

# **forbiddenfruit**

**KERRY GREENWOOD**

**A Corinna Chapman mystery**

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

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Not to mention Ihr Altesse, Belladonna, Principessa di Gatti, of course. And Blackberry and Doughall the Giant Kitten.

In loving memory of Dennis Pryor, a charming and compassionate man of remarkable learning.

This book is for M.V.C.S, M.O.N.V.C.S., and all the singers of the Known World.

My fanatical vegans and my fanatical Christians are all fictional. There are no such organisations or churches and they are all a product of the author's horrible imagination. The freegans are not. They seem to have left the city, however. If they turn up in your area it would be nice to step a few paces of the Hare Wombat dance with them. And perhaps buy them an ice cream. They rarely find edible ice cream in dumpsters.

For unto us a Child is born,  
Unto us a Son is given.

—GF Handel, *Messiah*

# CHAPTER ONE

*Now bring us some figgy pudding,  
And bring some out here!*

Trad.

Four am is not an ideal time, especially if someone is trying to have a conversation with you about glacé cherries and the desirability of making our own.

I opened one eye, which was about as much as could be expected, made a broad sweeping motion with my only available arm, and grunted ‘Go away!’ with all the force at my disposal.

‘Oh, shit,’ said someone, and there was a whisking noise. When the alarm went off and I really had to wake up, I saw, in order of perception: 1) my cat, Horatio, indicating extreme displeasure by folding himself into a tabby and white pillar and twitching the very end of his tail; 2) my apprentice, Jason, looking abashed and rumpling his thick curly blond hair; and 3) my lover,

Daniel, holding Jason by the shoulder with one hand and offering me a large cup of very strong black coffee with the other.

The last was the only thing I wanted at that moment and the delegation departed, led by Horatio, who was suggesting that only immediate and the fullest of full-cream Farmhouse milk could assuage his injured feelings at this disgraceful irruption into his solemn morning ritual. In fact, they might gainfully omit the milk component and go straight for the cream.

After my first coffee, I did the usual morning things in my usual morning trance, spiced with some outrage. Jason might be a feckless adolescent but Daniel knew how I felt about being awoken even a millisecond before I had to be. I treasure my hours of sleep. I grumbled as I dressed in my size 20 cotton baker's overall—the weather was warm, which meant that the bakery would be blistering until the air conditioning kicked in—and pulled back my hair and secured it in a clip. I looked at myself in the mirror, always unwise at this hour. Three chins, which would refine to two when I woke up. Hair which was now reddish since Meroe had arrived with that henna rinse and the need for a subject for her experiment. Blue blurry eyes. Corinna Chapman. Good morning, ma'am.

Jason had gone, Daniel was reading the paper, and my croissant, jam, butter and a pot of coffee were on the table, while Horatio discussed his dish of cream underneath. I ate, I drank, I contemplated the front page of Daniel's paper and it came into focus. Gradually, I became a human, instead of a grizzly bear woken up before it was even spring. I hate it when this happens because I have to apologise for whatever it was I did when I was half asleep.

Fortunately, I hadn't done much. I might have meant to clip Jason's ears, but I simply hadn't had the coordination.

'What was all that about?' I asked.

‘I caught him too late,’ said Daniel. ‘I was just coming in when I heard him babbling about making glacé cherries. Sorry, *ketschele*. I sent him down to begin the baking so you could have a civilised breakfast.’

‘And so I have,’ I replied, leaning over to kiss him. Mmm. Coffee and croissant and the scent of Daniel’s skin, which always smelt like cinnamon. ‘No harm done—I’ll just mention that if he does such a thing again I will personally put him into a pie and bake him. This must be about his Christmas cakes. He’s been obsessing about them for days.’

‘And enthusiasm should not be quashed,’ Daniel told me, returning the kiss with compound interest.

I know about these things, because I was once an accountant, until I discarded my pantyhose forever, gave my suits and kitten-heeled shoes to the Brotherhood, and took up baking, which has brought me modest financial profit and much greater happiness than I deserve.

I dumped the bad mood. What right had I to feel grumpy when I had Daniel and Jason and the inhabitants of Insula, an eccentric but fascinating building in the middle of Melbourne, my favourite city?

I smiled. Horatio, having finished the cream and his kitty dins, decided that a thorough wash was essential before he went to meet his public in the shop, Earthly Delights, and levitated onto a suitable chair for the purpose.

‘Time to close the windows,’ said Daniel. ‘It’s blowing a gale.’

