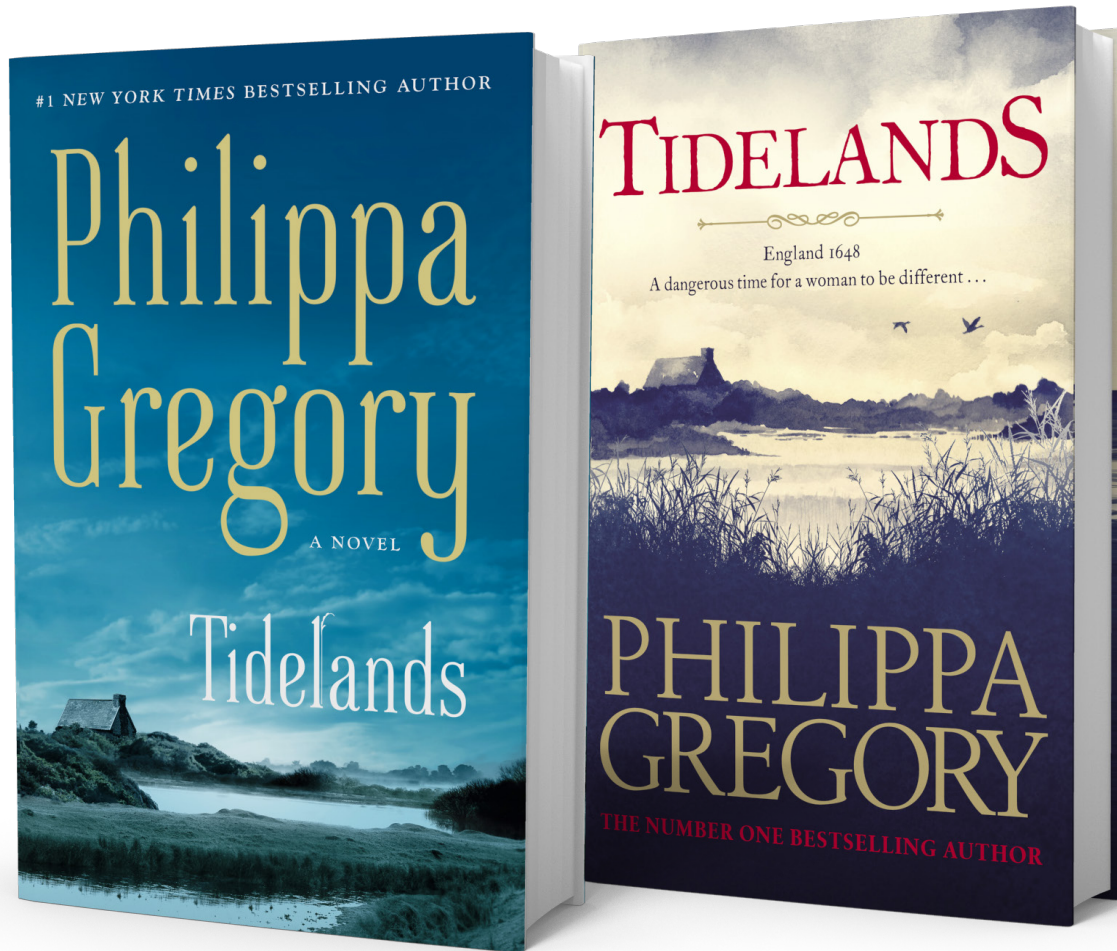


EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT



The cook opened the top half of the door, smiled to see that it was Alinor, and said: 'I need nothing today, Goodwife. His lordship isn't home till tomorrow and I don't make eel pie for anyone else.'

'I came to see Mr Tudeley,' Alinor said. 'It's about my boy.'

'There's no work,' the cook said bluntly, lifting the lid on a giant stew-pot and stirring the contents. 'Not with the world as it is, and nobody knowing what will happen next, and no good coming to anyone, with the king missing, and parliament up in arms, and our own lord up and down to London every day of the week, trying to talk some sense into them, and nobody listening to anyone but the devil himself.'

