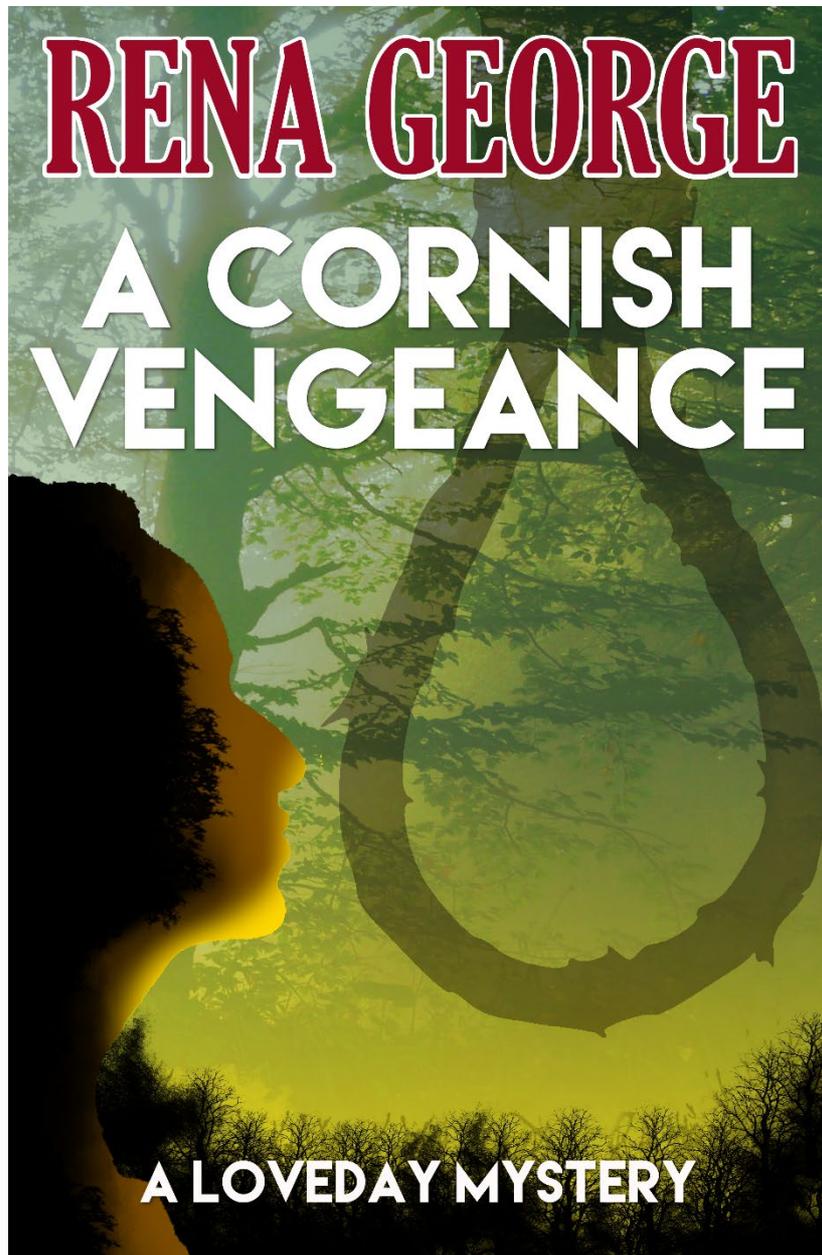


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A Cornish Vengeance

Chapter One

Loveday spooned the scrambled eggs onto two slices of slightly burned toast, and turned to Sam.

'Are you sure it was suicide?'

He looked up, narrowing his eyes.

'Why?'

'Just seemed odd, that's all. I mean why would a man like Silas Venning break into a National Trust property to kill himself?'

'Where do you think he should have gone?'

Loveday slid one of the plates in front of him and sat down with her own breakfast.

'Don't get crinkly. I'm just saying.'

Sam waggled his fork.

'Don't you go getting involved in this.' He scowled at her from under his eyebrows. 'I mean it, Loveday. Stay out of it.'

She made a face at him.

'Is that an order, Inspector?'

'Absolutely.'

'You can't tell me what to do.'

He threw up his hands in a gesture of defeat.

'And don't I know it. All I'm saying is - just for once - leave this one to me.'

'Did you know Venning had booked a holiday?' She could tell from his expression that he hadn't, and it gave her a tiny buzz of triumph. 'Laura told me. They were going to Bermuda next month.' She leaned forward. 'Now why would he do that if he was going to top himself?'

Sam's chair made a scraping noise on the flagged floor as he pushed it back from the table and stood up.

'You're not going? You haven't finished your breakfast.'

