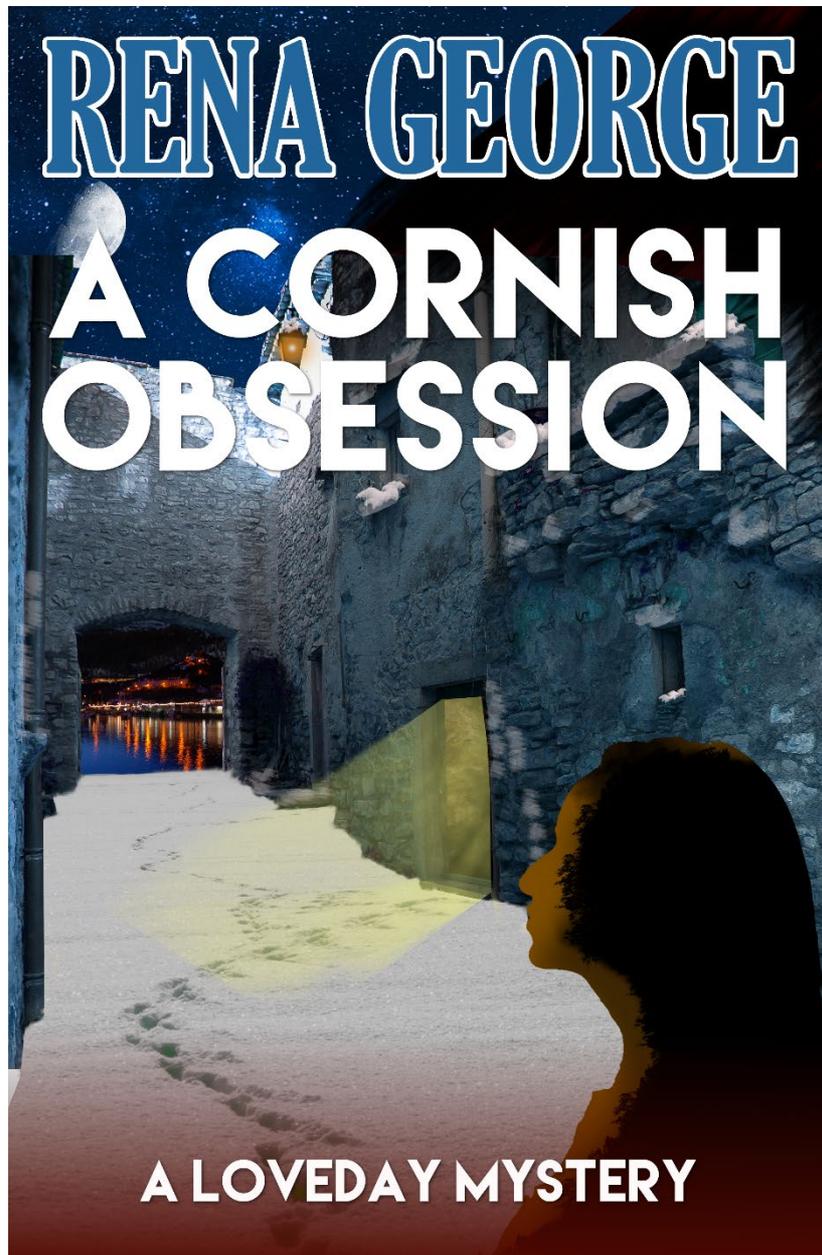


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A Cornish Obsession

Chapter One

The Five Stars Inn wasn't the only pub in Marazion, but it was the one Jago Tilley favoured, not least because he knew his old mate, Harry Tasker, would already be in there propping up the bar.

Locking his cottage, he stepped out into the bitter December night and glanced back to the dark vista of Mounts Bay. He could just make out the hazy cluster of lights over at Newlyn. The sight made his old heart contract.

In his mind's eye he was back there chugging out of Newlyn Harbour aboard his fishing boat *Maria*, and off to join the rest of the fleet at the fishing grounds. He suddenly wondered where his old pilchard drifter was now. For all of his life it had provided him with a good income, as it had his father before him. It deserved respect. He wondered if its new owner cared about it as much as he had.

Shaking his head, he tugged up the collar of his frayed, black jacket and shuffled past the two adjacent cottages, scowling at the cheerless black windows. They were holiday homes now, and unoccupied at this time of year. Jago didn't like things changing. In his day, family homes stayed with the family. He gave a disgruntled frown. Nobody respected the past, not any more.

He was still chuntering to himself as he lumbered up the terrace to the main road that ran through the village.

Jago's only neighbour now in the secluded terrace was Priddy. At the thought of her, the old man's mouth quirked into a smile. What would he do without Priddy? Having her living just through the wall all these years was a comfort, not that he'd tell her that, of course.

He reached the end of the terrace and crossed the main road, making his way the hundred yards or so along the narrow pavement to the pub.

When he got there, the door swung easily to his touch, and the pub smells – sticky beer, a faint aroma of cooking, and the damp waft of customers' coats and jackets – assailed his nostrils. They were good smells, comforting smells.

'Evening, Jago.' The young barman looked up as he came in. 'And how are you tonight?'

Jago couldn't remember ever having given him permission to address him so familiarly.

'Fine,' he grunted, spotting Harry in their corner at the far end.

The barman was already pulling Jago's pint before the old man had even clambered on to his stool.

