

Praise for other Corinna Chapman mysteries

‘Corinna Chapman is certainly cheeky, charming and full of chutzpah.’—*Advertiser*

‘Kerry Greenwood has created a masterly chick-lit thriller, filled with sensual delights, twists and turns.’—*Cairns Post*

‘Full of great food, humour, magic and lust—not to mention a likable new sleuth, a lot of dead bodies and a spate of nasty little hate crimes.’—*Sun Herald*

‘An appealing mix of humour, romance and tales of the seedy side of the city.’—*Sunday Times*

‘A happy combination of the “chick-lit” genre and a traditional cosy mystery story, redolent with the smells of good things in the oven.’—*Limelight*

‘Funny, street-wise and way outré.’—*The Age*

‘This is a fun read with amusing one-liners, entertaining characters, delicious recipes and enchanting descriptions of Corinna’s feline companions.’—*Canberra Times*

‘*Earthy Delights* is a pleasure to read—witty, surprising, and opinionated ... there is corruption and violence . . . but there is also redemption, and compassion, and friendship, and courage, and humour. And good food. And lots of cats. If any of these appeal to you, *Earthy Delights* probably will, too.’—*Western Australian*

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When she is not writing she is an advocate in Magistrates' Courts for the Legal Aid Commission. She is not married, has no children and lives with a registered Wizard.

Also in the Corinna Chapman series:

Earthly Delights
Heavenly Pleasures
Devil's Food

trickortreat

KERRY GREENWOOD

A Corinna Chapman mystery


ALLEN & UNWIN

CHAPTER ONE

Four am, in my experience, contains many things. Darkness, cold, solitude, gloom, despair, madness—

I'll begin again. My name is Corinna Chapman and I am a baker, which means that in order to supply my shop, Earthly Delights, with bread to feed the suffering multitudes, I need to rise from my downy couch at four in the morning and get it all started. This has slightly soured my sweet nature, particularly this morning, because in that said downy couch reposed my dear and beautiful Daniel, a sabra of great gentleness and charm, and I could think of lots of things to be doing with him which did not involve ever leaving my bed.

But business is business, as my old mentor Papa Pagliacci used to say, and four am is four am and here I was, my apprentice beside me, bringing the bakery to life. Coffee steamed in its pot. The dough hooks clicked, the mixers mixed and the scent of spices lay heavy around Jason, who was making a mix for the Welsh bread. For an ex-junkie he had filled out beautifully. His hair was thick and curly, like Harpo Marx, though confined severely for work under his white cap. His bones

were all decently covered now. His hands and arms were developing the baker's muscles, sturdy, able to knead recalcitrant rye bread for fifteen minutes without a pause which might stiffen the dough. I was so proud of him. I looked away before he caught me staring at him. Jason embarrasses easily.

It was beginning to get light outside—what our ancestors used to call piccaninny daylight. Dreary and grey, but light.

I inspected the night's massacre of vermin. Four mice and a rat. The rat was as big as a kitten. Erk. Much as I love most furry creatures, I have never been able to extend this affection to rats, though I am fond of mice and indeed used to have them as pets when I was a child. It's something about the naked tails, I believe. I disposed of the corpses in the bin and opened the street door to allow Heckle and Jekyll, my Mouse Police, out into the lane. They were going to hunt down and kill the tuna scraps which either Kiko or Ian at the Japanese restaurant were happy to give them. They belted off in a blur of black and white in search of endangered species of the Southern Ocean in order to render them more gravely endangered. There was a rather endearing scamper of hard paws on the stone floor.

Then I heard someone singing. Not the usual type heard at this hour in Calico Alley. Drunks, these days, do not sing 'Show me the way to go home', a song made to be slurred. No, they sing 'Heartbreak Hotel'. Almost invariably, in my experience. In a key of their own devising. And this wasn't 'Heartbreak Hotel' or any Elvis number. I didn't know it. But it was sweet and clear and I caught some unfamiliar words, 'Wassail, wassail, all over the town . . .' Then something about a 'white maple tree'. I could not see the singer. He or she was up at the other end of Flinders Lane, near the newly opened (curse its blood) hot bread shop.

