

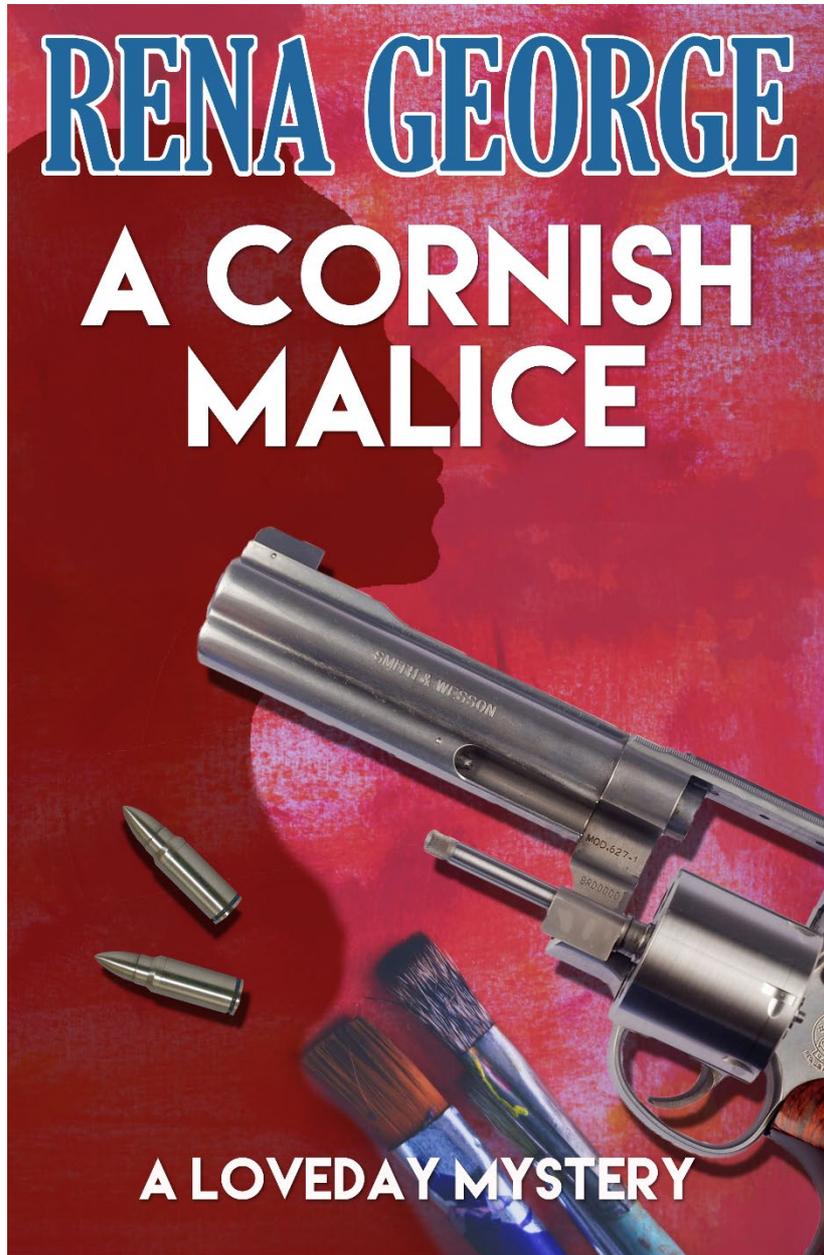
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A LOVEDAY MYSTERY

A Cornish Malice

Chapter Two

'Shocking news about Laura Venning's husband.' Keri Godden looked up from her computer screen as Loveday walked into the office.

Loveday slipped off her jacket and hung it on the ancient coat stand before sitting down at her desk opposite. She sighed. 'Yes, I'll have to ring her later. I'm not looking forward to it. Merrick wants to give her the chance of pulling out of the publicity, if that's what she wants.'

