

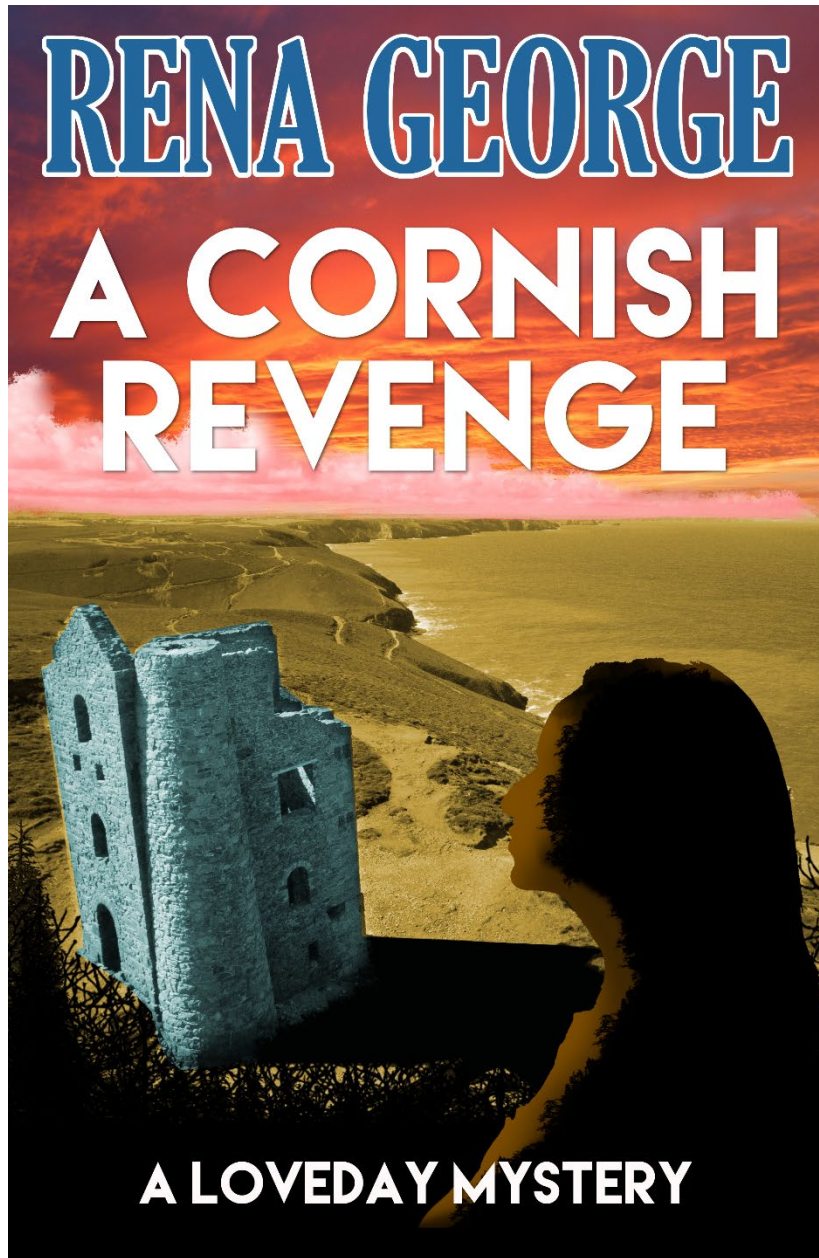
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RENA GEORGE

A CORNISH REVENGE



A LOVEDAY MYSTERY

A Cornish Revenge

Chapter One

Loveday Ross frowned at the glistening ribbon of wet road twisting ahead and tried to work out what was wrong with Lawrence.

The previous evening's exhibition in St Ives had been a triumph. At least five of his paintings had sold, which was wonderful because he'd made a point of inviting the county's most knowledgeable and discerning art critics and buyers. So why had he seemed so distracted?

She sighed, forcing her concentration back to the morning's picture shoot. Loveday was on her way to the old tin mine workings at Borlase, near Lands End. It was a bizarre place to hold an art class, particularly on damp, grey Sunday in September. Images of pretty coves and villages, old harbours and standing stones, flitted through her mind. Any of these would have made a better picture spread for the magazine than the bleak landscape of brick chimneystacks and mine relics, but she trusted Lawrence. He knew what he was doing.

