



TIDELANDS, SUSSEX,
MIDSUMMER EVE, JUNE 1648

The church was grey against a paler grey 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 mud flats, 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 ale house, 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 fallow 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 grey 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 unravelling 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 lich-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, unchanged, 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 defence 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 grey 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 travelling 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. Sealsea 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 honour 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?’

He shook his head. ‘I went to the house where I was told to go, the safe house, and it was all dark and locked up. I was told to tap a special knock on a garden door, but no-one came. I saw the bell tower over the top of the trees, so I came here to wait, in the hope that if they are asleep now, they will answer later. I didn’t know where else I might go. I don’t know this place. I came in by ship on the high tide, and it looked like a wasteland of sea and mud for mile on mile. I’ve not even got a map!’

‘Oh, there’s no map,’ she told him.

He looked aghast. ‘No map? Why has it not been mapped?’

‘It’s the tidelands,’ she told him. ‘The shingle bar before the harbour, and the harbour itself changes with every storm. The Chichester people call it “Wandering Haven”. The sea breaks into the fields and takes back the land. The ditches flood and make new lakes. It never stays the same for long enough to be measured. These are the tidelands: half tide, half land, good for nothing, all the way west to the New Forest, all the way east till the white cliffs.’

‘Is the minister of this church one of the new men?’

‘He’s been here for years and he does as he’s told, now he takes his orders from the new parliament. He’s not whitewashed the walls or broken the windows yet. But he took down the statues, he keeps the altar at the crossway of the church and prays in English. He said that good King Henry set us free from Rome a hundred years ago, and this King Charles wants to take us back, but he can’t. He’s defeated. He’s ruined, and parliament has won the war against the king.’

The stranger’s face grew dark with anger. ‘They’ve not won,’ he insisted. ‘They’ll never win. They can’t win. It’s not over yet.’

She was silent. She thought that it was long over for the king, who was imprisoned, his wife fled to France, leaving two little children behind, and his son, the prince, gone to the Netherlands. ‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Would he denounce me, this minister?’

‘I think he’d have to.’

‘Is there anyone here of the old faith? In hiding? On this island?’

She spread her hands as if to show him her ignorance. He saw that her palms were scratched and scarred from the shells of lobsters and crabs and the rough twine of the fishing nets.

‘I don’t know what people hold in their hearts,’ she said. ‘There were many for the king in Chichester, some of them papists; but they’re killed or run away. I know no-one except one or two old ladies who remember the old faith. Most people are like my brother: godly men. My brother fought in the New Army under the general. General Cromwell is his name. You’ll have heard of him?’

‘Yes, I’ve heard of him,’ he said grimly. He paused, thinking hard. ‘Can I get to Chichester tonight?’

She shook her head. ‘The tide’s coming in now, and it’s high tonight for midsummer. You can’t cross the wadeway to the Chichester road till morning, and then you’d be seen. Won’t your boat come back for you?’

‘No.’

‘Then you’ll have to hide till low tide tomorrow evening, and go across the wadeway at dusk. You can’t take the ferry. My brother’s the ferryman, and he’d arrest you on sight.’

‘How would he know me for a cavalier?’

Her smile lit up her face. ‘Sir, no-one looks like you on Sealsea Island! Not even Sir William is as fine.’

He flushed. ‘Well, if I have to stay on the island, where can I hide?’

She thought for a moment. ‘You can lie in my husband’s shed till tomorrow evening,’ she offered. ‘That’s the only place I can think of. It’s not fit. He kept his nets there, and his pots. But he’s been missing for months and nobody ever goes there now. I can bring you food and water in the morning. And when it’s light, perhaps you can go to the Priory, just over there. You could go in the morning privately and ask to see the steward. His lordship’s away from home, but the steward might take you in. I don’t know. I can’t say what they believe. I don’t know.’

He bowed his head in a thanksgiving. ‘God bless you,’ he said. ‘I think God must have sent you to be my saviour.’

‘I’ll show you the net shed first, before you bless me for letting you sleep there,’ she said. ‘It’s not for the likes of you. It stinks of old fish.’

‘I have nowhere else,’ he said simply. ‘You are my saviour. Shall we pray together?’

‘No,’ she said bluntly. ‘We’d do best to get you into hiding. I don’t think anyone else will come here at this time of night, but you never know. Some like to think themselves very godly. They might come to pray at dawn.’

‘You came here to pray,’ he reminded her. ‘Are you godly? Are you one of the godly believers?’

She flushed at her own lie. ‘I didn’t really,’ she admitted.

‘Then for what?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

He ignored her embarrassment, assuming that she had come

to meet a lover in some sordid village affair. 'Where is the net shed, and your home?'

'At the top of the harbour, near the ferryhouse, across the rife from the mill.'

'The rife?'

'Broad Rife,' she said. 'The river that flows into the head of the harbour. It moves with the tide, ebbs and flows, but it never runs dry. It's high now. It's been such a wet summer, the wadeway's not been dry for weeks.'

'Your brother's ferry crosses the rife when the tide is full?'

'And there's a wadeway at low tide for people to walk across.'

'I would not put you in danger. I can find my own way if you tell me the direction. You don't need to lead me.'

'You can't. The harbour's like a maze of paths and there are deep pools and channels,' she explained. 'The sea comes in faster than a trotting horse, and spreads across the land quicker than a man can run. You can get stuck in the mud or cut off on a path, or trapped by water. There are quicksands that you can't see till your foot sinks beneath you and you can't draw it out. Only us who were born and bred here ever cross the mire. I'll have to take you.'

He nodded. 'God will bless you for this. He must have sent you to guide me.'

She looked doubtful, as if God had not been generous with his blessings in her life. 'Shall we go now? It'll take us a while to get across.'

'We'll go,' he decided. 'What shall I call you? I am Father James.'

She recoiled from the priestly title. 'I can't call you that! I might as well go to the justices and get arrested at once! What's your real name?'

'You can call me James.'

She gave a little shrug as if she was offended by his discretion. 'I bear my husband's name,' she replied. 'They call me Goody Reekie.'