'I know,' Alinor said, following her into the hot kitchen. 'But still, I have to speak with him.' She felt a pang of hunger bite in her belly at the waft of beef broth. She pursed her lips against the rush of water in her mouth. The cook raised her head from her work, mopped her sweating face with her apron, and shouted to someone inside the house to see if Mr Tudeley would see Goodwife Reekie. Alinor waited by the door, and heard the servants ask if she was to be admitted, and then a footman put his head in the kitchen and said: 'You're to come in, Goodwife.'

Alinor followed the lad along the corridor past the storerooms to the panelled door of the steward's room. The footman swung it open and Alinor went in. Mr Tudeley was sitting at the rent table, papers spread before him. 'Goodwife Reekie,' he said, barely glancing up. 'You wanted to see me?'

Alinor bobbed a curtsy. 'Good day, sir,' she said. 'I did. I do.'

The boy went out, closing the door behind him and the steward waited, expecting that she would ask to be excused her rent for a quarter. Everyone knew that the Reekie widow and her children were hand-to-mouth; nobody had much sympathy for the deserted wife of a drunkard.

'I was at church last night and I met a man who told me his name was James,' she said in a frightened rush. 'Father James. I've brought him here. He's waiting by the haystack in Seaward Meadow.'

'You brought him for me to arrest, a recusant priest?' Mr Tudeley asked her coldly, looking over his steepled fingers.

Alinor swallowed, her mouth dry, her face frozen. 'As you wish, Sir. I don't know the rights and wrongs of these things. He said he wanted to be brought here, and so I brought him, with no-one the wiser. If he's a friend of his lordship then I have to obey him; if he's an enemy then I'm reporting him to you.'

Mr Tudeley smiled at her white-faced anxiety. 'You're not acting on principle then? Not joined your brother's party, Goodwife Reekie? Become one of these prophesying preaching women? D'you want to see him burned for heresy? D'you want to see him hanged and drawn for treason?'

'I ill-wish no-one,' Alinor said rapidly. 'And I believe as my lord does. Whatever Sir William thinks right. It's not for me to judge. I don't want to judge. I brought him to you, so that you'd do the right thing, Mr Tudeley. I brought him to you, for you to judge.'

Her pale earnestness reassured him. He got to his feet. 'You've done very well.' He reached into his pocket and brought out a handful of pennies. He counted out twelve, a shilling in copper, two days' earnings for a farm labourer like Alys. 'This is for you,' he said. 'For serving his lordship though you didn't know, and you still don't know what he wants. For being a good servant in the deepest of ignorance.' He laughed shortly. 'For doing the right thing, though you don't know what you do, as ignorant as a little bird!'

Alinor could not take her eyes from the pile of coins.

He reached into the drawer and pulled out a purse, opened the drawstrings and put a small silver coin down beside the pile of pennies. 'And look,' he said. 'A silver shilling. To buy your silence. You're a poor woman, but you're no fool and you're not a gossip. Not one word of this, Goodwife. It could not be more important. We're still at war, and nobody knows who the victor will be.'

'If anyone speaks of this it will be the worst for you. Not for me – I will deny it and nobody would listen to your word against mine. Not for his lordship, who is not even here. Not for the man who waits by the haystack – he will be far away, as fleet as a hare before the hounds. It will be you that they throw in the water for false faith, for false dealing, for false speaking. It will be you that they say is a spy, a traitor, or at least a gossip. You that they swim in the rife with your skirts dragging you down and the sea coming in. Do you understand me?'

'Yes,' Alinor croaked, her throat tight with fear. 'Pray God it never happens. I swear I'll say nothing. Yes, sir.'

'So we will say that you came to me today to see if I had work for your boy, and I said the two of you could come and weed the herb garden, pick what needs drying this summer, and tidy the still room. And we will pay him and you the usual rate: six pence a day each. You will spend these pennies carefully, one at a time and never tell anyone where they have come from, and you will save the shilling and never say it came from me.'

