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Written by Rory Clements

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Holy Spy

RORY CLEMENTS



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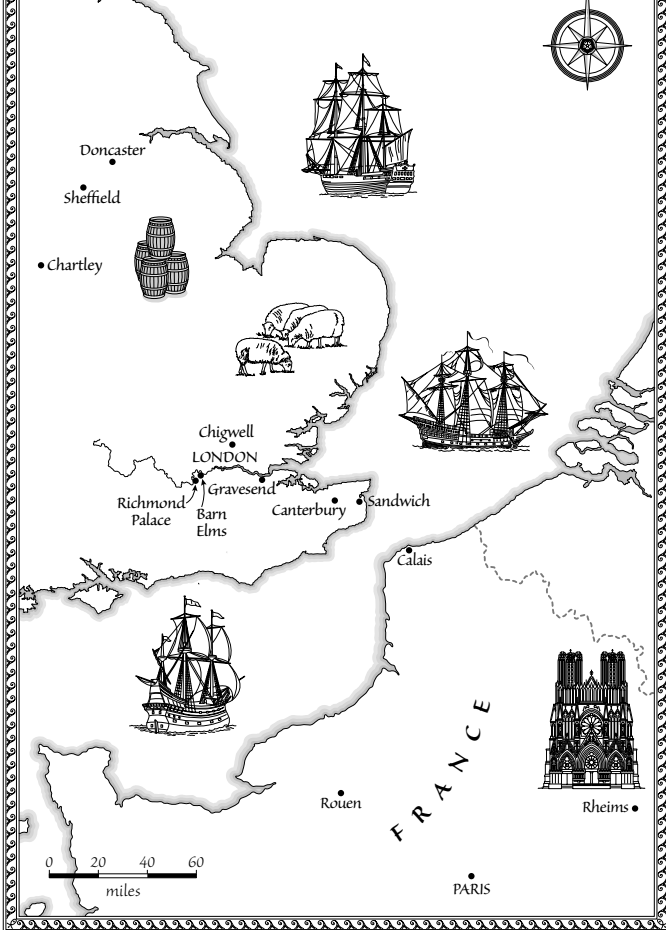
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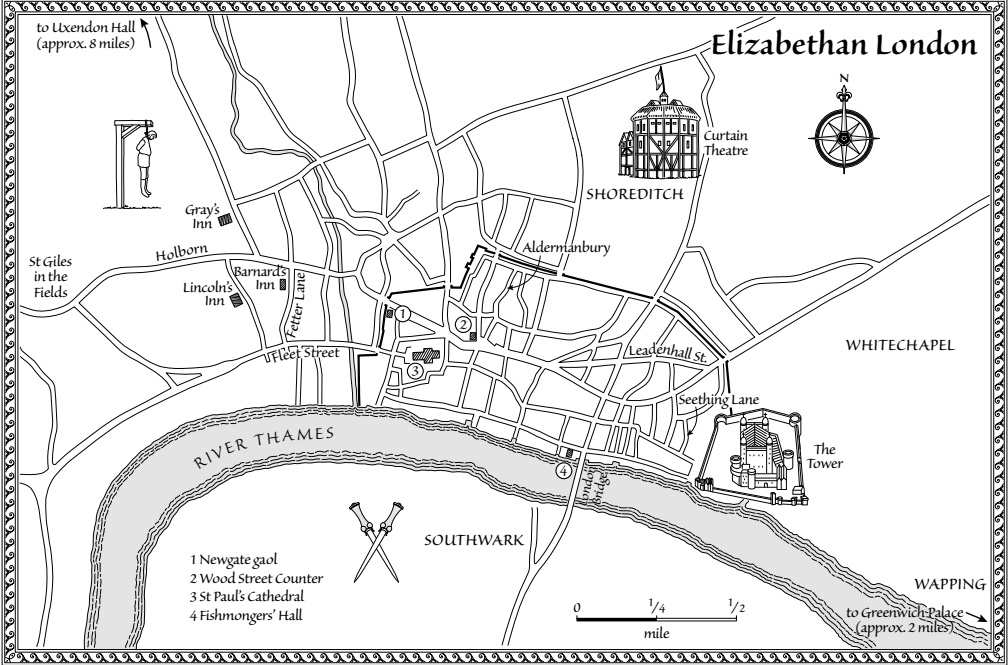
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Chapter 1

Rheims, France, 1585

GOODFELLOW SAVAGE STOOD before the cross with his head bowed, his long, military beard flat against his chest. Once spoken, these words could never be undone. A vow made before God could not be broken.

