MRS MACKEREL And The POISONED PASTY PUZZLE

By Craig Melvin

Mrs Mackerel and the Poisoned Pasty Puzzle
Mrs Mackerel and the Clotted Cream Conundrum



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For Mel, Max & Rosa

PROLOGUE

The man on the beach shifted a little as the tide lapped at his feet. It was shortly after midnight and he'd come round to feel the bump on his head, reflexively raising a hand to touch it. The hand was held back by the iron force of the restraining shackles that clamped him spreadeagled to the rock.

He'd tried shouting and then screaming for help, but in his heart knew it was useless. This bay was deserted, had been for a hundred years, so his captors had said – 'cursed' was the word they'd used. Now the curse was about to fall on him.

The moonlit salt water licked at his thighs, an autumn tide rising fast to carry him away to the other side. His wrists dripped blood where he'd wrenched and pulled at the shackles holding him fast. Wild animals caught in a trap had been known to chew off a limb. Even he lacked the bite for a task such as that.

Davy Jones' locker. Not the worst way to go. Once the asphyxiation high kicked in. His mind flipped between feeble acceptance and furious denial.

He howled at the cruel moon. Foam broke over his chest, a spume of salt-death filling both nostrils before running back down to the sand. How much of this would he have to endure before the rising waters covered his nose fully and drowned him out?

Desperate for oblivion and having run out of other viable options, the man dashed the back of his head against his rock prison. Oh for the strength to knock himself out and miss the final act. Oh for the cyanide pill he'd carried in his wallet throughout the war. Oh for a swift death.

The last wave submerged him completely, then drew back tantalisingly far enough for him to draw his final breath and utter a single word.

'Mary.'

CHAPTER ONE

Mary Mackerel clutched her mother's pearls, shrugged off the cardigan of her pink lambswool twinset and allowed the steward to place it on the luggage rack above her Cornwall-facing seat.

'Thank you, Franco. Warm work, this typing lark.'

'Working on a new one, are we, Mrs Mackerel? My Vera has your *Mediterranean Cookbook* indoors – cooked up a storm from it, so she has.'

'Well, that is wonderful to hear. Sadly things have . . . turned against me somewhat. Did you see the . . .'

Franco frowned, diplomatically. By the look of the scrunched balls of paper beside her portable Remington, the infamous cook was struggling with her new book. Yes, he'd seen the . . . The whole nation had seen it. *Britain's Best Home Cook* 1958. She'd been the judge. Assassin, more like. Berated the poor housewife for her choice of menu, calling her 'dear', saying 'no, no, that won't do', pretending to gag

at the poor timid thing's menu choices. Yes, he'd seen it.

'It wasn't my fault, you know. The damned BBC, making me work so late in the day. And after a particularly good luncheon at the Savoy. No, not my fault at all. Some spooked higher-up at the Corporation settling an old score or some such. Fine job they did of it, too. Total set-up, in my view. All that lovely champagne at the Savoy, and egging one on to live up to that no-nonsense approach Mrs Mackerel is known and loved for. Not so loved any more. Known, certainly. I only said what I saw. Dreadful menu. Poor show all round. Too late now, of course. Of course that's not the way Tony saw it. "Leave London, Mary," he said. "It's your only hope. Send yourself to Coventry."'

'Now then, Mrs M. Coventry's a bit harsh.'

'"Set up shop somewhere remote and pen a penance book. Where can you bear?" Cornwall, I said to him. Dear Hugh and I had some wonderful times there, motoring around before the war, hugger-mugger in his Alvis. Just the two of us. Simon already off at boarding school, you see. It was the way. Yes, Cornwall. One's publishers have advanced a few months' income, if one is careful. *The Cornish Riviera Cookbook*. One's chance to prove that Britain's larder is a match for France. Up for the challenge. What else can one do? Not that publishing loot pays the bills like it used to. I've had to go all in on things and open a little restaurant down there, too. The Mermaid, Penzance. Edge of the world. End of the line. Sold the flat in Pimlico. Car's already waiting for me at Penzance Station – came back to London by train after signing the deeds at some Dickensian solicitor in the

town square. Going to make the Mermaid as legendary as the Savoy. Got to make her pay, by Christmas, at the very latest, come hell or high water.'

One way to deal with the public humiliation, thought Franco, privately. *Hope it works*. For a while back then, Mary Mackerel had been more hated than Hitler. It'd blow over. Probably best to remove herself from the public eye for a while.