The voice ceased. Odd. But nice. I went back inside to work on the bara brith, contemplating the hot bread shop.

It's not as though I have anything against the provision of new bread to the populace. The more fresh bread the better. Fewer polystyrene plastic-wrapped loaves means a better, more well nourished world. But did a hot bread shop, which was part of a chain and therefore able to keep its prices down, have to set up just along the street from me? Was there not enough of Melbourne, really quite a big city, for Best Fresh Bread to sell in that they had to come to my little corner? I felt like Eeyore talking about his sad and boggy place. *Locus tristis et palustris*, as the Professor would say.

Jason said, 'I think that's kneaded all right,' and I realised that I had knocked down the poor Welsh bread practically to its component molecules. No one could say that it wasn't worked enough. I set it aside to prove again, if the yeast had any breath left.

Jason delivered his report on Best Fresh's bread. It was succinct. 'It's crap,' he said.

'You must be able to say more than that,' I replied.

'Complete crap,' he elaborated.

Well, that's sixteen and male for you. I'd have to send a qualified appraiser to buy some for me.

The sun came up. The paper person flung the paper and missed killing anyone. I am sure that is his aim. He biked off, mumbling, 'Foiled again!' into his skimpy adolescent beard. Something huge loomed over me in the shadowy alley. A hand as big as a loaf reached for me.

But it was all right. It was Ma'ani, driver of the Soup Run bus, who oddly enough never has any trouble with rough behaviour on his shift. Even the wild boys instinctively know that it is better not to taunt someone who is over six feet in

every dimension, especially across the shoulders. Those who don't have the instinct speedily acquire it. I remember seeing Ma'ani pick up a brawling fighting-mad drunk by the waist and dip him head first into a city fountain until he calmed down. Which he did, really quite fast. Ma'ani had come for the bread which I donate every day to the Soup Run, which feeds the poor and homeless. Last shift. He swung the sack easily over his massive back and grinned, teeth white in the shadows.

'All right, Corinna? Hey, Jason,' he said.

'You making a pick-up from Best Fresh?' demanded Jason suspiciously.

'That new place? Nah. They got a contract with a pig food manufacturer,' he said. 'Rather feed it to pigs than people. Sister was cross.'

'I bet she was,' I said appreciatively. Sister Mary is a diminutive nun with a will of adamant. If there is anything harder than adamant—it's just diamond, isn't it?—then she has a will of it. She would really not be impressed with Best Fresh deciding not to feed her lambs. In favour of pigs and further profit . . . ouch.

However, ours not to dwell on the discomfiture of others, ours to make more bread. The day was getting on and the coffee maker was getting into its stride. No coffee, no baking, is my equation. I need no funny drinks with ingredients which will be banned once Food and Health works out what they are. Just the aromatic bean, pure arabica, joy! I poured the sacred second cup which has to wait until all the mixers are mixing. Fragrant, hot and pure. Bliss.

Jason left to try to beat his record in scoffing the Trucker's Special breakfast at Cafe Delicious, where the Pandamus family clean up betting on him. I sat down to listen to the bread rising, a small sound like a crinkle in the air. So soft that

I could be imagining it. A sound that comes from a very long way away in time, when they discovered leavening in Ancient Egypt and the Pharaoh's maidens sat down in a mud-brick kitchen and waited for the dough to rise, just as I was doing in my clean tiled bakery with the machines clicking. They would, however, have been drinking beer, not coffee. The other great gift of yeast.

'Blessed be,' said someone from the street door. Without turning round I knew it was Meroe, my friend and jobbing witch, as 'blessed be' is a Wicca greeting. Meroe came in. She is a thin woman with a sharply defined face and long black hair. She always wears black garments and a brightly coloured shawl or drape. Today's was a length of sky-blue silk with fluffy white clouds on it. She was carrying a basket and offered me an apple. It was a shiny scarlet apple and all too, too Brothers Grimm for this early in the morning.

'Will I go to sleep for a hundred years?' I asked, taking it.

'Probably not,' she replied. 'Anyway, it is too late for you, Corinna. You have already got your prince. Don't be greedy.'