‘I hate north winds,’ I agreed, doing so and pulling the dark curtains across. ‘I loathe summer, and I detest Christmas. It’s only the start of December. Already it’s hot and already the shoppers are frantic. I’m glad we’re closing for January, because by the time we get to Christmas, we are all going to be knackered.’

‘Hanukkah is less stressful,’ said Daniel. ‘Now, if you are going to the bakery, I am going to have a shower and flake out. I’ve had a long night in the rafters, trying to locate a poison pen.’

‘Tell me later,’ I said, kissed him again, and descended to the bakery.

I was half an hour late, and Jason had already set all the mixers going, a charming noise. The Mouse Police, Heckle and Jekyll, had delivered their tribute of dead vermin and had been rewarded. I came in as Jason opened the door into Calico Alley and they scrambled out, in search of endangered species of the Southern Ocean, scraps of which Kiko and Ian from the Japanese restaurant always keep for them. For former street cats, they had expensive tastes.

The coffee pot was on and so was the industrial air conditioner, which might keep us alive during the summer. It was an engineering marvel, according to the Green Tech people who installed it, using waste heat from the ovens to do something ingenious and carbon neutral. And it was blasting out a lot of cold air, which was wonderful. I stood in the jet stream and revolved slowly.

‘Rye bread on, Captain, pasta douro prepared, muffin mix ready.’

‘Well done, Midshipman.’ I saluted. We were playing Hornblower, which Jason had taken as his manual for living. There could be worse role models. Besides, I got to be captain. ‘Now, what was that about cherries?’

‘Sorry to wake you, sir, I won’t do that again,’ he mumbled. ‘But why shouldn’t we make our own glacé cherries? It just needs someone to watch the syrup. It has to be cheaper than buying them in hundred-gram lots.’

‘You want to try it? Go ahead,’ I said, waving a Picardian hand. ‘Make it so.’



He jumped up and showed me a recipe. It was handwritten.

‘Where’s this from?’ I asked.

‘Yai Yai,’ he answered, meaning the matriarch of the delightful Pandamus family, who run Cafe Delicious. ‘She says you can candy anything with it.’

‘Yes, it’s *glykos*, it’s yummy,’ I observed. ‘Go ahead, but it’s going to be a long process!’

‘No problem, Captain, I’d rather stay in here with the cooler on anyway.’

‘Good point,’ I agreed. I was going to ask Therese Webb, Insula’s expert on all things woven, tatted, knitted, spun, embroidered and stitched, to teach me some handicrafts. It was looking to be a long summer. I preferred the planet when it had more ozone layer.

I sat down to drink more coffee and compound my seed bread, a delicacy which comes to its full flower when married to blue cheese, and noticed that the Mouse Police had come back, reeking of tuna and panting. Cats generally don’t like summer. Horatio, who is getting on, loves the sun, but no cat likes the north wind, which disarrays the ears and fibrillates the whiskers. They plumped down on their flour sacks for a good grooming session in the backwash of the cool air. I could tell that the air conditioner was going to be a popular acquisition. Five in the morning and already the alley was being scoured by a hectic, invasive, dust-bearing wind which would, as soon as the sun rose, turn into dragon’s breath.

Jason clanged the first of the rye loaves out of the oven and put in the pasta douro. I took a deep breath. I can only smell the scents of the bakery early in the morning. The nose gets used to smells, which is probably a survival trait for, say, Rotorua with all those sulphur lakes, but is also a pity considering that the aroma of baking bread is one of the premium scents of the universe.

I let the cracked wheat slide through my fingers. Jason was reading, which was hard for the boy, as he had been thrown out of school very early. But he was teaching himself and one day he might even grasp the concept of spelling, and grammar as well. Though he was going to get that from Hornblower, not from recipes.

‘Have we got a cherry stoner?’ he asked.

‘I expect so,’ I replied. ‘Go and check the second drawer from the left in my kitchen.’

I have a theory that all kitchens, if sufficiently occupied and loved, grow their own appliances. Only this can explain that that particular drawer always jams on an ice-cream scoop, which I am sure I never bought, and that I had at one time three melon ballers. Or it could be that some previous tenant was devoted to the worship of the goddess Anioia (a creation of the divine Terry Pratchett) who rules over Things That Stick in Drawers. Jason was serious about this Christmas cake project. I went over to see what he was reading.

An op shop recipe book, my favourite kind. Its pages were stained with ingredients long dried and it had the statutory sheaf of newspaper cuttings interleaved through the pages. I wondered how anyone could want to make lambs’ brains in cream sauce when Jason came back with a grin and a cherry stoner, which looks like it was designed to do impolite things to cows.

‘I reckon this ought to be it,’ he said. ‘You got a lot of junk in that drawer, Captain!’

