suppose you come inside and tell me about it,' I said, not wanting to conduct this interview in the street. 'But I haven't got long—I have a dinner date.'

'You?' she asked with that touch of incredulity which flicks a fat woman on the raw. I resolved that I would try to do the Christian thing and forgive my enemies, but that did not require me to present the other cheek. Especially since the Thomasina I remembered had a formidable right hook.

I sat her down in the assistant's chair. She had aged badly, looked haggard and lined. One advantage of being fat is that one does not wrinkle like the slim and gorgeous. Her hair had been a strong blonde. Now it was almost as mousy as mine. And she now wore glasses. I admit that I gloated, just a little bit. Corinna, your karma!

‘What’s this all about?’ I asked.

‘I started a company, catering for big events,’ she told me. ‘Gourmet food, you know, best of everything, hire my company and we do the works: decor, cutlery and crockery if required, flowers, staff, food, wine. The best people recommend us. You must have heard of us. Maitresse.’

‘I’ve heard of you,’ I agreed. One saw announcements in the fashionable press about weddings, for instance; dresses by someone or other, event by Maitresse. So Thomasina had done well. Good for her. ‘What has that got to do with me?’ I asked.

‘My baker has gone to Malta for his father’s funeral,’ she said, making a raking grab for my arm again. ‘I’ve got a big commission for a TV pilot. Not much going on this early in the year, most people are on holidays, this could make a big difference to us.’

‘Who’s us?’

‘Me and Julia. You remember Julia.’

‘I do. I had a crush on her in year eight.’

‘I’ve had a crush on her ever since school,’ grinned Thomasina. ‘And luckily she likes me too—we’re an item, so remember that if you recall your crush while you’re working for us.’

‘I don’t know what you want me to do . . . and time is ticking on.’ I hinted. I almost hoped that Daniel might wander down to find out what was keeping me. Even a stone butch like Tommy would have to admit that he was gorgeous . . . But nothing would deflect her from her mission.

‘Make bread!’ she screamed. ‘We’ve got this contract, food for the cast and crew, matter of twenty people, three meals a day, and snacks, mounds of salads, hundreds of sandwiches, canapés, afternoon tea—and no bread! It’s a nightmare!’

‘Plenty of bakers around,’ I murmured.

‘But not the best! I need the best. Maitresse needs the best, that’s what we do.’

‘And I’m the best?’

‘Everyone says so. The stock exchange party made a lot of talk. Even Mrs Dawson employed you for her afternoon tea.’

‘Word gets around!’ I said, amazed.

‘It’s a very small world and it never stops gossiping. Expensive, they say, but excellent.’

‘I’m on holiday,’ I temporised. ‘My apprentice is away.’

‘I can hire you as many helpers as you need. Please, Corinna!’

‘All right,’ I said. I had been bored. I don’t have a talent for relaxing. Daniel had just told me that he had a new case which would occupy a week, so we couldn’t go away. ‘What do you want, and for how long do you want it?’

We started to plan. When Daniel finally did come down to see what was holding me up, she heard his footsteps and looked up from an order sheet. And her expression was all that I could have desired.

I introduced her. Her mouth was still open in an O of astonishment. I had the orders and Daniel had made his effect and in any case I was starving.

‘What’s the name of this TV show, anyway?’ I asked as Tommy prepared to go.

‘Oh, didn’t I say? It’s a soap called *Kiss the Bride*,’ she answered, and took her leave.