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Opening Extract from...

DARK TIDES

Written by **Philippa Gregory**
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DARK TIDES
EXCERPT

Reekie Wharf, Southwark, London,
Midsummer Eve

Dear Ned, my dearest brother,

I have to tell you that we have had a letter from Rob's wife from Venice.

It's bad news. It's the worst news. She writes that Rob is drowned dead drowned. Rob's wife widow says that she is coming to England with his baby. I write to you now as I cannot believe it as I know you would want to know at once. But I don't know what to write.

Ned—you know that I would know if my son was dead.

I know he is not.

I swear to you on my soul that he is not.

I will write again when she has come and told us more. You will say—I think you will say—that I am lying to myself—that I cannot bear the news and I am dreaming that everyone but me is wrong.

I don't know. I can't know. But I do think I know.

I am sorry to write such a bad a sad letter. It is not possible that he be dead and I not know it. I would have felt it its not possible that he could be drowned.

How could I have come up out of deep water and twenty-one years later it hold him down?

Your loving sister, Alinor.
Of course I pray that you
are well. Write me.



MIDSUMMER EVE, 1670, LONDON

The ramshackle warehouse was on the wrong side of the river, the south side, where the buildings jostled for space and the little boats unloaded pocket-size cargos for scant profit. The wealth of London passed them by, sailing upstream to the half-built new Custom House, its cream stone facade set full square on the fast-flowing river, as if it would tax every drop of the roiling dirty water. The greatest ships, towed by eager barges, glided past the little wharves, as if the quays were nothing but flotsam, sticks, and cobbles, rotting as they stood. Twice a day even the tide deserted them, leaving banks of stinking mud, and piers of weedy ramps rising like old bones from the water.

This storehouse, and all the others leaning against it, like carelessly shelved books, shuddering along the bank towards the dark channel at the side, were hungry for the wealth that had sailed with the new king in the ship that had once been Oliver Cromwell's, into the country that had once been free. These poor merchants, scraping a living from the river trade, heard all about the new king and his glorious court at Whitehall; but they gained nothing from his return. They saw him only once, as he sailed by, the royal pennants flying fore and aft, once and never again: not down here, on the south side of the river, on the east side of the town. This was never a place that people visited, it was a place that people left; not a place that ever saw a grand carriage or a fine horse. The returning king stayed west of the City, surrounded by aristocratic chancers and titled whores, all of them desperate for promiscuous pleasure, jerked back from despair by gamblers' luck: not one of them earning their good fortune.

But this little house clung to the old puritan principles of hard work and thrift, just as the buildings clung to the quayside: so thought the man who stood before it, staring up at the windows as if he were hoping to catch a glimpse of someone inside. His brown suit was neat, the white lace at his collar and cuffs modest in these times of fashionable excess. His horse stood patiently behind him as he scanned the blank face of the warehouse: the pulley on the wall, and the wide-open double doors, and then turned to the murky river to watch the lumpers throwing heavy grain sacks, one to another from the grounded flat-bottomed barge, grunting a monotone chant to keep the rhythm.

The gentleman on the quayside felt as alien here as he did on his rare visits to court. It seemed as if there was no place for him at all in this new England. He was a dowdy reminder of a difficult past in the glittering noisy palaces, best clapped on the back with a quickly forgotten promise. But here on the quayside at Southwark he stood out as a stranger: a rich idler among laboring men, a silent presence amid the constant scream from the pulley of the crane, the rumble of rolling barrels, the shouted orders and the sweating lumpers. At court, he was in the way of a thoughtless round of pleasure, he was too drab for them. Here, he was in the way of the passage of work, where men were not individuals but moved as one, each one a cog; as if even work was not work anymore; but had been atomized into a new painful machine. He thought the world was not whole anymore; but sundered into country and court, winners and the lost, protestants and heretics, royalists and roundheads, the unfairly blessed and the unjustly damned.

He felt very far from his own world of small luxuries taken for granted: hot water in a china jug in the bedroom, clean clothes laid out for the day, servants to do everything; but he must enter this world of work if he were to make right the wrong he had done, bring a good woman to happiness, heal the wounds of his own failure. Like the king, he had come to make a restoration.