The air was heavy with the fragrance of incense. In the north transept of this magnificent cathedral, at the heart of the city, a young priest swung a thurible, his black-robed figure throwing shadows from the flickering glow of a dozen candles that decorated a nearby table.

Goodfellow inhaled the holy smoke deeply through his long, hooked nose. He had been over the matter of the vow a hundred times or more. He had lain long nights without sleep in his narrow seminary cot debating whether assassination – killing in cold blood rather than in the heat of battle – could truly be lawful in the eyes of God. His mind said yes; his heart was not so easily won over. But in the end . . . well, here he was.

One of his companions, a young man with pudgy pink hands, clasped his shoulder. ‘Say the words, Goodfellow. Say them.’

Savage nodded, then took a deep breath. ‘In the sight of these witnesses, I swear by Almighty God that I shall not rest until I have slain the usurper Elizabeth Tudor, eternal enemy

of the Holy Roman Church. I crave the benediction of the Church and the Lord's blessing on this my poor sword and on this my solemn undertaking.'

The words seemed to ring out so that the whole world must have heard them, but in truth they were little more than a whisper. Had he truly made the vow? He leant forward and placed the sword on the flagstones before him.

'And so I give up my soul, wretched sinner that I am, to His mercy, in the certain knowledge that my own life is now forfeit.' Yes, he knew *that* well enough. No man could kill the Queen of England and escape with his life. His own death would follow as sure as the sun follows the rain.

He fell forward, prostrating himself, his arms outstretched so that his fingertips touched the honed blade. Somewhere in the distance, a bell clanged, summoning the young seminary men to their studies. Savage scarcely heard it. He was alone with Christ.

In the pleasant garden of a small auberge, not a furlong from Notre-Dame de Rheims, John Shakespeare lay back and rested against the trunk of a sycamore tree, enjoying its cool shade. The air was hot and still; no one but a fool or an indentured man would venture into the sun on such a day. He heard a whistle and opened his eyes. Across the way, he spotted the boyish figure of Gilbert Gifford in his priestly robes.

Shakespeare raised one finger, then closed his eyes again. Five minutes later he stretched his arms and yawned. He picked up his book and cup of wine, rose lazily to his feet and sauntered back towards his room in the inn, where he went to his chamber and shut the door behind him.

Ten minutes later there were three raps at the door. Shakespeare opened it and admitted Gifford, glancing around to ensure they were not observed.

‘Well, Mr Gifford?’

‘He has vowed to kill Her Majesty.’ His voice was a whisper.

‘Do you believe he will truly attempt it?’

‘It is a vow made before God, not a promise to man. A vow is immutable. Once made, it must be fulfilled. He knows this and understands it. This is why he took so long to come to his decision. He is a soldier and has a soldier’s honour. I believe he would rather slit his own throat than repudiate this vow. He plans to return to England before autumn.’

‘And then?’

‘That is up to you and Mr Secretary. Seize him on arrival at Rye or Dover if you wish, and I will testify against him. Or you can watch him and wait. I rather thought that was Walsingham’s plan.’

Shakespeare did not reply. It was not his place to disclose Sir Francis Walsingham’s plans to any man, least of all to Gilbert Gifford. He looked at his angelic, smooth and beardless young face with a curious mixture of admiration and distaste and wondered, not for the first time, whose side he was really on. A man who did not know the truth about him might be taken in by his deacon’s robes, but Shakespeare knew better.

‘Or if you wish, we could merely put an end to him here. A bullet to the head, a blade to the throat . . .’

Shakespeare ignored the suggestion. ‘How does he expect to carry out this mission?’

‘That is for you to discover.’

‘What do you know about John Savage, Mr Gifford?’

