

Susan SALLIS

THE MULTI-MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Searching for Tilly

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help them start a new life?



Susan Sallis was the author of over twenty bestselling novels, many of them set in the West Country. She was born in Gloucestershire and lived in Somerset with her family. She died in 2020.

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SEARCHING FOR TILLY

Susan Sallis



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In memory of my mother-in-law, Jane,
who walked from Brighton to Cheltenham with
her mother and sister in the 1890s

One

November 1918

Tilly was the dreamer in the Quince family. Her mother insisted that one of her 'spells' always came on when there was work to do but her father understood they were triggered by some special sight. "Tis awe and wonder, Bessie," he would tell his wife. 'Awe and wonder at God's work. Don't stop our girl from that.'

'She dun't get no spell when she's in chapel!' Bessie would protest.

'Sometimes she do. And 'tis something no one else do get, my love. This be pure worship.' He wanted to tell her that the difference between his middle child and his wife was the same difference as that between Mary and Martha. But he did not. Bessie could be sharp at times. Instead he inclined his head towards the garden, full of fat winter cabbage at the time. 'See out there, my lovely Bessie. What do you see?'

'I see our winter dinners. I see rain what will be turning to snow before long. I see a lot of

mud which will be trod into my kitchen, prob'ly by Tilly 'erself—'

'An' what d'you suppose Tilly do see?' He was grinning at her, turning her so that her back was to the fire, lifting her draggled skirt to warm her bare calves. She could feel herself going soft against him.

'God's green cushions a-watered by 'is blessed tears . . .' She started to laugh and he kissed her and then nuzzled his face into her neck. She let it go, loving it in one way, frightened of it in another.

'With my body I thee worship . . .' he whispered into her ear as he undid the rope that kirtled her sacking apron around her waist. She let it fall but held his hand still. 'No more children, John Quince. You did promise me. No more children.'

'No more children, wife. I did promise you.' He could have been murmuring anything, she knew that and began to struggle. 'I love you, Bessie Quince. I love you with my heart and my soul and my body . . . my hands and arms and eyes and mouth . . .' He did. And she was no match for him. She wept for love of him. She could not find words like he could, but she could cry tears and she could return his kisses and make it easy for him.

They heard Tilly scraping her boots at the back door and John Quince lifted his Bessie and carried her into the wash house and put his back to the door while he went on kissing her.

‘My apron—’ she gasped, still turned to melting butter by this man of hers who was sometimes a stranger.

For some reason this made him laugh and he let her go so that she stumbled back against the copper set in its brick furnace. The dolly went flying and Tilly’s voice called anxiously, ‘Ma, be ’ee all right?’

‘Course I be all right.’ Bessie did not mean to sound so irritable; Alice would not worry if she thought her mother was scalded to death in the wash house and as for Billy Boy – still her baby at six years old – he would squawk the place about their ears but make no enquiry. It was dreaming Tilly who would want to know what she was doing in the wash room when it weren’t a Monday and why her sacking apron was thrown so carelessly on the hearth.

Sure enough Tilly raised her voice again. ‘Ma, your apron be a’most in the fire! And why you doing washing today?’

Bessie jerked open the door and went into the kitchen. ‘The wise don’t never ask why’s,’ she snapped as she snatched back her apron and kirtled it too tightly, so that she could barely breathe. ‘Get that kettle pushed into the coals, my girl. Your pa is home early from the pit and will want a wash down.’

Tilly’s face cleared. ‘Ah. I see. Where is he?’

‘In the wash house, where does ’ee think? Leave ’im be for five minutes.’

But Tilly pushed at the kettle inexpertly and went straight to the door.

'Pa, did you see the rainbow?' she called through it. 'It were different today. It had a green in it. And a red, 'cept that Mr Tompkins did call it magenta. In't that nice, Pa? Magenta. I do like that word.'

He was still laughing. Bessie could have murdered him but she could not help her mouth curving into a smile. Her body felt blessed by his hands and she was different herself; special. Worshipped. He had said worshipped. She was worshipped. Her smile grew. God was worshipped. Was she God? She clapped her hand over her mouth in terror. Such a thought was blasphemy and would be punished. God knew every thought in her head however much she tried to obliterate them.

John Quince, her husband, spluttered through the wash-house door, 'If we should 'ave another girl, our Tilly, would you like to call her that name – whatever you did say . . . Maggie what?'

Tilly knew well when her father was teasing her and she started to splutter too. Bessie thought irritably that they sounded identical and frivolous. The minister at Bethesda down Trevoise way had condemned frivolity. 'A frivolous woman is as hollow as a sounding cymbal!' he had declared. He had not mentioned a frivolous man.

Tilly held her side. 'Magenta, Pa! Madge Enta.'

'Right. Madge Enta it shall be!' pronounced John Quince magisterially.

And Bessie had known right then that she was in fact pregnant and it would be another girl. Tears of sheer terror flooded her eyes. Another birth, more pain, more sickening weakness just when there was extra work to be done, less money; worse than any of those was the fear of another death. There had been two dead babies before Alice and another two before Billy Boy came along and clung tenaciously to life. Eighteen years of marriage, seven children and only three to show for it. And now . . . what?

Tilly was there by her side. 'Ma, what is it? Is it a pain? Why's you crying?'

She pushed her aside. 'I heard Billy Boy. I'll go up and fetch him. Put a pinch more tea in the pot and top it up. I'll be down directly.'

But of course John Quince, who had ears like jug handles when needed, was out of the wash house like a long dog, no shirt, braces over his copper-red shoulders, sweeping her up in his arms and climbing the loft ladder as if she weighed a farthing. He lifted the trap with the top of his head, pushed her through and slid after her, then called down to Tilly to watch for her sister and give her some hot tea as soon as she came through the door. Then he closed the trap and cradled Bessie's head and started the kissing again. But it took him a long time to kiss away her tears.