Keri frowned. 'I doubt if that's top of her list of priorities right now. Poor woman. She must be devastated. I mean - ' Keri was getting into her stride now. 'I imagine it must be bad enough if your husband dies, but if he deliberately kills himself...' She let the sentence trail off.

Loveday pressed her lips together, staring at her blank computer screen. 'Maybe he didn't,' she said thoughtfully.

Keri looked up quickly. 'OK, Loveday. Spill. What do you know?' She leaned forward, her eyes eager. 'What has Sam told you?'

Loveday gave her an incredulous stare. Keri was the sweetest of friends, but she'd no idea about the kind of relationship she and Sam had. Why did no one believe Sam didn't discuss his cases with her - well, almost never? 'He's told me absolutely nothing,' she said. 'So I know no more than you, Keri. As far as I can gather the police are treating Silas Venning's death as suicide.'

'But you don't think it was suicide, do you?' Keri narrowed her eyes. 'Come on, Loveday, you can't fool me.'

Loveday threw up her hands in mock defence. 'I told you. I've no idea.'

Keri gave her one of her half smiles. 'Really?'

'Yes, really,' she came back, more emphatically than she felt for she did have some serious reservations about Venning's death being a suicide.

'But it does makes you wonder,' Keri persisted. '...A man like that going off into the woods to do away with himself.'

That thought was still running through Loveday's mind when the office door swung open and Merrick Tremayne strode in.

'My office, Loveday,' he beckoned to her as he passed her desk. 'I need a word.'

Loveday followed him into the glass-partitioned room that was his office, and waited while he took off his tweed jacket and loosened the knot on his yellow tie. He motioned for her to sit.

'So,' he said, pushing his hands through his silvering hair and stretching back in his swivel chair. 'What are we going to do about Laura Venning?'

Loveday shrugged. 'I thought we'd agreed that would be down to her?'

'What does Sam think?' Merrick said. 'Did the man kill himself?'

Loveday put up her hands and shook her head in an exasperated gesture. Another one who assumed she was privy to the collective minds of the Devon and Cornwall Police. 'I honestly have no idea what Sam thinks. I'm usually the last to know.'

Her boss caught the sharpness in her voice and his head came up. 'Everything all right with you two?'

Loveday said nothing.

'Oh, sorry. None of my business.'

Loveday sighed and shook her head again. 'No, it's not that, Merrick. I know you only have Sam's best interests at heart...our best interests.' She paused, looking away. Was something wrong? Sam could be moody, she was used to that. But this time he was shutting her out – and whatever the problem was, it wasn't just the job, even though that's what he'd told her.

'It's probably nothing,' she said, 'Just me being over-sensitive as usual.' She looked across at him. 'You're Sam's best friend, Merrick. Has he said anything to you?'

'About what?'

'About why he's so bloody moody for a start.'

'We haven't talked about it, no. I expect he just needs some careful handling at the moment.'

She stared at him. 'You do know something. You know what's wrong with Sam.' Her eyes were wary. 'Tell me!'

Merrick swallowed. He thought she would have known. Why hadn't Sam talked to her?

'Well? Go on,' Loveday persisted. 'Tell me. I've been going out of my mind here.'

All this cloak and dagger stuff was getting her seriously worried. She held her breath. Sam was ill. That must be it. That's what Merrick was going to tell her. And if he was ill then it must be serious. Why else would he have kept it from her?

'It's Tessa,' Merrick said at last. 'Today is Tessa's birthday.'

The words didn't sink in at first. Tessa? And then she knew. 'Oh, God.' She slapped a hand to her forehead and slumped back in her chair. Of course. Why hadn't she remembered? It was true that work was full on at the moment, there were still five full-page slots to fill, and the current edition of the magazine was due at the printers next week. Sam's workload wasn't exactly light either. But she should have remembered about Tessa.

Her mind scrolled back a year. She and Sam hadn't been together long, but she'd noticed the change in his mood then too. As the late summer days drew on he eventually told her.