'What shall I call you?'

‘Call me that,’ she said pertly. ‘Since you don’t tell me your true name why should I tell you mine?’

She turned from his surprised face and led the way out of the church, waiting patiently as he bowed low to the altar, kneeling on one knee and putting his hand to the ground. She heard him whisper a prayer for his safety and hers, and for all those serving the true faith in England tonight, for the king in his cruel captivity, and the prince abroad.

‘My husband’s missing,’ she remarked, as he joined her at the door. ‘He’s been gone for more than half a year.’

‘God bless him, and keep you,’ he said, making the sign of the cross over her head. She had never seen the gesture before, and she did not know to bow her head and cross herself. Nobody had publicly crossed themselves in England for nearly a hundred years. The people had lost the habit, and those who were still roman catholic were careful to keep their faith hidden.

‘Thank you,’ she said awkwardly.

‘Do you have children?’

She opened the heavy door to the porch, looked out to see that the graveyard was deserted, and then beckoned him to follow her. They walked in single file between graves where the stones were so thick with old moss and lichen that only a few letters could be seen.

‘Two still living,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘I thank God for them. My daughter is thirteen and my son is twelve.’

‘And does your boy fish in his father’s place?’

‘The boat’s missing too,’ she said, as if that were the greatest loss. ‘So we can only fish with a line from the shore.’

‘Our Lord called a fisherman before he called anyone else,’ he said gently.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘But at least he left the boat.’

A laugh broke from him at her irreverence, and she turned and laughed with him and he saw, again, the bright warmth of her smile. It was so powerful and so illuminating he wanted to catch her hand and keep her smiling at him.

‘The boat matters so much, you see.’

TIDELANDS

‘I do see,’ he said, taking hold of the shoulder straps of his pack, keeping his hands away from temptation. ‘How do you manage without boat or husband?’

‘Poorly,’ she said shortly.

At the low wall of rough stone flints at the edge of the graveyard she hitched up her brown skirt and hemp apron and swung her legs over the stile, as lithe as a boy. He climbed after her and found himself on the shore, on a little path no wider than a sheep track, with quickthorn hedges closing in on both sides and meeting over the top, so that the two of them were hidden in a tunnel of thick leaves and twisted spikey boughs. Walking ahead of him, she bent her head and wrapped her elbows in her shawl, striding out in her wooden pattens, following the erratic course of the narrow path. The sound of the sea grew a little louder as she scrambled down a bank, and then they were suddenly in the open, lit by the fitful moon in the pale sky, on a beach of a white shingle. Behind them the bank was topped by a big oak tree, its roots snaking through the mud, its downswinging branches bending low to the beach. Ahead of them was the marsh: standing water, sandbanks, tidal pools, mud, reed islands, and a wide winding channel of water with branching silted streams swelling and lapping over the mud, flowing in little waves that broke at their feet.

‘Foulmire,’ she announced.

‘I thought you said it was called Wandering Haven?’

‘That’s what they call it in Chichester, because it wanders. They never know where the islands are, they never know where the reefs are; the rivers change their beds at every storm. But we, who live on it and know all its changes, who change our paths in obedience to its moods, who hate it as a hard taskmaster, call it Foulmire.’

‘For the birds? Fowl-mire? Bird-marsh?’

‘For the mud: foul,’ she said. ‘If you mis-step it holds you till the sea comes for you and you are foully drowned. If you get free you stink like a foul thing for the rest of your life.’

‘Have you always lived here?’ he asked, wondering at the bitterness in her voice.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘I am mired. I am bound as a tenant to a neglectful lord and I cannot leave. I am wife to a vanished man and cannot marry, and I am sister to the ferryman and he will never carry me across to the mainland and set me free.’

‘Is all the coast like this?’ he asked, thinking of his landing, when the captain had steered them in the dark, past reefs and over shallows. ‘All so uncertain?’

‘Tidelands,’ she confirmed. ‘Neither sea nor shore. Neither wet or dry, and no-one ever leaves.’

‘You could leave. I will have a ship,’ he said lightly. ‘When I finish my work here, I will sail back to France. I could give you a passage.’

She turned and looked at him and once again she surprised him, this time by her gravity. ‘I wish to God that I could,’ she said. ‘But I would not leave my children. And besides, I have a terror of deep water.’

She walked on ahead of him, scrunching on the shingle beach that wound between the bank and mud where the water was seeping inwards. A roosting seagull whirled up ahead of them with an unearthly call, and he followed her shadow over shingle and mud and the driftwood, hearing the steady hiss, as the sea somewhere out in the darkness to his right, came constantly closer, flooding mudbanks, drowning the reeds, always coming unstoppably on.

She scrambled up another bank to a path that ran higher, above the tidemark, and he followed her between gorse bushes where the night-time flowers were drained of their colour and glowed silver rather than gold, but he could still smell their honey scent on the air. An owl hooted near him and made him start as he saw it, dark in the darkness, wheeling away on wide silent wings.

They walked for a long time, until the pack on his back became heavy and he felt as if he were in a dream, following the wooden heels of her pattens, the dirty hem of her skirt, through a world that had lost meaning as well as colour, on a winding track through desolation. He pulled himself up, and whispered

an *Ave Maria*, reminding himself that he was honoured to carry the word of God, the precious objects for the Mass, and a ransom for a king; he was glad to have to struggle on a muddy path through an unmapped shore.

The sea seeped further inland as if it knew no boundary. He could see the water creeping through the driftwood and straw on the shingle below them, and on the other side of the bank the ditches and ponds were swelling and flowing back inland as if it were, as she had said, a place that was neither sea nor shore but the land itself that ebbed and flowed with the tide. He realised that for some time he had heard a strange hissing noise overlaying the sound of the lapping water, like the seething of a giant stewpot, like the bubble of a kettle.

‘What is that? What is that noise?’ he whispered, stopping her with one hand on her shoulder. ‘Do you hear it? A terrible noise! Strange, like the water is boiling.’