* * *

Alice Quince was thirteen – fourteen come Easter – and was a balmaid down at Wheal Three Legs on the Trevose road. The maids worked at the mine entrance, sorting, washing, spotting the red copper in the rock. Alice had not reached that stage of expertise yet and she was a run-for-your-money girl, kilting her skirt and splashing through the mud to the wagons and back again, paid a shilling a day – which was better than Wheal Trevithick – and sharing her pasty with the ponies or one of the snotty-nosed urchins who ran around their mothers' heels begging for food. She was Bessie's favourite girl – obviously Billy Boy superseded both of them but that was how it should be. Alice was pretty and practical too. Her five shillings each week made a difference to the family's comfort. Bessie herself worked the morning shift, splitting the ore with an enormous hammer and revealing the copper. Alice cooked up the oats and added bee sugar and milk, made certain Tilly had her school slate and a cob of bread for midday, flannelled Billy Boy's face and hands, secured the fireguard and set him down to play till his mother came home. If her father was on a later shift she would get him up before she went too. She was a good girl; you could rely on Alice. Not a bit like Tilly.

The morning after the incident in the wash house, when it seemed as if the whole world was drowning in rain, Tilly and Alice set forth before Bessie got home. They wore enormous

sou'westers which almost covered their shoulders; their shawls were crossed over their shirts and the ends pinned at the back of their waists; and rickety boots gleaned from the miners' relief fund chafed their bare feet. Three yards from the cottage door their skirt hems were soggy with water. Their father called, 'Lift your skirts, my maids! You be getting soaked!' But their hands were tucked well inside their shawls and they pretended not to hear.

The cliff path was treacherous with liquid mud which ran from every adit that Wheal Three Legs possessed.

'I wouldn't want to be down there today.' Tilly shuddered. 'All the walls a-running and cold like a grave.'

'Tisn't like that,' Alice said comfortingly. 'Tis the driest place you could find on a day like this. And it will be warm. The walls is sweating, you see.'

'You never been down,' Tilly objected.

'Pa told me. Often. We must never worry about him. He said he felt like a rabbit in a burrow. 'Specially in bad weather.'

'Did he really say that?' Tilly was entranced. She could see it in her head, the men fitting into the shaft, eyes bright, noses sensitive to the slightest smell, ears attuned to the sounds of the earth. 'Mother earth,' she murmured into the brim of her sou'wester.

Alice gave a small laugh. 'You talking about Ma? Reckon you're right, our Tilly. Ma can

be kind an' 'ard too when she 'as to be. I'd know that,' she commented without any kind of criticism. She knew she was her mother's favourite, but she never used that knowledge. She was certain that Tilly was unaware of it and she did all she could to hide it from the younger girl. She said now, soberly, 'She 'asn't been the same since Billy Boy.'

Tilly looked up and a drop of rain fell on her nose. 'He isn't no trouble. And she loves him very much.'

Alice looked back. 'You've got a dewdrop, our Tilly. Get your rag and wipe it off.' But she herself stopped, fished out the rag that was pinned to Tilly's bodice and wiped the rain away. She put her face as close to her sister's as the sou'wester brims allowed and said quietly, 'Too many babies, our Till. Just you remember that when you've grown.'

Tilly looked surprised. 'There's only us three. Mrs Baker at the Miner's Lamp has got fourteen and another one on the way!'

'Who told you that?'

'Iris Stevens. Her ma is the midwife down at Tregeagle.'

'Yes . . .' Alice thought a moment then added, 'Mrs Baker is a different kettle of fish. She's strong as a horse. Ma isn't like that. Anyway she's had seven babies, our Tilly. I've told you that before. The others died.'

That set Tilly off on one of her 'rambles'. She wanted to know what their names were,

boy or girl, fair or dark . . . 'I can't believe that we've got four brothers. Or sisters. Or two of each. Or one sister and three brothers. Or—'

'Don't go on so, Tilly. And don't say anything to Ma about it. It hurts her.'

Tilly was silent then said, 'She told you?'

'Yes. But I'm the eldest and I helped her with Billy Boy.' Alice spoke shortly. She had been seven years old and absolutely terrified. She thought she might manage better now but she was very sure that she would never have any babies herself.

The girls separated at the school and Alice pulled her hat right down over her face and went back along the cliff path alone to the mine. Tilly stood on the bottom rung of the school gate and let Jacko Miles swing her into the yard. Raindrops flew off the back of her hat and there were screams and giggles and then the school bell clanged from the porch and they shuffled into lines; one for the little children and one for the seniors. Tilly had been in the seniors for a whole year now and took her place next to Philip Radjel, who should have been down the mine, as he was almost thirteen; but he had a weak chest and the mine captain said it wasn't worth taking him on for the time he had left. So Mr Tompkins, the schoolmaster, let him stay at school and used him to keep the garden tidy at the schoolhouse, and wash the floor when anyone vomited or – and this was Philip's favourite

thing – help Miss Casson with the little ones. He had told Tilly that he wanted to be a teacher when he was old enough. Tilly had said nothing. She knew he would be an angel.

They filed in; Tilly hung her shawl and sou'wester on a hook labelled with a yellow and orange crayoned quince, coloured on her first day at school five years before. She had been one of the first to use the fat wax pencils sent by Sir Geoffrey Bassett, who had been anxious for the Reverend Carridon to approve his second marriage before his first wife was actually dead. The Reverend came to school once a week to conduct an orthodox service and had graciously demonstrated to the children the various colours. Purple, crimson, yellow and orange; blue, green and – excitingly – black. But no gold, which was the colour of quinces. So he had suggested streaks of yellow and orange. And there they were. She had loved the Reverend Carridon from that day and vowed she would be buried in the churchyard at Tregeagle.

They stood behind their long desks and waited in silence for Mr Tompkins to walk in from his study and take over from Miss Casson who stood before them, smiling slightly at Philip Radjel, then straightening her face in case Jacko Miles thought the smile was for him. Mr Tompkins had told her on numerous occasions not to 'encourage' Jacko Miles.

The hymn that morning was 'Eternal Father

strong to save', which Tilly found frightening. The sea was frightening. Even in the summer she saw its glitter as menacing. And God's arm did not calm the restless wave however much they prayed and sang about it. But the tune was good and Miss Casson managed the harmonium extremely well. The big clock on the wall above Mr Tompkins's raised desk showed that it was nine thirty. Pa's shift started at ten o'clock and he was always early. He would be standing by the engine house talking to Dick Stevens. She smiled to herself.