'Enough of little old me. What about you? Been working the *Riviera Express* for long?'

Franco began to explain his work as a jobbing steward and, seeing Mrs M's eyes glaze over, changed track.

'Would you care for a scone? It's nearly teatime. I say, that new James Bond is a cracker. How far are you in?'

'Been dipping into it between typing bouts – Bond's on the *Orient Express* from Istanbul. Knew Fleming, Hugh and I, during the war. Not that I'm at liberty to tell you about it. Official Secrets Act and all that. Dear Hugh, I do miss him so. So lonely entering one's half-century this summer without him.'

'I worked on the *Orient Express* before the war. Did most of the luxury trains of the world, steward for hire. Wonderful times. More murders than an Agatha Christie, I can tell yer, but . . .'

'You'd have to kill me. I know. I say, Franco, would you pass me down my cardy? Frightful chillsome all of a sudden.'

Franco handed down the woollen, cleared away the balls of paper and set off to the galley for Mrs M's scone. Safely behind swing doors, he unballed the discarded copy.

My first cookbook with this publisher, McTavish, after five wonderful years with the Gas Board Easy Cook series, was The Mediterranean Cookbook. Written at a time when almost every essential ingredient of good cooking was either rationed or unobtainable, the book offered, I hope, a glimpse into sunnier times and climes and, in its own small way, presented a warm beaker of the south to our grey, straitened northern selves. Times change and even olive oil is less of an oddity than it once was. This new book, The Cornish Riviera Cookbook, is an exploration of the abundant larder of colourful and nourishing provisions available to us on our own shores. I am exiling myself to the Duchy to see what ingenuity and devotion can bring me in the land beyond Devon. Lllllllhhhhhhhhjjjjj. Blast and damn my bloody publisher and this stupid projectttttttttgggssss.

Franco chuckled to himself, folded the evidence and popped it into the pocket of his gold-brocaded waistcoat to show Vera when he got back to Brighton. He'd been waiting for a transfer to the *Brighton Belle* for over a year now, taking whatever shifts he could get out of London in the meantime. Wasn't all bad. Penzance had some lovely tearooms for him to while away his half-hour break before heading back to prepare the *Riviera Express* for her return trip to the Metrop. And now, the promise of a restaurant run by television legend Mrs Mackerel, too. That'd ruffle a few feathers in piratical Penzance. Likes of Mary Mackerel coming down there with her can-do London ways. Franco

had only needed a few hours in that town to know things ran differently at the end of the line.

He shuttled the cream tea to Mrs Mackerel and then went to get table three their pink gins. Mary re-cased her portable Remington and pushed it out of reach ahead of her on the table. Time to leave cookbook writing for when she was in a better frame of mind. Now, where were they? She gazed out on heavy September seas as the train chugged past Dawlish, nothing but beach to the left of her, scone to the right.

'Mmh, cream then jam.'

She lifted the county-correct confection to her thin lips, savoured the fat, sugar and acid flavour sensation, and shut her eyes.

Mary woke with a start as the train clattered over the Tamar Bridge. She'd been dreaming about Egypt again. The day that Hugh . . . no, it was the stuff of nightmares and should remain there. Mary touched the teapot, still warm enough for another cup. Loading the second half of her scone with jam and then cream, she raised her cup in a salute to Cornwall before polishing off the lot in two large bites, remembering the cheese scones she'd perfected at Cordon Bleu.

If Mary Mackerel had been a romantic sort, which she wasn't, she might have called this a Proustian moment. The brief, vivid sense memory based on the taste of this mouthful of scone flooded her mind with recollections of Paris after the war. The two of them in their cosy Île Saint-Louis garret, her cooking on nothing more than a baby Belling, Hugh's

important work for the Foreign Office, rebuilding a war-torn Europe, bringing the perpetrators of war crimes to justice. A crusade that had cost him his life, and nearly cost her hers, too. Mary enrolling at Cordon Bleu, run by the formidable Madame Elisabeth Brassart, befriending fellow exile Julia Child, baking the famous Cordon Bleu cheese scone that Madame had declared parfait, so *parfait* that Julia had slung hers in *la poubelle* in a jealous fit of pique.