‘I know, and it is inevitable. No matter. Nice book.’

‘Mrs Dawson gave it to me. She said she wouldn’t be needing it again, she mostly eats out. And she says she knows all her favourites by heart. I’d love that,’ he said, suddenly, clutching the cherry stoner to his adolescent bosom and looking upwards in rapture. With his golden curls and blue eyes, he looked like a painting by one of the Pre-Raphaelites of *The Soul’s Awakening*. ‘To know all the recipes by heart.’

‘And so you shall,’ I assured him. ‘I’m going to do my seed bread—can you get the muffins on?’

‘Last of the rye bread on,’ he said, sliding the tins into the oven. ‘Muffins, aye, sir!’

I sat down by the mixer and poured the seeds into the mix, in order, heaviest to lightest. This is a lovely bread but it needs care. Most things that are worth anything do. I listened to the mixers mixing, the ovens roaring, the air conditioner breathing and the Mouse Police purring. I was a very lucky woman. Time went on. Bread got baked.

The plastic-wrapped paper hit the door and I fielded it before it could fly into a tub. That paperboy has it in for me. Leaving the very last mix to rise, I dismissed Jason to Cafe Delicious, whose Trucker’s Special he can engulf in record time (three eggs, a potato pancake or hash brown, two strips of bacon, tomatoes, mushrooms, baked beans, sausages, toast and a can of Pepsi; I do not know where he puts it all in his slim frame). The Pandamus family clean up betting on how long it will take him to eat it.

I sliced ham and bread and cheese for the shop, counted out the orders and put them in their shipping cage for the courier to pick up and deliver to the restaurants in the city. It was getting light and fairly soon I would have customers walking down Calico Alley.

The first was my favourite witch, Meroe.

‘Blessed be,’ she said.

‘Good morning, though I hesitate to say that.’

‘The Goddess is in a mood,’ she agreed. ‘Seed bread? Wonderful. I intend to hole up with Belladonna until the storm comes.’

‘There’s a storm coming?’

Meroe has long, harsh black hair and always dresses in a black top, a long black skirt and a wrap, from the colour of which you can usually guess her mood. I don’t know how old

she is. When she smiles, she might be a weather-beaten forty. When she broods, she might be a youthful seventy. She takes care of all magical ritual round our way from her shop, the Sibyl's Cave. Today's wrap was a neutral purple, shot through with silver threads.

'Watch the way the Mouse Police are polishing their whiskers. Bad weather coming. Besides, I heard the early weather report,' she confessed, grinning. 'Poor Bella finds storms very trying. I need to be with her.'

Belladonna is a very sleek, plump and self-satisfied black cat. I could not imagine her finding anything upsetting. I said so.

'She's very sensitive to the electricity in the air, poor creature. I have actually got a small shock from stroking her in really stormy conditions. No cat likes to have blue sparks shooting from her whiskers.'

'Not soignée,' I agreed. 'I wouldn't like it myself.'

Meroe was replaced with Mrs Dawson, who always went for a walk in the early morning to appease her Puritan conscience, which thereafter let her lead the life of a sybarite. She slept in 'disgracefully late'. She lunched at amusing little cafes, she dined in Chinatown or at various clubs, and she deserved it all. She had been a society hostess for most of her life and now, as a widow, she got to please herself at last.

Her clothes, as always, were a poem. She wore light cotton khaki trousers and a top hand-printed with giraffes. I appreciated the giraffes as I put a loaf of the sourdough into her willow-leaf basket. As always, she gave me exact change.

'Really, the only time that one can walk without the danger of heatstroke,' she commented, 'is early in the morning, and even so I am disagreeably hot.'

'Meroe says there is a storm coming,' I offered.

'If Meroe says so, then there will be a storm.'

I stood in the blast from the air conditioner as Heckle prowled past me, intent on something in the lane. Then there was a scuffle, a cry, and a thud. Jason fetched down the first-aid kit.

‘Oh, no! Has he got another one?’ I asked, dismayed.

‘He’s got another one,’ he replied. ‘Go, kitty! We’ve got the only attack cat in the city.’

I sighed and sallied forth to comfort Heckle’s latest victim.

It all started when the paperboy, doubtless filled with nameless malice, ran over Heckle’s tail. This had meant a hasty trip to the vet, who had stroked the vertebrae into place but had been forced to amputate the top centimetre or so, which had been hopelessly crushed under the unforgiving wheels. Heckle had recovered completely in body, but his animal spirit, Meroe said, was outraged and required vengeance.

