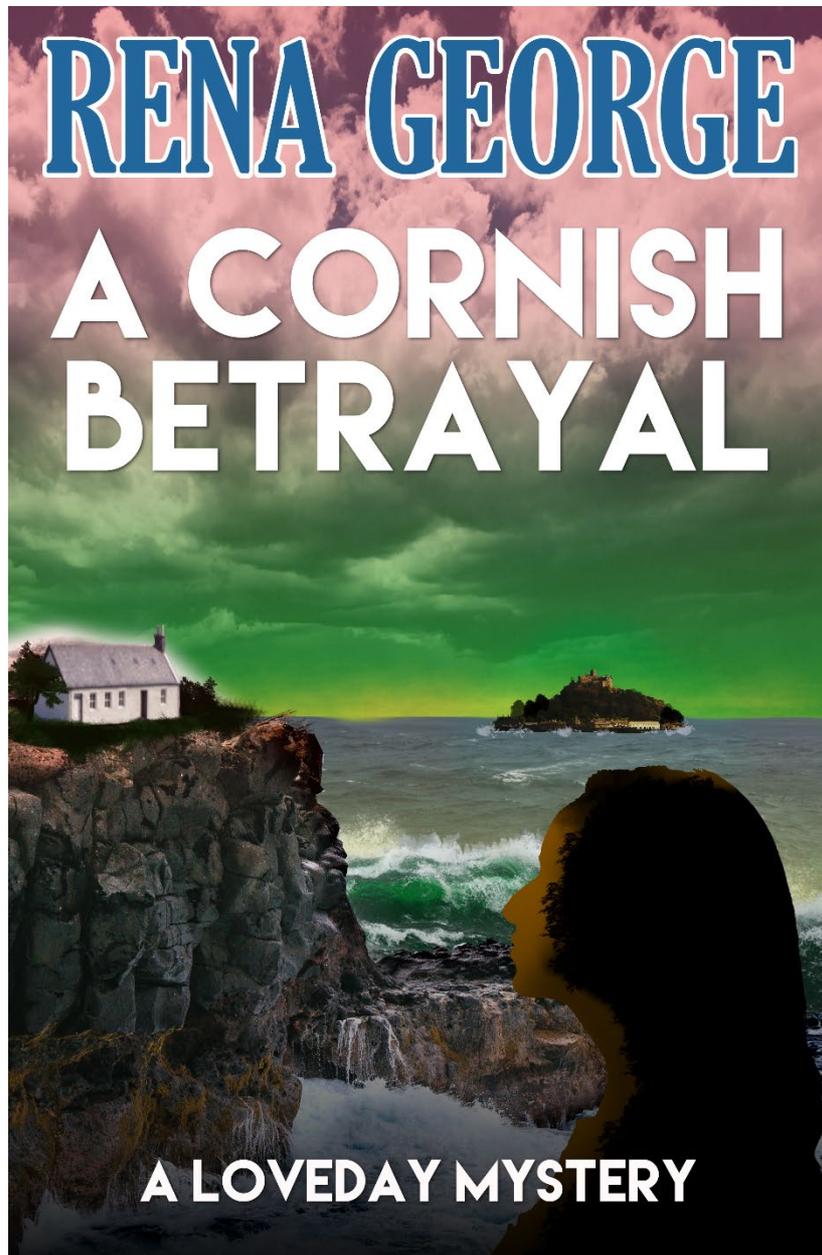


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A Cornish Betrayal

Chapter One.

Keri gave her friend a curious frown. 'You have a strange faraway look tonight, Loveday. Care to share anything with us?'

Loveday glanced away from the pinks and golds of the sunset she could see from the tiny cottage window and turned to the three others around the table.

'Sorry, I'm not great company tonight.' She gave Keri and Ben an apologetic grin. 'And after your magnificent spag bol too. You must give Sam your recipe.'

'Ignore her, she's being facetious,' Sam said, putting his hand over the top of his wine glass to turn down Ben's offer of a top up. 'Loveday knows that my culinary skills are strictly limited to collecting the takeaways.'

Keri gave him a puzzled stare, but Loveday cut in. 'He's not joking. Sam's not exactly a cordon bleu chef, but then neither am I.'

Keri tilted her head and looked from one to the other. 'You don't look as if you're exactly fading away from malnutrition.'

Loveday smiled. 'That's because we dine out at the Godolphin so much. Sam likes to keep me in the style I've grown accustomed to.'

'Becoming a property owner is changing you already,' he laughed.

'Property owner?' Keri's head snapped up. 'You kept that a big secret. Well come on, don't keep us in the dark. Have you come into a fortune?'