These train scones were pretty poor. Three out of ten. But they put her in mind of her triumphant Paris win. Reflexively, Mary reached for the Remington Portable. It'd be as good a place as any to start *The Cornish Riviera Cookbook*. The classic English cream-tea scone. With a bit of a dig at the frogs, to wit. That and . . . Cornish pasty, obviously. Couple of classic regional recipes that'd not scare the horses. She could write the damned introduction later, when it didn't make her see red. Now . . . cheese scones Cordon Bleu. She slipped a sheaf of paper into her trusty typewriter and rattled the keys while the train clacked across rusty Cornish tracks. She knew the recipe by heart. No need to go back and check it later.

'Eight ounces self-raising flour, teaspoon salt, one ounce butter, one egg, cup of milk, teaspoon of baking powder, five ounces reblochon . . . no, that'll not do . . . five ounces cheddar. Yes . . . bloody boring cheddar for my bloody boring British cookbook.'

The pink gin couple tutted and she wrinkled her nose up at them. What was their bloody problem? Perhaps she was muttering a little loudly. Phooey, damn the lot of them. Then

she remembered; a creeping feeling of shame. The television programme. Probably her last. Hopefully there was a dearth of televisions in Cornwall. Maybe it hadn't been broadcast that far? She could only hope. Mary went back to her recipe and finished it in a couple of minutes. Now, what went into Cornish pasties? She'd have to consult the old grey cells for this one. It must be lodged in there somewhere. Could always ask a local when she got to Penzance. Good way of breaking the ice. Turnips for sure. There'd be no shortage of those down here. The train passed fields brimming with the kind of root vegetables that the French would consider animal feed.

Was the sun past the yardarm yet? Gosh but she fancied a drink. Parched. Thirsty work, typing for a living. And she was hot again. Time to take that extra layer off. Where was he? Damn the little man.

'Franco, where are you? I'm dying of thirst out here. Dehydration on the *Cornish Riviera Express*. Bring champagne, bring gin, bring any bloody wet thing.'

Mary bellowed this command at Franco from her seat. Enjoying her pariah status as the pink gins continued to tut, Mary re-cased her Remington, leaving the scone recipe on the roller; she'd write the little anecdote and cooking instructions later. It was a start, anyway, black ink on white paper. Something to send her long-suffering publisher from the Penzance post office. Julia Child was still working on her big French cookbook for Americans. It'd never amount to anything. It had been Mary who introduced Julia to Le Cercle des Gourmettes in Paris, where she'd met Simone

Beck who partnered with her on the little book they had published in 1952, What's Cooking in France, to the sound of little fanfare and yet to do any meaningful business. It gave Mary some pleasure to see that bossy woman fall short of her expectations, and she'd told her as much at the time. *Pot, kettle, black*, Julia had shot back, somewhat Childishly, as Mary termed it. No doubt Julia would have heard of her nationwide shame and it would have brought her some comfort.

From Julia Child, her troubled thoughts turned easily to her one and only child, Simon. Recent very public events had seen her already difficult relationship with her only offspring stretch to a breaking point resulting in their current estrangement. Simon, away at boarding school at what he saw as his mother's cruel insistence, had always blamed Mary for his father's untimely death. If only he'd been there, he could have done something to protect him. 'Nonsense,' snapped Mary, telling him as much herself over a strained tea at the Savoy. Her rising from the table and not coming back had done little for mother–son relations, either. She knew that.

Unsure of what to do with this red rage when it came up – with her publisher, with Simple Simon, with Hugh for bloody well dying and leaving her alone – Mary busied herself with her packing preparations. Cardy, Remington, paperback. Franco finally turned up and brought her carpetbag down from the rack before setting off to the galley in search of a half-bottle of vintage champagne. Should be enough to see her off the train and into the car.

Mary took out her first aid tin, a souvenir from the war, US Army issue, emptied of medical gear and refilled with a set of emergency supplies procured in Soho a day before her departure for Cornwall. A half-pint of good olive oil, dried basil, oregano, thyme and mint. Sea salt, though they'd have that down there, surely, but better safe than sorry. Some baking powder from Fortnum's, a good chorizo minus a couple of slices snatched before boarding at Paddington, and a bulb of smoked garlic. Mary held the garlic up to her nostrils and inhaled deeply.

'Aah.'

The pink gins turned away, horrified; it was a disgusting act. Typical of that woman. Did you see the way she tore into that good British housewife, her with her airs and graces and Parisian ways. Came from nothing, they say, too. Father something in the civil service, but mother common as muck. Think she'd have known better than to belittle her own kind.