He hitched his horse to a ring on a post, stepped to the edge of the wharf, and looked down into the flat-bottomed barge which was grounded heavily on the ramp beside the quay. "Where've you come

from?” he called down to the man he took to be the master of the ship who was watching the unloading, ticking off the sacks in a ledger.

“Sealsea Island, Sussex,” the man replied in the old, familiar drawling accent. “Best wheat in England, Sussex wheat.” He squinted upwards. “You’ve come to buy? Or Sussex-brewed ale? And salted fish? We’ve got that too.”

“I’m not here to buy,” the stranger replied, his heart thudding in his chest at the name of the island.

“Nay, you’ll be here for a dance in the ladies’ great hall?” the ship-master joked and one of the lumpers gave a crack of a laugh as the gentleman turned away from their impertinence, to look up at the warehouse again.

It was on the corner of a run of shabby three-story warehouses built of planks and old ships’ timbers, the most prosperous of a poor row. Farther along the quay, where the River Neckinger joined the Thames in a swirl of filthy water, there was a gibbet with a long-ago hanged man, few tatters of cloth holding the bleached remaining bones. A pirate, whose punishment had been to hang, and be left to hang as a warning to others. The gentleman shuddered. He could not imagine how the woman he had known could bear to live within earshot of the creak of the chain.

He knew that she had no choice, and she had done the best she could with the wharf. Clearly, the warehouse had been improved, rebuilt. Someone had gone to the expense and trouble to build a little turret at the downriver corner of the house, looking out over the Thames and the River Neckinger. She could step out of the glazed door and stand on a little balcony to look east: downriver towards the sea, or west: upriver to the City of London, or inland along St. Saviour’s Dock. She could open the window to listen to the cry of gulls and watch the tide rise and fall below her window and the goods come into the wharf below. Perhaps it reminded her of home, perhaps some nights she sat there, as the mist came up the river turning the sky as gray as water, and she thought of other nights and the thunder of the tide mill wheel turning. Perhaps she looked across the turbulent river to the north, beyond the narrow street of chandlers and victuallers, past the marshes where the seabirds wheeled and cried; perhaps she

imagined the hills of the north and the wide skies of the home of a man she had once loved.

The gentleman stepped up to the front door of the warehouse which was clearly home, business, and store combined, and lifted the ivory handle of his riding crop and rapped loudly. He waited, hearing footsteps approaching, echoing down a wooden hall, and then the door opened and a maid stood before him, in a stained working apron, staring aghast at the glossy pelt of his French hat and his highly polished boots.

“I should like to see—” Now that he had got this far, he realized he did not know what name she used, nor the name of the owner of the warehouse. “I should like to see the lady of the house.”

“Which one?” she demanded, wiping a dirty hand on her hessian apron. “Mrs. Reekie or Mrs. Stoney?”

He caught his breath at her husband’s name and the mention of her daughter, and thought that if he was so shaken to hear this, what would he feel when he saw her? “Mrs. Reekie,” he recovered. “It is she that I wish to see. Is Mrs. Reekie at home?”

She widened the gap of the front door, she did not open it politely to let him in, it was as if she had never admitted a visitor. “If it’s about a load, you should go to the yard door and see Mrs. Stoney.”

“It’s not about a load. I am calling to see Mrs. Reekie.”

“Why?”

“Would you tell her that an old friend has called to see her?” he replied patiently. He did not dare give his name. A silver sixpence passed from his riding glove to the girl’s work-stained hand. “Please ask her to receive me,” he repeated. “And send the groom to take my horse into your stables.”

“We don’t have a groom,” she answered, pocketing the coin in her apron, looking him up and down. “Just the wagon driver, and there’s only the stables for the team horses and a yard where we store the barrels.”

“Then tell the wagon driver to put my horse in the yard,” he instructed.