Tessa, his beautiful young second wife, had been an artist. She was talented and just beginning to win acclaim for the delicate silver jewellery she made. The little shed at the end of Sam's garden in Stithians had been her workshop. It was still there.

Loveday remembered how the muscles in his jaw had tightened when he told her about the accident - and the drunk driver who took Tessa's life.

So that was it? Loveday blew out her cheeks. 'I should have remembered,' she said quietly.

Merrick sighed. 'Has Sam ever mentioned Brian Penrose to you?'

'Brian Penrose?'

'He was the driver...the one responsible for Tessa's accident.'

'No. I don't think he's ever mentioned him, not by name.'

Merrick shifted uneasily in his chair. This shouldn't be down to him, but Sam obviously hadn't told her. He took a breath. 'Well the thing is, Loveday...'

She almost knew what he was going to say before the words were out.

'Sam has always been adamant that when this man got out of prison he would be there waiting for him,' Merrick said, and paused.

Loveday could feel her heartbeat quicken.

'The thing is,' he went on. 'It's today... Penrose is due for release from Exeter Prison today.'

Loveday's mouth fell open. That couldn't be right. Sam was in Truro...in his office at police headquarters. Ignoring Merrick's words of caution, she flew out of his office, making straight for her desk. Keri looked up in surprise as Loveday fumbled in her bag for her mobile. When she found it she pressed Sam's number. It went to answerphone. She scrolled through her list of contacts until she found the number for Sam's sergeant, DS Will Tregellis.

'Hi Will. Is Sam with you?' she asked as soon as he answered.

There was a split second's hesitation, as Will cleared his throat. 'Err no. Isn't he with you?'

'Why would he be with me when he's working?' she snapped.

Another hesitation, and then, 'He...he booked a day's leave.'

Loveday clicked off the call and stared unseeing across the room. Merrick was right. Sam had gone to Exeter Prison. She tried to imagine what he would do when he saw this man. Although he seldom talked about the accident, she knew how much resentment he'd built up about it. He thought two years for killing his beloved Tessa was no punishment at all.

Loveday had tried not to be jealous of the feelings he still had for his late wife. How could she be jealous of a dead woman? But it was there all the same, somewhere at the back of her mind.

Her worry now was what Sam would do? Would he approach the man? Would he strike him? Would he kill him? She was trembling.

Keri had come round her desk to put an arm around Loveday's shoulder. 'For Heaven's sake, Loveday, what's happened? Are you ill?'

Merrick appeared, signaling for Keri to pass over Loveday's jacket and bag, as he took her arm and led her out of the office.

Loveday was still shaking as they sat in a café round the corner, an untouched coffee going cold in front of her.

'You know Sam better than anyone, Merrick. What will he do? She wished she could stop her teeth from chattering. 'Will Sam kill that man?'

The closer he got to Exeter, the more Sam could feel the familiar anger searing inside him. He tried to rationalize it, tried to focus on Loveday, tried to justify his need for vengeance, but he couldn't. From that moment when he'd met Penrose's arrogant stare from across the courtroom, he'd known what he had to do. In one unforgivable, alcohol-fuelled moment behind the wheel of a stolen car, Brian Penrose had taken the life of the woman Sam had loved. He'd killed Tessa! And for that, Sam could never, would never, forgive him.

How many times had he relived events of that terrible night? Tessa had been excited at meeting up again with her old school chum, Verity Langman. It had been years since the two had seen each other, and Sam could still remember how happy she'd been as she left the cottage, turning at the end of the path for a final wave. He didn't worry when she hadn't got home by eleven. The two old friends would have a lot of catching up to do. But when it got to midnight and Tessa still hadn't called him Sam started to get a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It was Will who had come to his door that night, Sam's old pal, Detective Sergeant Will Tregellis. He'd known instantly of course that something terrible had happened. His kids, Jack and Maddie, flashed briefly through his mind, but he'd known it wasn't them. They were safe in Plymouth with their mother, his former wife, Victoria, It was Tessa that something had happened to.