They prayed – standing up because Mr Tompkins couldn't bear the fuss made by twenty-four children getting down on their knees – for fishermen, farmers and miners. The miners came last, Tilly noticed. Then they said Our Father, then Mr Tompkins and Miss Casson went halfway down the room and dragged across the screen which divided the juniors from the seniors, and the day began.

It was mid-morning and Tilly's stomach was rumbling, and her thoughts were concentrating on the bread cob in her pocket and completely by-passing the long-division sum on her slate. She would have put her hand down and tried to pinch off a corner of the bread except that when she had done so before, Mr Tompkins had known instantly what was going on and had taken away the cob so that she went hungry until she got home. Even so her hand went into her pocket without any conscious command

from her and, as if on a clockwork neck, Mr Tompkins's head swivelled in her direction. And then it happened: God did intervene. The earth moved; the school moved; the dividing screen jumped up and hit the ceiling, and plaster snowed upon the children.

Jacko Miles yelled, 'Earthquake!' and from next door Philip Radjel could be heard saying, 'It's all right, Miss Casson . . .' and then the sound came to them: overpoweringly loud, yet somehow muffled, an explosion.

They all knew what it was. They stood stock still, glued to their benches, staring at Mr Tompkins; from next door the little ones could be heard starting to cry. The sound had barely died away when the hooter sounded. Above that, above the sound of the rain, someone screamed. Tilly knew it was her scream when Jacko Miles took her hand and held it tightly.

Mr Tompkins strode down their half of the room and took hold of the screen, pushing it back on his own, having to shove hard when it got stuck. When they could all see each other, he picked up one of the weeping eight-year-old girls and carried her back to his desk. Her legs were bound with rags and they dripped miserably on to the floor; she had wetted herself. He sat her on his desk and encircled her with a protective arm.

'Children, listen to me. Stop crying, Carrie. I want you to listen to what I have to say.'

He waited, and gradually Carrie stopped cry-

ing and the other children watched him with terrible apprehension.

He said, 'There's been some kind of accident. That is why the hooter is sounding. It must be at Wheal Three Legs. Some of you have fathers in that mine. You will be anxious about them. I want you to go home in an orderly fashion. You will go quietly and fetch your outdoor things, put them on in here and walk home – do not run. If anybody needs me, I shall be in the schoolhouse and Miss Casson will stay in the school itself. You will know where to find us.' He looked around. 'I don't doubt that God will spare all the miners whatever has happened. But your families will need you now.'

He glanced at Miss Casson and she took over the exodus, helped by Philip Radjel. Jacko Miles was at the gate, tugging it open, swinging on it so that it crashed against the school wall. The children poured out. Tilly took to the cliff path, holding in her mind the picture of her father, safe in his burrow like a rabbit. The rain hit her hard. It came from the sea, beneath which the long arm of Three Legs cautiously explored for the precious red copper. She must not imagine that.

She was almost home when a second tremor hit the soles of her feet and convulsed her legs and body. And then the crunch of another explosion. She stopped in her tracks and turned to face the sea. 'You can't have him!' she shouted. 'You've got to save him . . . save him . . . please save him!'

Something happened. She did not at first know what it was. And then she looked down at her shawl and saw the flakes of snow settling in the folds.

That day the Armistice was signed.

Two

August 1999

The three women were sitting in the old parlour of Widdowe's Cottage with the French doors wide open to the garden sloping down towards the sea. It was too hot for comfort; the coastal footpath ran past the end of the garden and the head of the occasional walker moved slowly and carefully along the top of the escallonia hedge. None of the walkers glanced their way: their sights were set on the cove below, with its incoming tide and towering rocks offering some shade. The three women looked their way now and then but without much interest.

Of the three, Jenna was obviously the youngest. With her brown hair carelessly looped into a rubber band at the back of her head, she could have passed for eighteen – until the sun caught the planes of her face and revealed the skin, stretched so tightly over her bones that it showed too much of her skull. Her brown eyes had been moving slowly between her mother and her

aunt, not always seeing them. But now her aunt was speaking and Jenna stared at her with disbelief.

Jenna's mother, Caroline, was fifty-two and could easily have been her older sister. Her brown hair was threaded with grey but well cut in an ear-length bob and her eyes saw most things but gave nothing away. At that moment she too stared incredulously.

Laura, on the other hand, twelve years her senior, looked older than sixty-four. She was clearly an outdoors woman: her hands were rough with gardening, her face burned by the sun. Her short straight hair was white and nearly unkempt. She had been blonde and beautiful and her eyes still reminded the others of her old self. They were startlingly violet-coloured, large and full of dreams. She had just announced that they were going to start knitting squares for Oxfam. It was 9 August – 'one of the dog days' as she had pointed out – and they had to do something.

'We could sunbathe,' Caroline protested, but without enthusiasm.

'I mean, we have to *do* something,' Laura emphasized.

'But knitting?' Jenna's inward stare focused in astonishment. 'We don't *like* knitting. Do we?'

'What *do* we like?' Laura returned the look with interest.

Jenna said nothing and seemed to be drifting back to her thoughts. Caroline said, 'Well . . . we

could try a three-handed reading group. Perhaps.'

Laura beamed. 'That's excellent, darling. We'll do that too. And we'll sunbathe too, Caro. And we'll cook.'

Caroline said with just a touch of sarcasm, 'Why don't you draw up a timetable, Laura?'

Laura continued to smile. 'I will. We don't have to stick to it of course, but it would help.' She glanced at Jenna meaningfully. 'We have to make new lives. And if we don't organize ourselves we might go right off the rails. Which would be a pity.'

Caroline followed her sister-in-law's gaze and, after a second, nodded.

'We can try.' She managed a wry smile. 'But honestly, Laura . . . knitting.'

Laura nodded too, a congratulatory nod. 'I know. But I was in Oxfam yesterday. D'you remember Madge Appleton, lived next door to Geoff and me when we came to Cornwall first? She works there on Mondays and she rushed out to ask how we were. And she was knitting – yes, even as she rushed out!'

Caroline laughed; Jenna appeared not to hear. Laura went on, 'They need blanket squares. I bought wool and needles and jotted down the instructions and . . . here we are!'

Jenna surfaced and smiled briefly. 'How long will it take?'