As she turned into the parking area, she glanced down at her green canvas satchel and went through a mental checklist – notebook, pens, digital recorder, and camera. Her mobile phone was in her pocket. She got out, striding across the rough terrain, forcing the worry about her friend temporarily from her thoughts as she raised her camera and zoomed in on the old engine houses that clung precariously to the cliff-edge. They were an iconic Cornish image and she would be remiss not to include them in the article.

It had stopped raining, but the sea still looked hostile under the iron-grey sky. In spring and early summer these cliffs would be alive with nesting seabirds, and Loveday had been told that the secret coves and caves far below were favourite basking sites for Atlantic grey seals. But on this damp autumn morning, the kind her Scottish father would have described as 'dreight', it all looked very different.

She picked her way along the rough track, stopping to watch the black crows, or were they ravens? She could never tell which was which. Her neck cricked as she gazed up, smiling as they squabbled for the best vantage points on the high brick stack.

The bleakness of the place made her shudder and she wondered again why Lawrence had chosen it. The wind whipped long strands of dark hair across her eyes and she pushed them back, hooking them behind her ear. She stopped to listen. It was easy to imagine the tappings of miners, long since gone, echoing along the labyrinth of the shafts and tunnels beneath her feet.

She'd been watching for the old Land Rover and looked up when she saw it bouncing along the rough track. It was being followed by another vehicle she didn't recognize. Lawrence waved as he drove past, and his two passengers gave friendly nods as the little convoy reached the parking area and pulled alongside Loveday's car.

They all scrambled out, laden with an assortment of bags, painting easels and sketchpads. Released from the captivity of the vehicle, Flossie, whose one brown and one blue eye endeared her to everyone, bounded across the grass to lavish a frantic welcome on Loveday. She laughed, ruffling the dog's neck and feeling a handful of silky fur between her fingers. 'Oh, I know Flossie...And I love you too,' she said, screwing up her face to receive the slap of a wet pink tongue.

'Sorry, Loveday,' Lawrence grimaced, striding towards her, 'I'll get around to training her, one day.'

His jeans were threadbare about the knees and he wore his usual shabby safari-style jacket over what appeared to be a clean blue checked shirt. But it was a very different image from the previous evening when he'd made a special effort to dress smartly for his exhibition. He'd been the centre of attention then, with praise lavished on him from all directions. But Loveday sensed something was not right. She'd known Lawrence Kemp for a year and although they were not romantically involved, they were good friends, hence the invitation to be his special guest at the event.

She studied him as he turned to introduce his little art group, and decided he looked tired.

His eyes narrowed against the sharp wind. 'Meet Jacob and Netta Vincent, from Manchester.' he said.

Loveday held out her hand and the man, short and stocky with a complexion the colour of ripe rhubarb, grasped it in a pumping action. 'You'll be the journalist lady. Just you say

where you would like to photograph us.' He nodded across to Netta. 'You'll find the wife and I will be very accommodating.'

Loveday shot Lawrence a glance, but managed to keep a straight face. His wife coloured and offered her hand before scowling at her husband.

The younger of the two women who had driven up in the second car came forward. 'I'm Abbie Grainger,' she said. 'And this is my friend, Kit Armitage.'

They all shook hands, and as Lawrence took his students aside for a briefing, Loveday moved away to take some casual shots. She studied the group from a distance. It was difficult to imagine the two women as close friends. They seemed like complete opposites. Abbie was tall, with long black hair and a tan that Loveday suspected had not come from a bottle. She wore an expensive grey fleece over white tee shirt and jeans.

Kit's bright pink anorak looked too flimsy to keep the chill of the wild Cornish cliffs at bay. Her pale hair had been scraped back into a ponytail that pulled her skin so tightly it gave her a startled expression. She lacked her companion's robust, healthy appearance.

The group had circled around Lawrence, listening to his instructions for the morning's painting session, when his head suddenly jerked up. 'Did you hear that?' Everybody stopped talking and strained to listen.