'True, true,' I said, and bit. It was a perfect apple, crisp and juicy and just tart enough. 'And what can I offer you? Jason's date and walnut muffins, just out of the oven? Bara brith in an hour or so, poppy seed rolls? Nice loaf of rye?'

'Rye,' said Meroe. 'And one of those muffins—no, make it two. Is this a new recipe?'

'Yes, he has been working on it for a week. I reckon he's got the balance of fruit and nut just about right now. He minces the dates so that they are distributed through the whole mix. Nice?' I asked, as she broke one of the muffins and took a bite.

'Superb,' she said. 'Tell him so, will you?' She gave me some money and was about to leave when someone came stumbling down Calico Alley, wailing.

The Mouse Police belted inside as though wolves were after them and cowered in their bed of sacks. The wailer got closer. It was an eerie noise. Not like someone crying or screaming, but keening in a tired little voice that sounded like it had been going on forever.

Meroe stepped out into the alley. Witches never run away from anything, even when it might be wiser to do so. I had to go with her, though I didn't want to and the noise was, as the girls say, creeping me out. The wailer was a young man. He was wringing his hands and wailing, and now he was closer I could hear words. 'Gone, gone,' he said. 'Gone, gone, gone. My hands. My hands! Gone, gone, gone . . .'

Meroe stepped in front of him and took both of his hands in her own.

'Your hands are here,' she said in a clear tone, calculated to pierce through a drug-affected fog. 'Here. Look at them.'

'Gone, gone,' mourned the young man. He seemed unaware of Meroe's existence. He kept bumping against her in a vague way, as though she was a wall in his path. She turned him gently so that he was facing an actual wall and he continued to try to walk through it.

'Call an ambulance, Corinna,' she instructed me and I went inside to do so.

I have the number on my speed dial. The drug-fucked are not unknown in Calico Alley, though usually they just lie down and go blue, or spend their energy fighting the air. The irritating wail continued, setting my teeth on edge. It was getting to the Mouse Police, too, and I would have said they were as tough a pair of streetfighting moggies as one could wish not to meet down a dark alley. But they didn't like this, and they had huddled together, buried in their flour sacks, and clearly weren't coming out until the noise went away. I wished I could do the same.

In ten minutes the ambulance was in Flinders Lane and two competent amboes were jumping down. The young man wailed at them, too, and they also attempted to demonstrate to him that he had hands while he insisted that he didn't.

'Not the usual run of junkie,' commented one ambo. Her name was Julie, and I had met her before. Her mate was Tom.

'No,' I said, actually looking at the wailer. He was dressed in a good grey suit, shirt and tie fresh on today, shiny black shoes, designer haircut. 'Not at all. I wonder what he's taken?'

'He can't tell us,' said Tom. 'Might be ice. Might not be anything at all. Might be a fruitcake. Plenty of them around. Load him up, Jules, and we'd better get on. Nice to see you again, Corinna,' he said. He collected their reward of two muffins, and the ambulance left. The wailing died away, to my considerable relief.

'That was strange,' I said to Meroe.

'Very,' she agreed.

'And unsettling,' I went on.

'Yes,' she said. We looked at one another for a moment. Real insanity is the most frightening thing in the world.

Well, except for large homicidal maniacs with machetes. They are bad, too. But that faint, relentless voice from that dried-up throat, mourning the loss of his hands—I shook myself.

The Mouse Police burrowed up out of their sacks and began a relieved and slightly embarrassed wash. Yes, we are tough, they implied, but no cat could be expected to put up with that frightful noise, I mean, could they? Not with ears like ours. And I had to agree with them. I poured myself another cup of coffee. Jason came back. Meroe took her leave, and baked bread began to happen.

Once we had the orders sorted out and the wire racks of the shop all filled, it was time to meet my shop assistant of the day. It was either Goss or Kylie who was jumping up and down with impatience in the street, both hands under armpits, getting some warmth out of her shrug. The girls change hair colour and even eye colour so often that I am not at all sure what they actually look like. Since they have taken to covering their navel rings, I have no chance, and just ask who it is every day. This girl had pink hair and bright blue eyes and said she was Kylie. And I had no reason to believe that she was fibbing. I unlocked the shop door and the scent of baking flooded out into the cold street. Kylie took a deep, appreciative sniff.