'To knit a square? The rate we shall go, probably a week.' Laura smiled at her niece

but Jenna's brown eyes widened and her face stretched so that it looked as if it might split.

'I don't think I could bear that.'

Caroline said swiftly, 'Take a turn round the garden, Jen. Laura and I noticed a handsome toad under one of the stones on the gravel patch. See if he's still there.'

Jenna made for the wide-open French doors. As she moved out of earshot, Caroline turned towards her brother's widow and said in a low voice, 'Darling, I know your intentions but you're going too fast. The accident happened two months ago. Jeremy was killed – she lost her *husband*, Laura. You and I know about being widowed. She was sitting next to him in the car, they skidded on that oil patch, went into the crash barrier, she had some bruises. Don't you think she may well be wishing . . .' She stopped because Laura's gasp was a small scream.

'Of course I know what she is wishing, Caro! Of *course* . . . You probably wished it when Steve was killed. When Geoff was dying I wanted to go with him . . . I know I did. But life has to go on, darling – we know that too. And you told me it was Jen herself who wanted to come down here until she was fit for work again.'

Caroline patted her sister-in-law's arm. 'It was, Laura.' She made a small face. 'That was probably because undiluted mum all the time was a bit too much for her!' She tried to laugh. 'And I'm the first to agree with you about life going on, even when it's the last thing we want.'

She drew a deep breath, then expelled it with another forced laugh. 'But blanket squares? You want us to take up knitting blanket squares? You can see she's not up to it.'

Laura looked up from her lap where several balls of wool nestled expectantly. Her eyes were wide. She had actually cast on some stitches and managed two or three rows.

'Oh Caro, I'm so sorry! You always tell me I blunder in where angels fear to tread. It's just that I want so much to rescue her from that awful place she's in, when her eyes go like a seal's with a caul of total misery over them. I wanted to do something.'

Caroline put an impulsive hand over the knitting. 'Dearest Laura. Geoff's been dead for . . . how long?'

'Fifteen years and eight and a half months,' Laura said promptly.

Caroline swallowed; it came out so pat . . . fifteen years, eight and a half months . . . a generation ago, an age to most people, obviously not to Laura.

'Can you remember anything from the first four months?'

Laura blinked. 'I try not to remember. It's all a bit of a fog.'

'Yes. It was the same for me when Steve was killed.' Caroline sighed. 'You have to fumble about a bit, don't you? And that feeling of being alone—'

'Jen's not alone, Caro. She's got you.' She

paused and added in a smaller voice, ‘. . . and me, for what that’s worth.’

‘She knows that, of course she does. You’ve always been another mother to her, Laura. Better than me at times.’ She shook her head wryly when Laura protested. ‘It’s true, my dear. She often resents me, I can feel it. If I told her that I know what she is going through, she would hate me for it – my grief is nothing like her grief. I accept that. But if you said it to her, Laura, it would be different.’ Again she shook her head as Laura protested vigorously. ‘Look, it doesn’t matter, my dear. I know that you are important to her – all right, both of us are important to her . . . that hasn’t changed. It’s everything else that has changed. She needs us. But we still cannot share her grief. It’s personal. It’s private. She’s *got* to be alone with it. You can see how she shuts herself off – the seal’s caul as you so aptly put it.’ She removed her hand and put it carefully on to the arm of her chair. ‘You were the same,’ she went on in a new, matter-of-fact voice. ‘Coming down here all on your own. Wouldn’t let Steve and me visit you.’ She shook her head at the protests. ‘All right. You couldn’t stop us when we turned up but you never let us stay a night. You never let Steve help you with the repairs—’

‘Geoff and I had started them. Don’t you see, I was doing it for Geoff?’

‘Pointing? Reroofing?’

‘Mr Jempson helped with both those projects.’

‘We never saw him. All we saw was you up a ladder. Iron hoops on the one which went over the roof ridge. Those sort of bungee-rope things holding the other in place!’

‘They were his ladders. He secured them like that. And I was still in my forties, remember! Anyway, that’s not the point – you’ve already made that.’ Her eyes were full of tears and she said, angry with herself, ‘I must give Jen more space. I must stop finding jobs for her.’ She looked at the wool again with disgust. ‘I must drop the knitting business.’

She pulled her needles out of their stitches. Caroline gave a little scream and leaned forward to prevent her from unpicking the small piece of work.

‘No! Laura, you are still so incredibly impulsive! Of course you must not stop knitting! And I’ll definitely join you. Let’s make that timetable and carry it through! Not for Jen – for us – you and me! We need it. And she will, too, when she gets through some of this fog! And if she sees us placidly knitting—’

‘I can’t do it all day, for God’s sake!’ wailed Laura, watching Caroline wriggle the stitches back on to a needle. ‘I hate knitting, actually!’

‘We’ll do it for an hour a day,’ Caroline said soothingly. ‘Can you manage that?’

‘I suppose so.’ Laura accepted the repaired square reluctantly. ‘I can’t think what possessed me to imagine this could help poor Jen.’

‘It will. Eventually.’ Caroline took a ball of

wool from her sister-in-law's lap, and needles from the coffee table, and began to cast on stitches expertly. After a moment, Laura stabbed her needle through a stitch and wound the wool around it fiercely. Caroline said, 'We're doing this for us at the moment, Laura. And if it works for us then Jen will see that and might – just might – join us.'

Laura glanced at her sister-in-law and sighed. She was so like Geoff at times. This, nearly always, was an enormous comfort, but then, quite suddenly, it would twist Laura's gut so that she had to move away. This was such a moment. The way Caroline had taken her silly, impulsive idea and made of it something so sensible, just as Geoff had always done . . . it was heartbreaking. Laura stood up, pocketed her ball of wool and, still knitting, went to the window.

'She's looking for that toad at the bottom of the garden. Poor Jen. Oh Caro . . . poor, poor Jen.'

'Yes.' Caroline's voice was infinitely sad, then she added briskly, 'But she could be so much worse off, darling. She could be on the bread-line. She could be completely alone. Whereas she has a good job which they are holding for her indefinitely. And she has her Aunt Laura who has made a life for herself in this rather lonely corner of Cornwall . . .' She laughed as Laura began to refute this. 'And of course, she has her poor old mum!'