'It's only the wind,' Abbie Grainger said.

'No, there's something else.' Lawrence insisted.

Loveday looked round for Flossie. A few minutes ago the dog had been nosing around the bumps and bushes, her feathery plume of a tail waving excitedly when she'd sniffed out something that might be a rabbit burrow.

Then the sound came again, and this time they all heard it...a definite whine.

Lawrence cursed. 'It's Flossie. She's got herself stuck somewhere.'

Jacob clicked his tongue, eager to get on with the business of painting. 'I thought she was a sheep dog. Aren't they supposed to be smart?'

His remark earned him a poke in the ribs from his wife.

'I'm sorry folks. I'll have to look for her,' Lawrence said, taking off in the direction of the whine.

'I'm coming with you,' Loveday shouted, running to keep up with his long stride. They followed the winding path down to the cliff edge. The cliffs here were high and Loveday's fingers were crossed that Flossie hadn't gone over and landed on some inaccessible ledge. Then there were the mineshafts. If the collie had tumbled down one of these then any rescue might be out of the question.

But neither of these things had happened to Flossie. They found her crouched by the cliff edge, whimpering. Lawrence scampered over a rocky outcrop to reach her and as he bent to pick her up, the cove below came into view. He pulled back, his face ashen.

'Stay back, Loveday!'

His hand went out to stop her going to the edge, but it was too late. She was already there and peering down. Someone was on the beach, the white body rigid and motionless. He was lying at a curious angle, arms and legs stretched out in different directions. Then she froze, the bile rising in her throat as she realized she was staring down at a dead body!

Hardly aware of what she was doing, her hand sought out the camera and she began clicking.

'Oh my God,' the voice behind them cried, and they turned to see that the others had followed. Netta's hand was covering her mouth. 'It's a body, isn't it? There's a dead body down there.'

Loveday raised her arm, warning the woman not to advance further. No one noticed that Kit Armitage, who had been standing behind Netta, had begun to sway until Loveday let out a warning shout. But it was too late to save her. They all heard the thud as she fell and they rushed forward to help.

Lawrence and Jacob managed to get her to her feet and supported her between them as they walked her back to Abbie's car. Loveday hurried after them, punching triple nines into her mobile phone as she went. All around her voices were raised in confusion. When she got a response she shouted over the mêlée. 'Police please! We need the police!'

Abbie ran ahead and opened the car's back door so Kit, conscious now, but still deathly pale, could be lowered gently inside. 'She'll be fine now. I'll look after her,' she said.

'Well we can't leave her like this. She needs to see a doctor,' Loveday was rummaging in her bag for the unopened bottle of water. She unscrewed the cap and offered it to Kit, who was now struggling to sit up.

'I'm fine, really I am,' she protested. 'I don't know what came over me.' She sipped at the water then offered the bottle back. But Loveday smiled. 'No, you keep it.'

'She's not ill,' said Abbie. 'Kit's grieving.' She gave her friend an understanding smile. 'Her sister, Margaret, died two weeks ago.' She broke off and looked out across the cliffs to where Lawrence was striding back with the Vincents. '...And now this -'

'I'm so sorry,' Loveday said, 'That must have been terrible for you down there.'

Kit began to sniffle, and Abbie produced a tissue from her bag. 'I'll get her back to the hotel.'

'I think we should all wait here for the police.' Loveday said.

They both stared at her. 'But we don't know anything about this. We never even looked down the cliffs,' Abbie said.

'It's my first time in a situation like this, too,' Loveday said gently, 'But whoever that is down there, he didn't get there by himself.'

'You mean he was murdered?' Kit said numbly.

Loveday nodded. 'Maybe. At any rate, I think we should all stick around until the police arrive.'

* * *

'Sorry, boss,' Detective Constable Amanda Fox spoke into her mobile phone as she pushed open the back door of the Truro police station and headed for her car. 'But something's come up.' She grimaced, anticipating Sam Kitto's reaction at the other end of the line. 'I told the Super that it was your weekend off...but he insisted on my calling you.'

Detective Inspector Sam Kitto, of the Devon and Cornwall Police, glanced at the fishing rod propped up against the back

door and an image of the river bank, where he'd planned to spend the day, flashed through his mind. He ran a hand through his springy dark brown hair and sighed. 'OK, Amanda. What is it this time?'

