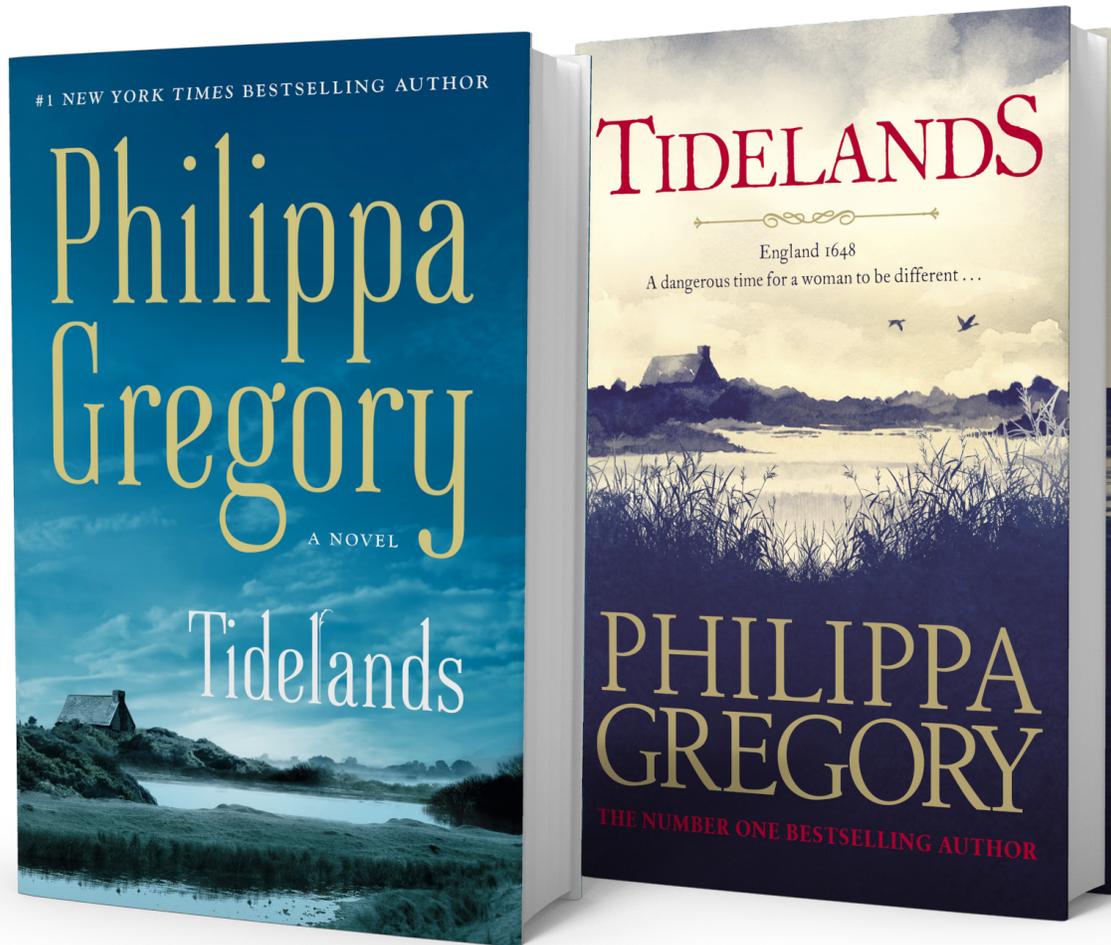


# EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT



TIDELANDS, SUSSEX,  
MIDSUMMER EVE, JUNE 1648

The church was gray against a paler gray sky, the bell tower dark against the darker clouds. The young woman could hear the faint stir of the shingle as the tide came in, whispering across the mudflats, recoiling from the beach with a little hiss.

