

Chapter 1

The question between them, being unresolvable, remained unresolved. Their irresolution: his and hers, and the intrinsic insolubility of their relationship stood between them like a wall ... like a rock ... like a ...

Isobel broke off from typing and consulted the thesaurus beside her on the desk.

Like a barrier, bastion, bulwark, dyke, rampart ... Like an impenetrable bulwark, like an impenetrable bastion, like a bastion, like a rampart...

She hesitated. Her husband put his fair head around the door of her study.

‘Can’t you take a break for lunch now?’ he asked plaintively.

She glanced at her watch. It was not yet one o’clock but Philip’s condition meant that he needed regular small meals, and if Isobel failed to provide these, he became hungry and irritable.

‘What has Mrs M. left for us?’ she asked, getting up from her desk and glancing back at the screen, thinking distractedly about soup and barrier, bastion, rampart and bulwark.

‘Soup and bread rolls again,’ he said. ‘But I got her to buy a piece of steak for supper.’

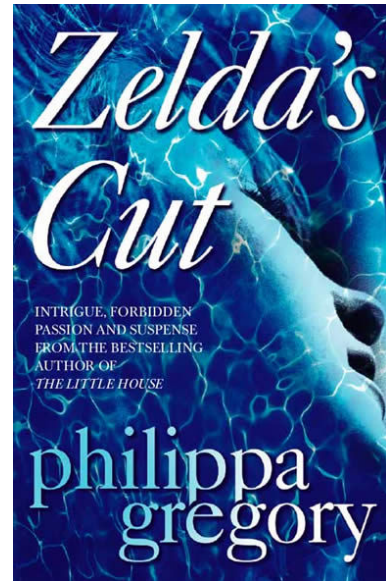
‘Oh good,’ she said, not hearing him.

The kitchen was a pretty room with sprigged curtains and wooden units. The view from the window over the sink looked up the hill at the back of the house, the green shoulder of the Weald of Kent, bright now with springtime growth. Beside the Aga stood a saucepan filled with home-made soup. Philip watched as she put it on the hot plate and took the rolls from the bread bin.

‘I’ll lay the table,’ he volunteered.

When Isobel brought the bowls to the table she found that he had forgotten a knife to cut the cheese, and there was no salt. She fetched them without irritation, her mind still on bastion, rampart or bulwark.

‘You had two phone calls while you were working,’ Philip said. ‘Someone from your publishers, I wrote down the name. And Troy.’



‘What did Troy want?’

‘It’s such a ridiculous name,’ he remarked. ‘D’you think his parents really christened him Troy? Or was he called Trevor and has been trying to live it down ever since?’

‘I like it,’ she said. ‘It suits him.’

‘Never having had the honour, I couldn’t say. But it is a ridiculous name.’

‘Anyway,’ Isobel said patiently. ‘What did he want?’

‘You don’t imagine he’d tell me, do you?’ he demanded. ‘I’m just the messenger boy, the telephone operator. The receptionist at Hotel Literature.’

‘Hotel des Lettres,’ she suggested and was rewarded by the gleam of his smile.

‘Trés belle.’

There was a brief silence, he reached across the table and squeezed her hand. ‘Sorry,’ he said briefly.

‘Aches and pains?’ she asked.

‘A bit.’

‘Why not have a lie down?’

‘I have all the rest of my life to lie down,’ he snapped. ‘That’s one of the things I have to look forward to. Progressive disability, or as you would say: a nice lie down. I don’t especially want to rush towards it.’

She bowed her head over the bowl of soup. ‘Of course not,’ she said quietly. ‘I’m sorry.’

Philip put his spoon in his empty bowl and finished his bread. ‘I think I’ll go for a walk,’ he said. ‘Stretch out a bit.’

She glanced outside at the clear skies. Their house was in a fold of the Weald, he had the choice of walking upwards to the crest or downwards to the village.

‘You could walk to the pub and I could drive down to meet you there later,’ she suggested.

‘You mean so I don’t face the challenge of an uphill?’

Isobel was silent.