‘Lower your voice if you would, Mr Shakespeare. We are not the only spies in Rheims.’

Shakespeare stifled his irritation, smiled and waited.

‘I know little more than I have told you,’ Gifford said at last. ‘Men call him Goodfellow for his sweetness of nature, which

you might think sits uneasily with his present intent and his known ferocity on the field of battle. He is tall – so tall that his feet extend a foot beyond his cot. Taller even than you, Mr Shakespeare, and muscled like a fighting dog. He is a soldier and poet who has fought with Parma against the Dutch rebels. And yet he is also full of charm and wit; no man could meet him in a tavern and not wish to buy him a gage of ale. He has no money but much good cheer.’

‘And yet here he is at Rheims, training for the priesthood and plotting the death of the Queen of England.’

‘He is devout. I think he saw much bloodshed in the wars and was moved towards the spiritual life. But my cousin, the good Dr Gifford, and the priest Hodgson had other plans for him. They have been working on him for three months now, persuading him that his true vocation lies in the qualities God gave him as a man-at-arms. It was explained to him that the Holy Vicar of Rome and Father Persons of the Society of Jesus consider it not only lawful but desirable to kill the Queen. He took much persuading . . .’

Yes, thought Shakespeare, and I am sure that you played the major part in moulding him to your will. Perhaps you were the main instigator, Mr Gifford.

‘I want to meet this Mr Savage.’

‘Not here. He would become suspicious. We will work out a scheme whereby you encounter him by chance. You will, of course, have to feign fervour in the cause of papism.’

‘Then do it. And do not commit any of these things that you have told me to paper, even in cipher. I will carry word to Mr Secretary.’ Shakespeare allowed himself a smile. He was aware that this day he had chanced upon the very thing his master had been seeking for many months: the first tentative steps towards the death of a queen.

Chapter 2

London, England, 1586

THREE BODIES COILED and writhed on the large tester bed. They looked to Shakespeare like adders dancing in a springtime frenzy. The man was on his back, his body arching as the two slender whores, sisters, ministered to him and to each other. Shakespeare watched them through a small hole in the wall and felt ashamed. No man should observe his fellow humans in their carnal ecstasy. He pulled back from the spyhole and Thomas Phelippes immediately took his place.

‘You see,’ he said in a whisper. ‘They are remarkable fine specimens of their sex, are they not? Such sisters are surely the desire of every man’s loins.’

Yes, they were comely. Shakespeare had been stirred, but he would not admit it to the slimy Phelippes. ‘I have seen enough. Let us go.’

Phelippes grinned, his thin, pitted face more repulsive than ever. Behind his grubby spectacles, there was a challenge in his watery eyes. ‘I can arrange them for you, if you wish. No silver need change hands. Just say the word.’

‘No. Let us repair to the tavern to discuss this.’ He pulled Phelippes away by his bony shoulders.

‘Very well.’ Phelippes slid the cover across the spyhole and

ran a hand through his lank yellow hair, raising his eyebrows in mockery at Shakespeare's distaste. Treading softly, they made their way out of the Holborn house and into a taproom in the next street where they ordered pints of ale. Shakespeare drank deeply, as though the draught might cleanse him.

'Mr Shakespeare, it was important you should view Gifford thus. I think Mr Secretary will be more than satisfied with our report.'

'Perhaps. But it was unseemly. And I am certain very costly.'

'I could watch the Smith sisters all day. Have you ever seen such paps and such womanly bellies?'

'They know their trade, I grant you, but I thought you had a new bride to look to, Mr Phelippes.' God preserve her! How could any woman bear to look on his reptilian face each morning?

'And Gifford! He is so small and hairless, so pink-skinned! He looks as though he should still be at his mother's teat, not a whore's.'

'Do not be deceived, Mr Phelippes. Gilbert Gifford is twenty-five years of age and man enough for our needs. It is the very innocence of his appearance that gains him entry into men's trust. Often to their detriment.'

'But do *you* trust him? And what of Mr Secretary; does he trust the pink thing?'