She halted, quite unafraid, and pointed out into the middle of the moving water. ‘Oh, that. Look, there, out there, in the mire, can you see the bubbles?’

‘I can see nothing but waves. God save us! What is it? It sounds like a fountain?’

‘It’s the hushing well,’ she said.

He was absurdly frightened. ‘What is it? What is that?’

‘Nobody knows,’ she said indifferently. ‘A place in the centre of the mire where the sea boils as it comes in. Every high tide, so we pay no attention. Sometimes a stranger takes an interest in it. A man told my brother it was probably a cave, underneath the mire, and the bubbles pour from it when the sea fills it. But nobody knows. Nobody’s ever seen it.’

‘It sounds like a seething pot!’ He was horrified by the strangeness of the sound. ‘As if it were hell boiling over!’

‘Yes, I s’pose it’s fearful.’ She had no interest in it.

‘What does it look like when the sea goes out?’ he asked curiously. ‘Is the ground hot?’

‘Nobody’s seen it when the tide is out,’ she repeated patiently. ‘You can’t walk to it. You’d sink and the mire would

hold you till you drowned on the next tide. P'raps it's a cave – and you'd fall into it. Who knows? P'raps there really is a cave that holds all the sea, the waters that ebb and flow underneath all the world. P'raps it's the end of the world, hidden away here in Foulmire, and we've been living on the doorstep of hell for all these years.'

'But the noise?'

'You can take a boat over it,' she offered. 'It bubbles like a cauldron and it hisses loudly. Sometimes it's so loud that you can hear it in the churchyard on a still night.'

'You can sail out to see it?'

'Well, I wouldn't,' she specified. 'But it can be done, if you've nothing else to do.'

He guessed that there was never a day in her life when she had nothing else to do.

She turned and walked on again. She had no interest in the threatening hiss that grew louder as the bank curved towards the harbour, and fainter as they moved away.

'Were you ever at school?' he asked, trying to imagine her life, living here in this desolate landscape, as ignorant as a flower. He lengthened his stride and walked beside her as the path widened.

'For a few years. I can read and I can write. My mother taught me her recipe book, and the herbs, and her skills.'

'She was a cook?'

'A herbalist. A healer. I do her work now.'

'Did anyone ever speak to you of the old faith? Did anyone teach you the prayers?'

She shrugged. 'My grandame preferred the old ways. When I was a girl sometimes a travelling priest would come to the village and hear confessions in secret. Some of the older people say the old prayers.'

'When we get to the net shed, I should like to pray with you.'

He saw the ghost of her smile. 'You'd do better to pray for your breakfast,' she said. 'We don't eat well.'

The path narrowed and they went single file again, the thorns pressing on either side of them. Somewhere in the woods away

to his left he could hear the piercing song of a nightingale, singing to the pale sky.

He thought he had never travelled through so strange a landscape with so alien a companion. He had followed his vocation throughout England, going from one wealthy house to another, hearing confessions and celebrating the Mass, usually in hiding, but always in comfort. His dark good looks had served him well. He had been petted by the richest ladies of the kingdom, and respected by their fathers and brothers for risking his life for his faith. More than one beautiful girl had sunk to her knees and confessed to disturbing dreams of him. Their desire had never touched him. He was sworn to God and never distracted. He was a young man of only twenty-two years old; he revelled in the chance to test his fervent convictions, and in the sense of his own righteousness.

He had been promised to the Church since boyhood, and his teachers had trained him and inspired him, and then sent him out into the world to travel in secret, meeting with royalists and sharing their plans, going from one besieged palace to another, carrying funds from the exiled queen, plans from the imprisoned king, promises from the prince. He had been in some dangerous and frightening places – slept in priest's holes, hidden in cellars, served the Mass in attics and stables – but he had never before spent the day with no refuge, alone on an unmapped shore, or followed the footsteps of a common woman who held his safety in her roughened hands.

He felt for the gold crucifix that he wore under his fine lawn shirt and gripped its awkward outline. Superstitiously he glanced at the mud beneath her feet to be sure that she was making footprints like a mortal. Even though he could see the sharp tracks of the wooden pattens, he crossed himself, thinking that she was an unearthly guide to an ungodly land, and if it were not for the power of his faith he would think himself lost indeed, walking through a world of ancient elements: water, air, and earth.

They walked on, for perhaps an hour in silence, and then she turned sharply left and scrambled up the harbour bank and

he saw, dark against the dark sky, a ramshackle hovel, walls of driftwood in-filled with dried mud, thatched with reeds from the marsh. It looked like sea wrack thrown up by a high tide. She leaned against the ill-fitting door that creaked as it opened.

‘The net shed,’ she announced.

It was pitch-dark inside, the only light from the moon coming in glimmers through the cracks in the walls.

‘Do you have a candle?’

‘Only in the house. You can’t show a light here. It’d be seen from the mill on the other side of the mire. You’ll have to sit in darkness, but it’ll be dawn soon and I’ll bring you breakfast and some ale.’

‘Is your house nearby?’ He was apprehensive at being left here alone in the dark.

‘Just along the bank. And it’ll soon be light,’ she reassured him. ‘I’ll come back when I can. I have to set the fire and fetch the water. I have to wake my children and give them breakfast. Then, when they’re gone for the day, I’ll come back. You can sit here on the nets; you can sleep.’

She took his hand – he felt the roughness of her scarred palm – tugged at it so that he bent down, and she pushed his hand against the rough twine of a heap of nets. ‘There,’ she said. ‘The old nets. It’s not good enough for you but I don’t know where else you can go.’

‘Of course it’s good enough for me,’ he assured her, his voice eager and unconvincing. ‘I don’t know what I would have done if I had not met you. I would have slept in the woods and been washed away by the hissing waters.’ He tried to laugh; she did not.

‘If you hear anyone coming, or if anyone tries the door, you can kick out the back wall. We’re on the edge of the ditch; you can roll down into it. If you run along the bank to the right, it’ll lead you inland to the ferry and the wadeway, left to the woods. But nobody ever comes here, nobody should come here.’