‘Yes, sir,’ she said again.

He nodded. ‘And I will forgive you your rent for this quarter.’ He turned the table on its central pivot till the drawer with the letter ‘R’ was before him. He drew out Alinor’s rent book and put a tick beside her name. ‘There.’

‘Thank you,’ Alinor said again, breathless with relief. ‘God bless you, Sir.’

‘You can go now. Tell the man in the meadow to come in quietly by the door that the tenants use on rent day. Do you understand? Tell him to make sure that no- one sees him. And you and I will never speak of this again. And you will never speak of it to anyone at all.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said for the last time, and she snatched up the money as quick as a thief, slid the coins into her pockets, and was out of the room silently in a moment.

She went out through the side door that they used on rent days to make sure that it was unlocked for him, and back through the kitchen garden to pick up her pattens, and then, pushing her feet into the wooden shoe- protectors she walked, through the gate and into the meadow. Anyone seeing her would think only that she was taking the most direct route back to her house at the far end of the harbour. Father James, watching from behind the hay-stack, saw her come out of the little wooden door in the flint wall, walking lightly, her head up, her apron tied around her waist, her skirt hushing on the cut grasses, releasing the scent of hay and dried meadow flowers. The moment he saw her, the easy grace of her stride, he knew that he was safe. No Judas could walk like that. She was as luminous as a saint in a stained-glass window.

‘I’m here,’ he said as she came around the stack of hay.

‘You’re to go in,’ she said breathlessly. ‘You’re safe. Through that door in the wall where I came out, and left through the kitchen garden. There’s a small door to the house – it’s black oak – at the side of the house on the left. You go in there. It’s unlocked. The steward’s room is just two steps down the corri-dor on the right. His window overlooks the kitchen garden. He’s waiting for you. His name is Mr Tudeley.’

‘He did not . . . he was not . . . you are not in his power now?’ She shook her head. ‘He paid me,’ she said, trembling with relief, ‘for bringing you in. He’s on your side. And he paid for my silence. I’m richer by far for meeting you.’

He took both her hands. ‘And I, you,’ he said.

For a moment they stood hand- clasped, and then he released her. ‘God bless you and help you to prosper,’ he said formally. ‘I shall pray for you, and I shall send you money when I am back in France again.’

‘You owe me nothing,’ she said. ‘And Mr Tudeley already gave me two shillings. A whole two shillings!’

He thought of his seminary, the gold plate on the altar, the glitter of diamonds and rubies on the shrines, the gold crucifix on the gold chain around his neck. Tonight, he would dine off silver and sleep on the finest on linen while someone laundered his shirt and polished his boots. Tomorrow or the next day he would meet Sir William and they would hire a boat and bribe men with the fortune that he carried. Meanwhile this woman celebrated earning two shillings. ‘I will pray for you.’

‘I hope you get safe home,’ she said.

He nodded. He could think of nothing to keep her, but he found he did not want to let her go. ‘I shall pray for you. And that you get your boat.’

‘I might,’ she said.

They spoke together and both broke off. ‘Will you ever . . . ?’ ‘If I come back here . . .’

‘I don’t expect to come back here,’ he admitted. ‘I have to go where I am sent.’

‘I won’t look for you,’ she assured him. ‘I know this is no place for you.’

‘You are . . .’ he started, but still there was nothing that he could say.

‘What?’ she asked. There was a slight blush on her neck just above the rough homespun gown.

‘I didn’t know . . .’ he began.

‘What?’ she asked softly. ‘What didn’t you know?’

‘I did not know that there could be a woman like you, in a place like this.’

The smile started slowly, in her dark grey eyes and then her lips curved and the colour rose in her cheeks.

‘Goodbye,’ she said abruptly, as if she did not want to hear another word after those, and she turned and went across the meadow towards the sea, where the tide was slack, a dark line against a cloudy sky.

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