Mary turned her back on them and packed her bag.

She stood on the platform at Penzance and waved goodbye to Franco and his dining car, and while the train sat at this edge-of-the-world terminus letting off cloaks of smoke, waiting for the return trip to the Metrop, Mrs Mackerel fished in her handbag for her car keys and turned tail for the car park.

The station was empty, the sun low in the September sky, glinting off the few vehicles parked on the verge that doubled as a car park in front of the entrance. Hugh's drophead Aston stood out, rather, in its dazzling purple livery. It was

the last thing that Hugh had bought himself before, no, she wouldn't go there, inspired by his good friend Ian Fleming who was obsessed with this marque. It ran well and had been maintained by a mews garage in Pimlico. It had never once occurred to her to buy a 'more suitable' car. What was more suitable than this? She loved it and had no intention of parting with it.

Mary had got a good price for her Pimlico flat and had screwed Mrs Jones, the former owner of the Mermaid Teashoppe, Quay Street, Penzance. The woman had desperately wanted to sell and Mary had been the only buyer. The only buyer with London money, that was. Mrs Jones had been inundated with ridiculous offers from local chancers, before Mary turned up. For now, Mary was comfortable, but with the advance for her next cookbook, the one she'd dubbed *Humble Pie and Other Dishes*, being much smaller than she had commanded before she murdered her career on national television, Mary needed the restaurant to pay. The clock was ticking; it'd be striking midnight by Christmas.

Mary unlocked the car, dropped the canvas hood, slung her carpetbag onto the passenger seat and fired her up. She pulled the collars of Hugh's sheepskin car coat around her neck, yanked the engine into reverse and executed a flawless two-point turn to take her home to Quay Street. Home. Strange thought after all those years of considering London as just that. Even during the Paris and Cairo years. Take a bit of getting used to, no doubt. Leaving the flat she had shared her married life with Hugh in had brought on a

pang of loneliness that she'd not felt as keenly since the first few months after his death. Still, he was with her now, in his car, the faint scent of cigar smoke and hair oil lingering in the collar of his car coat. She held him close and dumped the car into overdrive as the station approach curved into Wharf Road and the esplanade drive that would take her to the Quay Street turn-off.

Her mother had kindly informed her that she was not much to look at, right from when she was a little girl. Straight brown hair cut into a practical bob and a face that reminded some, in low light, of Virginia Woolf. Tall, but not overbearingly so, Mary had weighed the same nine stone woman and girl, regaining her figure months after giving birth to Simon. She looked her best, she felt, at the wheel of Hugh's car, sporting Hermès scarf, wool pleat slacks, mulberry brogues and a big fat smile on her face.

The Quay was busy with traffic heading to and from the port. Fishermen's lorries blocked her progress, but not for long. A quick blast on the Aston's horn and Mary swung around them, occasionally having to quickly swing back in at the dizzying sight of something coming the other way. Then Mary was hurtling along, past Scilly Isles Ferry traffic and all that the working port had on the in and out. Most of it legal. She was about to hit the turning for Quay Street at the Dolphin pub; fourth to second and she'd be on the home straight. One road down to the quay from the town, one road out. This, this was the real Cornwall. The sagging-windowed memories she had from holidaying here as a child, gazing from the rear window of her father's Jaguar as

they wound their way down to the holiday let on the quay that they'd rented annually for over a decade. Happy times. Now tainted with the sadness of adult life, the war and all of this latest trouble. When a spot of being sent to Coventry had first been mooted, Cornwall had been her first, and only, choice.

The Cornwall of her late middle age was still the Cornwall of her childhood. Prime agricultural land rolling in uninterrupted splendour to the cliff edge, Betjeman beversed church spires hiding behind hillocks, burnished paths that wound through lady's finger, thyme and bright varieties of saxifrage. Red Admirals still basked with their wings apart, a mile of sunny, empty sand away, a mile of shallow pools and lugworm casts. Safe, faint and surfy lapped the lowest tide, as it had done when Mary paddled in the briny up to her tiny knees.

Where else was there for Mary to run to, but the nostalgic embrace of Cornwall? And truth was, Mary had yearned for a restaurant of her own since her Paris days. It was only married life and then the work for the Gas Board cookbooks, with all of the touring demos and the annual big show at the Ideal Home Exhibition in London, that had delayed her plans. Now, with this disgrace and a yearning for a fresh start, she had her chance.