He nodded, but in the dark, she could not see him.

‘I know it’s not fit,’ she said uneasily.

‘I am grateful for it. I am grateful to you,’ he said. He realised that he was still holding her hand and he pressed it to his lips. Instantly, she jerked her hand away, and he flushed in the darkness for his stupidity in showing her a courtesy that she would never have known. The wealthy ladies of the safe houses were accustomed to being kissed. They extended their white hands to him and raised their fans to their eyes to hide their blushes. Sometimes they would go down on their knees in a flurry of silk and kiss his hand, hold it to their damp cheeks in penitence for some trivial sin.

‘Excuse me,’ he tried to explain. ‘I just meant to say that I know this is a great gift. God will remember what you have done for me.’

‘I’ll bring you some gruel,’ she said gruffly. He heard her backing towards the doorway and saw the crack of moonlight as the door opened. ‘There’s not much.’

‘Only if you have some to spare,’ he said, knowing that there would not be any spare food in her house. She would go without to feed him.

She closed the door quietly and he felt for the pile of netting and tugged at it a little to spread it out. The stink of old fish and the foul harbour mud rose with a buzz of sleepy flies. He gritted his teeth against his repulsion, and sat down. He drew his booted feet up and tucked his cape around him, certain that there were rats. He found that even though he was desperately tired, he could not bear to lie down on the ill-smelling knots. He reproached himself for being a fool, an unfit priest without wisdom or experience, a foolish boy sent out to do mighty work in great times. He was afraid of failing, especially now, when so much depended on him. He had confessions to hear and secrets to keep, and in his mind, battened down, he carried a plan to free the king. He was afraid that he had neither the courage nor the determination to carry it through and he was about to pray to be a strong emissary, a good spy, when he realised that he was mistaken: he was not afraid of failing, he was afraid like a child, afraid of everything, from rats in the net shed, the hushing well

outside, and somewhere beyond it all the vengeful armies of Cromwell and the tyrant's black-eyed stare.

He sat in the darkness and waited.



Alinor hesitated outside the door of the net shed, listening for him moving inside in the dark, as if he were a strange animal that she had penned. When he was quiet, she turned and ran along the bank to where her own cottage stood, facing the mire, a one-storey building thatched with reeds, set square in a little herb garden fenced with driftwood.

Inside her cottage everything was just as she had left it, the embers of the fire on the hearth under an earthenware lid, the runes drawn in the ashes to prevent a spark, the children in the bed in one corner of the room, the pot of gruel by the fireplace with the lid clamped on, to keep it from rats, and the roosting hens in their corner, who clucked sleepily as the cool air, smelling of mud and brine, blew in with her.

She took a bucket from the fireside and went out, inland, along the shoreline where the high tide was lapping at the mud and the reeds. She climbed up the bank, and down the other side using rough-cut steps, to the deep freshwater dipping pond. She held onto a worn post to fill her bucket, then lugged the sloping load back to her own cottage. She poured a bowl of water and set it on the table, took off her cloak and washed her face and hands, using the home-made grey fatty soap, rubbing her fingers with particular care, painfully aware that the priest had held them to his lips and must have smelled the lifelong scent of fish, smoke, sweat and dirt.

She dried her hands on a scrap of linen, and sat for a little while, staring out of the open door where the sky – pale throughout this white night – was getting brighter and brighter. She wondered why – since she had failed to meet a ghost – she should feel so bewitched.

She shook her head, as if to pull herself back from the shadowlands, and rose up from her stool, to kneel before the fire, using a rag to lift the earthenware cover from the embers. With the back of her other hand she erased the runes against fire that were drawn in the cool ashes. She fed the glowing heart in the middle of the ash with little twigs, and then more driftwood, and when it caught she set the three-legged iron pot in the heat, added water from the bucket, and stirred the soaked oatmeal inside, bringing it slowly to the boil.

The children, in the one bed, slept through the sounds of preparation. She had to wake them, touching each one on the shoulder. Her daughter smiled in her sleep and rolled over to face the rough wooden wall, but her boy sat up and asked: 'Is it morning?'

She bent down to hug him, burying her face in the warmth of his neck. He smelled of himself, sweet as a puppy. 'Yes,' she said. 'Time to get up.'

'Is Da home?'

'No,' she said flatly. The perennial question no longer gave her a pang of grief for her son. 'Not today. Get dressed.'

Obediently Rob sat on the edge of the mattress and pulled his jacket on over the linen nightshirt. He pulled up his breeches and tied them with laces to the jacket. He would go bare-legged and barefoot to his work today. He was crow-scaring at Mill Farm after morning school. He sat up at the table and she poured gruel into his bowl.

'No bacon?' he asked.

'Not today.'

He took up his spoon and started to eat, blowing on each mouthful and sucking it loudly. She gave him a cup of small ale; no-one at Foulmire ever drank the water. She turned back to the bed, sat on the edge and touched her daughter's shoulder.

Alys rolled over and opened her dark blue eyes to look at her mother as if she were part of a haunting dream. 'Did you go out?' she asked.

Alinor was surprised. 'I thought you were asleep.'

'I heard you come in.' The girl sighed as if she were about to sleep again. 'In my dream.'

'What did you dream?'

'I dreamed you met a cat in the churchyard.'

The two of them were intent. 'What colour?'

'Black,' the girl said.

'What happened?'

'Nothing. That was all. You stood before him and he saw you.'

Alinor thought of this, held it in her seer's vision. 'He saw me?'

'He saw you, he saw everything.'

Alinor nodded. 'Don't speak of this,' she said.

The girl smiled. 'Course not.' She pushed back the covers of the bed and rose up, standing tall at her mother's shoulder, her fair hair in a plait down her back, her skin Saxon-pale. She turned to her pile of clothes at the foot of the bed and pulled on her skirt of felted wool, dried mud crusted on the hem, and a patched shirt. She sat on her stool at the table to wash her face and hands and then took the bowl to the door and threw it over the herbs outside.

