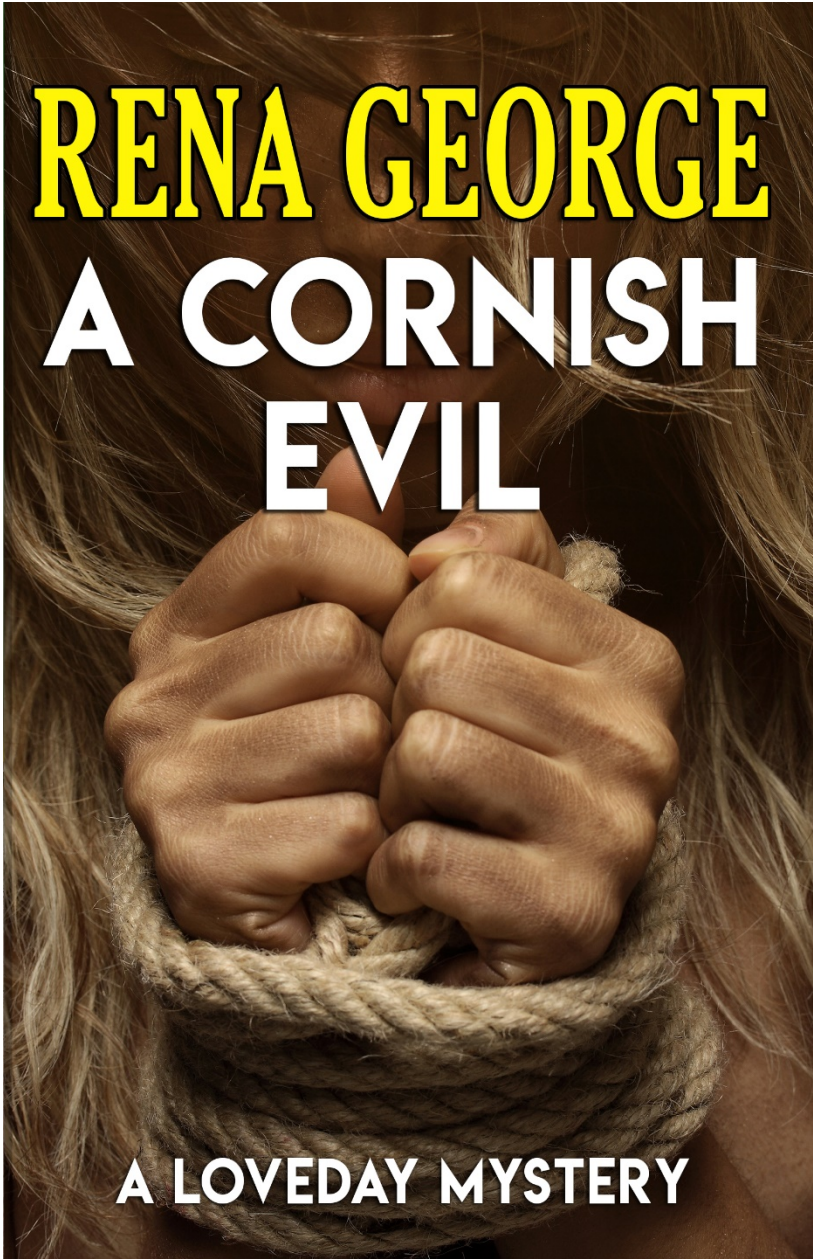


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RENA GEORGE
**A CORNISH
EVIL**

A LOVEDAY MYSTERY

A Cornish Evil

Chapter Two

Merrick hadn't stinted on the reception. He'd booked the Trevere Manor Hotel, on the outskirts of Truro. It was one of the most luxurious and expensive hotels in Cornwall. Not that Loveday was complaining, and judging by the delighted look on Connie's face, she wouldn't be raising any objection to the sumptuous venue either.

The special entrance for the bride and groom had been festooned with cream and pink roses. These had been entwined with green and silvered foliage. Loveday and Sam looked at each other and smiled when they saw Connie's gasp of delight and watched her reach up to kiss Merrick, her eyes shining.

'Merrick's pushed the boat out with this place,' Sam said, lowering his voice to a whisper as his arm encircled Loveday's waist. 'Look at the room through there.' Opulent was the word that came to mind as Loveday peeked into the beautiful dining room. Chandeliers glittered above tables draped in white linen and beautifully set for the wedding breakfast. Each table had a centrepiece of cream roses and an array of long-stemmed wine and water glasses sparkled at each place setting.

Connie saw their admiring glances as she and Merrick came forward to join them. 'Isn't this perfect?' She beamed, leaning in to kiss Loveday's cheek.

Loveday sighed. 'It's spectacularly beautiful. How clever of you Merrick, to plan all this by yourself.'

'Exactly what I was thinking,' Connie said. She had a twinkle in her eye.

