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A CORNISH KIDNAPPING



A LOVEDAY MYSTERY

A Cornish Kidnapping

Chapter Two

Not possessing a 'sat nav', Loveday had poured over the map before she set off. Gynys Cove was further north than she had realized. At Indian Queens she took the A39, staying on that until she had passed the Port Isaac sign, and then veered off onto a minor road.

The Black Swan was at the bottom of one of those twisting Cornish lanes that wind down to a waterfront. She'd found a parking space at the top of the hill, and reached into the back of the Clio for the canvas satchel containing her camera, notebooks, pens, and digital recorder. Then she set off down the slope, automatically snapping pictures as she went.

She passed a cluster of cottages at the top, and registered her approval at an old red telephone box that, judging by the squash of books inside, had reinvented itself as the village's mini library.

Then she saw it! The pictures Marika Sweet had sent showed a pretty waterside tavern. This building was so ugly and rundown that it seemed almost derelict. The Black Swan sign hung askew from rusty chains and paint peeled from doors and window frames. Loveday stared at the place. Surely this couldn't be right?

She hadn't heard the light footsteps behind her, and spun round, startled, when the woman spoke.

"If your looking for lunch, my dear," the newcomer began kindly, "you won't get any in there. This place has been closed for some time."

The woman's keen grey eyes studied her. She wore a pale green twinset, tweed skirt, and her silver-grey hair was elegantly styled.

Loveday glanced back at the sad building, and frowned. Marika Sweet had definitely said the Black Swan. Had it all been a practical joke at her expense? "I'm a bit confused," she began. "I'm supposed to be meeting someone here. Could there be another Black Swan somewhere nearby?" But even as she spoke she knew how unlikely that would be.

The woman shook her head, her eyes lingering on the shuttered windows. "Not around these parts, sorry." She turned to retreat back into the small cottage that sat on its own at the bottom of the lane, and then stopped, wheeling round. "Have you come far, my dear?"

"Truro." Loveday said, her mind still flicking through possibilities that she had somehow misunderstood Marika Sweet.

"Then why don't you come in and have a cup of tea?" She nodded back to the shuttered building. "And I'll tell you all about this place."

This was an offer Loveday wouldn't refuse. She'd been brought to this strange place, apparently on some wild goose chase, and there was just a chance that this sweet old lady might know why.

She'd walked as far as the little slipway when a movement further upstream caught her eye. When she realized what it was she stopped, transfixed. A three-masted clipper ship was anchored in the middle of the river.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

The woman had joined her on the slipway and was gazing out at the ship.

"What's she doing here?" Loveday was mesmerized.

"A commercial venture, I'm afraid. The owners charter her out to film companies and the like."

"I've seen old sailing ships like this at Charlestown Harbour, but I didn't know about this one. What's her name?"

"The Arabella, I believe," Miss Sproat said, turning back to her cottage. "Come inside and I'll get that tea."

Loveday was already planning an article around the Arabella as she followed the old lady into the chintzy elegance of her sitting room.

The cottage was much like her own one in Marazion where, from her tiny front room, she had a spectacular view of St Michael's Mount. At low tide a cobbled causeway was exposed making it possible to reach the tiny island on foot. She delighted in the constantly changing scene. On summer evenings, when the sun sank behind the rooftops of Penzance and painted the sky crimson, the castle glowed and twinkled on its high rock, reminding Loveday of a book of children's fairy tales that she'd once had.

The view from the window of this old lady's place was more restricted, but if she inched far enough left she could just glimpse a tiny stone quay, and further out, a couple of tall-masted yachts.

"It's lovely here," she commented, as her host returned with a tray set with bone china cups and saucers and matching sugar bowl and milk jug. She put it down on a low table and came forward. "I'm Millicent Sproat."

Loveday took the outstretched hand and smiled.
“Loveday Ross.”

Millicent’s eyebrows rose. “From that attractive burr in your accent I suspect you are a newcomer to Cornwall, like myself.”

“If you call five years new, then yes, I suppose I am.”

‘My dear,’ the grey eyes twinkled. “I’ve been here for fifty years and I’m still not regarded as a local. I take it you are Scottish?”

“A bit of both actually. Mum’s Cornish, but Dad’s from Inverness.” The sudden flash of home brought a smile. “They run the family pub up there.”

The old lady nodded approvingly and turned to pour their tea.

“You said you could tell me about the Black Swan,” Loveday prompted.

Millicent put down the teapot and glanced to the window. “The Swan used to be a proper place, but that was in the days when Mr and Mrs Sweet ran it.”

“Sweet?” Loveday’s head came up sharply. “That’s the name of the woman I came to meet. She gave me the impression that this place was thriving. We were considering running a picture-feature about it.”

The old lady’s brow wrinkled. “You’re a journalist?”

“I’m sorry,” Loveday said. “Didn’t I mention that? I work for a magazine called *Cornish Folk*. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

Millicent Sproat shook her head. “I don’t think so, but I was telling you about the Black Swan. It used to be such a

lovely pub; people came from all over Cornwall to dine there. The food was wonderful, but it was the setting that entranced people most.”