She'd asked Rupert, owner of the Hole in Bath, for his help in finding somewhere and they'd spent a pleasant few days roaring around 'the Isle of Kernow', as Rupert called it, before settling on the Mermaid in Penzance.

'It's a half-timbered mock-Tudor monstrosity, Mare. But

it's near the harbour and, y'know, I think it will fit you like a glove.'

'And it's cheap as chips, Ru. Don't forget that small fact. I can put up with mock Tudor for this kind of geld.'

The sun was setting into the Celtic Sea to her left. A cow poked its nose through the back of a lorry to her right. Mary dropped through the Aston's gears and headed up to her new home. She left the Dolphin Tavern, guarding the corner of The Quay and Quay Street, in a petrol haze. Fabled place, Rupert had said – in 1585 the tavern had served as John Hawkins' HQ, for recruiting Cornishmen to fight the Spanish Armada. Though not all Cornishmen had fought for the Crown. Sir Walter Raleigh had smoked the first pipe of tobacco in Britain within its granite walls. It had then become a courtroom for three centuries and had a famous ghost for each of them. *Sure you'll get to meet all three of them, Mary*, Rupert had ribbed, *if you haunt the place long enough. Ghosts probably float between the Dolphin and the Mermaid, anyway*.

Mary pulled in, briefly, for a tractor bringing produce down from the fields by the sea, and waved at the young man at the wheel.

Happy; she felt happy for the first time in years. Nature had laid on a golden arrival for her, and she was glad that this lasting impression on her first day as owner of the Mermaid had been bestowed. The removal men had taken her belongings from London the day before and placed them, as much as was humanly possible, in exactly the same spots as they had been in her Pimlico flat. This was helped

by the fact that the kitchen to the rear of the ground floor of the restaurant was a similar proportion to the kitchen of her flat, with lots of room for her giant pine table and Welsh dresser. There was even the same three-oven oil-fired Aga that she'd had in London, so no new techniques to learn there.

Upstairs there was a sitting room, a bathroom and two bedrooms, again much like her London flat. She'd asked the removal men to give her the front bedroom with the view of the Platt and harbour. Heavenly. And then, with a swift left hand down on the wheel, Mary was home. Somebody had been in and placed a lit candle in the window.

Mary lifted the shell by the front door and, hey presto, there it was. The key. Left by the removal men, she presumed, but who had lit the candle this evening? She let herself into her restaurant, dumped her carpetbag on the floor and made her way across the customer-free table-and-chair space to the candle.

Dear Mrs Mackerel,

Welcome to your new home. The Mermaid welcomes you. If you want to know who's who in the village, join me in the Dolphin Tavern this evening. I'm staying there tonight before I move to my sister's in Looe tomorrow.

Best wishes,
Mrs Jones.

So, no hard feelings on the sale price then? Maybe Mrs Jones thought she'd got a great deal. Mary looked out of

the faux-Tudor windows into the lowering light of Quay Street. Her car looked at home, parked on the strip of land outside the Mermaid. She'd have to move it when open for business, it blocked the view of the restaurant, but it'd be OK for now.

Time to take in her new home and business. Eight tables, in various configurations of two, four, eight and forty chairs randomly scattered at sixes and sevens sat empty. Decent enough bentwood furniture. No need to replace them for now. Just needed the addition of fresh linen and flowers to smarten things up. A small service bar, which had last seen action as a tea and cake dispensary, could be tarted up with a few nice glasses, some objets d'art borrowed from the rest of the house and a shelf of expensive bottles of booze. Rupert had twisted the arm of his fine wines and spirits supplier to add an extra leg to his delivery round. They said that if Bath was out on a limb, Penzance was out of the known world, but they'd do it for Rupert and the promise of a good customer in Mary when things took off at the Mermaid. *Mary, as in Mackerel . . . the one who . . . Yes, her, but don't let that taint what could be the beginning of a beautiful restaurant supplier relationship. She's a dear friend brought low*.

Mary went through to her kitchen and plonked herself down in her usual chair at the end of the table nearest the Aga. It felt just like home. Mrs Jones had left the Aga on low and it gave the flagstone-floored room a touch of welcoming warmth.