'I'm late,' he said, planting a kiss on top of Loveday's head as he passed.

But she knew she had annoyed him. Sam didn't like her getting involved in his cases. She never did it on purpose, but when you're born with a natural sense for justice, you're not going to turn your back when someone asks for help - which they seemed to do quite often. It crossed her mind that maybe she should have been a detective instead of a journalist.

She followed him out to the car, pulling her robe closer as the salty breeze stung her face. The rabbits under her hedge had made an early start on the grass below the cottage window, and she smiled at them. Their lives were so uncomplicated.

Sam kissed her again briefly, and Loveday stepped back to watch his car as it moved slowly out of the drive and turn onto the seafront. The tide was in, and the causeway to St Michael's Mount was still under water. In an hour or so the cobbles would be exposed, and the day tippers would arrive in their usual droves to visit the castle.

The Mount was the first thing Loveday saw from her bedroom window when she got up in the morning, and it never lost its magic. She stood for a moment looking out across the bay. An early mist was rolling in, obscuring the tiny harbour over at the mount. She didn't like confrontations with Sam, and their conversation in the kitchen could so easily have turned into that. Perhaps it would have escalated if Sam hadn't driven off?

She pushed back her long dark hair and drew her robe closer. She was entitled to her opinion. All Cornwall would soon be talking about Silas Venning's so called suicide, and she was willing to bet that she wouldn't be the only one who thought it suspicious.

Loveday turned back to the cottage, glancing up when the back door of the big house across the drive opened, and Cassie Trevillick came hurrying out.

'Morning Cassie. Early start?'

Cassie nodded.

'Rush job, and I don't trust that lot down at the marina to actually finish the work on the Lively Lady unless I'm there to give their rear ends a kick.'

Loveday grinned.

'What way is that to talk about your loyal workforce?'

'Loyal? I wish.'

Cassie was employed by wealthy boat owners to refurbish the interiors of their yachts.

She nodded back to the house. 'I've had to leave Adam in charge of getting the children off to school. He's complaining about being made late for his surgery.'

Cassie and her GP husband, Adam, owned Loveday's cottage. They were also her best friends.

'You should have asked me,' she said. 'I could have dropped the kids off at school.'

Cassie waved a hand, dismissing the offer.

'No, he'll manage fine.' She opened her car door, then hesitated, turning. 'Is Sam looking into this terrible business with Silas Venning?'

If Loveday had learned anything during her time in Cornwall it was not to be surprised at how fast gossip spread, but still...

'It hasn't been announced yet,' she said. 'How did you know?'

'Jungle drums...you know what this place is like. And besides, I knew him.'

'Really? You knew the Vennings?' It was another thing she had learned about Cornwall. Everybody knew everybody else.

Cassie's nodded.

'Silas has put a few contracts my way.'

'Did he strike you as the kind to take his own life?'

Cassie eyed her suspiciously.

'Does Sam think it isn't suicide?' She was frowning. 'He surely doesn't think - '

'No, of course not,' Loveday cut in quickly. The last thing she wanted was to be responsible for starting rumours, even if she did have her own opinions about how Silas Venning had met his untimely death.

'But you said...'

'No I didn't. I only meant...well, you don't expect a man like that to just take himself off into the woods and string himself up from a tree.'

Cassie gave a sad shrug.

'Who knows what goes on in other people's lives.' She glanced down at her watch. 'God, is that the time? Sorry, Loveday. I have to go.'

She got into the Land Rover, turned the key, and gave a wave as she took off down the drive.

With a sigh, Loveday went back inside. Silas Venning's death hadn't yet been made public, but the shocking circumstances surrounding the demise of such a high profile local man would soon be all round Cornwall.

She wondered how Laura was coping. She and Silas had never struck her as a particularly devoted couple. They were high fliers, sought after guests at the county's best parties, which was probably why Merrick had suggested doing the spread on Laura in the first place.

The couple surrounded themselves with elegance. They lived at Trevore, a grand white mansion on the banks of the River Fal. It wasn't Loveday's idea of cosy comfort, but maybe artists were like that.

The high ceilings and white walls provided the perfect backdrop for the powerful strokes and swirls of intense colour that were characteristic of Laura's work.

She greeted Loveday in the house's imposing front room on the day she arrived by appointment to interview her.

Without preamble the artist had said, 'I suppose you will want to see my studio.'

'I'd love to,' Loveday had smiled, following her back into the big light reception hall with the black and white chequered floor.

She'd watched Laura glide ahead, up the sweeping staircase, past a lovely stained glass window, and stop by a white-panelled door before throwing it open.

'This is where I work.'