Merrick's hands came up in a gesture of defence. 'OK...OK, I can tell you two have seen right through me.' He hesitated. 'I hired a wedding planner.'

'A wedding planner?' Connie's eyebrow arched. 'You hired a wedding planner after we agreed to keep the wedding low key?'

Merrick gave an uncertain frown. 'I wanted it all to be perfect.'

Loveday and Sam held their breath, hoping they weren't about to witness the happy couple's first row. But a slow grin was spreading across Connie's face as she held out her arms to embrace Merrick. 'That's the most endearing thing I've ever heard,' she said.

'So, I'm forgiven for doing all this despite what we agreed?'

'You're forgiven.' Connie laughed.

'I think your guests are arriving,' Sam said.

Within minutes the room had filled with buzz and chatter as the wedding guests mingled and waitresses bearing trays of drinks moved amongst them.

The hotel manager had guided Connie and Merrick to a little table bearing the two-tier wedding cake on a silver tray. There was a burst of applause as the couple made the ceremonial first cut with a silver knife and everyone looked on as they posed for the photographer.

'They look so happy Sam, don't they?' Loveday said, tilting her head to the side as she watched them. He didn't reply and when she glanced up at him she saw the faraway look was back in his dark eyes. Did this mean he still resented his first wife Victoria was planning to marry again? Or was the wistful gaze for his beloved Tessa? Loveday guessed the second, and a shiver ran through her.

The arrival of a waitress with a tray of champagne forced her mind back to the present. The next time she looked at him, Sam was smiling. He seemed happy for now and that was good enough for her. 'This is the kind of marriage that's for keeps,' he said as she sipped her champagne and nodded agreement. 'Connie and Merrick are perfect for each other.'

'They do look good together,' a voice over her shoulder said. When Loveday swung round it was Edward Tremayne's craggy face she saw smiling back at her. 'It's good to know Merrick has found someone lovely. I've been reminiscing about the first time Connie came to us at Morvah.' He sighed. 'We couldn't have found a better housekeeper. And she cooks like an angel.'

'And now she's one of the family.' Loveday laughed.

But Edward's eyes had strayed across the room to where his younger son, Cadan, stood with a beautiful young woman. 'That's his latest girlfriend, Marietta,' he said. 'She's a student

at Falmouth Art School.' His old face creased into a grimace. 'They're sleeping together, you know,' he muttered, his body language registering his disapproval.

Loveday saw Sam give the couple an appraising look and knew the same thought she'd had was crossing his mind. The girl looked to be still in her teens, while Cadan was in his thirties. She was far too young for him. She also looked a lot less sophisticated than his usual choice of lady friend. Cadan must have been aware they were discussing him for he swung round and flashed them a dismissive smile. Marietta too, had noticed them and leaned her head in towards Cadan, no doubt enquiring who they were. Loveday smiled at the girl, but she could well understand Edward's disapproval. She hoped the young woman knew what she was doing getting mixed up with Cadan Tremayne.

She was remembering her first encounter with Merrick's half-brother on the stairs at the magazine office in Truro some years ago. She had been going up to the editorial floor to be interviewed for the editor's job on Cornish Folk. Cadan had barred her way, teasing her about being in a hurry. She hadn't appreciated being accosted by a complete stranger who'd been arrogant enough to try flirting with her. Learning later he was a member of the Tremayne family had done nothing more to impress her. She was still annoyed his behaviour had almost spoiled her delight at having been offered the job as Merrick's right-hand woman at the magazine.

She saw Cassie waving to her from the other side of the room and nodded back, returning the wave. She would have preferred to have been seated at a table with Cassie and Adam, but as best man and bridesmaid she knew she and Sam would be placed at the top table with the bridal party. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Cadan move across the room. She watched as he tapped one of the waiters on the shoulder. The man wheeled round, a look of dismay on his face when he recognized Cadan. Loveday frowned, it looked like they were having words. She wondered what was going on there. She knew Merrick's half-brother wasn't popular, but this was something else. They were definitely arguing. These two had history. She glanced away, deciding it was none of her business what Cadan got up to.

She hadn't noticed Priddy Rodda come up beside them and spun round at the sound of her voice. 'Has Sam got his speech

ready? I'm expecting a few laughs,' her friend joked. Loveday had no idea what was in the speech. Sam had been very secretive about it. She pulled a face. 'I did offer to help but he insisted on writing it on his own. I don't know what's in it, but judging by the tiny scrap of paper he composed it on, it won't be long.'

'Suits me.' Priddy's ample chest rose in a satisfied sigh as she raised a glass of sherry to her lips. Judging by her rosy glow Loveday guessed it perhaps wasn't her first glass. She smiled. Priddy wasn't used to alcohol, but she seemed to be enjoying it.