'Not exactly.' Loveday said. 'In fact not at all. It's more like a pile of rubble that's been left to me by an ancient aunt I've never even met.'

As she spoke, Loveday's mind flicked back to the surprise phone call from her mother.

'I have some bad news for you,' Heather Ross had said.

Loveday's heart had thudded. 'It's not Dad, is it? Has something happened?'

'No, of course not,' Heather had cut in quickly. 'It's your great aunt Martha. I've had a call from her grandson, Peter. I'm afraid she's passed away.'

Loveday frowned, trying to remember great aunt Martha, but she'd searched her memory in vain. The woman sounded like a character from a Dickens novel.

'You probably don't remember her,' Heather had said. 'They emigrated to Canada before you were born. Granddad was the one who kept in touch with them.'

Loveday's grandfather, Marack Yelland, was in his eighties now, and quite frail. Convincing him to leave his beloved Cornwall when her grandmother, Rose, died three years earlier had not been easy, but her parents had eventually persuaded him to move into the little bungalow next to the family pub in the Black Isle near Inverness. He was settled there now, and she knew her mother was happier having him close by.

'Believe it or not, your brother, Hugh, taught him to use the Internet, so he has been keeping in touch with Peter through emails.'

Loveday smiled. Her granddad had been emailing her too. They were touching little notes full of sad, thoughtful memories of the old days and his life in Cornwall with her lovely and much missed grannie.

'Anyway, as I said, Peter rang last night,' her mother had continued. 'But it was late so I thought it best to put off calling you until now.'

Loveday felt a pang of regret. She should have made more of an effort to visit Peter and the rest of the family in Canada.

She'd said, 'I'm so sorry, Mum. Are you OK?'

'I'm fine but Granddad was quite emotional when I told him this morning. He's been reliving the old days and the family history back when his father, Edward Yelland, and sisters, Alice and Martha were brought up in Carn Hendra.'

'Carn Hendra?'

'It was a tiny stone cottage down in the wilds of West Cornwall.'

'It sounds like a hard life,' Loveday had said.

'It certainly would have been for Martha and her husband, Henry, back in those days. He was a tin miner. Their daughter, Christa – Peter's mother – was married to another miner, and she was a bal maiden.'

Loveday had heard about the tough lives of the bal maidens. They were employed to break the ore for smelting. She was trying to imagine the women using their heavy hammers to smash the stone into small pieces. She shook her head, such exhausting, dirty work, and all for a pittance in pay.

'When's the funeral?' she'd asked.

'It's already taken place two days ago in Ontario,' Heather had told her. 'But there's more. Apparently Aunt Martha still owned the family property in Cornwall.' She'd taken a breath. 'The thing is, Loveday. She's left it to you.'

Loveday had gasped. 'She's left me a house?'

'Not a house exactly, it's a cottage...well, what's left of it, although I expect it must be pretty much a ruin by now. It's years since I was out there but I can vaguely picture it. I didn't know it was still in the family. No one has lived there for years.'

Loveday's mind switched back to the present and she realized that everyone was looking at her.

'Well, don't leave it there, Loveday. Tell us about it.' Keri's look of excitement made Loveday smile.

'I haven't come into a fortune,' she said quickly, explaining about her mother's surprise telephone call, and her own amazement at the gift from her elderly great aunt.

'It's a rundown cottage over Zennor way,' she said. 'It might not even still be standing. Probably only a scattering of stones by now.'

Keri raised an eyebrow. 'You mean you haven't been to see it yet?'

'Not yet, I've only now heard about it.'

'What will you do with it?' Ben asked.

Loveday grimaced. 'Absolutely no idea. I'm going over there tomorrow to have a look.' She glanced at Sam. 'Fancy coming with me?'

'Not sure,' Sam said. 'Depends on what I have on tomorrow, but things are quiet at the moment so it should be fine.'

Keri had slipped into the kitchen and reappeared with a big red coffee pot and four mugs on a tray. She nodded back to the kitchen and Ben went to collect the cheese board.

Loveday sat back surveying the array of cheeses and savoury biscuits and gave her tummy a pat. 'Not sure I've got room for any more food.'

'I'm sure you can manage something,' Keri said, but her attention was on Ben, and when Loveday followed her gaze she caught the worried frown. And now that she thought about it, he had been very quiet during the meal.

'Everything all right, Ben?' she asked.

'What?' He glanced across at her. 'Yes, everything's fine.' But he hadn't been able to disguise his distracted look. Sam had noticed it, too.