So he had gone out several times, seeking it. He favoured young men and only if they were running. His method was ingenious. He waited until he could see the whites of their sports shoes then, with a sinuous wriggle, inserted himself between the running ankles.

He had never failed to bring down his prey. It was costing us a packet in band-aids and apologies, but so far no one had accused Heckle of doing it on purpose. He would sidle back into the bakery with a look of malignant satisfaction plastered all over his whiskers and then observe the process of repairing the victim with a smug smile. I could not imagine what I was going to do about him.

Meroe had promised to appeal to his better nature but I was not at all sure that Heckle, an old streetfighter, actually had a better nature. Clearly that centimetre of missing tail had to be paid for in blood.

I found the latest revengee sitting on the kerb, looking dazed, and raised him by the arm, escorting him into the bakery and sitting him down on the cook’s chair.

‘I’m so sorry, are you hurt?’

‘Just a bit of a scrape,’ he murmured. ‘Hey, Jason, is that your cat?’

‘Rowan,’ said Jason, looking a little abashed. ‘Sorry about that! This is my boss, Corinna. This is Rowan, he’s a music student, got the flat opposite me, just moved in.’

‘They told me that the city would be full of adventures,’ said Rowan. Nice boy. I examined him as I mopped gravel and blood off his skinned knees. Thin, young, knobby as to knee and elbow, still growing into his limbs, Grandma would say. Pleasantly blue eyes, thatch of mousy hair. Private school accent. Abused. One knows another. I remember challenging Therese Webb, our resident craftsperson, when she diagnosed a portrait as ‘sick as a child’. It was Robert Louis Stevenson and she was right, but she couldn’t tell me how she knew. Therese spent most of her childhood in bed with asthma. One knows another, she said. Well, I spent my childhood in the mud and cold being neglected by my hippie parents. Then I spent the rest of it at a very exclusive girls’ school, being bullied unmercifully. One knows another.

But he showed no signs of wanting to kick Heckle, which was encouraging. As Auden said, ‘those to whom evil is done do evil in return’, but that was not necessarily the case. Some to whom evil is done resolve never to inflict such pain on anyone and become very good indeed.

I plastered the knees in Betadine lotion—who knew what organic toxins lurked in Flinders Lane gravel?—and offered Rowan his choice of refreshments to beguile the time while it dried. He chose coffee and one of Jason’s amazing raspberry muffins.

‘You’re Ferguson’s son, aren’t you?’ asked Mrs Dawson. ‘You have the look of him.’

Rowan flinched, spilled coffee on his running shorts, and I changed the subject rapidly. The last thing the bullied want is to be told they resemble their tormentor.

‘Music? So you are the source of the carols which have been echoing round the building the last few days?’

‘Yes,’ he said with a grateful look. ‘We needed a place to rehearse and the cellar has the most beautiful acoustics. Almost as good as the underground car park at uni. We make enough money out of singing carols to finance the rest of the year’s concerts. Mostly.’

‘Very seasonal,’ Mrs Dawson was pleased to approve. I kept my opinion of carols to myself. I detest Christmas. Still, the singers were at least not committing the cardinal breach of taste, which is to include in their repertoire those sugary things which blight all shopping expeditions from the first of December. If I have to listen to someone crooning ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas’ one more time, I shall commit an indictable offence. Mayhem of some sort. And the same goes for Perry Como.

Rowan drank his coffee, ate his muffin, and got gingerly to his feet. Then he leant over Heckle and stroked his ears.

‘There, poor old puss, did I hurt you?’ he asked.

Jason stifled a giggle, and Heckle looked, for the first time in his piratical life, embarrassed. This boy was definitely among the good guys.

But there was bread to make as Rowan took his leave and Mrs Dawson stayed to share some gossip.

‘I met his father on many occasions,’ she told me. ‘Nasty piece of work. New money,’ she added with unconscious arrogance. ‘And my mother met his grandfather. He told her he was a self-made man. She replied, “Oh, the horrors of unskilled labour!”’

I laughed. Mrs Dawson packed a muffin into her basket.

‘So what was the elder Ferguson like?’

‘A big, red-faced bully,’ said Mrs Dawson. ‘Crude, loud and drunken. His son, this boy’s father, was thin and scared. As was

his wife, who was a school friend of mine. Poor Emily. This boy has just the look of his father.'

'Rich?'

'Oh, yes, dear, made a fortune in some agricultural pursuit. Pork, perhaps? I may be transferring the attributes of the animal to the man, which is a little harsh on the pig, whom I believe is an amiable creature. Well, I must get on. Pleasant to have some young people in the vicinity again.'

I did not agree. But there was bread to bake, so I baked it.