Will had been gentle as he told him about the accident...about the vehicle that struck his beloved Tessa as she walked back to her car in the St Ives car park. He hadn't told him the driver didn't stop. Not then.

Even now Sam remembered the concern on Will's face as they drove to the hospital. They'd taken her to Truro. Tessa's condition was critical. The nurse was grim-faced as she explained the doctors were doing all they could for her, but it was a serious head injury and it could take sometime before there was any definite news.

Not knowing what else to do, Sam had phoned Victoria. He knew she'd come. It seemed right that she should be there. Seeing her, and imagining the children sleeping safely at home, had given Sam a little spike of comfort in the whole terrible nightmare. Victoria had put her arms around him when the young doctor came and told him they couldn't revive Tessa. They had done all they could to save her, he'd said kindly, but she had died.

At first Sam hadn't wanted to leave the hospital, hadn't wanted to leave Tessa alone in that cold, unfamiliar place. But Will had contacted Merrick, and when he arrived, the three of them had somehow managed to coax him away. There was nothing he could do there they'd told him, and so, reluctantly he'd allowed himself to be led out of the hospital.

He was never quite sure what had happened next, but they must have taken him to Merrick's house – an old converted farmhouse on the outskirts of Truro - because he woke up next morning in an unfamiliar room, and when he'd dragged himself out of bed and gone to the window, it was morning, and Merrick's housekeeper, Connie Bishop, was standing by the door with a cup of tea in her hand. She bit her lip and Sam thought he saw a trace of tears as she bustled past him and put the mug down beside the bed.

She turned, giving Sam a solemn look. 'We are all so very sorry, sir...' But her voice dried up and she couldn't finish the sentence.

Sam nodded and turned away, the lump in his throat choking him. He couldn't allow the woman to see that. He really couldn't cope with her sympathy.

Connie cleared her own throat. 'Mr Tremayne says to come down whenever you're ready.'

Ready, Sam thought, ready for what? He would never be ready to accept that he'd lost his lovely Tessa. But he nodded and said, 'Thanks, Connie. Tell Merrick I'll be down shortly.'

He found them in the kitchen. Merrick got to his feet as Sam walked in. The look of sorrow in his friend's eyes was unbearable. How would he get through this if his friends all pitied him? He had only one question. 'Did they catch him?' He barked out the question in a hoarse voice.

Merrick nodded. 'He's in custody.'

Sam turned on his heel, his eyes glinting cold steel. But Merrick was right beside him. 'Where are you going, Sam? I said the man is in custody. Let your colleagues deal with this.'

Sam's shoulders were rigid. 'I need to see him, Merrick.' The muscles in his jaw tightened. 'I need to see the scum that killed Tessa.'

'And you will,' Merrick said gently, turning Sam back into the kitchen. 'But maybe just not today.'

Sam's hands tightened on the steering wheel, but he forced himself to release his grip as his thoughts returned to the present. He was on the A30, less than forty minutes from the prison. He had no idea what time Penrose would be released but he'd guessed it would be early, certainly before the visitors were due to arrive. Sam muttered a curse. He should have checked the visiting hours, but he doubted if they would start much before 2pm. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was almost ten. He could have a long wait. He wondered what Penrose would be doing now. He tried to imagine him in his cell. Would he be excited? Would there be a big gathering of family and friends waiting to greet him when he stepped from behind that prison door?

The traffic had lessened as he approached the city and he could feel his heart beat accelerate. A few more minutes and he would be there. A white Clio was turning off at the junction just ahead of him. For a second he thought it was Loveday, or was that his guilty conscious taking over? She had no idea he had been planning this. He hadn't mentioned Penrose's release date to her, although he'd known it for weeks. Merrick knew, of course. There was nothing he could hide from his old friend. He could read Sam like a book. But he felt guilty about not telling Loveday. He tried to justify that by convincing himself that he was just sparing her any hurt. But deep down he knew the real reason was that Loveday would try to stop him doing what was happening now. He found a parking place in the car park near the prison and walked to the main door.