‘Poor old mum, indeed! You look like sisters and you know it—’

‘And part of this knitting deal is that we do it sitting down and relaxing as much as we possibly can, Laura. You can never manage longer than ten minutes in a chair. No wonder you sleep badly. Come on. Sit down until it’s time for tea.’

Laura tried to laugh but it was difficult when Caroline was using the same words Geoff had so often used: *sit down, my beautiful girl . . . no wonder you’re so skinny*. She sat down so she was still able to see through the window, and tried to project her thoughts into Jenna’s. Jeremy and Jenna. The names had sounded like a music-hall double act, even more so when Jeremy had fondly contracted them into Jen and Jem. ‘Sounds racy, doesn’t it?’ he had said. ‘And we’re such conformists, Jen negotiating insurance deals with building consortiums, me a very junior architect with one of those consortiums.’ They had met at a conference centre on the south coast where they had come together—because their youth separated them from the others. Throughout their five-year marriage they had stayed that way, shinningly young with their destinies intertwined for ever and ever and ever . . . And here was Jen now, half of the act, Jen without Jem, another widow to swell the ranks at Widdowe’s Cottage. Except that it was no longer singular; they should rename it ‘Three Widdowes’ Cottage’. Her difficult laugh became a sudden sob.

Caroline’s response was instant. ‘Look. You’ve

come through your grieving, Laura. I've come through mine. Jen will come through hers, eventually.'

Laura knitted furiously, carelessly. 'It's so unfair, Caro! I was forty-eight! I'd had over twenty-five years with Geoff! You were younger! And Jen younger still! Too young . . . too bloody young!'

'Darling, you're messing that up completely! Give it to me . . . just lean back. Breathe gently. Try to let it go . . . down through your body. Out through the soles of your feet. You remember.' She was smiling; she was repeating Laura's own words to her when Steve had died. But actually, Caroline had never wept.

She went on speaking, gently and calmly, even as she reknitted Laura's royal blue square. 'Nobody is too young for anything. You know that. And in a way, Jen is lucky to have known Jeremy at all! They were like Romeo and Juliet, probably a true match made in heaven . . . born for each other . . . all the things most people dream of but realistically know will not happen.' She paused and then added as an afterthought: 'The same applies to you and Geoff, darling. It was different for me.' She finished a row and changed needles to start on the next. 'As you know, Steve had left me – I know we don't talk about it, Laura, but now and then . . .' She was knitting very fast. 'I felt the most enormous regret. There would not be another chance to make it work . . . it was another opportunity I'd

let slip by.’ She laughed. ‘Did you know I was going to take dear Ma on holiday just before she died?’ She started another line. ‘Yes, I was going to drive her down here to see you and Geoff and what you were doing with her old home. Steve was on one of his cruises in charge of the leisure activities, Jenna had mumps and by the time she was better and Steve was back home, my mother was in hospital with pneumonia.’ She turned the knitting again. ‘Jenna was fourteen when Steve left us, sixteen when he was killed. She always blamed me.’ Caroline spoke levelly and without emotion.

Laura made a sound of protest and forgot her measured breathing. She said, ‘You’ve always put up such a front, Caro! Have you never spoken of this to Jen?’

‘Of course not.’ Caroline managed a laugh. ‘I’m all right. I really am. What about you?’ She handed back the battered knitting and resumed her own.

Laura said, ‘You’ve nearly finished this one! Oh Caro, I’m fine. You just said it, didn’t you? Jen and Jeremy made for each other. Geoff Miller and Laura Wheatley . . . likewise.’ She put the knitting down and fumbled for a handkerchief. ‘I was – am – so lucky, my dear. Don’t take any notice of me sniffing away madly! We’re so different yet so similar. You show one side of the coin – always a calm and cheerful face. I show the other. Geoff said I should have been on the stage!’ She laughed.

Caroline nodded. ‘That’s a nice thought. Two sides of one coin. I like that.’ She said, ‘Don’t forget I was brought up by Tilly Miller, née Quince, who always maintained it was as easy to be cheerful as it was to be sad!’ She laughed. ‘Let me do the supper tonight. I’ll make a salad and scrape some of those potatoes you dug yesterday. We’ll hard-boil eggs and dig into the cheese. Too hot for anything else.’ She smiled sideways at her sister-in-law. ‘D’you know, when Geoff brought you home to meet Ma I was five and so jealous I could not even look at you. And now, here I am trying to say the sort of things Geoff would have said . . . trying to make you sit still for just an hour.’ She stopped smiling and concentrated on her needles. ‘I love you, Laura. But there’s a tiny bit of me that is still jealous!’

If she had wanted to shock Laura out of her sudden spat of grief, she certainly succeeded. Laura’s violet eyes opened wide.

‘Jealous? Of me?’

‘Well, of course. Geoff was like a father to me. He must have been almost twenty-five when I was born. He would come home from his school and give me all the time I demanded – apparently I was very demanding. I had him all through the school holidays. He taught me to read and write and do up my shoes. And then you did a stint helping out with everything at his school and . . . suddenly there you were. And it was so obvious he could see no one else but you.’

‘But I knew about you – I knew how you felt

about Geoff. And I knew how he felt about you. I respected that, Caro. Didn't you know that?'

'Of course. That's why I loved you too. But – but – your *generosity*, yes, that's what it was. Generosity. It was almost too much . . .' She finished a row and turned the knitting around. 'Perhaps I don't mean that I was jealous. Perhaps I mean that I've always known you were a better person than me. I didn't deserve Geoff's love. You did.'

Laura put down her knitting and blew her nose and said something about rubbish. Then stood up. 'I'll do the supper. I absolutely refuse to cry again. You're good at knitting and I'm not. I've always been good at talking things out . . . now you're doing that better than me, too!'

Caroline looked up, surprised, then smiled. 'All right. I accept all that. And I can certainly knit better than you – look at this! But it's your idea and it's a brilliant one. About time we did something for charity. Go and do the meal and I'll pick up your dropped stitches and set you right again. Go on – shoo!'