She drew herself a glass of water from the tap at the Belfast sink and took a cool drink before deciding to head

out for a walk around her fishy corner of Penzance, finishing up at the pub to meet Mrs Jones. First, a foot-tour of her new home. Mary took the staircase that led from the back of the kitchen to the rooms above the restaurant. All looked pretty shipshape. It was comforting to see Hugh's history books on the bookshelf in the sitting room and her paisley eiderdown on the brass bed.

Mary let herself out of the Mermaid and turned left to head up to the top of Quay Street. It was a stiff walk in the half-light of evening and she was a little puffed as she turned at the top onto Chapel Street, to see the quay and harbour laid out before her, twinkling in the evening glow.

To her left was the grocery and hardware store. Behind that on its own road lay the church, St Mary's no less, and further up, the town hall and police station on Market Square. Beyond that, the post office, where she'd be mailing the first chapters of *The Cornish Riviera Cookbook* as soon as she'd thumped them out on her Remington. Fishermen's cottages, listing seaward, ran down both sides of Quay Street until one hit the Mermaid on the right-hand side and, a little lower down on the same side of the road, facing the quay, the Dolphin Tavern.

To the side of the pub lay the Platt, the sloping entrance to the harbour where boats were launched, ice creams licked and shanties sung. Five fishing boats bobbed against the inner wall of the harbour. Two red, one green, one blue and one yellow. It was high tide, the water lapping up onto the Platt. Mary hoped that was as high as it usually came, otherwise she'd have a wet Mermaid.

To the left of her restaurant, at the point where The Quay met Wharf Street, was the lifeboat station, and beyond that, Penzance Railway Station. Away along the front towards Newlyn were the Newlyn Art Gallery and School, and with a brisk tug from there one could rise up the hill towards the pottery, the boarding houses and the doctor's surgery. Across the way from the Platt at the water's edge were the fish market, kipper smokehouse and pilchard plant. Mary liked pilchards. In some parts of Europe they were as revered as some of the more royal fish. They were better eaten fresh, in her opinion, rather than canned as was the way of things. Though better canned than not at all. Britain had won the war on canned pilchards. *That and a little help from our American cousins. Righto, that's the length and breadth of the Penzance scene*.

The Market Building bell rang seven, reminding Mary that, as far as her fledgling restaurant business was concerned, time was money and the Penzance town clock would be forever ticking down. Now, to brave the pub.

Mary pushed at the heavy wooden door of the Dolphin. The reek of beer, tobacco smoke and vinegar assaulted her senses. She took a sharp sniff of disapproval and shouldered her way through the public bar to the snug. She found Mrs Jones fireside.

'Evening, Mrs Mackerel.'

'Mary, please.'

Mrs Jones did not respond in kind with her own Christian name. Mary shrugged it off along with the cardy of her twinset. Mrs Jones had about her the look of a woman

who'd recently had a great weight lifted from her shoulders. Here she was in the Dolphin, nursing a port and lemon by the roaring fire, at peace with the world. At peace, but not prepared to be called by her Christian name.

'Now then, Mary. I'll tell you who's who and that's me off to Looe.'

Mary ordered a cognac from the barmaid and took the fireside seat next to Mrs Jones.

'That's Betsy, the barmaid. Younger than she looks, but that's hospitality work for you. Currently stepping out with a fisherman. Or was it a farmer? No, pardon me, it's a miner. You get my drift.'

'Thank you, Mrs Jones. I think that's clear.'

'Through there, look, public bar. The usual rabble.'

Mary squinted through the porthole window connecting the two bars.

'In order of self-importance, that's Mike the landlord, him with the handlebar moustache. Give him a wide berth. All hands. Though . . .' She looked Mary up and down. 'You should be safe.'

'Thank you. That's reassuring to know.'

'John Brown, there by the bar, he's one of the fishermen. The Browns go back centuries here in Penzance. Handsome chap, isn't he?'

Mary concurred that he was.

'Chap over there. With the combover, that's Tom Tinner. Owns the mine over Lamorna. Blood on his hands, that one, so they say. Tried to get the Mermaid from me for a song. Wanted it for the . . . never mind. It's good you got it. Put

a stop to all that. Farmers at that table. All cousins. There, the blond ones. Arthurs they are called. Land and sea, the never-ending Penzance squabble. Those two women, arty types. Rosie Potter, runs the pottery. Potty's what everyone calls her. Don't know if that's her real name. Other's Barbara Nicholls, the famous la-de-da sculptor. Thick as thieves, those two. Though I've heard there's a third side to that queer triangle. The rest you'll meet along the way.'