Shakespeare smiled. He knew that his master, Walsingham, trusted Gilbert Gifford as much as he trusted any man, which was not at all. Shakespeare sometimes wondered whether he himself might be spied on by others in the employment of the Principal Secretary. Well if so, then so be it; the watchers would have a dull time of it. No whores, no salacious connections.

As for Gilbert Gifford, a man who went by many names, Walsingham's fear was that he would vanish, his work

unfinished. He was like a will-o'-the-wisp, one minute here, the next gone. And that was the point of these two fair sisters of the skin. Their task, for which they were being paid very well from Mr Secretary's purse, was so to bewitch Gifford that he would stay and do his master's bidding. It was a plan with obvious flaws, for there were whorehouses in every city of the world. These two would have to offer something that could not be found elsewhere. So far, they seemed to be doing all that could be hoped for, and more.

'Do they have the pox, Mr Phelippes?'

'Ah, so you *are* interested?'

'Just answer my question.'

'No, they do not have the pox. They save themselves for the best, which is why they are so highly prized – and *priced* – like spice of the Indies.'

'Good. They will only make themselves available to Gifford at *our* behest. I would have them retain their mystery and freshness so that he does not tire of them, for without him we have nothing.'

Chapter 3

THE AFTERNOON SUN fell across his face. He shifted his chair so that he was in shade. Alone in the parlour of his house in Seething Lane, he was sitting at the head of the oak table where he took his meals and did much of his work.

This day John Shakespeare had put aside his labours on intercepts and correspondence from the world's embassies. All he had in front of him was a copy of the Holy Bible, a quill, an inkhorn and a sheet of paper with three names on it. One of them had a few words next to it: *agreeable disposition, respectable family, untried, a little young.*

There was a rap at the door from the anteroom.

'Come in.'

Boltfoot Cooper pushed open the door and limped in. 'The second woman is here, master.'

Shakespeare nodded to his assistant. 'Bring her through, Boltfoot.'

Boltfoot shuffled off and reappeared a few moments later, in company with a woman of middle years, perhaps forty, with greying hair beneath a lawn coif. She had a brisk walk and a competent air. Boltfoot ushered her forward and she approached the head of the table, stopping four feet from Shakespeare.

'Mistress Rymple?'

She gave a quick nod, not quite a bow. ‘Indeed, Mr Shakespeare, sir.’ She held out a paper with a broken seal. ‘This is a letter of commendation from my last employer.’

Shakespeare took it from her, unfolded it and read it. The letter said that Annis Rymple had performed her duties as lady’s maid to her employer’s satisfaction but that her services were no longer required as her mistress had gone to God. The letter was signed by the widower. Shakespeare handed the paper back to her. ‘How long had you worked in your last position?’

‘Twelve years, sir.’

‘You were a lady’s maid. You know there are no ladies in this house.’

‘But I would make a suitable housekeeper, I am certain.’

‘What were your duties?’

‘I dressed my lady and busked her hair. Her chamber was my world and when she went to the country, I was always her travelling companion.’

‘What of cooking, baking, brewing, shopping, laundry and sweeping? Those are the duties we must have performed here. We would have hens, too, for eggs, and I want a pig.’

‘There were other servants for those duties, but I am sure I will adapt well enough. It was made clear to me by the factor what was required. You are a single gentleman, I believe. It will just be you for whom I must do these things, will it not, sir?’

Shakespeare turned to Boltfoot, who was hovering like a hawk by the door. He did not look happy. ‘And Mr Cooper, of course.’

Annis Rymple looked slightly taken aback. ‘If that is what you wish of me, then I will obey your orders, Mr Shakespeare. I can cook pies and bake cakes and bread and I am sure a fine house such as this has a spit for roasting.’

‘How much did your last employment pay?’

‘Five pounds from Lady’s Day to Lady’s Day, with a week at Easter to visit my mother in Hertfordshire.’

Shakespeare scratched a few words against her name. *Experienced, good reference, most likely capable. A good age. Unlikely to come with child.* He smiled at her and nodded. ‘Mr Cooper, if you will take Mistress Rymple back to the anteroom, I believe we have one more candidate to see.’

‘She has not arrived, master. The choice is between Mistress Rymple here and young Miss Cawston, whom you have already met.’