She opened the front door just wide enough to admit him, leaving it open so the men on the quayside could see him, standing awkwardly

in the hall, his hat in one hand, his riding crop and gloves in the other. She walked past him without a word, to a door at the rear, and he could hear her shouting from the back door for someone to open the gate to the yard, though there was no delivery, just a man with a horse that wouldn't stand on the quayside. Miserably embarrassed, he looked around the hall, at the wood-paneled doors with their raised stone thresholds to hold back a flood, at the narrow wooden staircase, at the single chair, wishing with all his heart that he had never come.

He had thought that the woman he was visiting would be poorer even than this. He had imagined her selling physic out of a quayside window, attending births for sailors' wives and captains' whores. He had thought of her so many times in hardship, sewing the child's clothes with patches, stinting herself to put a bowl of gruel before him, turning this way and that to make a living. He had thought of her as he had known her before, a poor woman but a proud woman, who made every penny she could; but never begged. He had imagined this might be some sort of quayside boardinghouse and hoped she worked here as a housekeeper; he had prayed that she had not been forced to do anything worse. Every year he had sent her a letter wishing her well, telling her that he thought of her still, with a gold coin under the seal; but she had never acknowledged it. He never even knew if she had received it. He had never allowed himself to find the little warehouse on the side of the river, never allowed himself even to take a boat downriver to look for her door. He had been afraid of what he might find. But this year, this particular year, on this month and this day, he had come.

The maid stamped back into the hall and slammed the front door against the noise and glare of the quayside so he felt that he was at last admitted into the house, and not just delivered into the hall like a bale of goods.

"Will she see me? Mrs. Reekie?" he asked, stumbling on the name.

Before she could answer, a door farther down the hall opened, and a woman in her thirties stepped over the raised threshold into the hall. She wore the dark respectable gown of a merchant's wife, and a plain working apron over it, tied tightly at the curve of her waist. Her collar was modestly high, plain and white, unfashionable in these

extravagant days. Her golden brown hair was combed back and almost completely hidden under a white cap. She had lines at the corners of her eyes and a deep groove in her forehead from frowning. She did not lower her eyes like a puritan woman, nor did she coquet like a courtier. Once again, with a sense of dread, James met the direct unfriendly gaze of Alys Stoney.

“You,” she said without surprise. “After all this time.”

“I,” he agreed, and bowed low to her. “After twenty-one years.”

“This isn’t a good time,” she said bluntly.

“I could not come before. May I speak with you?”

She barely inclined her head in reply. “I suppose you’ll want to come in,” she said gracelessly and led the way into the adjoining room, indicating that he should step over the raised threshold. A small window gave the view of the distant bank of the river, obscured by masts and lashed sails, and the noisy quay before the house where the lumpers were still loading the wagon, and rolling barrels into the warehouse. She dropped the window blind so that the men working on the quay could not see her direct him towards a plain wooden chair. He took a seat, as she paused, one hand on the mantelpiece, gazing down into the empty grate as if she were a judge, standing over him, considering sentence.

“I sent money, every year,” he said awkwardly.

“I know,” she said. “You sent one Louis d’Or. I took it.”

“She never replied to my letters.”

“She never saw them.”

He felt himself gasp as if she had winded him. “My letters were addressed to her.”

She shrugged as if she cared for nothing.

“In honor, you should have given them to her. They were private.”

She looked completely indifferent.

“By law, by the laws of this land, they belong to her, or they should have been returned to me,” he protested.

Briefly, she glanced at him. “I don’t think either of us have much to do with the law.”

“Actually, I am now a justice of the peace in my shire,” he said stiffly. “And a member of the House of Commons. I uphold the law.”

As she bowed her head, he saw the sarcastic gleam in her eyes. “Pardon me, Your Honor! But I can’t return them as I burned them.”

“You read them?”

She shook her head. “No. Once I had the gold—the French pistole—from under the seal, I had no interest in them,” she said. “Nor in you.”

He had a choking sensation, as if he were drowning under a weight of water. He had to remember that he was a gentleman; and she had been a farm girl and was now some kind of servant in a poor warehouse. He had to remember that he had fathered a child who lived here, in this unprepossessing workplace, and he had rights. He had to remember that she was a thief, and her mother accused of worse, while he was a titled gentleman with lands inherited for generations. He was descending from a great position to visit them, prepared to perform an extraordinary act of charity to help this impoverished family. “I could have written anything,” he said sharply. “You had no right . . .”