Mary thought that she'd rather like to get to know the two arty ladies, as soon as she'd seen the back of Mrs Jones. She stood and went to the bar.

'I say, landlord? I'm Mary Mackerel, new owner of the Mermaid. Your neighbour. Is there a chance of a bite to eat?'

Mike looked at her as if she'd ordered a spaceship. Highly unusual to order food this late. Reflexively, he stroked his handlebar moustache.

'How do. My cook is just cleaning up. Might find a way of providing you with a pasty, p'raps?'

'A pasty will be perfect, and an apposite meal for my first night.'

'Sue,' he yelled up the stairs, 'bring us down a pasty.'

Sue appeared shortly with said baked good on a chipped plate. She had short red hair, wonky teeth and shining eyes. Mary took to her immediately.

'Hello, Sue. You must be the cook.'

Mary lowered her voice and stepped in a little so that only Sue could hear her.

'Happy here? I'm opening up the Mermaid as a restaurant. Need to be up and trading as of yesterday. Come and see

me at 9 a.m. and we'll talk about me raising the wage you get here.'

Sue's shining eyes widened at the sight of Mike glaring at Mary. She bobbed a little by way of acceptance and then shot back up to the kitchen.

Mary took a bite of her pasty, chewed for a couple of moments and promptly spat it out into a tissue she'd whipped from her pocket. She stood and pronounced loudly, 'That is filthy. Lumps of lard stuck to the roof of one's mouth.'

Mrs Jones positively beamed.

'Well, you certainly are settling in, Mary. Poached the pub's cook and insulted Hale Pasties in front of the whole pub. The Hale brothers have been baking their famous pasties and supplying pubs and cafés to all of Cornwall for nigh on two decades.'

'Well, I can do better than that,' she pointed at the mess on the chipped plate, 'and I'll prove it.'

Mary walked through to the public bar and announced her intentions to the slack-jawed room.

'Good evening. I am Mary Mackerel, proprietor of the Mermaid. I shall be giving away free pasties at noon tomorrow. Be prompt, they are sure to go like hot cakes.'

John Brown, the handsome fisherman, rose and strode out of the pub, a broad smile on his weather-beaten face. A few moments later he stepped out of the gentleman's lavatory, sporting a red kerchief about his neck and a sour look on his puss. *How did he do that*? Mary wondered. *Must be an outside entrance to the gents*. Good to know in case of

the need for a French exit. Mary's spying days were behind her, but one never knew. She set off purposefully lounge-bar-wards.

'Noon tomorrow. Well, Mary, you'll be needing a trip to the grocer's first thing. Or tap up Bootleg Bill, long hair, lovely eyes. You'll not miss him. Local wrecker and smuggler, can usually get you anything you could possibly want at an hour or two's notice.'

'Champion,' said Mary to Mrs Jones.

A hum struck up from the public bar. Male voices, together in unison.

'Shanty,' supplied Mrs Jones.

Mary crossed her legs, cocked her head and listened to the fishermen, farmers and miners in heavenly harmony. Land and sea singing off the same shanty sheet, for once. One man, with straggly long hair and heavy leather trench coat, stood slightly apart and didn't sing.

In Lamorna Cove, the nets are rotten
In Lamorna Cove, the fallow fields lie bare,
In Lamorna Cove, sound of tinners' picks forgotten,
Of Pollack's ghost village Cornish folk beware.

Mrs Jones nudged Mary as the shanty men continued to hum the tune in wordless lament. She leant in and hissed in Mary's ear.

'They say Lamorna Cove is cursed. The mine collapsed and killed a dozen men and boys. A generation later all the men were lost fishing in a storm at sea. Nothing grows on

its north-facing land. They sing the song together, farmer, fishermen, miners, but feud bitterly about who caused it and what will happen with the land. The fishermen swore an oath, long ago, something like, "land, sea . . . come for thee" – no, that's not it, oh . . . I don't remember now. It's all because of . . .'

Mary was just wondering what the story was with the leather-clad non-singer in the choir when, at that moment, an old man in a yellow sou'wester burst into the pub and gave three sharp blasts on his whistle. The humming stopped in an instant and all singers, plus Mike the landlord, raced out of the pub's door.

'Lifeboat,' said Mrs Jones.

Sue flew down the stairs after them.