Laura went, thankfully. The kitchen was her domain. It smelled of the bunches of sage and rosemary tied to the old beams, drying to the crispness needed for 'rubbing down'. Soon she would be bringing in the onions and their pungent smell would override the subtler ones. She stood on the coconut matting, which made the uneven slates less perilous, and held on to the edge of the table, inhaling the familiarity of

the space, fighting for that precious calm which Caroline had talked about. She closed her eyes and imagined it flooding her being. She wanted it so desperately. Too desperately.

Jenna's voice spoke from the open back door. 'I can't see any toads. And actually . . .' She came to the table. 'I'm frightened of them anyway. Perhaps my mother doesn't know that.'

She tried to make it sound funny, then saw the tears trickling from her aunt's closed eyes. She enfolded her. They wept together.

Three

September 1999

August eventually lapsed into September. Burning-brass-hot days when Laura felt nothing happened. Jenna had moved out of her flat in London in June, two weeks after Jeremy's funeral, and Caroline had brought her here on the train. Laura had met them at Penzance and driven them to Widdowe's Cottage, almost rejoicing because she was so certain this was the right thing to do. Caroline would nurse her daughter back to life and Laura would prepare wonderful meals and let the cliffs and the sea work their healing powers just as they had for her all those years ago and then, ten years back, for Caroline. It was never going to 'get better' of course. That had been rammed home to her on the day of the knitting. There would always be scars, but . . . but . . .

The fact was, Jenna's flood of tears on that day – the day of the knitting – had not helped her. She still wandered around, doing what she

was told, drifting into semi-consciousness, eating Laura's carefully prepared meals without appreciation; without even identifying them. Locked away somewhere with her grief.

Caroline tried to compensate.

'Laura, my dear, these courgettes – I've always thought courgettes were tasteless and mushy but these are heavenly. Don't tell me. Coated in egg – and then breadcrumb? And of course, the fresh herbs . . . simply delicious!' And Jenna, recalled to herself, might echo a murmured 'delicious' or simply smile at her aunt.

Then, as the sun mellowed and the dews soaked the parched grass, Jenna's wanderings took her further afield. She had taken the route to Tregeagle along the cliff path with Laura but had turned back quite soon. She went to the cove and swam. She had gone the other way towards the old mine workings and then up on to the road where there was a cluster of shops and a pub called the Miner's Lamp. Then, for two days, she did not tell Laura or Caroline where she was going; it became another secret, locked away with everything else.

Early in the second week of September she announced after breakfast that she would have a walk. Laura said nothing. Caroline said, 'Which way will you go? If you go towards the mine you could go up to that one-stop shop and get some bread.'

'I thought of going the other way,' Jenna said.
'Oh. Thanks,' Caroline came back.

Laura, just as quickly, intervened. 'I plan to take the car into Penzance tomorrow, Caro. Why don't we all go and stock up and look round the shops?'

They stood at the back door and watched Jenna walk down the garden and through the azaleas and on to the cliff. The sea, no longer blindingly bright, moved lazily below.

Laura said sadly, 'She still can't really *see* anything, can she? That's what's so awful about it. She's cut off from everything that could give her life meaning. Even the soaking wet grass – she didn't notice it!'

Caroline watched as her daughter's head moved along the cliff path, only just visible above the high ferns. 'She's noticing something. I don't know what it is. She knew which way she was going, for instance.'

Laura said nothing; she had thought Jenna was simply being contrary.

Caroline sighed sharply and turned to go into the house again. 'It's cooking morning, isn't it?' She managed a glint of a smile at Laura. 'I must be getting into the swing of things – didn't even have to consult the timetable!'

Laura stayed where she was, looking across the ferns.

'Listen. This is the first day of autumn – yes, I know it's too soon and all that. But it's cool enough so that I can do some proper gardening. I want to get the bean sticks out and put away and lay the beans to rest.'

‘Darling, I’ll do most things for you but I cannot dig or weed,’ Caroline protested.

‘Of course you can’t! That’s why – if I want my garden to survive – I wouldn’t dream of asking you!’ Laura turned and laughed with a feeling of sudden release. She hated the slight conflicts between the three of them; it was nothing, of course, small undercurrents . . . that was all. ‘But I think you should be outside too, and I wondered about your sketch book.’

‘I didn’t pack it,’ Caroline said immediately.

‘No, I thought you might not have done. Geoff’s is in the writing desk. Second drawer down.’

Caroline held the back of a dining chair and stood very still. ‘Geoff’s?’

‘Surely you knew he painted? Only when we came down here, of course – no time otherwise. He’d make sketches and work on them at home. Oils. He liked slapping them on to canvas as thickly as he could!’ She started down the path to the shed. ‘I’ll do an hour, then make coffee.’

Caroline stayed where she was, watching. She was beginning to feel that this gathering of the three of them at Treleg was a mistake. Laura was too emotional and imagined she understood Jenna better than anyone. It was ridiculous. One minute she was insisting on her wretched timetable, which Jenna almost always ignored, the next she was closeted with Jenna, encouraging her into the sheer self-indulgence of tears. Caroline knew that if she’d stayed at Jenna’s flat

in London, she could have invited Jenna's old college friends to visit and got her back to work before Christmas. But Jenna herself had suggested Laura's cottage – the only wish she had been able to voice.

Caroline nibbled her lip, remembering too that it had been she herself who had told Laura to give Jenna time for grief. And never once in Jenna's twenty-six years had Caroline ever said, 'She's my daughter and I know her better than you do.' And now here was Laura underlining the fact that she had known Geoff was an artist. And Caroline, his beloved little sister, had not. She took a deep breath, acknowledging to herself that she was being unfair and petty and totally unreasonable.

And then she went into the parlour and opened the second drawer of the desk and there was an enormous manilla envelope printed in Laura's large square letters GEOFF'S SKETCH BOOK. She took it out – it was heavy – and put it on the coffee table and then slid off the envelope and was confronted with Geoff's work. Fifteen years, eight and a half months since he could have touched the book, let alone worked in it. She knelt down and began to turn the pages.

Laura stuck the fork into the ground and began to twist out the bean sticks. She bound them in bundles of six, which was the heaviest she could handle. She had done four wigwams of

sticks this year and they had yielded splendidly. She thought she would do wigwams next year, too. It made picking that much easier.