‘Well, offer them both ale and I will make my decision presently.’

Boltfoot gave a perfunctory bow of the head and retreated with Annis Rymple.

Shakespeare watched them go. It seemed clear to him that the older woman must be the correct choice. The other one had no experience of service and he did not have the time or patience to indulge her fumbling efforts to run this household, modest though it was. He rose and walked across to the latticed window that looked out onto the sun-drenched yard. It was unkempt and unused. There should be chickens clucking there and, yes, a pig or two. He needed a mature, proficient woman. Mistress Rymple would do well enough.

He turned at the creak of the door. Boltfoot had returned.

‘Master . . .’

‘Tell Annis Rymple the job is hers if she can start without delay. Send the other one, the girl, away with a shilling for her trouble.’

‘Yes, master.’

It occurred to Shakespeare that Boltfoot seemed disappointed. Well, that was not his concern. ‘Go to it, Boltfoot.’

‘Master, you have another visitor. A fine-dressed gentleman, by name of Severin Tort.’

Shakespeare frowned. He knew the name, of course. Severin Tort was a lawyer renowned for his unparalleled knowledge of the laws governing contracts and covenants between merchants. It was said he would have been made a judge by now were it not for his quiet insistence on clinging to the old faith.

‘Well, bring him through, fetch brandy – and then deal with the maids.’

Severin Tort was lean and short with a lawyer’s clever eyes. Too clever to trust, perhaps. He wore black, broken only by the white lawn ruffs at his throat and cuffs and the silver sheen of his hair. He had a strangely modest and restrained air about him for one accustomed to arguing cases against the most learned men in the realm.

Shakespeare proffered his hand in greeting. ‘Mr Tort, it is a pleasure to welcome you to my home. Naturally, I have heard of you.’

‘Indeed, and I have heard much of you, Mr Shakespeare. I know you were a Gray’s Inn man, which is my own alma mater. I must thank you for receiving me unannounced.’

‘Will you sit down? Mr Cooper will bring us brandy presently.’

Tort took a chair halfway down the long table. He sat neatly, his hands loosely clasped on the tabletop. ‘You will be wondering why I am here, but before I reveal anything I must tell you that it is a confidential matter. I would ask that you say nothing outside these walls.’

‘Mr Tort, that will depend on what you say. I cannot give you such a pledge without knowing more.’

Boltfoot brought in a tray with a flask of brandy and two glass goblets. Shakespeare nodded to him to leave and indicated that he should close the door after him. He poured a brandy for his guest and one for himself.

‘What if I were to tell you that it concerns Katherine Giltspur?’

Shakespeare frowned. The name meant nothing to him.

‘You probably know her better as Katherine Whetstone.’

The name hung there. It sucked the air from Shakespeare’s body. Had he heard correctly?

Tort repeated the name. ‘Katherine Whetstone. You do know her, I think?’

Know her? He knew the name as well as his own. Kat Whetstone. He had loved her. They had been lovers for over two years. ‘Yes, I know her – *knew* her,’ he said.

She had lived with him, in this house, and they were as good as man and wife. Indeed, he had begun to assume that eventually they would be married. And then one day he returned from his work in Walsingham’s office and she was no longer here. All she had left was a note. *Do not look for me, John. This life of yours is not for me. We always knew that, which is why we never made vows. God be with you. Your loving Kat.*

‘Good. It is as I thought, sir.’

The heat in the room was suddenly overpowering. Shakespeare looked into Tort’s shrewd eyes, seeking some clue as to his reason for being here. Did the lawyer know what he was doing, reopening this bloody wound? Even eight months away touring France, the Low Countries and the Italies had not repaired the tear in Shakespeare’s soul. He still thought of Kat every day. A glimpse of fair hair, a laugh in the street, any manner of looks and sounds could bring her lovely face to mind, for it had never faded from his imagining. He conjured up a smile for the benefit of his guest.

‘Kat Whetstone. Yes, of course I know her – but I have neither seen nor heard of her in two years.’ His voice was brisk with affected indifference. ‘I was surprised to hear her name.’

‘But you know her well?’