'It's a body, boss...out at Borlase Cove.'

Sam frowned. Bodies washing ashore were not exactly uncommon in a county bounded on three sides by the sea. They usually turned out to be suicides, or some ill-fated foreign crewman lost overboard from a passing ship. He searched his mind, but couldn't recall any recent reports of missing people.

'What's so special about this one?'

'It looks suspicious, boss.'

'Suspicious?'

Amanda had reached her car and was clicking to unlock the doors. 'It looks like he was tied down to the beach. Sergeant Tregellis and DC Rowe are already there. Want me to pick you up, boss?'

Visions of a recent journey in the passenger seat of his young detective constable's car as she sped along the busy A30, negotiating traffic like an obstacle race, flashed into his mind.

'It's fine,' he said. 'I'll meet you there.' From his cottage in Stithians he'd have a head start on his young detective constable, assuming she was speaking from the station in Truro.

Blue and white incident tape fluttered across the road as Sam approached, shaking his head and giving a wry smile at the valiant efforts of two zealous young officers to preserve a possible crime scene. Several police vehicles, and various other unmarked cars, were already in the parking area. As he pulled alongside them, he spotted Amanda's car speeding over the bumps behind him. He waited for her to park and get out and they walked together across the springy turf, making for the trodden path that wound its way to the figures grouped about the cliff edge.

'What do we know?' he called over his shoulder, as they moved in single file past warning notices highlighting the dangers of underground shafts and tunnels.

'It's weird, this one.' Her voice reached him in snatches as she shouted over the wind. 'Looks like he was tied down to the shingle and just left to drown.'

'He?'

'Seems so.'

Detective Sergeant Will Tregellis and Detective Constable Alan Rowe were already taking witness statements. He narrowed his eyes and scanned the horizon. Another sheet of rain was making its way ashore. Sam and Amanda moved to the edge and looked down into the cove. The familiar rotund shape of Home Office pathologist, Dr Robert Bartholomew, clad in the necessary police issue white overalls, was crouched by the body. Two similarly dressed Scene of Crime Officers were on their knees amongst the shingle, collecting whatever scraps of evidence were around. Sam was holding out little hope for that. The police photographer was pacing the cove, recording the scene from every angle.

Sam instructed Amanda to take over from Sergeant Tregellis. Will joined him on the cliff edge, following his boss's gaze out to sea.

'Not a lot they can do down there, boss. Doc reckons the tide's been over him a couple of times already.'

'How did the team get down there?'

Will Tregellis nodded towards a lifeboat and two larger fishing vessels that were waiting just offshore ready to offer what help they could. 'The RNLI's inshore boat,' he said. 'It's just about the only vessel that could get into that cove. They're waiting to recover the body and bring the others ashore.'

'Where will they land?' Sam asked.

'There's a beach of sorts just along the coast. We have vehicles waiting there.'

Sam was noting the speed of the waves. 'How long have they got down there?'

'We think about fifteen minutes...ten to be on the safe side, before the tide -.'

'I don't think we should hang about for another ten minutes. Let's get these people out of there now,' Sam said.

‘But what if they haven’t finished?’

Sam’s eyebrows descended into a frown. ‘Now, Will,’ he growled.

Lawrence had joined Loveday, watching the latest arrivals. The woman, in a well-cut dark suit and green wellies, was a good six inches shorter than her male companion. She’d made an attempt to tame her mass of crinkly auburn hair by securing it with a butterfly clip at the back of her head, but the wind was tearing at it, giving her a disheveled appearance.

The man had a definite air of authority, despite the casual tweed jacket and dark, open necked shirt. He’d glanced briefly in their direction as he passed but showed no inclination to speak to them. Loveday studied him, guessing he was in his mid to late thirties, at least six feet tall, with strong wide shoulders. His dark hair was brushed back, revealing a high forehead. Even from this distance she could tell his eyes were dark. Not bad looking, she thought, if you liked that serious, rugged type.