“You could have written anything,” she conceded. “And still, I would have had no interest.”

“And she . . .”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what she thinks of you,” she said. “I have no interest in that either.”

“She must have spoken of me!”

The face she turned to him was insolently blank. “Oh, must she?”

The thought that Alinor had never spoken of him in all these years struck him like a physical blow in the chest; knocking him back in his hard chair. If she had died in his arms twenty-one years ago, she could not have haunted him more persistently than she had done. He had thought of her every day, named her in his prayers every night, he had dreamed of her, he had longed for her. It was not possible she had not thought of him.

“If you have no interest in me at all, then you can have no curiosity in why I have come now?” he challenged her.

She did not rise to the bait. “Yes,” she confirmed. “You’re right. None.”

He felt that he was at a disadvantage sitting down so he rose up and went past her to the window, pulled back the edge of the blind to

look out. He was trying to contain his temper and, at the same time, overcome the sensation that her will against him was as remorseless as the incoming tide. He could hear the rub of the fenders of the barge as the water lifted it off the ramp, and the clicking of the sheets against the wooden masts. These sounds had always been for him the echoes of exile, the music of his life as a spy, a stranger in his own country; he could not bear to feel that sense of being lonely and in danger once again. He turned back to the room. "To be brief, I came to speak to your mother, not to you. I prefer not to talk to you. And I should like to see the child: my child."

She shook her head. "She cannot see you, and neither will the child."

"You cannot speak for either of them. She is your mother, and the child—my child—has come of age."

She said nothing but merely turned her head away from his determined face, to gaze down at the empty grate again. He controlled his temper with an effort but could not stop himself seeing that she had matured into a strong square-faced beauty. She looked like a woman of authority who cared nothing for how she appeared and everything for what she did.

"The child is twenty-one years old now, and can choose for himself," he insisted.

Again, she said nothing.

"It is a boy?" he asked tentatively. "It is a boy? I have a son?"

"Twenty-one gold coins, at the rate of one a year, does not buy you a son," she said. "Nor does it buy you a moment of her time. I suppose that you are a wealthy man now? You have regained your great house and your lands, your king is restored and you are famous as one of those who brought him back to England and to his fortune? And you are rewarded? He has remembered you, though he forgets so many others? You managed to elbow yourself to the front of the queue when he was handing out his favors, you made sure that you were not forgotten?"

He bowed his head so that she should not see the bitterness in his face that his sacrifice and the danger he had faced had done nothing more than bring a lecher to the throne of a fool. "I am fully restored to my family estates and fortune," he confirmed quietly. "I did not ever

stoop to curry favor. What you suggest is . . . beneath me. I received my due. My family were ruined in his service. We have been repaid. No more and no less.”

“Then twenty-one pistoles is nothing to you,” she triumphed. “You will hardly have noticed it. But if you insist, I can repay you. Shall I send it to your land agent at your great house in Yorkshire? I don’t have it in coin right now. We don’t keep that sort of money in the house, we don’t earn that sort of money in a month; but I will borrow and reimburse you by next week.”

“I don’t want your coins. I want . . .”

Once again her cold gaze froze him into silence.

“Mrs. Stoney,” he cautiously used her married name and she did not contradict him. “Mrs. Stoney, I have my lands, but I have no son. My title will die with me. I am bringing this boy—you force me to speak bluntly to you, not to his mother, and not to my son, as would be my choice—I am bringing him a miracle, I will make him into a gentleman, I will make him wealthy, he is my heir. And it will be her restoration too. I said once that she would be a lady of a great house. I repeat that now. I insist that I repeat it to her in person, so that I can be sure that she knows, so that she knows exactly, the great offer I am making her. I insist that I repeat it to him, so that he knows the opportunity that lies before him. I am ready to give her my name and title. He will have a father and ancestral lands. I will acknowledge him . . .” he caught his breath at the enormity of the offer, “I will give him my name, my honorable name. I am proposing that I should marry her.”