Exeter Prison was an old red brick Victorian establishment that had originally been built for just over 300 inmates. Sam knew it now housed more than 500 offenders. On this dull, grey morning it looked austere. He moved to a corner where he could shelter from the wind, and pulled up the collar of his coat.

Sam had read stories about this place when it had been a setting for executions more than a hundred years earlier.

He vaguely recalled the details of a bizarre case when three attempts to execute a prisoner all ended in failure. Apparently a trap door in the scaffold failed to open. Sam shivered, narrowing his eyes into the wind. The story had had a happy ending, the prisoner's sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment, and after several petitions to the then Home Secretary, he was released - even if he'd had to wait some twenty years for his freedom.

The blue wooden door at the front of Exeter Prison didn't open until 11.30. Sam had steeled himself waiting for the man to emerge. Brian Penrose was smaller than he'd remembered, thinner too. He stood by the road, frail and vulnerable looking, not glancing back at the building in which he had been incarcerated for the past two years. There was no sign of anyone coming to meet him. Sam could feel his heart pumping. He had visualized this moment so many times.

Penrose had done his time, but two years was nothing for taking Tessa's life. This was his moment to get even. A life for a life. That would be the only fair outcome. He was going to beat the man to a pulp with his bare hands.

He tried to start forward, but his feet wouldn't move. The man looked so pathetic. Whatever had happened to him inside hadn't been good. But he hadn't driven all this way to let him just walk away. He clenched his fist, feeling the life coming back to his feet. In a handful of strides he could be across that road, his fist at Penrose's throat. He began to move forward.

The car came from nowhere, tyres screeching as it shot past him. Sam saw the look of shock in Penrose's eyes turn to terror as he realized what was about to happen. There was a scream, and then a sickening thud as the car slammed into Penrose, catapulting his body into the air. It hit the ground with a thump as the driver gunned up his engine and roared off at speed.

For a split second everything froze. Even from where he stood across the road Sam could tell that Penrose was dead.

'Your coffee's gone cold, Loveday. Shall I get you another?' Merrick said, rising from the table.

Loveday was about to refuse when her mobile rang. Her eyes widened when she recognized the caller's name. 'It's Laura Venning,' she said, staring at the phone.

Merrick sat back down again and gave a little wave telling her to answer it. It had been less than twenty-four hours since Silas Venning's body had been discovered. Laura would want to stop the article. Loveday cleared her throat. 'Laura!' She swallowed. 'I was so sorry to hear about Silas.'

'Oh you know?' Laura Venning said, giving a hopeless little sigh. 'Yes, of course, you would.' She hesitated, choosing her words. 'I need to see you, Loveday. Can you come over?'

'Well, yes, of course...' She felt a sudden rush of compassion for the woman. 'You're not on our own, are you?'

'As a matter of fact, I am.' Laura's voice was brittle. No show of emotion. Loveday was already reaching for her bag. 'I'm leaving now,' she said, but the phone connection had already been cut. Loveday began to struggle into her jacket.

'Hang on,' Merrick said, getting up to block her exit. 'You can't just go rushing off like this. I thought we were talking.'

'What's the point? Sam's switched his phone off. There's nothing either of us can do to help him if he doesn't want to be helped.' She glanced at her watch. It was already 11.45. 'And by now whatever was going to happen, probably has happened.'

Half an hour earlier Loveday had been sick with worry for Sam, but now she was just plain angry. He hadn't trusted her enough to confide in her. Whether his late wife was dead or alive, it was still Tessa that he loved. And if he'd been prepared to kill for her... A wave of nausea swept over her. She had to stop herself thinking like this.