It was the height of summer, the eve of midsummer, the apex of the year, and though the night was warm, she felt chilled, for she had come to meet a ghost. This was the walking night for the dead, this night and their saints' days; but she did not think that her drunken violent husband had been under the care of any particular saint. She could not imagine angelic eyes on his erratic progress from sea to alehouse, and back again. She did not know if he was run away, or dead, or pressed as a sailor in the disloyal fleet that had turned on their king and now sailed under the rebel flag for parliament. If she were to see him, she would know he was dead for sure, and she could declare herself a widow and think herself free. She had no doubt that if he had drowned, his ghost would be coming, dripping water through the misty graveyard, on this white night of midsummer, when the sallow gleam from the west showed the sun refusing to sink. Everything was out of its place and time on this full-moon Midsummer Eve. The sun unset, the throne upset, the world overset: a king imprisoned, rebels in

power, and a pale moon, white as a skull amid gray flying banners of clouds.

She thought that if she were to meet her husband's ghost drifting like a sea fret through the dark yew trees, she would be the happiest that she had been since her girlhood. If he was drowned, she was free. If he was among the walking dead, she was certain to meet him, for she had the sight, as her mother had, as her grandmother had, back through the generations, through all the women of her family, who had lived here forever, on the tidelands of the Saxon shore.

The church porch had old wooden benches made from warped ships' timbers on either side of the entrance. She tightened the shawl around her shoulders and took a seat, waiting till the moon, hidden now and then by unraveling clouds, should reach its midnight height over the church roof. She leaned back against the cold stones. She was twenty-seven years old and as weary as a woman of sixty. Her eyes closed; she started to slide into sleep.

The creak of the lych-gate and rapid footsteps on the shingle path of the graveyard woke her at once, driving her to her feet. She had not thought that the ghost of her husband would come early—in life he was always late for everything—but if he were here, then she must speak to him. Breathlessly, she stepped from the church porch, nerving herself to face whatever wraith was coming towards her from the darkness of the graveyard, on the whispering breath from the incoming sea. She could smell the brine on the air, she could sense his advance, perhaps soaked in seawater, perhaps trailing seaweed—and then a young man rounded the corner of the porch, recoiled at the sight of her white face, and cried out: "God save me! Are you of this earth or the other world? Speak!"

For a moment, she was so shocked that she said nothing. She stood very still and stared at him, as if she would see through him, her eyes narrowed, trying to see beyond her earthly vision. Perhaps he was one of the undead: undrowned, unhangd, walking in this night, which was their night, under the mid-summer moon, which was their moon. He was as handsome as a faerie prince from a story, with long, dark hair tied back at the nape of his neck, and dark eyes set in a pale face. Behind her back she clenched her thumbs between her fingers in the sign of the cross, her only defense against being seduced, or carried away, and her heart broken by this young lord from the other kingdom, from the other world.

"Speak!" He was breathless. "Who are you? What are you? A vision?"

"No, no!" she contradicted him. "I'm a woman, a mortal woman, the ferryman's sister, the widow of Zachary the missing fisherman."

Long after, she would remember that the first thing she told him was that she was a mortal woman, a married woman, a widow, anchored in this world by the power of a man.

"Who? What?" he demanded. He was a stranger: these names meant nothing to him though anyone from the tidelands would have known them at once.

"Who are you?" She could tell he was gentry by his beautifully cut dark jacket, by the lace at his throat. "What're you doing here, sir?" She looked behind him for his servants, for his guard.

The empty graveyard stretched out in the eerie half darkness to the low wall of knapped flints shining darkly in the moonlight as if they had been washed over and left wet. The thickly crowned trees leaned over, casting a darker shade on the dark ground. There was nothing to see but the light of the moon throwing the shadows of the headstones onto the ragged scythed grass, and nothing to hear but the soft sigh of incoming tide under a full moon.

"I can't be seen," he muttered.

"Nobody here to see you." Her abrupt dismissal of his fear made him look again at her oval face, her dark gray eyes: a woman as beautiful as a Madonna in an icon, but drab here in the unearthly half-light, her tattered kerchief hiding her hair, shapeless in her ragged clothes.

“What are you doing here at this time of night?” he asked suspiciously.