'You might as well tell them,' Keri said.

'Tell us what?' Sam's head had come up.

Ben swallowed and Loveday saw the muscles in his jaw working.

'Go on,' Keri encouraged.

He sighed. 'One of my friends has disappeared.'

They all stared at him.

'It's probably nothing but...well, I'm getting worried.'

'Disappeared? What do you mean disappeared?' Sam's expression was serious. In the three years he'd known Ben he could never have described him as fanciful. In fact for an artist, he was remarkably down to earth. So what was this about?

'You mean your friend has gone off somewhere?' Loveday interrupted.

'That's just it. I have no idea. He was going to show me round his boat. Jamie has been living on an old narrowboat he's renovating down near Karrek. But when I turned up on Monday he was nowhere to be seen. And he hadn't slept on the boat the previous night.'

'Who told you that?' Sam asked.

‘Scobey, the old boy who’s been helping him with the boat. He didn’t look very happy about the situation either. He said it wasn’t like Jamie to go away and not mention it.’

‘And this was five days ago?’ Sam said.

Ben nodded.

‘How do you know he hasn’t come back?’ Loveday asked.

‘He hadn’t come back yesterday. I checked. As I said, I’m starting to worry.’

‘Starting?’ Keri repeated. ‘You’ve been worrying about this all week.’ She turned to Sam. ‘Something’s not right, Sam. We are both beginning to think this is serious.’

Loveday had been studying Keri’s face. Her friend was her PA at Cornish Folk, the Truro-based magazine she edited. And if Keri felt this Jamie’s sudden disappearance warranted concern then they should listen.

Sam was also feeling uncomfortable about Ben’s story, but he tried to keep his tone light. ‘Does Jamie have a girlfriend?’

‘I think so,’ Ben said. ‘He’s mentioned a girl called Maya, but I’ve no idea who she is, or where she lives.’ His shoulders lifted in a helpless shrug. ‘Scobey’s right. It’s not like Jamie to just disappear. He would have told someone what he was doing.’ He would have told Scobey or left a message for me explaining he’d had to go away.’

‘Not if he didn’t want anyone to know where he was,’ Keri said. ‘You told me he didn’t get on with his parents. Maybe they’ve been trying to find him and he’s lying low for a while.’

‘Why would he do that?’ Loveday chimed in. She was thinking of her own family and how close they all were. It was inconceivable to her not to get on with your parents. Whenever any of her family came to visit her in Cornwall it was cause for celebration.

‘Jamie’s folks are Sarah and Charles Roscow.’

It was clear Ben expected her and Sam to recognize the names, but they didn’t. Loveday pressed her lips together and shrugged.

'The father runs some big London investment bank,' Ben continued. 'Jamie's mother is involved in it too. They live in a sumptuous pad somewhere behind Harrods.'

'They wanted Jamie to join them in the business but he had other ideas, which is why he came to Cornwall. As far as I know his parents have disowned him.' He frowned. 'I think he got involved with some undesirables in London. He wasn't exactly doing drugs, but I think he might have dabbled.'

'But they must know he's down here,' Loveday said.

Ben shook his head. 'I doubt it. Jamie went to great lengths to make sure they didn't find him – hence the boat.'

Sam had stayed silent over the last minutes. He was thinking. The lad had only been missing – if he actually was missing – for five days. He could reel off any number of legitimate reasons why he'd gone away, but something was beginning to bug him and he didn't like the troubled feeling that was beginning to settle in the pit of his stomach. He hoped he was wrong.

'I take it you haven't reported Jamie missing yet, Ben?'

'No, I wanted to run it past you and Loveday first.'

'Well, as you say, it's only been five days, and there could be plenty of explanations for that. But you're obviously concerned...'

'You see! What have I been saying, Ben?' Keri interrupted. 'Sam agrees with me. You should report it to the police. Tomorrow is Saturday. I'm not working. We can go into Truro together.'

'Someone else might have already done it...maybe Scobey. I don't want to waste anyone's time.'

'You wouldn't be doing that,' Sam reassured him.

'I don't suppose you could make a few enquiries, Sam, before it all gets official? You said things were quiet with you at the moment.'

'I can maybe put out a few feelers, but I'm not promising anything. There's not much the police can do unless you file a missing person report.'

'I can't see there would be any harm in it,' Loveday agreed.

Ben was still looking unsure, but Keri thumped the table as she stood up to clear away the coffee things. 'That's settled then. We'll go to the police in the morning.'

'Sounds like a plan, Ben.' Sam gave what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

'You think I should?'

'Definitely!' Loveday said.