Loveday had gasped, she'd never seen such a beautiful room. Floor to ceiling French windows looked out over the river. She

could see a pleasure boat packed with tourists, making it's way upstream. At high tide vessels could sail all the way into Truro, but when the tide was low, passengers would disembark at Malpas, and make their way into town by road. Loveday supposed it added an extra dimension to the experience.

'I would find it hard to concentrate with a view like that to distract me,' she'd said.

Laura's eyes had scanned the river, and there was a trace of a wistful smile.

'Silas needs to be close to the water. It's why we chose this house.'

Loveday had nodded.

Paintings in various stages of completion were propped around the room. More canvasses were displayed on easels, making Loveday wonder if the room had been staged for her benefit.

Laura's emerald silk caftan rustled as she'd moved from one canvas to the next, describing the ethos behind each work. The paintings were the colours of Cornwall, the mauves, blues, and indigos. There was the aquamarine of the seas and cobalt blue of the sky, the silver grey granite of the rocks, and dark brooding purples of the moors.

Loveday had been entranced. She'd wandered around the room studying each one in turn.

'They're wonderful, ' she'd said.

Laura Venning's haughty expression twitched into a smile.

'Yes, they are, aren't they?'

Loveday looked up. The woman obviously wasn't burdened with false modesty.

'Would you mind if I record the interview?' Loveday had produced her small digital recorder. 'It's just a back up for my notes. I delete everything once it's written up.'

'I don't mind. What would you like to know?'

Loveday had done her research and already knew quite a bit about the woman. She was the only daughter of Geraldine and Graham Anstey, who ran a property empire in Cornwall, and was already an established artist when she met and married

self-made millionaire, Silas Venning. But her paintings still bore her maiden name.

Laura indicated they should sit.

Pen poised, Loveday had looked up from her notebook.

‘Do either of your parents paint?’

Laura narrowed her dark brown eyes, remembering her childhood. She’d shrugged.

‘No, and neither did I when I was younger. I wanted to be doctor.’ She’d looked out to the river and Loveday had wondered again if the view was a distraction when she worked.

‘Meredith and I both wanted to study medicine. She carried on, but I lost interest.’ She’d tilted her chin. ‘I’d discovered art, you see.’ She waved an arm at the windows. ‘Who wouldn’t want to paint with all of this on your doorstep?’

But Loveday had seen the glint of regret in the woman’s eyes and wondered if medicine had given up on Laura rather than the other way round.

‘Meredith?’ she’d asked.

Laura had nodded.

‘A friend...my best friend. She’s a consultant now at the hospital in Truro.’

‘And you haven’t missed abandoning your first love?’

Laura’s eyebrows had lifted, and she’d stared at her.

‘Medicine, I mean,’ Loveday had said quickly.

Laura had given her an icy smile, her glance travelling back to the paintings.

‘What do you think?’

‘I think you are a gifted artist, Mrs Venning.’ Loveday had paused. ‘What does your husband think of your work?’

There had been the briefest hesitation before she’d answered.

‘Well, he loves it of course. And now that it’s getting public recognition - ’

She'd been interrupted by a light knock on the door. It'd opened, and a small, grey-haired woman came in carrying a tray of tea things.

'Thank you, Elizabeth,' Laura had said, pointing to a small table. 'We'll see to ourselves.'

The woman nodded, glancing at Loveday as she put the tray down and hurried out.

'It's Earl Grey, is that all right for you?' Laura was already pouring.

'It's my favourite,' Loveday smiled.

She'd tried to steer the conversation back to Silas as she sipped the hot tea, but Laura was clever at fielding off questions she didn't want to answer, leaving Loveday curious about her reluctance to talk about her husband.

Film stars, business tycoons, and other wealthy people came from all over the world to buy their luxury yachts from the Falmouth-based Venning Marine. As far as she knew the company was thriving.

The interview was over in less than an hour, and despite her attempts at probing questions, Loveday had the annoying feeling that she hadn't really discovered much more about the woman than what she'd already known when she arrived.

'I'll need to see what you are going to write before it is published, of course,' Laura had said.

It wasn't a usual request, but Loveday had no problem with it.

'I'll see to that,' she'd smiled, shaking Laura's hand as she left.

She had taken quite a few photographs. If Merrick decided they were good enough he would use with them in the magazine. But this was to be a high profile article, possibly even a front cover for Cornish Folk. She'd already decided to suggest commissioning Mylor Ennis, a professional freelance photographer, who also did graphic work for them.

That had been a week ago. Any further plans to run the feature had been thrown into turmoil when Sam turned up at Loveday's cottage with the news of Silas's apparent suicide. She'd rung Merrick, and together they'd decided to leave the final decision about running the feature to Laura herself.