There were no other cars in the drive as Loveday pulled up at the side of the big white house. All the way there she had forced all thoughts of Sam from her mind. But no doubt he'd be accusing her of interfering again when he heard about this visit.

That is, if he hadn't been arrested for attacking Penrose - or worse - by then.

Loveday took another glance around. It was odd that the place seemed so deserted. By all accounts Laura and Silas had a huge circle of friends. So where were they?

Loveday had expected a wan-faced Laura to open the door, eyes red-rimmed from crying, but there were no signs of a sleepless night on this face, no outward evidence of any grief at all in fact. Perhaps this was how the woman dealt with trauma. The tears would come later. Her first instinct was to reach out, offer comfort and soothing words, but Loveday sensed Laura Venning would not welcome such gestures. She followed her through the airy hall and into the drawing room. The enormous windows had the same view as the ones in the studio upstairs, but today angry dark clouds loomed, and the river mirrored the sky's gloomy mood. 'Thank you for coming, Loveday.' Laura's voice was brisk as she waved Loveday to sit on one of the two huge sofas.

Loveday touched her arm. 'You shouldn't be on your own, not today. Can I call someone for you...one of your friends perhaps?'

'My parents are on their way home from the Caribbean. They'll be here by tonight.' Laura's controlled behaviour was wrong-footing Loveday. She wasn't sure how to react. She cleared her throat.

'It must have been such a shock for your parents, too.'

Laura frowned, ignoring the question. She said, 'It hasn't been on the news. Why would that be?' She rounded on Loveday. 'You're a journalist. You must know.'

Was this why she'd been invited - to be pumped for information? Loveday shrugged. 'I'm not a newspaper journalist any more. The police don't usually release this kind of information to magazines.'

'But you must have contacts in the police?' She'd been pacing the room and suddenly swung round to meet Loveday's confused stare, and then her expression softened. 'I'm sorry. I don't know what you must think of me.' She sank onto the sofa. 'They won't tell me anything you see, only that Silas was found hanging from a...' Her voice trailed into silence and for the first

time Loveday thought she saw a sparkle of tears in the dark eyes.

'The police probably don't know any more than that,' she said gently.

Laura looked up, eyes defiant again. 'Silas didn't kill himself!'

Loveday swallowed, trying to find the right words. 'I can't imagine what you must be going through...'

'We were going to Bermuda next month. I told you that the last time you were here, didn't I?'

Loveday nodded.

'And he'd booked an appointment with his dentist on Friday,' Laura went on, agitation now in her voice. 'Now why would he do that if he was going to kill himself?' She paused, glancing out over the river. '...And besides, he had no reason to...he was happy...we were happy.'

'Your husband had no business worries?' Loveday probed gently.

Laura shook her head. 'Of course not. Venning Marine is thriving. Ask anyone.' She got up, and went to a table of drinks behind the sofa. She lifted a bottle of vodka and wagged it at Loveday. 'Will you join me?' Loveday shook her head. Laura was returning to her seat, glass in hand, when the doorbell rang. She put her drink on the long glass coffee table and looked up, frowning. 'Can you see to that? Tell them I'm resting or something. I don't want to see anyone today.'

Loveday's eyebrow lifted. She wasn't sure she appreciated being ordered about like one of this woman's lackeys, but under the circumstances... She stood up and went to the door.

Meredith Deering didn't wait to be invited in. She swept past Loveday into the drawing room, and threw her arms around Laura.

'I'm sorry,' Loveday said helplessly. 'I tried to stop her.'

'It's fine, Loveday. I didn't mean to keep Meredith out.' She turned and went to pour the newcomer a drink. Loveday sank back onto the sofa. Something was going on here, something she hadn't yet worked out. If Laura believed her husband hadn't killed himself, the implication was that someone else had - and that was murder! So why wasn't she telling all this to the police?

'Have they told you how it happened?' Meredith asked, her green eyes moist.'

Laura shook her head. 'Not a word. How did you hear?'