'Look.' Priddy nodded to the hotel manager, who had made his way to Connie and Merrick and was having a discreet word with them. 'I think this chap is going to tell us to go through and take our seats at the tables.' Loveday thought so too. She put her glass on a nearby table and gestured to Sam that she was disappearing to the ladies' room for a few minutes. 'I'll come with you,' Priddy said, keeping her glass with her as she followed Loveday through the room and out across the hotel foyer. As they passed the stairs to the upper bedrooms a man came running down, casting anxious glances about him as he went. His jeans, tee shirt and scruffy looking black leather jacket appeared so out of place there that Loveday hesitated, turning back to watch him as he took long hurried strides across the plushly carpeted foyer and went out through the revolving glass doors.

Under different circumstances she might have been curious enough to follow him to the car park to see which way he went, but this was Connie and Merrick's wedding reception and the running man was none of her business. A movement from behind made her glance round. Another guest had emerged from the wedding room and appeared to edge back round the corner as the man passed her. There was no mistaking the filmy peach dress. It was Cadan's friend, Marietta and it very much looked like she hadn't wanted to be spotted. But who exactly had she been hiding from?

Loveday was still puzzling over the girl's odd behaviour when she and Priddy got back to the others. 'Oh look. There's Cassie and Adam,' Priddy said. 'I think I'm at their table. I should go and join them.' She gave a departing wave as she hurried off across the room, leaving Loveday looking around her. The top table people were still on their feet and Sam and Merrick were chatting. Connie appeared at her side. 'I know it's ridiculous but

I'm as excited as a schoolgirl today,' she said. 'I'm feeling guilty now I ever suggested our wedding should be a quiet affair. Merrick was right. This is wonderful.'

'It is,' Loveday agreed, catching Connie's gaze to her impeccably dressed wedding guests, who were now filing through and organizing themselves at the cluster of large round tables. She could see a group of waitresses gathered by the door with bottles of champagne ready to come in and fill everyone's glass. 'I think we should take our seats,' she said.

The Trevere Manor Hotel had excelled itself with the wedding breakfast menu. Loveday ran her eye down the list of enticing choices.

Trevere Poached Salmon with Cucumber and Dill

Cornish Oyster

Artichoke Royale with Truffle and Pear

Rosemary and Cornish Sea Salt Roasted Belly of Pork

Roast Rib of Cornish Beef and Mustard

Grilled Looe Bay Mackerel

Cornish Goat's Cheese Tart

Roast butternut squash, asparagus, tender stem broccoli,
Chantenay carrots

Bread and Butter Pudding with Rodda's Clotted Cream

Cornish Trifle

White Chocolate Mousse with Raspberries and Lime

A selection of Cornish biscuits and cheeses

'What! No Cornish pasty?' Sam said, picking up his menu card. Loveday gave him a nudge.

The food was as delicious as it promised. Loveday saw Connie glancing over the tables and knew she was assessing how much their friends were appreciating the banquet. There was no doubt they were. It was excellent, even if it did lack Connie's special touch.

Sam's speech got an enthusiastic reception and she noticed a few hankies coming out when he threw in a few off the cuff remarks about the couple. Sam clearly knew things about their friends that even she hadn't. Loveday led the applause when he'd finished and Merrick and Connie beamed across the table at him as he sat down.

'Where did that come from?' Loveday said in a conspiratorial whisper over the rim of her glass. 'It was brilliant.'

Sam gave her a smug smile. 'I can rise to the occasion when it's called for, besides, I'm quite fond of these two.'

Loveday stretched across to squeeze his hand. 'I know you are,' she said. 'We both are.'

The band struck up a rendering of 'You're My World' as Merrick led Connie onto the dance floor and a ripple of applause went around the room.

Loveday glanced to Sam. 'You know of course we are expected to join them now?'

'I didn't,' Sam said as he got to his feet and held his hand out to her. 'But I'll give it a go. I'll try not to step on your toes.'

It was another hour before Merrick and Connie slipped away to prepare for their departure.

'I think they were hoping to get off without any fuss,' Loveday said to Sam, keeping her eye on the stairs as everyone waited for the couple to emerge.

'There's no way that was going to happen,' Sam said. He and Adam had returned to the reception after loitering suspiciously around the back of the couple's going away car.

'Please tell me you two didn't tie strings of cans and a "Just Married" notice to the back bumper of Merrick's car,' Cassie said, giving her husband a suspicious look.

'I think it's exactly what they've been doing,' Loveday grinned.

A cheer went up as Merrick and Connie reappeared and made their way to their car. Everyone followed. A tear sprang into Loveday's eyes as she and Sam hugged them both.

Edward was also looking emotional as Merrick threw his arms around him. There was even a hug for Cadan and Marietta. A roar of laughter went up as the car moved off trailing a clatter of cans and red L sign.

Cassie shook her head. 'Classy,' she said.

Sam and Adam shared an amused look as they all headed back to the room and the band began to play a slow waltz.