

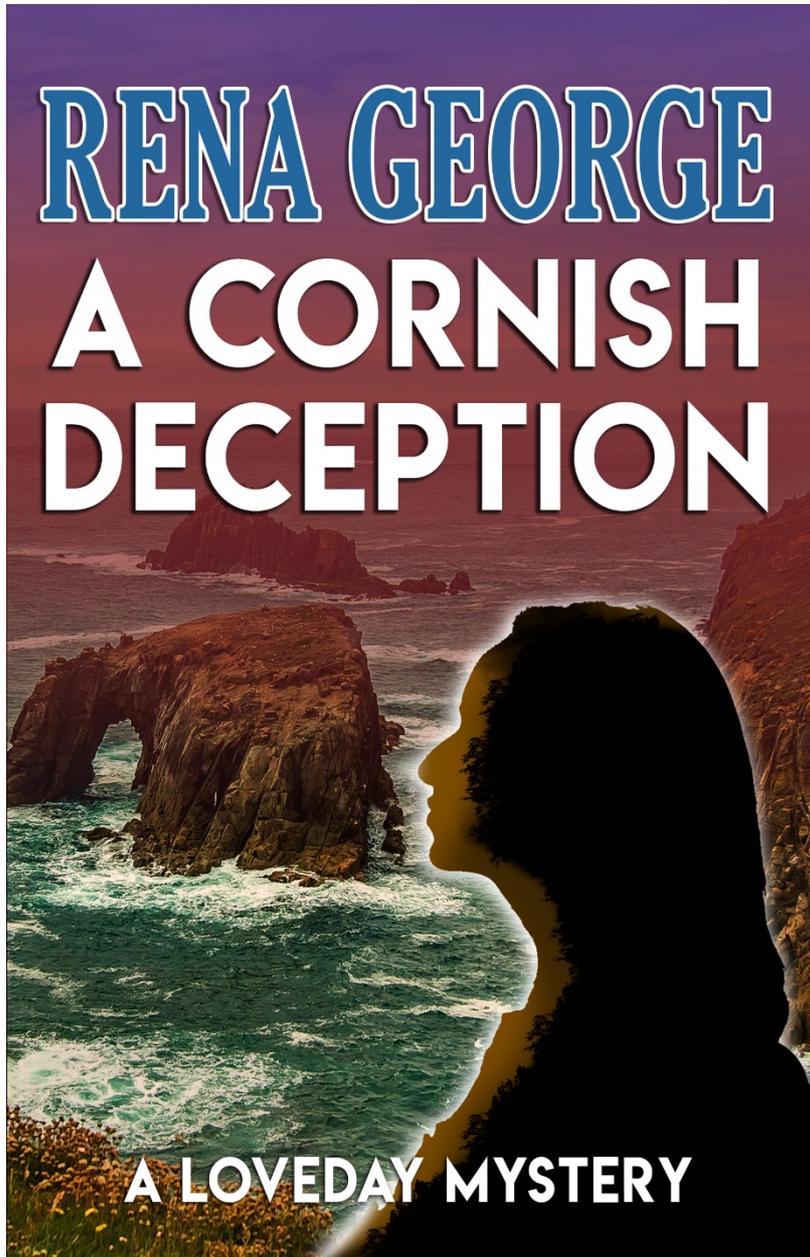
Available on Amazon

amazon

BUY NOW

RENA GEORGE

A CORNISH DECEPTION



A LOVEDAY MYSTERY

A Cornish Deception

Chapter One

Loveday was not feeling at all confident as she pulled into Symington's car park. It was Cornwall's most prestigious antiques auction house. She had intended dropping by for the previous day's viewing, but there had been the usual last-minute panic at the office to get the magazine to the publisher on time, and with Merrick away in Italy for a week the onus was on her, as editor, to get it right. So here she was, an hour before the sale was due to start, searching for a space in the busy car park. She spotted one at the far end and swept the Clio into it, and then got out to hurry inside the building.

There was furniture everywhere, and she had to squeeze round a large mahogany dresser and a tapestry-covered chaise longue to get inside. The place smelled of age, dust and polish. Loveday's nose twitched. It was quite pleasant. She passed a reception desk where she could see a couple of women busy on phones. Behind them, men in suits appeared to be checking catalogues and scanning computer screens. The place was buzzing.

She'd not been to an auction sale before and would have enjoyed the excitement if she hadn't felt under pressure to buy this bible box for Merrick.

Loveday looked around her. The place was a maze of corridors, and the antiques seemed to spill out from everywhere.

The main saleroom, when she found it, was already full of people, most of whom seemed to be marking catalogues as they browsed around the items for sale. She bought one from a member of staff, and asked to be pointed in the direction of the bible box.

She was still examining the picture in the catalogue as she moved away. She couldn't see what was so special about it. It looked like the top part of an old school desk, and then she noticed the price – £1,000 to £1,500. She swallowed. Was this right? Why would anyone pay so much for an old box?

The assistant was at her shoulder again.

'It's a come and buy me estimate,' she advised. 'It will probably realize a lot more.'

If Loveday had been less than confident before, she was feeling distinctly nervous now. Merrick had given no indication how valuable this thing was likely to be. Why had he trusted her to bid on his behalf? She pulled out her phone and stared at it. Should she ring him in Rome? She didn't even know what time of day it would be there. He had been adamant she should put in the winning bid.

'I'm depending on you, Loveday. You're the only one I can trust to do this for me,' he'd said.

But he hadn't known then what the estimate would be. She should have paid more attention to what he'd told her at the time. She knew Merrick wanted the box for his elderly father, Edward Tremayne, the original owner of Cornish Folk magazine.