‘Scrumptious!’ she said. ‘What’s the muffin today, Jase?’

‘Jason,’ said Jason sternly. Names were important to him. ‘It’s date and walnut. Want one?’

‘Half a one,’ temporised Kylie, who was on a perpetual diet. ‘Corinna can have the other half. It doesn’t matter to her.’

This was true. I weigh about a hundred kilograms, am as healthy as a horse, and have no truck or any other kind of vehicle with diets. People who intend to offer me their latest weight loss miracle diet, pill, rare oriental herb or tea can find another sucker. Daniel thinks I’m beautiful. So there.

Jason tore a muffin in two, gave half to me and half to Kylie, and went back into the bakery to meet the carrier who would take my bread to all corners of the city. I don’t really need a shop to make a living—my bread sells very well to restaurants and cafes—but I like to see the smiles on the faces as the poor starved peons of the city buy a little mouthful of pleasure to sweeten their long, long days.

My own view is that everyone works too hard and too long and they ought to get out more. There isn’t time in their

improverished lives to do anything creative, or even to just sit and stare, one of my favourite occupations. And how the wired-in young—never without their music, never out of touch because of mobile phones, constantly sharing everything, even pictures—are going to cope if they ever encounter solitude and silence is another thing. They might easily go mad . . . which brought me to the handless wailer again. What could send someone off into that sort of delusion? It didn't sound like a drug. Perhaps he just cracked. Working in the city at present was enough to make anyone break down . . .

Meanwhile, Horatio, my tabby and white gentleman, had descended to the shop, where he took up his position next to the cash register. I removed the float from the mop bucket—no adolescent male burglar was going to look in a mop bucket—and Kylie pulled the blinds on a new day. Earthly Delights was open for business.

Which was slow. Despite the admirable muffins, created by Jason the Muffin Master, despite the scent of fresh baking and caraway seeds and fruit, the hordes failed to arrive. I went out into the lane to see if my suspicions were correct, and saw that they were. Best Fresh was doing very good business.

But the faithful eventually did arrive at Earthly Delights in sufficient numbers so that the day was not a total loss. Some people valued organic ingredients, fine spices and perfect skill over a fifty cent price difference.

'They'll get sick of it,' said Kylie. 'They're just going there because it's new. Don't stress on it, Corinna,' she said, and I decided not to stress on it. There was nothing I could do about it anyway, short of firebombing the place. Which I was trying not to consider.

We all live in an eccentric building called Insula, which is Latin for an apartment house, and it is a Roman apartment

house. Every flat has a theme and a name—I, for instance, live in Hebe, the handmaid of the gods—and we have an impluvium full of goldfish in the lobby and a roof garden with a temple of Ceres, complete with a statue of the goddess. How it escaped the vandalism of the sixties I do not know, but it is perfect, sparkling, very comfortable and home to as rich a collection of interesting people as I could ever imagine. They were all, I could tell, going to come in and buy bread today, to make me feel better about Best Fresh. Even, perhaps, Mrs Pemberthy, who is always accompanied by her rotten little doggie, Traddles. Horatio ignores Traddles as beneath the notice of a nobly born cat.

And here they came, my fellow tenants. Mrs Dawson, back from her bracing early morning walk, was the first. She bought a loaf of rye bread and a muffin, tendering, as usual, the correct money. She caressed Horatio briefly. He allowed this with royal condescension.

‘I should not be concerned about them,’ she told me. Elegant as ever, she had marked the tentative beginning of spring by changing her bitter chocolate leisure suit for dark trousers and a priceless cashmere jumper in soft apricot. I loaded her bread into a broad, willow-leaf peasant basket. ‘Quality will prevail,’ she told me, and went out. I hoped she was right.

Jason had dispatched all of the bread orders and was beginning to clean the bakery. There was a time when I had done this myself, and it was nice to hear someone else clanking about with buckets of hot water. He was singing gently to himself. Jason had never heard gospel or work songs before he came to me. Now he likes them. Instead of trying to sing hip hop, which is hard without an accompaniment, he was singing spirituals.