Alinor took her stool beside her children and clasped her hands. 'Father, we thank thee for our daily bread,' she said quietly. 'Keep us from sin forever and ever. Amen.'

'Amen,' they said in a chorus, and Alinor served her daughter and herself, leaving a portion in the pot.

'Can I have that?' Rob asked.

'No,' Alinor said.

He pushed back his stool and knelt on the floor for her blessing. She put her hand on his matted curls and said: 'God bless you, my son.'

Without another word, he took his cap from a hook behind the door, pulled it on his head and opened the door. The sound of seagulls crying and the salty morning air poured into the darkened room. He went out, banging the door behind him.

'He'll be early for school,' Alys remarked. 'He'll be playing football against the church door again.'

‘I know,’ Alinor replied.

‘You look strange,’ the girl told her mother. ‘Different.’

Alinor turned her face to her daughter and smiled. ‘In what way?’ she said. ‘I’m the same as yesterday.’

Alys saw the deceit in the way her mother’s eyelashes veiled her gaze. ‘You look as you did in my dream. Where did you go?’

Alinor gathered up the empty bowls and stacked them on the table. ‘I went to the church to pray for your father.’

The girl nodded. She knew very well it was Midsummer Day. ‘And did you see him?’ she asked, very low.

Alinor shook her head. ‘Nothing.’

‘So perhaps, he’s still alive? If you didn’t see him, then he’s not dead. He could still come home.’

‘Or perhaps I have no sight.’

‘Perhaps that. Perhaps you met a black cat and he truly saw you.’

Alinor smiled. ‘Don’t speak of it,’ she reminded her daughter. She thought of the priest, waiting for his gruel in the net shed. She wondered if he had truly seen her, like the black cat of her daughter’s dream.

The girl ran her fingers through her thick fair hair and pushed it back from her face, then pulled her cap over the golden plait. She sat down to put on her boots. ‘I wish to God we knew,’ she said irritably. ‘I don’t miss him, but I’d like to know I can stop looking for him. And it’s not fair on Rob.’

‘I know,’ Alinor said. ‘Every time a ship comes to the tide mill quay I ask for news of him, but they say nothing.’

The girl lifted up a boot and poked her finger through the hole in the sole. ‘I’m sorry, Ma, but I need new boots. These are through at the toes and the sole.’

Alinor looked at the patched uppers and the mended soles. ‘Next time I have money, next time I go to market,’ she promised.

‘Before winter, anyway.’ The girl pulled on her worn boots. ‘I might bring a rabbit home tonight. I set a snare yesterday.’

‘Not on Sir William’s fields?’

‘Not where the keeper ever goes,’ she said mischievously.

‘Bring it home and I’ll stew it,’ Alinor promised, thinking of the extra mouth to feed if the priest did not leave till the evening ebb tide.

The girl knelt before her mother and Alinor rested her hand on the tender nape of the girl’s neck. ‘God bless you and keep you safe,’ she said, thinking of her daughter’s young prettiness, and the miller and his men who watched her as she crossed the yard and joked of the husband she would have in a few years’ time.

The girl smiled up at her mother as if she knew her fears. ‘I can fend for myself,’ she said gently, and went out, shooing the hens out of the door and out of the gate so that they could pick their way down to the shoreline.

Alinor waited till she heard the crunching sound of footsteps on shingle recede, as her daughter walked along the shore to the ferry crossing at the rife. Only when she could hear nothing outside but the calling of the seabirds, did Alinor spoon the warm gruel into the spare bowl, her missing husband’s bowl, and take his carved wooden spoon and his own wooden cup filled with small ale, and carry them back along the bank to the net shed.



She tapped at the door and went in, ducking her head below the crooked lintel. He was asleep, sprawled over the nets, his good woollen cape spread under him, his beautiful curling hair tumbled around his face. She observed his pallor, and the dark long sweep of his eyelashes, the sleeping strength of his body, his chest and arms and the length of his legs in the expensive riding boots. Nobody would take him for anything but a stranger, foreign to this impoverished island off the south coast of England. One glance would tell anyone that he was a nobleman. He was as out of place, sprawled on the stinking nets in the ramshackle shed, as she would have been among the silks and perfumes of the king’s court, in the old days, when the king had a court in London.

She thought it was disrespectful to wake him, but then the cooling bowl in her hand reminded her that if she left the gruel beside him and he woke to find it cold and congealed he would be nauseated. So she bent down, put the cup of ale on the floor, and gently shook the toe of his boot.

His eyelashes flickered at once and he opened his eyes and sprang to his feet in one movement. ‘Ah! Goodwife,’ he said.

She held out the bowl and the mug of small ale. ‘Gruel,’ she said. ‘I know it’s not good enough for you.’

‘It comes from you, and it comes from God, and I am grateful,’ he replied. He put the bowl and spoon and mug on the floor and he knelt down and spoke a long whispered grace in Latin. Alinor, not knowing what to do, bowed her head and whispered ‘Amen’ as he finished, though she had been told by the minister – they had all been told – that God did not speak in Latin, that God spoke in English and should be addressed in English and that everything else was a sham and a heresy and a papist mockery of the truth of the Word.

He sat cross-legged on the nets as if they were not crawling with vermin, and he ate the gruel like a hungry man. He scraped the wooden bowl with the wooden spoon and drained the cup of small ale.

‘I’m sorry, there’s no more,’ she said awkwardly. ‘But I’ll bring you some fish soup if you’re here at dinner time.’

‘It was very good. I was hungry,’ he said. ‘I am grateful to you for sharing your food. I hope that you did not go without to feed me?’

She thought with a brief pang of guilt of her boy, who would have eaten more at breakfast. ‘No,’ she said. ‘And my daughter might bring home some meat for dinner.’

He narrowed his eyes as if he was trying to conjure a calendar and see if there was a holy day or a fast day that he should observe. He smiled. ‘It’s St John’s Day. I shall be glad to dine well, but if there is only a little I beg that you take it for yourself and your children. You do a great service to me and for God by hiding me here. I don’t want you to go hungry. I am accustomed to it.’