He suddenly glanced up and met her eyes. Had that been the trace of a smile? She didn’t wait to find out, turning away, embarrassed at having been caught staring at him. It was the woman officer who came over. The other young detective was still having his ear bent by the Vincents.

‘DC Fox.’ She introduced herself, brusquely. It was a West Country accent, but not Cornish. She fixed Lawrence with a look. ‘And you are -?’

Lawrence gave his details and described how they found the body. DC Fox jotted the information into her notebook and turned to face Loveday. ‘And you -?’ she asked.

The woman’s apparent inability to finish a sentence was beginning to irritate Loveday. She smiled at the unreceptive face. ‘I’m Loveday Ross,’ she said. ‘I’m a journalist.’ The information had the desired effect and Loveday had to stifle a victorious grin as she watched the woman’s bored expression change to one of suspicion.

DC Fox looked up from her scribbling. Loveday had her full attention now. ‘Can I ask why you’re here, Miss Ross?’

Already feeling guilty at her blatant attempt to antagonize the woman, Loveday smiled. ‘Don’t worry. It’s not a newspaper. I work for a local magazine – Cornish Folk.’ She had allowed her

voice to rise questioningly at the end of the sentence, but the woman gave no indication she had ever heard of the magazine, which was strange considering it was in every newsagents' shop in the county.

'Stop hiding your light under a bushel, Loveday,' Lawrence cut in. 'Loveday's the editor of Cornish Folk.'

Loveday frowned at Lawrence's well-meaning attempt to establish her professional status. 'Assistant editor, actually,' she corrected. 'And I'm here today because we will be running a feature about Lawrence's art school in the next issue.'

DC Fox clipped the cap back on her pen and Loveday thought she had glimpsed the trace of a smirk. 'You might have to postpone that,' the detective said.

Loveday watched Amanda Fox retreat in search of the Vincents who had been standing apart, totally engrossed in the activities around them. Until now, she hadn't given a thought to the problems this would cause at the magazine when they no longer had Lawrence's vital article to fill those two empty pages. But as soon as the realization dawned, Loveday chastised herself. How could she be so callous? What did a magazine article matter when a man lay dead only a hundred feet below? He'd have a family somewhere...parents...a wife...perhaps children. Nobody deserved to be staked out like a trapped animal waiting to die. The thought made her shiver.

Sam had been keeping an eye on his DC's progress with the witnesses. He liked to stand back like this, watch people's body language. It often told more about a witness than what they actually said. And the body language he had witnessed between the two women just now had been interesting. Amanda had riled the other one. He'd seen the same thing so many times before. The young detective's abrasive attitude put people's backs up. Despite the macabre scene below, he had to smile. He could tell by the way Amanda's back straightened, her shoulders stiffened, and her chin came up, that she had met her match.

He turned to Will. 'Just these four witnesses?'

'No,' Will said. 'There's another couple of women over there.' He flicked a thumb in the direction of the car park. 'One of them felt queasy so they asked if they could stay in their car.' He

looked up to catch the attention of one of the uniformed officers. 'I'll get them down here now, boss.'

Sam shook his head. 'Don't bother. I take it you've got their statements?'

'We have. They're visitors, staying along the road at the pub in Polmarth. They've been asked to hang on another day or so just in case we need to speak to them again. The couple over there...' he nodded towards the Vincents, now deep in conversation with DC Fox. 'They're visitors as well...staying in the same place as the women.'

'And the other two?'

'Both local. The man's an artist, Lawrence Kemp. Runs some kind of an art school. The others are his students – oh, all except her.' he nodded towards Loveday. 'She's a journalist.'

Sam's brows knitted together. 'That's all we needed. What's she doing here?'

Will shrugged. 'Some kind of magazine article, I think. It was DC Rowe who spoke to her.'

Below them the lifeboat had moved in to recover the body. Sam knew Dr Bartholomew would accompany it ashore. The crew had already collected the Scene of Crime Officers and transferred the group to one of the fishing boats, which was now on its way to deposit them at St Ives harbour.

'I want a word with the pathologist,' Sam said. 'How do I get to the landing site?'

Will gave directions and Sam called over his shoulder as he left. 'Make sure none of the witnesses discuss this with anybody – especially the journalist. What was her name?'