'Radio Cornwall. It was on the eleven o'clock bulletin.' Meredith looked away, biting her lip. 'It said the police were treating it as an unexplained death.'

Laura's eyes widened. 'That means suicide, doesn't it?'

'No, Laura,' Loveday said, quickly. 'It just means that the police don't yet know how Silas died.' But the woman wasn't listening. She jumped up and began pacing the room again. 'I knew there was something that Detective Inspector Kitto wasn't telling me.' Loveday stiffened at the mention of Sam's name. She tried to cover it, but Laura had been watching her. 'You know him?'

Loveday looked away. She was in no mood to be questioned about Sam. 'We've met,' she said, trying for a non-committal tone.

Meredith hadn't touched her drink. 'I can't believe you're taking this so calmly. Are you sure you're all right, Laura? Maybe I should give you something to help you sleep.'

But Laura swept the offer aside, holding her friend's concerned stare. 'When did you last see Silas, Meredith?'

Was it Loveday's imagination, or had the faintest tinge of colour just touched the newcomer's cheeks?

Meredith tucked a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear and forced a smile. 'It would have been the yacht club dinner two weeks ago, wouldn't it?'

'Not since then?' Laura persisted. Meredith shook her head. 'No, why do you ask?'

'Because he didn't kill himself, and I want everyone who knew him to back me up. If Silas had been planning something like this, I would have known.' Laura shook her head. '...I would just have known.'

Loveday leaned forward. 'You noticed nothing unusual about your husband's behaviour in the last few days?'

'I just said so, didn't I?' Laura snapped, then immediately put out a hand. 'I'm sorry. It's just that...'

Meredith's head jerked up and she stared at her friend, as though she had just realized the implication of what was being suggested. 'You can't really believe someone...' Her voice shook. '...That someone murdered Silas?'

Laura's shoulders lifted in a shrug. 'What other explanation could there be?'

Meredith had gone deathly pale, and Loveday saw her hand shake as she reached for her glass.

'And this is what you want to tell the police?' She looked askance.

'Unless you can suggest any reason why Silas might kill himself, Meredith?' Meredith moistened her lips. It was a few moments before she spoke. 'Maybe I can.' She hesitated. 'Silas came to see me at the hospital last week...as a friend.'

'But you just said the last time you saw him was at the yacht club dinner two weeks ago...'

'I know what I said. I...I lied.'

Laura was staring at her, eyes narrowed.

'Silas had a serious heart problem,' Meredith said. 'It was treatable, but he didn't want you to know about it, not yet. I told him before that he had to take things easier, but he just needed more reassurance. That's what the trip to the Bahamas was about.' She swallowed. 'I suggested it ages ago.'

Laura strode across the room to the window and stood with her back to them. 'I want you to leave now, Meredith,' she said.

Meredith was on her feet. 'Please, Laura,' she pleaded. 'It wasn't up to me to tell you.'

'And close the door on your way out.'

Loveday heard Meredith gasp, before she turned on her heel and marched out of the room. Laura didn't turn back until they both heard the door slam. 'I think you should go too.' She gave a little sigh. 'Look, I appreciate you coming over, but I need to be on my own right now.'

'Of course,' Loveday said, getting up. She wasn't happy about leaving Laura alone in her present mood, but she couldn't force the woman to let her stay. She suddenly swung round to look Loveday in the eye.

'And about that article...I want you to publish it.'

'Really? Are you sure that's what you want?'

Laura nodded.

Loveday turned to go, and then hesitated, looking back. 'Will you be all right on your own here?'

Laura was replenishing her glass.

'Are you sure I can't call someone for you?' She met the woman's dark stare.

'You can call the police. I don't know what game Meredith is playing, but Silas didn't kill himself. If he was ill he would have treated it as a challenge, not been defeated by it.' She came forward and touched Loveday's arm. 'Meredith knows something. The police need to talk to her.'