Her face lit up as she laughed, and he was struck again by her sudden transformation. 'I wager I'm more accustomed than you!'

He had to stop himself from touching her smiling cheek. 'You're right,' he conceded. 'Fasting is my choice, part of my faith.'

'I thought I'd guide you to the Priory this morning,' she offered. 'If you want to try the steward there, and see if he'll take you in.'

'I should be glad of your help. I should be glad to meet with him. Do we go back the way we came?'

'Yes,' she said.

'Then I can find my own way. I'll go alone. I won't put you in danger.'

'It's the mire,' she reminded him. 'I have to guide you. I can walk ahead of you, so that we're not seen walking together.'

He nodded. 'You must keep your distance.'

'Very well.'

They were silent for a moment. 'Will you sit?' he invited her. 'Sit and talk with me?'

She hesitated. 'I have to go to my work.'

'Just stay a moment?' He wondered at himself, seeking her company when he should have been using the solitude for prayer.

She sank to the floor, tucking her feet under her rough woollen skirt. The room was shadowy, smelling of salt and seaweed and the foul undertone of marsh mud. The floor was tamped-down earth, the nets flung carelessly one on top of another, the lobster pots rotting with their load of old seaweed and shells.

'What should you be doing, if I were not delaying you?' he asked her.

'This morning I'd be weeding in the garden, and cleaning the house, picking the herbs, for drying or distilling, probably spinning. This afternoon I'll go up to my brother's house at the ferry, to start barley in the brewhouse for our ale. I'll make bread from the yeast. Sometimes I work at Mill Farm – in the dairy or

bakery – or I weed or dig or harvest, depending on the season,’ she shrugged. Clearly there were too many tasks for her to list. ‘As it’s Midsummer Day I’ll pick herbs again this evening, those in my own garden and those that I grow at the ferryhouse, and I’ll distill in the ferryhouse still room. Sometimes, someone sends for me, for childbirth or sickness. I go to church some evenings. It’s good to sit, just for a moment.’

‘You must be lonely?’

‘No – though I miss my mother,’ she conceded.

‘Do you not miss your husband?’

‘I’m glad to be rid of him,’ she said simply. ‘Except for the loss of the boat.’

‘He was unkind to you?’ He gripped his hands in his lap to stop himself covering her clasped hand with his own. He thought the man must be a monster to hurt such a woman as this – and what was the minister of the church doing, what was her brother doing that he did not protect her?

But she shook her head. ‘No worse than many. I never complained of it. But he took a lot of feeding, and a lot of working for. It was tiring to be his wife, wearisome. But without him we’ve got very little money and few ways to earn it, and no way of saving. I fear for my girl – working at Mill Farm every day – as pretty as she is. She’s got to marry in two or three years and where I’m going to find her dowry, I don’t know. And I fear for my boy, growing up and not even his father’s fishing boat to inherit. He’ll get the ferry after my brother, I suppose, but not for years, and then it’s a hard life. I don’t know what’ll become of either of them.’ She shook her head as if she had puzzled over this often. ‘Nor of me, either. God keep us all from begging.’

‘You can’t beg,’ he said, shocked. ‘You can’t be reduced to begging.’

‘Well, we borrow,’ she admitted, and he saw from the ghost of her smile that she meant that they poached game from Sir William’s lands.

‘God does not forbid borrowing if it’s only rabbits,’ he told

her, and was rewarded by a mischievous gleam. 'But you must be careful . . .'

'We are,' she said. 'And Sir William only cares about his deer and the pheasants. Perhaps we'll buy a boat somehow. Perhaps times'll get better.'

'Don't you have a man who would take your husband's place?' he asked, thinking of her waiting for someone at the church on Midsummer Eve.

He was shocked by her disdain, as she turned her head away. He had met duchesses with less hauteur.

'I shan't marry again.'

'Not even for a boat?' he smiled.

'Nobody with a boat would have me with two children,' she observed. 'Three mouths to feed.'

'Is your daughter like you?' he asked, thinking that she must be as pretty as a princess in a story, like a princess in disguise.

'Not really,' she answered with a smile. 'She has high hopes, she listens to her uncle, thinks that anyone can be anything, that the world is laid out before her, that everything has changed. She's all for parliament and the people. I don't blame her. I can't help but hope for better for her, and for Rob.'

'Your son?'

Her face warmed at his name. 'He's born to be a healer. He's got my mother's gift. From a baby he was out in the herb garden with me, learning the names and their potency. And I've taught him how they're used, and sometimes he comes with me, for a sickness, or a death. If I could only keep him at school so he could have book-learning! A cunning man with learning can make a good living among people with money, in a town perhaps.' She shrugged. 'Not here. I get paid in food and pennies for the herbs, and my patients are all poor people. The only gentry are at the Priory. I nursed her ladyship before she died, and I physicked her son a few months ago. Twice a year I go to the still room and restock it and make it tidy, but when his lordship is ill, he sends for the Chichester physician.'

'You are a cunning woman?' he asked. 'What things can you do?'

‘Herbs and healing only,’ she answered carefully. She guessed that he would know nothing of the many careful gradations between healers who used natural cures and those who drew on dark arts and could sicken a whole village. ‘I’m a midwife. I used to have my licence, when the bishop was in his palace and could grant a licence – before he was thrown out and ran away. I can draw a tooth and set a bone, cut out a sore and heal an ulcer, but I do nothing else. I am a healer and a finder of lost things.’

‘You found me,’ he said.

‘Were you lost?’

‘I think that it is England that is lost,’ he said seriously. ‘We cannot put our king from his throne, we cannot choose how we worship God. We cannot put parliament over everything. We cannot make war against the king appointed by God to rule us.’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

He hesitated. ‘You said last night that your brother is for parliament?’

‘He ran away to fight and he would have stayed with the New Model Army, but when my father died he had to come home again to keep his right to the ferry. Our family had the rights to the ferry for generations, and we are tenants of Ferryhouse.’

‘It’s the only way to cross to the mainland? Your brother’s wherry?’