Millicent’s cup chinked against its saucer as she put it down quickly and continued, “That was before they sold it to the Clemo brothers.” She turned away, but not before Loveday saw the shadow cross her face.

Hoping she wasn’t going to leave her story there, she asked, “The Clemo brothers? Are they local?”

Miss Sproat nodded. “I believe they are originally from Redruth, but they seem to have a finger in many pies. They are the ones who own the ship out there.” She nodded towards the river. “I’ve no idea where they are based now. I understand they also have a yacht in Falmouth Marina. They could be living on that for all I know.”

“I don’t suppose you know the name of this yacht?”

Miss Sproat either had no idea, or she was ignoring the question. She gave a deep sigh. “I can’t imagine why they bought this place, for they closed it down almost at once. We all thought they would exploit the venue, being a waterfront property I mean, but they didn’t. They just put up the shutters and left it to deteriorate.”

Loveday was already wondering if there might be some kind of story here after all. “Did you know the original owners well, Miss Sproat?”

“Oh yes, they were my friends - at least Marika was, her husband, Colin...” She sighed deeply. “Well...he gambled. That’s why they lost the business. They had so many debts, and they couldn’t afford to keep up the repairs. And when they struggled to meet the bills the brewery just eventually stopped supplying them.”

She met Loveday's eyes. "You can't have a pub with no beer," she said, but there was no accompanying twinkle in her eye to suggest she was joking.

"I'm trying to understand why Marika Sweet would tell blatant lies to bring me here," Loveday said, holding Millicent's candid gaze. "Have you any ideas?"

The old lady's shoulders rose in a shrug.

"She actually told me that she had started a new business as a wedding planner and would be promoting the Black Swan as a wedding venue."

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I know nothing of this."

Loveday was thinking hard. "I don't suppose you know how I can contact the woman? I mean if she was a friend of yours then perhaps she left an address?"

Another shrug.

That's when Loveday noticed the magazine. There was a just a corner of it peeping from under a pile of newspapers on a table by the window, but she would have recognized her own *Cornish Folk* magazine anywhere. And from what she could see, it looked like the current edition. She glanced away quickly, not wanting the old lady to see she'd spotted it.

Millicent Sproat was talking again. "The Clemo brothers did make one concession to the local community," she said. "They let us organize a party in the function room. It was a Friday night and people came from all the surrounding villages." She sighed, remembering. "Then the next morning the place was shuttered and locked, just as you see it today. There was no advance notice, no explanation afterwards. The Clemos just closed the place down."

Loveday was getting a bad feeling about this. She was sure the woman knew more than she was admitting. So why had she been brought here?

“Who knows what goes on in there now,” the old lady said quietly.

Loveday sat up, her journalist instincts beginning to kick in. “I don’t understand. You said the place never opens.”

“It doesn’t...well, not to the public.” Millicent leaned forward, lowering her voice as though fearing she might be overheard in her own sitting room. “But people come and go at night. My little bedroom has a view of the slipway down there. I’m a light sleeper and the slightest noise wakens me. It’s the oars splashing in the water, you see. No matter how careful they are I can always hear them.”

Loveday got up and went to the window, looking out at the pub. She didn’t like being made a fool of, and the mysterious Marika Sweet had apparently done just that. Then she stopped. Had something moved behind one of the pub windows? There it was again! There was definitely someone inside the Black Swan...someone who didn’t want to be seen.

“Miss Sproat,” she called over her shoulder, keeping her gaze on the window. “I think there’s someone over there.”

Millicent Sproat came to stand beside her. “I don’t think so. I’d have noticed if the Clemos had come back.” She glanced up the road. “And there’s no sign of their car.”

But Loveday knew what she’d seen. Somebody was playing games with her - and she was going to find out why.

Her mind flitted through all the other things she could have been doing today. Her landlady and friend, Cassie Trevillick, lived with her GP husband, Adam, and their two

young children, in the big house next to the cottage in Marazion that Loveday rented. She had invited her to Falmouth Marina that afternoon.

Cassie ran a successful interior design business, specializing in the refurbishment of yacht interiors. Only the very wealthy could afford Cassie's services, and there was no shortage of those amongst the yachting communities of Cornwall. But sensing a possibly good feature idea, Loveday had passed up her friend's invitation, choosing instead to drive all this way to meet someone who wasn't even here. Her blood was rising now. She'd been messed about enough for one day.

She made up her mind, derelict or not, there was no way she was going back to Truro until she'd had a good nose around the Black Swan. She turned to pick up her bag.

"Are you sure you won't have another cup of tea, my dear?" Miss Sproat was suddenly looking anxious.

Loveday shook the old lady's hand. "Thank you, but no. I really have to be going."

"Well, if you're sure."

"Quite sure," she smiled. She had to get a look inside that building.