‘Deep river,’ sang Jason, ‘my home is over Jordan! Deep river . . . oh, shit.’ There was a louder clank as he dropped the mop. I stifled a laugh.

My next customer was tall. She had long legs clad in fishnets, six-inch spike heels, cascading black ringlets and studded bands around wrists and throat. Her mouth was painted blood red.

‘Mistress Dread!’ said Kylie, pleased. ‘What can I get you?’

‘Wholemeal bread. And rolls. Got a supplier for lunch,’ she replied in her deep voice. Mistress Dread (in private she prefers to be called Pat) runs a shop which sells leather wear for the discerning customer. She also runs a very well patronised dungeon where the very best S&M people gather to suffer and be suffered. When she said she was having a supplier for lunch, the mind boggled.

We supplied her with wholemeal bread. Kylie was thinking the same as me.

‘You don’t think she meant . . .’

‘I don’t know what she meant,’ I said firmly. ‘He’ll be lucky if he isn’t cooked and eaten. What a woman, Kylie!’

‘Yair,’ she sighed. ‘Strong. Here’s the Professor,’ she added.

My very dear Professor Dionysus Monk came in, beaming goodwill. He is the nicest man I have ever met, as well as the most learned. He came in with a parcel which he put on the counter next to Horatio, who sniffed and settled down with all four paws upon it. I hoped it wasn’t chocolate.

‘I promised to lend this book to Daniel,’ he said. ‘Rolls, please, and a muffin or two. Nox delights in your cheese scones, by the way, so perhaps I ought to have some of those too.’

By the time they had all come through I was almost sniffing. Therese Webb came down from her flat Arachne in a flurry of home weaving, for date muffins. Jon and Kepler had

descended to ground level from their flat, Neptune, and bought bread. Jon was about to fly away to another one of those godforsaken, pox-ridden, starving places where he went to bring kindness, water treatment plants, high protein biscuits and trade to the lost, stolen, enslaved and oppressed. I admire him immensely. Kepler is his shadow, a willowy, beautiful Chinese man who was expressly created, it seemed, to be Jon's soul mate. They are very sweet together.

Then, as the day's trade did begin to pick up, more fellow tenants came to show the flag. Andy and Cherie Holliday, father and daughter long parted and now back together, bought two loaves and news that the queue outside Best Fresh had dissipated. Perhaps it was just an early morning novelty thing.

The ham and cheese rolls vanished fast. Jason went off to engulf all the leftovers at Cafe Delicious. I ate a ham roll. Horatio graciously accepted some of the ham. Well, most of it, really. Mrs Pemberthy (and her rotten little doggie Traddles) did come in, to tell me that Best Fresh's loaves were ninety cents cheaper. But she bought muffins.

The day wore on. By three, when I was usually sold out, there were ten loaves left. The Soup Run was going to do well tonight. But then Del Pandamus rolled into the shop, filling it nearly from side to side. He is quite big but he is also Greek, with an expansive personality. I am always glad to see him. I love his Eleftherios Venizelos moustache.

'Corinna!' he boomed. 'We need bread! Seven loaves!'

'Del,' I said, 'you never run out of bread. You're just doing this to make me feel better.'

'Me?' he cried, flinging his arms wide. His moustache bristled. 'Me, lie to you? I would never do such a thing. Yai Yai, she sent me. You want to argue with Yai Yai?'

‘Not a chance,’ I said hastily, parcelling up his bread. The secret of success in Greek society is always to remember that Yai Yai is never wrong.

So, all in all, it was with a not too heavy heart that I closed the shop, returned Kylie’s iPod and mobile phone to her and sent her off to do the banking, then farewelled the labouring Jason and ascended to my own apartment. There I washed, dressed in a long blue robe and, taking my cat under one arm and my esky under the other, ascended further to the temple of Ceres. It was glass sided and always warm.

I sat down on a marble bench under the shadow of the goddess, whose generous arms held a whole swathe of corn, and poured myself a drink. When a certain tall, dark and gorgeous man appeared, walking like a cat, my pleasure was complete.

Daniel and gin and tonic. Wonderful.