She lugged the bundles, four of them, into the shed and stacked them at the back. She would need to sort everything out to make room for the deckchairs that had been left out most of the summer. She stood, looking around, wondering how the spaces left by the garden furniture had somehow filled themselves in the last two months. She loved the smell of the shed, its clutter, its complete absence of organization. Flower pots were stacked everywhere, seed packets, bulbs, wire netting, strange fleece material to protect exotic plants from the frost, the mower and its miles of cable, a rack of tools – the shears had opened wide and looked predatory – the rake and spade that had been there when they bought the place. She had invested in a sort of corkscrew designed to extract weeds but she had never used it, as the hoe was easier to manage. And there it hung, its extra-long handle almost touching the wooden floor, its two heads looking right and left, the two-pronged side protruding like snail's eyes, the other a conventional pusher and puller. She reached out and touched things because Geoff had touched them and that comforted her. Then she took down the spade. She would cover the old bean vines, then go in and make coffee, because obviously Caroline did not intend to do any sketching.

She stepped out of the shed and glanced back

at the house and there was Caroline sitting on an old kitchen chair, eyes down on a large sketch book.

Laura shouldered the spade and walked on down the garden.

Jenna knew only too well that she was missing out on the sensual delights of this first autumnal day. She had chosen to accept Laura's invitation to live at the cottage because she had assumed the smells, the sights and the sheer exhilaration which she associated with Widdowe's Cottage would help her to bear the dreadful loss of Jeremy . . . even to forget it . . . even to forget *him* for a blessed while. It hadn't worked, of course; she was shocked at herself for thinking it would. As if she would want to forget what had happened . . . as if she would want – ever, ever, ever – to forget Jeremy! She wanted her grief, she needed it now. Grief was her life and she embraced it, hugged it to her so that she would not fully see, hear, smell, taste, anything else at all. And she had gone into Tregeagle Church, not to find solace, but to emphasize that grief, to make it the tearing, aggressive emotion it had been. And she went back. She went back yesterday and she was going back today. Because it was working. Because she had found something that made the grief . . . precious.

It had been a surprise to find the church unlocked and she had assumed it was occupied by cleaners or flower arrangers. Not so. It had

been completely and wonderfully empty. It had also been uncleaned and . . . dead. Not a single flower, not a gleam of brass. The sun had struck colours from the few stained-glass windows but she had barely seen them through the all-pervading mustiness. The thick smell of dust had been everywhere. She had trailed through the pews, glanced at the pulpit, walked right up to the altar, fingered the cloth, stared at the crucifix and then up at the east window; and been reminded of Miss Havisham's time-capsuled house in *Great Expectations*. This was what she wanted. For time to stay still so that it could not put a space between herself and Jeremy. She had felt something inside her sigh and relax.

She had turned and gone through the Lady Chapel and into the vestry, and found a cupboard full of vases, some stained teacups and saucers, piles of tattered prayer books. She had walked back into the nave and out through the door, then circled the whole church, threading her way through tombstones and long grasses, a standpipe with a watering can beneath it. The weather had been hotter that day and the whole place had shimmered. It was dead yet it was visible . . . she had stood still by the lychgate and willed Jeremy to appear; dead but visible. There had been a recent film, she had forgotten its name. The dead husband in the film had come back to comfort his wife. She had willed Jeremy to do the same . . . willed him until she

was exhausted. Nothing had happened.

'You're just . . . dead,' she had said aloud, almost angrily. Nothing had happened after all. An empty, dust-filled church, a long-ago graveyard. They all amounted to nothing. She had turned back to go home, determined not to come this way again.

But she had come the day after. Yesterday. The deadness had brought her. She had wanted to be dead, atrophied at the lychgate or in front of the altar. She had considered suicide and knew with a basic sanity that she could not do that to her mother or her aunt. But this kind of death was different; the church was there, but dead. And that was how she was.

She had repeated the circuit she had done the day before and then gone inside and sat in one of the pews. And after a while she had felt a kind of numbness; all feelings and emotions had gone away. She had supposed she could have moved but she had made no attempt to move, not even her eyes. She had become part of the church. There, but dead. She had been conscious of breathing very shallowly and she had sensed that her heart had slowed right down. She had sat and sat and felt nothing.

And then an enormous involuntary breath had come upon her; it had been there, in front of her face, waiting. She had opened her mouth and drawn it into her lungs, and then continued to breathe slowly but deeply. She had felt her toes in her soaking wet tennis shoes; the tips of

her fingers had tingled. She had waited and registered herself rising back to full life; coming up slowly but surely as if through water, breaking the surface very gently. And being. Being her physical self again.

There was disappointment but it had not been devastating this time. She had discovered something. She could do it again. For a space of time she had been anaesthetized from pain.

She had moved her arm and checked her watch. It had been an hour. Just over an hour, actually. She had stayed where she was, breathing, moving her legs, rubbing her jeans with the palms of her hands, being conscious of herself over and over again. After a time – allotted, she was sure of that – she had known she could stand. So she had stood and then moved slowly to the altar and stared around her, frowning. Already the certainty of what had happened had begun to elude her. Had she been resting? Or had something enormous happened . . . had she had some kind of out-of-body experience – the sort she was always reading about in the Sunday papers?

She had gone into the vestry and rummaged in more cupboards. There was an urn and in the tiny robing room there were candlesticks and an enormous Bible; and a locked cupboard above a desk. She had left the church and stood again by the lychgate, looking. Something was happening. She had had no idea what it could be. Perhaps she was closer to Jeremy here than

anywhere else? Perhaps this was a way of summoning him?

She had put her hand to her heart and found it beating hard; slowly but hard. And then she had gone home.

After breakfast the next day, she put everything away meticulously; her aunt had shown where she kept jams and marmalade, the butter compartment in the fridge, the carefully sectioned cutlery drawer. Laura had said, 'Anyone can wash up, darling. It's more important to put things away where we can all find them.' And Jenna had understood that her aunt was forestalling any possible criticism from Mum. She also knew that although Laura accepted her walks without question, her mother . . . suspected something.