“I came to pray.” She would not tell this stranger that it was well known that a widow would meet her dead husband if she waited for him in the churchyard on Midsummer Eve.

“Pray?” he repeated. “God bless you for the thought. Let’s go in then. I’ll pray with you.”

He turned the heavy ring handle on the door and caught the bar as it lifted on the other side so that it made no sound. He led the way into the silent church, quiet as a thief. She hesitated, but he waited for her, holding the door open without another word and she had to follow him. When he closed the door behind them there was only the dim light from the old stained-glass windows, gold and bronze on the stone-flagged floor. The sound of the rising sea was shut out.

“Leave the door open,” she said nervously. “It’s so dark in here.”

He opened it a crack and a ribbon of pale moonlight stretched along the aisle to their feet.

“What did you come here for?” she asked. “Are you a gentleman from London?” It was the only explanation for his clean collar and his good leather boots, the little pack that he carried, and the warm intelligence in his face.

“I can’t say.”

She thought he must be one of the agents traveling the country seeking recruits for either parliament or king, except that nobody ever came to Sealsea Island, and he was alone without companions, or even horses, as if he had been dropped from the sky like a stormbringer, swung low from the clouds, for ill-doing to mortals, ready to blow away again on a summer gale.

Are you smuggling, sir?”

His short laugh, nipped off when he heard his voice echo eerily in the empty church, denied it.

“Then what?”

“You cannot tell anyone you saw me.”

“Nor you tell of me,” she returned.

“Can you keep a secret?”

She sighed a cloudy breath in the cold musty air. “God knows I keep many.”

He hesitated, as if he did not know whether or not he dared to trust her. “Are you of the new faith?” he asked.

“I don’t know the rights or the wrongs of it,” she said cautiously. “I pray as the minister tells me.”

“I’m of the old faith, the true faith,” he confessed in a whisper. “I was invited here, but the people I was going to meet are away, and their house, where I would have been safe, is closed and dark. I have to hide somewhere tonight, and if I cannot meet with them, then I must somehow get back to London.”

Alinor stared at him as if he were in truth a faerie lord, and a danger to a mortal woman. “D’you say you’re a priest, sir?”

He nodded as if he did not trust words.

“One sent from France to do the heretic services with the hidden papists?”

He grimaced. “Our enemies would say that. I would say I serve the true believers in England, and I am loyal to the ordained king.”

She shook her head, uncomprehending. The civil war had come no nearer than Chichester, six miles north, when the little town had collapsed under a brisk siege from the parliament forces.

“They handed over all the papists when Chichester fell,” she warned him. “Even the bishop ran away. They’re all for parliament round here.”

“But not you?”

She shrugged. “No one’s done anything for me or mine. But my brother’s an army man, and very true to them.”

“But you won’t hand me over?”

She hesitated. “D’you swear you’re not a Frenchman?”

“An Englishman born and bred. And faithful to my country.” “But spying for the king?”

“I am loyal to the ordained King Charles,” he told her. “As every Englishman should be.”

She shook her head, as if grand words meant nothing to her. The king had been driven from his throne, his rule shrunk to his household, his palace was little Carisbrooke Castle, on the Isle of Wight. Alinor knew nobody who would declare loyalty to such a king, who had brought war into his country for six long years.

“Were you going to stay at the Priory, sir?”

“I may not tell you who would have hidden me. It is not my secret to tell.”

She made a little impatient noise at his excessive secrecy. Seasea Island was such a small community, not more than a hundred families; she knew every one of them. It was obvious that only the lord of the manor would have offered hiding to a papist priest and royalist spy. Only the Priory, the one great house on the island, had a bed and linen fit for a gentleman like this. Only the lord of the manor, sir William Peachey, would dream of supporting the defeated king. All his tenants were for parliament and for freedom from the crushing taxation that came from king and lords. And she thought it was typical of Sir William to make such a dangerous offer and then carelessly fail to honor it, leaving his secret guest in mortal danger. If this young man were caught by parliament men they would hang him for a spy.

“Does anyone know you’re here?”

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