He was panting as he finished speaking but there was no response, just another void of silence. He thought she must be astounded by the wealth and good fortune that had descended on them like a thunder-clap. He thought she was struck dumb. But then Alys Stoney spoke:

“Oh no, she won’t see you,” she answered him casually, as if she were turning away a pedlar from the door. “And there’s no child in this house that carries your name. Nor one that has even heard of you.”

“There is a boy. I know there is a boy. Don’t lie to me. I know . . .”

“My son,” she said levelly. “Not yours.”

“I have a daughter?”

This threw everything into confusion. He had thought so long of

his boy, growing up on the wharf, a boy who would be raised in the rough-and-tumble of the streets but who would—he was certain—have been given an education, been carefully raised. The woman he had loved could not have a boy without making a man of him. He had known her boy, Rob, she could not help but raise a good young man and teach him curiosity and hopefulness and a sense of joy. But anyway—his thoughts whirled—a girl could inherit his lands just as well, he could adopt her and give her his name, he could see that she married well and then he would have a grandson at Northside Manor. He could entail the land on her son, he could insist the new family took his name. In the next generation there would be a boy who could keep the Avery name alive, he would not be the last, he would have a posterity.

“My daughter,” she corrected him again. “Not yours.”

She had stunned him. He looked at her imploringly, so pale, she thought he might faint. But she did not offer him so much as a drop of water, though his lips were gray and he put up a hand to his neck and loosened his collar. “Should you go outside for air?” she asked him, uncaring. “Or just go?”

“You have taken my child as your own?” he whispered.

She inclined her head; but did not answer.

“You took my child? A kidnap?”

She nearly smiled. “Hardly. You were not there to steal from. You were far away. I don’t think we could even see the dust behind your grand coach.”

“Was it a boy? Or a girl?”

“Both the girl and the boy are mine.”

“But which was mine?” He was agonized.

She shrugged. “Neither of them now.”

“Alys, for pity’s sake. You will give my child back to me. To his great estate? To inherit my fortune?”

“No,” she said.

“What?”

“No, thank you,” she said insolently.

There was a long silence in the room, though outside they could hear the shouts of the men as the last grain sack was hauled off the barge, and they started to load it with goods for the return trip. They

heard barrels of French wine and sugar roll along the quayside. Still he said nothing, but his hand tugged at the rich lace collar at his throat. Still she said nothing, but kept her head turned away from him, as if she had no interest in his pain.

A great clatter and rumble of wheels on the cobbles outside the window made her turn in surprise.

“Is that a carriage? Here?” he asked.

She said nothing, but stood listening, blank-faced, as a carriage rolled noisily up the cobbled quay to the warehouse and stopped outside the front door which gave on to the street.

“A gentleman’s carriage?” he asked incredulously. “Here?”

They heard the clatter of the hooves as the horses were pulled up, and then the footman jumped down from the back, opened the carriage door, and turned to hammer on the front door of the warehouse.

Swiftly, Alys went past him, across the room, and lifted the bottom of the blind so that she could peep out onto the quay. She could only see the open door of the carriage, a billowing dark silk skirt, a tiny silk shoe with a black rose pinned on the toe. Then they heard the maid, stamping up the hall to open the shabby front door and recoil at the magnificence of the footman from the carriage.

“The Nobildonna,” he announced, and Alys watched the hem of the gown sweep down the carriage steps, across the cobbles, and into the hall. Behind the rich gown came a plain hem, a maid of some sort, and Alys turned to James Avery.

“You have to go,” she said rapidly. “I was not expecting . . . You will have to . . .”

“I’m not going without an answer.”

“You have to!” she started towards him as if she would physically push him through the narrow doorway, but it was too late. The stunned housemaid had already thrown open the parlor door, there was a rustle of silk, and the veiled stranger had entered the room, paused on the threshold, taking in the wealthy gentleman and the plainly dressed woman in one swift glance. She crossed the room and took Alys in her arms and kissed her on both cheeks.

“You allow me? You forgive me? But I had nowhere else to come!” she said swiftly in a ripple of speech with an Italian accent.

James saw Alys, so furiously icy just a moment before, flush brightly, her blush staining her neck and her cheeks, saw her eyes fill with tears, as she said: “Of course you should have come! I didn’t think . . .”