The dew was extra heavy and by the time Jenna reached the church on the cliff her jeans were soaked to the knees. The path veered inland just here and she supposed went on past the church and eventually into the village of Tregeagle itself. She stood at the junction and stared along the cliff side. It would have been possible to continue walking by the sea; she knew that the coastal path went right along here to Land's End. Why had she taken this turning two days before? Had it been some kind of divine providence? The path that led past the church was a tunnel of hazels. She could have been looking for shade; it was still very hot.

She crouched now. The hazel tunnel was heavy with dew and would have rained on her had she knocked the low branches. When she came to the lychgate the church looked different: the granite gave off a pink, mellow glow where before she had seen only its hardness. She had not noticed the weathervane yesterday; today it glinted, and as she looked up it swung to point due south. She had felt no breeze until then. She began to measure her breathing; it was fast. Was this the day she was to see Jeremy? Was it? Could it actually happen?

She almost ran to the door, looking for other differences which she might construe as some kind of evidence. She stood at the back of the nave, staring. The light was orange instead of red, blue instead of purple. It lay across the pews when before it had lit only the dusty floor. She glanced at her watch and found she was much earlier than yesterday and the day before. And the light was softer today; Laura had called it autumnal. Even so . . .

She sat in the same pew, put her hands in her lap, her feet together, dropped her head, began to measure her breaths. Slow, slower. Then less air, and less again. Very shallow now. Her blood pressure was dropping. She was within reach of the nothingness. Within reach of the place where Jeremy would be waiting.

A voice, gentle, precise consonants, spoke. It said, 'Are you all right?'

It wasn't Jeremy's voice so she kept her eyes

closed. It was someone who had come for her. She said on a brief outward breath, 'Yes.'

There was a long pause while she waited. Then the voice said, 'All right. I will leave you for a while, but I am within call.'

And then there was silence. And in that silence, confident that this was the right time, she entered nothingness.

The next minute it was as if the church itself was caving in. The voice – the same but very loud now – was saying, 'Come on! You are not going to die in my church! Come back this minute— d'you hear me? Come *on!*'

A hand gripped her ponytail and held her head up, another patted her face – slapped her face almost – and the voice blared in her ears like a klaxon and echoed around the ancient pillars and beneath the pews, skidded up to the altar and back again via the pulpit.

The strange thing was she couldn't 'come back' because she hadn't got to where she was going, and she fought the hands and the voice although she knew it was useless. And then, of all dreadful things, she was sick. She tried to warn the hands but the voice got in the way, so she flung herself forward until her head met the coarse cloth of a pair of jeans and she was sick all down them.

The klaxon cut off quite suddenly and the hands went to her shoulders and held her while she retched repeatedly and then groaned.

'That's better. Let it all come up. You really

will feel better.’ One of the hands disappeared and then came back with a handkerchief and mopped her up.

‘There’s water in the vestry. We’ll get cleaned up in a minute. First of all . . . what are you on?’

She looked up blearily. It was a man, not old, not young, black curls needing cutting, black eyes too, a snub nose, a long mouth and round chin. He wore a sweatshirt and stained jeans – stained by her, she supposed dimly.

‘On?’ she repeated.

‘What drug?’

‘I have something called marzipan – a name like that – to help me sleep. But it doesn’t work.’ She felt really ill and wanted her mother.

He grinned suddenly and his long mouth split his face into two separate halves.

‘I wouldn’t have thought it would,’ he said. ‘Sorry. We get a lot of addicts in here. They come to Cornwall, sleep rough and then get ill and have to find shelter. I leave the church open for them.’

‘I see. It’s so dusty. I thought it might not be a church any longer.’

He sat by her. The smell of her own vomit was choking. It overlaid the soft dead smell of dust and mustiness. She thought that she mustn’t cry; the one thing she must not do was to cry.

He said, ‘It’s not actually decommissioned. We use it at Christmas, Easter, Harvest . . . that sort of thing.’ He looked at her. ‘What is your name?’

‘Jenna.’

‘Have you come far? You need food, I expect.’

She shuddered at the thought. ‘I’ve come from Widdowe’s Cottage. I’m staying with my aunt, Laura Miller.’

‘Ah. The Quince place. I haven’t actually met Mrs Miller. I’m newish.’ There was a silence; he seemed comfortable with it, Jenna was not. She battled with tears and felt her insides crumpling helplessly.

He said, ‘I’m the rector. The church is cutting down on us so I have five parishes in my benefice. That’s why Tregeagle Church isn’t used most of the year.’

For some reason she was appalled that he was a churchman; as if she had been caught practising demonic rites in a holy place. At least she forgot her imminent watery collapse.

‘I – I was just sitting. Absorbing . . . the atmosphere.’

‘Of course. And you’ve walked . . . what . . . three miles? You need to drink. You are probably dehydrated after throwing up.’

She half laughed; his frankness was refreshing.

‘I haven’t apologized. Your clothes . . . my clothes . . .’

‘Tell you what.’ He stood up and waited for her to do the same. ‘Let’s see if there’s any tea in the cupboard. I can drink it black, can you? Then we could swim in Tregeagle Cove. I’ve been here two years and haven’t tried it.’ He looked at her. ‘Stand for a few minutes, then come on into the vestry. I’ll have a forage.’

She did as he said; she was still bewildered by her sudden emergence from the nothingness of waiting, the shame of the vomiting, and this man . . . who had interrupted . . . whatever it was, and had no idea of the enormity of what he had done.

After perhaps a whole minute she walked steadily up the aisle and cut in front of the pulpit to the vestry. He greeted her with a smile. There were cups on the table and the sound of singing water somewhere.

‘You’ve been here before,’ he said.

‘Yes. Twice. Look, I don’t want any tea and I’d better get back to the cottage. Forgive me, I don’t mean to be churlish but—’

‘That’s perfectly all right. But I think I might know what you’ve been looking for here. And I thought we might look together.’

She stared at him, brown eyes enormous. His smile widened.

‘It’s all right. Lots of people come looking, you know. And when you said you were at Widdowe’s Cottage, I remembered it was named for a widow called Quince and the name rang a bell. I was just going to unlock the cupboard and look it up for you. Hang on a minute.’

He disappeared into the tiny back room and she could hear him fiddling with a key. At the same time there was a loud click from a very modern electric kettle next to the sink. Next to the kettle was a teapot. She went to it and automatically put some boiling water into it,