She liked Edward, with his old-world charm, but she wasn't surprised the magazine had fallen on hard times when he had been at the helm. The cutthroat world of commerce had not suited Edward Tremayne but he'd refused to change his ways and move with the times, and so the magazine had suffered. That's when Merrick had stepped in to take charge, slimming down production costs and making difficult, but necessary, decisions to reduce the number of staff. Loveday knew exactly how much he would have hated that, but it had saved the magazine. Cornish Folk was still being run on a shoestring budget, but they were a team and everyone continued to embrace the challenge of keeping the magazine viable.

The Tremayne family lived in a large converted farmhouse on the outskirts of Truro, where Loveday and Sam were regular dinner guests. Her mind went back to the large drawing room where Edward now spent most of his time. The walls were lined with paintings, and his precious antiques filled the room. And now he wanted a bible box, not any old bible box, but this particular 16th-century one that looked likely to cost several thousands of pounds.

Loveday had been directed to find the item in the upstairs viewing room. The stairs creaked as she climbed, emerging in an area crowded with furniture. She glanced around wondering how she was ever likely to find this bible box thing amongst all the other stuff. But as she moved about the room she saw the

sale was more organized than she'd realized. Each item had a number that corresponded with its entry in the catalogue.

The bible box was numbered 105 in the catalogue. Loveday began checking the rows of furniture. She found 103, 104, and then 105. The box sat on top of a polished dark wood table. She moved in for a closer look, laying her hand on the old pitted oak lid and trailing her fingers over the aged grooves. She had to admit that it did have a kind of charm. It was incredible to think it had been around for five hundred years. She found herself wondering who might have owned it in all that time.

The movement around her took her by surprise. People were making their way downstairs. She followed them to the main saleroom. The place was so packed with bodies that Loveday could hardly squeeze in at the back. She muttered to herself. Stuck here behind all these other bidders, how could she hope to have any chance of making that successful bid for Merrick? The auctioneer wouldn't even be able to see her. She should have arrived sooner and got one of those places near the front.

She was frowning, annoyed, at the people ahead of her, when a movement near the auctioneer's rostrum caught her eye. Someone was waving a catalogue. 'Down here, Loveday,' the person was calling. 'There's a seat down here.'

Loveday craned her neck to see, and then grinned. It was Priddy Rodda. What was her friend, Priddy doing here? But now wasn't the time for questions. She was here, and she had a spare seat for Loveday right up at the front.

She began to ease her way through the crush, smiling apologetically to everyone who gave way to her.

Priddy continued to wave as Loveday fought her way to the front. 'I was saving it for Hannah,' she called. 'But she can't come.'

'You're a lifesaver, Priddy,' Loveday gasped, all but collapsing onto the hard chair as her catalogue slid to the floor and she bent to retrieve it. 'Not that I'm complaining or anything, but what on earth are you doing here?' She laughed, settling breathlessly beside her friend.

'I'm always here on auction days,' Priddy whispered back as the auctioneer arrived and the proceedings began. 'It's what you're doing here that I want to know.'

Loveday thrust the catalogue in front of Priddy and tapped the picture of the bible box. 'I'm bidding on this for Merrick.'

Priddy's eyebrow arched as she saw the guide price. 'He's prepared to pay all that? But that's scandalous.'

'I know, but he wants it for his father.' Loveday slid her friend a hopeful look. 'The thing is, Priddy,' she said, bending her head towards her in a conspiratorial whisper, 'I don't know a thing about bidding. I don't suppose you would do it for me? I have to get this box no matter what it costs.'

Loveday saw the gleam of excitement in Priddy's eyes and hoped she wasn't being too rash by handing over this responsibility to her friend.

The sale of the bible box came round faster than Loveday had expected. Bids were flying in fast from all corners of the room. The price had reached £3,000 and was rising in units of £100. In no time it was £4,500, and then £4,600 and £4,700. Priddy's hand was still shooting up as she vied with the other bidders. Loveday wanted to bury her head in her hands. She wasn't at all sure this should be happening. And then she heard the auctioneer calling out £4,900. There was a pause, and then, 'Going once, going twice. For the last time...' He raised his gavel, scanning the room for any more bids, but there were none. The gavel came down with a sharp crack, and the auctioneer pointed to Priddy.

'Congratulations, madam. It's yours.'

Priddy beamed at Loveday.

'We got it,' she said triumphantly.

'So you did,' said Loveday. She was wondering what Merrick would say when she told him how much it had cost him.

They were fighting their way through the crush to get out of the room when Priddy tugged her sleeve. She nodded to a man moving ahead of them.

'That's who was bidding against me. Do you know him?'

Loveday frowned, shaking her head just as the man turned and they saw him in profile.

'He does look familiar,' she said.

'What about the young woman with him?'

Loveday shook her head. 'I don't recognize her.' She frowned. 'I'm wondering if we shouldn't chase after him and tell him he can have the wretched box.'

'Did I bid too high? You said Merrick really wanted the thing.'

Loveday put an arm round Priddy's shoulders and gave her a crooked smile.

'Don't mind me. I'm sure Merrick will be delighted.'

But her fingers were crossed behind her back as they went to the office to settle up.

Merrick had authorized her to use the business's bank card to purchase the bible box, and asked her to have it delivered to the magazine office.

'He's still there,' Priddy said, as Loveday gave the delivery address.

'I think he's watching us.'

Loveday turned to speak to her friend, but her eyes glanced over the growing queue behind them. The man turned away before she caught his eyes, but not before she got a good look at him.

'Why do you think he's so interested in us?' Priddy said, as Loveday shot ahead out to the car park.

The man was nowhere to be seen. But as she stood at the top of the stairs, her mobile phone in her hand, she spotted him. He drove past in an old station wagon, a woman by his side. Loveday quickly read the number, dictating it into her phone. If the man had been up to no good then Sam could check out his vehicle on the Police National Computer.