“And this is my baby,” the lady said simply, beckoning to the maid behind her who carried a sleeping baby draped in the finest Venetian lace. “This is his son. This is your nephew. We called him Matteo.”

Alys gave a little cry and held out her arms for the baby, looking down into the perfect face, tears coming to her eyes.

“Your nephew?” James Avery said, stepping forward to see the little face framed in ribboned lace. “Then this is Rob’s boy?”

A furious glance from Alys did not prevent the lady from sweeping him a curtsy and throwing her dark veil back to show a vivacious beautiful face, her lips rosy with rouge, enhanced with a dark crescent patch beside her mouth.

“I’m honored, Lady . . . ?”

Alys did not volunteer the lady’s name, nor did she mention his. She stood, awkward and angry, looking at them both, as if she could deny the courtesy of an introduction and ensure that they would never meet.

“I am Sir James Avery, of Northside Manor, Northallerton in Yorkshire,” James bowed over the lady’s hand.

“Nobildonna da Ricci,” she replied. And then she turned to Alys. “That is how you say it? Da Ricci? I am right?”

“I suppose so,” Alys said. “But you must be very tired.” She glanced out of the window. “The carriage?”

“Ah, it is rented. They will unload my trunks, if you would pay them?”

Alys looked horrified. “I don’t know if I have—”

“Please allow me,” Sir James interrupted smoothly. “As a friend of the family.”

“I shall pay them!” Alys insisted. “I can find it.” She turned to the widow, who had followed every word of this exchange. “You’ll want to rest. Let me show you upstairs and I’ll get some tea.”

“*Allora!* It is always tea with the English!” she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. “But I am not tired, and I don’t want tea. And I am afraid I am interrupting you. Were you here on business, Sir James? Please stay! Please continue!”

“You are not interrupting, and he is going,” Alys said firmly.

“I will come back tomorrow, when you have had time to think,” Sir James said quickly. He turned to the lady: “Is Robert with you, Lady da Ricci? I should so like to see him again. He was my pupil and . . .”

The shocked look on both their faces told him that he had said something terrible. Alys shook her head as if she wished she had not heard the words and something in her face told James that the ostentatious mourning wear of the Italian lady was for Rob, little Rob Reekie who twenty-one years ago had been a brilliant boy of twelve and now was gone.

The widow’s mouth quivered; she dropped into a seat and covered her face with her black-mitted hands.

“I am so sorry, so sorry.” He was horrified at his blunder. He bowed to the lady. He turned to Alys. “I am sorry for your loss. I had no idea. If you had told me, I would not have been so clumsy. I am so sorry, Alys, Mrs. Stoney.”

She held the baby, the fatherless boy in her arms. “Why should I tell you anything?” she demanded fiercely. “Just go! And don’t come back.”

But the lady, with her face hidden, blindly stretched out her hand to him, as if for comfort. He could not help but take the warm hand in the tight black lace mitten.

“But he spoke of you!” she whispered. “I remember now. I know who you are. You were his tutor and he said you taught him Latin and were patient with him when he was just a little boy. He was grateful to you for that. He told me so.”

James patted her hand. “I am so sorry for your loss,” he said. “Forgive my clumsiness.”

Mistily, she smiled up at him, blinking away tears from her dark eyes. “Forgiven,” she said. “And forgotten at once. How should you guess such a tragedy? But call on me when you come again, and you can tell me what he was like when he was a boy. You must tell me all about his childhood. Promise me that you will?”

“I will,” James said quickly before Alys could retract the invitation. “I will come tomorrow, at midday. And I’ll leave you now.” He bowed to both the women and nodded to the nursemaid and went quickly

from the room before Alys could say another word. They heard him ask the maid for his horse and then they heard the front door slam. They sat in silence as they heard the horse coming around from the yard and stand, as he mounted up, and then clattered away.

“I thought his name was something else,” the widow remarked.

“It was then.”

“I did not know that he was a nobleman?”

“He was not, then.”

“And wealthy?”

“Now, I suppose so.”