Harry gave him a crooked smile. Jago often wondered if his old friend spent the entire day sitting at the bar and cadging drinks off the tourists with his rolling Cornish burr and tales of his exploits at sea. Jago knew that most of them weren't true, but it didn't matter. The Emmets, as the locals irreverently referred to the visitors, lapped them up anyway.

'Well, what do ee think, Jago? Will it snow afore the morn?'

Jago lifted his eyes to the high window and squinted out at the dark sky.

'Reckon so,' he said.

'You've just missed your Billy,' the barman interrupted, sliding Jago's frothing pint across the bar counter to him.

Jago's bushy white eyebrows came together in a frown as he tossed the coins for his beer on the bar top and growled, 'He's not my Billy.'

'I thought you two were cousins?'

'Well, we ain't.'

The barman's shoulders rose in a 'not bothered' shrug. He was only trying to be sociable.

'You got a grouch on you tonight, Jago.' Harry's brow wrinkled at his old buddy. 'What's the matter with ee?'

Jago waited for the barman to move out of earshot.

'That Billy came by pestering me again, that's what. Says how he can get good prices for some of my stuff.' He took a sip of his beer and wiped the froth from his mouth with the back of his hand. 'He only wants to sell it at that car boot they do over Rosenden way.'

Both men fell silent, and then Harry said, 'Have you got some good stuff over there, then?'

'That's none of your business Harry Tasker – and it's none of Billy Travis's either.'

'Ee is a relation of yours, though, in't ee?'

'And that's another thing that's none of your concern,' Jago barked.

Harry put his hands up as though in self-defence. 'Okay, don't be blowing your top. I was only making conversation.'

The old man gave a grudging sigh and shook his head. 'Oh, pay no heed to me, Harry. It's just that Billy Travis, ee's got me so twisted up inside...' He didn't finish the sentence, turning instead to his companion. 'It's only an excuse to rummage through my cottage. Ee thinks I don't know what ee's up to.'

Harry drained his glass and put it back on the counter. 'Just as well you can see through 'im then.'

‘Aye,’ Jago sighed again, but more satisfied this time as he hailed the barman and ordered refills for both of them.

‘And you can pour us both a glass o’ rum while you’re at it,’ he added.

The bar had filled up in the three hours that Jago and Harry had been drinking. The regular pub-goers wandered in and out. Several times the two old friends were joined by others, and more drinks were handed round as the inevitable reminiscences were shared.

‘You’re pushing the boat out a bit tonight, Jago,’ someone commented, and got a scowl in return. Jago knew he had a reputation for being tight-fisted, but he enjoyed his beer, and the comradeship he and his old friend shared.

Tonight, however, Harry had left the Five Stars before him, and when Jago looked round he realized most of the people remaining in the bar were strangers to him. He grimaced. Time to go home.

Struggling down from his stool he weaved an unsteady path to the door.

‘Sure you’ll be all right for getting home, Jago?’ the barman called after him.

Jago raised a dismissive arm. ‘I’ve been finding me way there for more’n seventy years, lad. Don’t need none of your help now.’

He pushed the door open, staggering back as the blast of freezing night air hit him. He steadied himself on the doorjamb, feeling suddenly woozy. ‘Impudent pup,’ he muttered to himself as he lurched across the road.

The snow that Jago had predicted earlier had begun to fall, just light, feathery flakes, but they were gathering in the gutters and the shop doorways as he made his slow progress along the main street. When he reached the turning that led down to his cottage, Jago felt a little jab of relief. Almost there, and he was still on his feet.

Fumbling in his pocket, he pulled out his key and began to unlock the door – and then he stopped, listening. His heart gave a little lurch as the noise came again. Was that someone moving about up the stairs? He tiptoed through to the front room and peered up at the ceiling. There it was again. The old man’s heart was pounding now. He’d told Billy Travis to leave him alone, yet here he was, searching his bedroom.

He waited, hardly daring to breathe. It had all gone quiet again. Maybe he’d imagined the noise, but he knew he wouldn’t rest until he’d checked.

He moved slowly to the stairs. The effects of the beer and rum he’d drunk in the Five Stars had made him giddy. One step at a time and he’d get there.

He'd reached the landing when he saw the shadowy movement. 'Who's there?' he barked.

The indistinct shape moved in front of him.

Jago narrowed his eyes, trying to focus, and then he scowled. 'You again?' He raised his arms to strike out. 'I told you not to come—'

But Jago Tilley didn't get the chance to finish his sentence. He felt the pressure on his shoulders, and suddenly he was falling.

His arms flayed out as he desperately tried to grab something to save himself. His nails tore frantically at the wall, but there was nothing to grip. He was hurtling backwards, plunging uncontrollably down the stairs. Pain seared through him as his head struck the floor at the bottom.

For a second he just lay there stunned, trying to understand what was happening to him. He could hear his attacker's feet pounding down the stairs. Jago tried to lift his head, but he couldn't. He tried to speak, but his words sounded all mashed up and incoherent. He gasped for breath, desperately trying to control his speech.

His assailant rushed past him into the front room.

'Help me...' the old man croaked. 'Don't leave me here!' He tried to call louder, but his voice only came out in a bleated whisper. 'Help me!'

He could hear the feet returning. Surely they would call for help? He forced his eyes open, trying to focus on the dark shape of his attacker towering over him. Then he saw the arms go up, felt the rush as the familiar object smashed down on his face again and again, until the blackness came.