‘It’s not a wherry,’ she corrected him. ‘It’s more like a raft on a rope across Broad Rife,’ she said. ‘Broad Rife flows between Sealsea Island and the mainland. It’s not deep – you can wade across at low tide. The wadeway is cobbled, so you can’t get stuck in the mud. My brother keeps the wadeway, and ferries people who don’t want to get their feet wet, and women going to market carrying their spun yarn or their goods, and at high tide the wagonners, or Sir William, who loads his horses and carriage on the ferry when the water is too high.’

‘He rows people across?’

She shook her head. ‘He pulls on a rope. It’s like a big raft, a floating bridge, big enough to take a wagon. At mid-tide the current’s very strong. The ferry is hooked fore and aft to an

overhead rope so that he doesn't get swept away by the tide and out into the mire, and then out to sea.'

He saw that she went pale at the thought of it. 'Have you always been afraid of water?' he asked curiously. 'Living here, on the shore?'

'The daughter of the ferryman and the wife of a fisherman,' she smiled. 'I know full well that it's foolish, but I have always had a terror of it.'

'Then how will you fish when you get your boat?' he asked.

She smiled and gave a little shrug, rising to her feet and picking up his bowl and his cup. 'I'll have to find the courage,' she said. 'I can row and I can throw a net, and the children can help me. I won't ever go out to sea on the deep waters. I'll stay inside the harbour bar. And then, if your side gets your way, and the king comes to his own again and the church goes papist, I can sell fish in the market and at the doors on all the fast days.'

'I will send you money for a boat when I get home,' he promised her.

She smiled as if it was a pleasantry. 'Where's your home?'

He hesitated, but he wanted to trust her with the truth. 'I live at my college in France,' he said. 'My family sent me to the English college at Douai when I was a boy of twelve, and I stayed on and took my vows as a priest. When the war started, they were glad that I was safely out of the way. My father fought against parliament and was defeated, wounded at Naseby. Now, he and my mother are in exile, with the queen in Paris, and I am a seminary priest, sworn to come to England to bring people back to the true faith.'

'Isn't it very dangerous to come to England?'

He hesitated. There was a death sentence for spying, and a death sentence for heresy. His college were proud of their history of martyrs, and kept candles burning before a wall of their carved names. When he was young he had longed to be one of the sainted dead. 'My college has sent many martyrs to England, ever since King Henry turned from the true Church. The Church was changed, despite people's wishes, more than a hundred years

ago; but we never changed. I am following where many saints have trod.' He smiled at her wondering gaze. 'Truly, I choose this. And there are many safe houses and many friends to help me. I can cross the country and never leave roman catholic lands. I can pray in a hidden sacred chapel every night. Now, the parliament has gone too far against the king, the army even more so. Now is our chance. All over the country, towns and villages are declaring for the king and saying that they want him back on the throne. People want peace, and they want to be free to worship.'

'Won't you go back to your college till then?' she asked doubtfully, thinking that the day would never come.

'No. There is one thing, a great thing, I have to do before I can go home.' He resisted the temptation to tell her more.

She guessed at once. 'You're never going to the Isle of Wight?' she whispered. 'Not to the king?'

His silence told her that she was right.

'So you see why you should not be seen with me,' he said. 'And I will never admit that I met you, that you hid me. Whatever happens, whatever befalls me, I will never betray you.'

Gravely she nodded. 'If you want to go to the Priory, we should go through the mire while it's low tide. We can see the steward as he has his breakfast, and if he won't have you in the house, there'll still be time to walk back through the mire before the tide gets too high.'

He got up from his seat on the nets, brushed down his jacket and swung his cloak around his shoulders. 'We go through the mire?'

She nodded again. 'We shouldn't meet anyone. Hardly anyone comes here. As we get to the Priory we'll be in the hollow lane of bushes. If you meet anyone there you can just drop over the bank into the ditch and hide. If you have to run, follow the line of the ditch and it will take you inland. You can hide in the woods.'

'And what will you do?'

'I'll say that I never saw you following me. That I was going out to the beach for tern eggs.' She turned and opened the door. 'Wait here.'

Suddenly, like a cannonade on the still air, there was an

explosion of noise, a cascade of water and then a terrible rumbling sound.

‘What’s that?’ he demanded, starting up, hand to his precious pack.

‘Just the mill,’ she said calmly. ‘They’ve opened the millrace and now the millstones are grinding. It’s noisy on a calm day.’

He followed her out into the brightness of the morning. The mudbanks and the water pools gleamed like tarnished silver, stretching to the horizon, dazzling and strange. The grinding and the clanking noise went on, as if someone were rolling back the iron gates of hell on a stone pavement.

‘So loud!’ he said.

‘You get used to it.’ She led the way down the bank onto a little spit of shingle that went into the mud of the mire and then petered out at a shallow riverbed. He walked at her side, his pack on his back, the heels of his riding boots sinking into the cloying mud and coming free with a horrid little sucking sound. Suddenly the shallow ditch beside him rushed with a gout of water that made him jump.

She laughed. ‘That’s the millrace, the water from the tide mill.’

‘Everything is so strange here,’ he said, ashamed of flinching from the water, which was now pouring along beside them, in the landscape that was otherwise so still. ‘My home is in the north, high hills, moorland country, it’s very dry . . . This is like a foreign land to me, like the Lowlands.’

‘The miller opens the sluice gates on the millpond, so the water pours in to turn his wheel,’ Alinor explained. ‘And then the water rushes out to sea.’

‘Every low tide?’ he asked, watching the torrent beside them.

‘He doesn’t mill every tide,’ she said. ‘There’s not enough demand for flour. But he stores grain and sends it to London when the price is right.’

He heard the resentment in her voice. ‘You mean that he profiteers? He buys the corn cheap and sends it away to sell at London prices?’

‘He’s no worse than anyone else,’ she said. ‘But it’s hard to see the grain ship going out with her sails spread when you don’t have the money for a loaf yourself, and you can’t earn enough to buy flour.’