“Ah,” the lady considered her sister-in-law. “Is it all right that I came? Roberto told me to come to you if anything ever . . . if anything ever . . . if anything ever happened to him.” Her face was tearstained and flushed. She took out a tiny handkerchief trimmed with black ribbon and put it to her eyes.

“Of course,” Alys said. “Of course. And this is your home for as long as you want to stay.”

The sleeping baby gave a gurgle and Alys shifted him from her shoulder to hold him in her arms, so she could look into the little pursed face for any sign of Rob.

“I think he is very like your brother,” the widow said quietly. “It is a great comfort to me. When I first lost my love, my dearest Roberto, I thought I would die of the pain. It was only this little—this little angel—that kept me alive at all.”

Alys put her lips to the warm head, where the pulse bumped so strongly. “He smells so sweet,” she said wonderingly.

Her ladyship nodded. “My savior. May I show him to his grandmother?”

“I shall take you to see her,” Alys said. “This has been a terrible shock for her, for us all. We only had your letter telling of his death last week, and then your letter from Greenwich three days ago. We’re not even in mourning. I am so sorry.”

The young woman looked up, her eyelashes drenched with tears. “It is nothing, it is nothing. What matters is the heart.”

“You know that she is an invalid? But she will want to welcome you here at once. I’ll just go up and tell her that you have come to us. Can

I have them bring you anything? If not tea, then perhaps a drink of chocolate? Or a glass of wine?”

“Just a glass of wine and water,” the lady said. “And please tell your lady-mother that I wish to be no trouble to her. I can see her tomorrow, if she is resting now.”

“I’ll ask.” Alys gave the baby to the nursemaid and went from the room, across the hall, and up the narrow stairs.



Alinor was bent over her letter, seated at a round table set in the glazed turret, struggling to write to her brother to tell him such bad news that she could not make herself believe it. The warm breeze coming in with the tide lifted a stray lock of white hair from her frowning face. She was surrounded by the tools of her trade of herb-alism, posies of herbs drying on strings over her head, stirring in the air from the window, little bottles of oils and essences were ranked on the shelves on the far side of the room, and on the floor beneath them were big corked jars of oils. She was not yet fifty, her strikingly beautiful face honed by pain and loss, her eyes a darker gray than her modest gown, a white apron around her narrow waist, a white collar at her neck.

“Was that her? So soon?”

“You saw the carriage?”

“Yes—I was writing to Ned. To tell him.”

“Ma—it’s Rob’s . . . it is . . .”

“Rob’s widow?” Alinor asked without hesitation. “I thought it must be, when I saw the nursemaid, carrying the baby. It is Rob’s baby boy?”

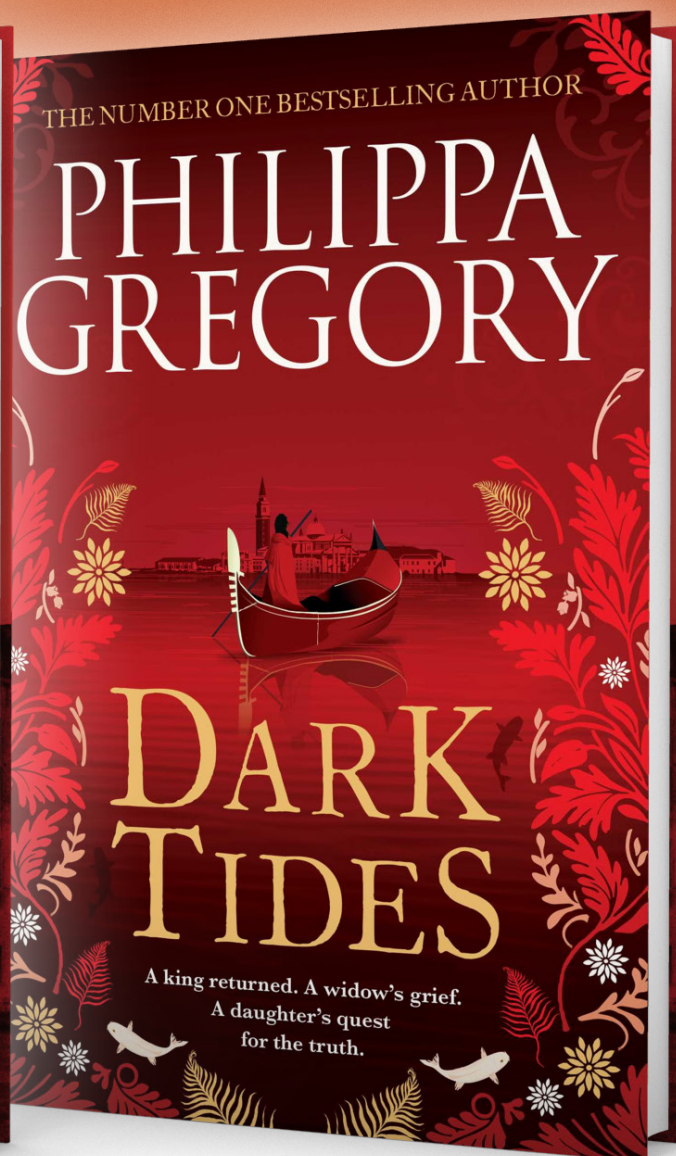
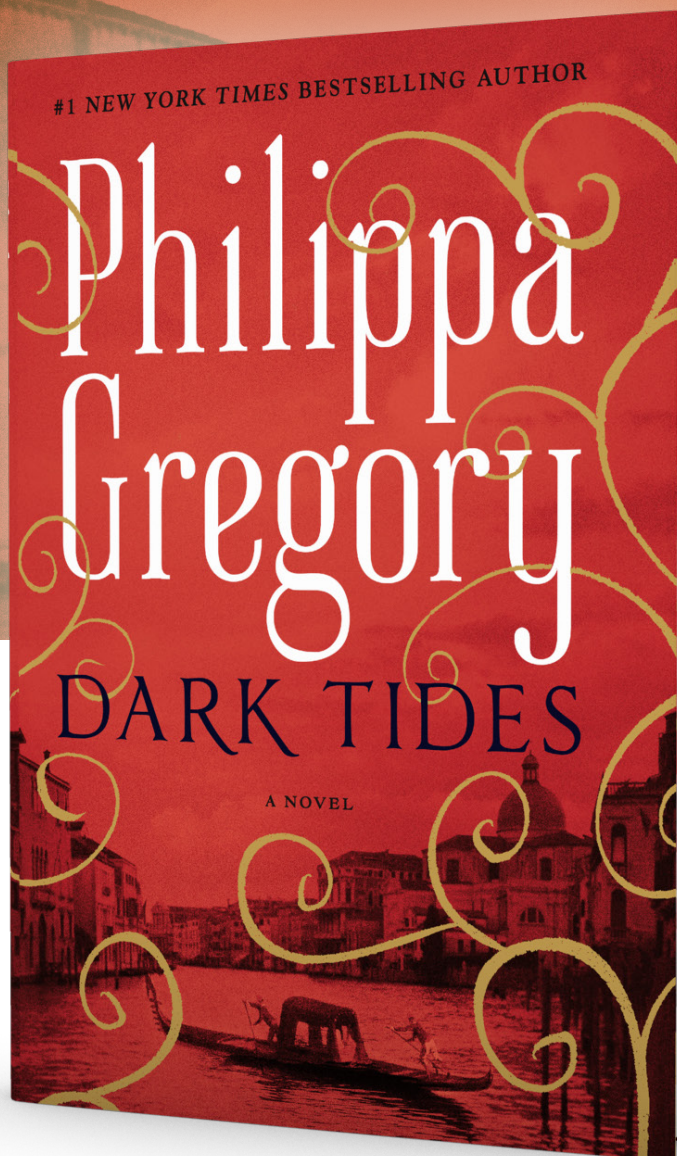
“Yes. He’s so tiny, to come such a long way! Shall I bring her up?”

“Has she come to stay? I saw trunks on the coach?”

“I don’t know how long . . .”

“I doubt this’ll be good enough for her.”

“I’ll get Sarah’s room ready for the maid and the baby, and I’ll offer her Johnnie’s room in the attic. I should have done it earlier but



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