‘Doesn’t his lordship set the price of the loaf? He should do.’

She shrugged. A good landlord would set the price and make sure that the miller took no more than a scoop of wheat as his fee. ‘Sir William’s not always here. He’s in London. He probably doesn’t know.’

The track she was following was invisible to him as it turned away from the mill stream, to the higher ground of a little island of shingle and then another, set amid a waste of soft mud. The harbour water was gurgling and receding all around them, all the time. Sometimes they were on the firm footing of a shingle spit, with a deep pool on the seaward side, where he saw shoals of tiny fish left by the receding water; sometimes they walked over sand ridged by the departing sea and he remembered the danger of quicksands and stepped in her footprints. Often, he thought she could not possibly know the way around deep creeks that ran through the featureless marsh. But she turned one way and then another, tracing her way through, sometimes on the sea bed, sometimes through the reed banks, sometimes on the wavering shore where half-submerged stanchions and mud-buried groynes showed that someone had once built a dyke and claimed land, but then lost it again to the indifferent sea.

When she turned inland after more than an hour of walking, they went into an overhung lane where quickthorn trees pressed close on each side. He made sure that he was so far back that he could drop out of sight the moment that he saw someone, or heard her exclaim a greeting, and yet close enough that he could follow her as she took the twisting path that led them towards the high roofs of the Priory, just visible above the thick trees. Brambles trailed across the path, tugging at his sleeves. This path was rarely trodden: the farm workers preferred the road, and when the king was on his throne and Sir William had his favour, all the grand visitors drove their carriages from the mainland over

the wadeway at low tide and entered by the ornamental gates to draw up to the double front door where a row of liveried servants bowed as the carriage doors opened. But the liveried servants had run away to fight for the New Model Army, and there had been no grand visitors since the war started and Sir William had joined the losing side.

The trees gave way to a scrubby-hedged meadow of badly mown hay, and the two of them went quickly across the open ground to the shelter of the high wall of knapped flints banded with red brick. Alinor paused, her hand on the ring handle of the wooden door.

‘Is this your safe house? Were you expected? Shall I tell the steward your name?’

‘I did hope to come here,’ James admitted. ‘Sir William said he would meet me here. But I don’t know how much he told his steward. I don’t know if you are safe going in there and speaking of me. Perhaps I should go in alone.’

‘Safer if you stay here. I can say that I met you by chance, and I’ve brought you to him. You wait here.’ She gestured to a stack of hay, carelessly built of poor grass in the seashore meadow. ‘Get behind that, and keep a lookout. If I don’t come back within the hour then something’s gone wrong and you’d better run away. Go back along the shoreline; stay on the bank. You can hide until the tide’s low again this evening, and wade over the causeway at dusk.’

‘God keep you safe,’ he said nervously. ‘I don’t like to send you into danger. His lordship assured me I would be safe here. I just don’t know if he will have told his steward.’

‘If he sends me to trick you, to bring you in for arrest, I’ll take my apron off as a signal,’ she said. ‘When I’m coming, if I’m carrying my apron in my hand, run away.’

She was pale with fear, her lips tightly compressed. She turned without another word and went through the door in the wall into the kitchen garden. She walked past the tidy beds of herbs and vegetables to the kitchen door of the Priory, stepped out of her wooden pattens and tapped on the door.

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 stewpot 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 curtsey. '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 woman 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, Goody 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: sixpence 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 haystack, 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 corridor 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 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,' he hesitated. 'Who shall I name in my prayers?'

'I am Alinor. Alinor Reekie.'

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 coming in, a dark line against a cloudy sky.



Elation at his words – 'a woman like you, in a place like this' – lasted her for days, while she went about her work in the heat

of the summer: weeding her garden, cutting herbs and drying them in the ferryhouse still room, walking all the way to Sealsea village to see one of the farmers' wives who was expecting her first child after the harvest. Her husband, Farmer Johnson, was well-to-do, owning his own lands as well as renting a share of the manor lands, and he gave Alinor a shilling in advance to visit his wife every Sunday, and promised her another shilling to attend the birth. She tied the two silver shillings in a rag and hid it under one of the stones of the hearth. 'A woman like you, in a place like this' sang in her head through the long hours of summer daylight. She thought that when she had saved three shillings she would speak to her brother about buying a boat. 'A woman like you, in a place like this.'

She repeated the words so often to herself that they came to lose their meaning. What was a woman 'like her'? What was this place like, that her living here struck him as incongruous? Was there any sense that he meant the place was fine and she was not fit for it? But then she remembered his brown gaze on the neck of her gown, the warmth in his eyes, and she knew exactly what he meant and she felt the joy of his words over again.

It never occurred to her that his words were wrenched from him, that it was a sin for him to voice them, even to think them. She had been baptised into a church where ministers were allowed to marry: there had been no celibate priests or monasteries in England for a hundred years. She did not understand that it was a sin for him to even look at a woman, let alone to whisper to her with desire. She heard the words forced from him as if he could not help but speak them; but she had no idea that he would have to confess them when he returned to his monastery; he would have to tell his confessor he had fallen into a mortal sin: he had felt desire.

She did not know herself, what she was feeling. She had been married young and given birth to two children, feeling nothing but pain. She did not know what it was that made her whisper his words as if they were an invocation, what kept the words in her mind as if it were a phrase of music that sang to her, over and over.

TIDELANDS

Her son, Rob, came back from crow-scaring with three pennies for the day's work, and her daughter, Alys, contributed her week's wages of two shillings and sixpence. They both handed over their earnings without complaint, knowing that the household had to pay cash for goods: fleeces for spinning, butter and cheese since they had no cow, bacon and lard since they had no pig, a fee for baking bread in the mill oven, a payment to the miller for grinding a peck of wheat, a fee to the Priory for the right to gather driftwood from the shore and terns' eggs from the beach, a fine for failing to dig the harbour ditches last spring. Rent, when it next fell due, the tithes to the church every month, new soles for Alys' boots.

'I'm going to buy a boat,' she told them. 'If I can.'