Shakespeare did not answer the question, though he could have said: We took some comfort and pleasure in each other's company. Our bodies were as one. For that was what it was – comfort and pleasure and the joys of the flesh, but never love; not to her, surely never love. Why did he still try to convince himself thus? Of course he had loved her, although he had never told her as much. He framed a question of his own for Tort.

'From her new name I take it she is now married?'

'She is widowed, very recently.'

'Married and widowed? This is sad news indeed . . .'

Tort's surprise was clear. 'Have you heard none of this? Her late husband was Mr Nicholas Giltspur, a merchant of great wealth and renown. Surely you have heard of their great riches? They have more gold and silver than any other merchant in London. And the Giltspur Diamond? Everyone must know of that. Mr Giltspur's death is the talk of the city.'

Shakespeare had, of course, heard of the great diamond, but had heard nothing of the death, having travelled back and forth across the narrow sea these past weeks. He shook his head. 'I have heard his name, though I have never met him. And I certainly know nothing of his death. I have been away much . . .'

He trailed off. 'You mean, she is Nick Giltspur's widow?' He wanted to laugh at the irony. Kat Whetstone, who had pledged never to marry, had attached herself to one of the wealthiest men in England. But then his humour turned to dust as he began wonder why an esteemed advocate should be bringing such news. When did lawyers ever bear good tidings?

'Have you truly not heard of the court case, Mr Shakespeare?'

'Court case? I know nothing of any death or any court case. I have been deeply involved in my work, Mr Tort.' Trailing Gilbert Gifford from Rheims to Paris and Rouen – then to

England, then back to France and finally, this week, returning once more to London; all the time ensuring that Gifford was content. These were matters that could not be discussed in this company. ‘And so the tittle-tattle of the streets has passed me by. But you have worried me. Please, tell me what this is about. Anything pertaining to Kat Whetstone will always be of interest to me.’

‘She has been married and widowed within the space of a two-month. Her husband was murdered last week. Stabbed with a long-bladed bollock-dagger near Fishmongers’ Hall, on Thames Street. The killer was caught at the scene of the crime and made no attempt to conceal his guilt. I would entreat you to brace yourself, Mr Shakespeare, for indeed I bring shocking news.’

Shakespeare downed his brandy, then poured himself another. Whatever was coming next, he did not want to hear it. ‘Continue, Mr Tort.’

‘The killer was a wretch named Will Cane. Not only did he confess his own part in the terrible deed but immediately implicated Mistress Giltspur. Under questioning and in open court, he said she had offered him a hundred pounds to kill her husband: ten pounds to be paid before the murder and ninety afterwards. He was quite clear and consistent on this – and he said it all without coercion of any kind.’

‘God’s blood, no!’

‘I am sorry, Mr Shakespeare.’

‘Is this true?’

Tort nodded.

‘No,’ Shakespeare said, as much to himself as to the lawyer. ‘I cannot believe such a thing of Kat. It is preposterous. Beyond madness.’

‘No, well, neither can I believe it. But we are in the minority. To the rest of the world, she is the basest example of

womanhood, a succubus and she-devil, a murdering hell-hag. She is now a fugitive, wanted as an accessory. Meanwhile, the killer is due to be hanged. If she is apprehended, she will doubtless follow him to the scaffold within days or hours – unless the mob gets to her first, for I fear they would tear her apart. And so she must remain hidden.’

Shakespeare was silent for a few moments, still trying to absorb the hideous news. Dozens of questions welled up, but one overrode the others. ‘I ask again, Mr Tort. Why are you here? Why have you come to *me*?’

Tort sipped his brandy. ‘Mistress Giltspur has asked me to come to you, that is why.’

‘Then you know where she is?’ Shakespeare demanded.

The lawyer avoided the question. ‘She believes you have influence and powers of investigation . . . that you may be able to help her.’

‘Help her? How? She cannot believe I have any influence to remove a charge of murder.’

‘She has some belief – or hope, at least – that you could discover the truth behind this foul murder and clear her name. *Before* she is arrested.’

‘But if she is guilty, as it seems—’ He stopped in mid-flow. Kat – a murderess? There was a ruthless, ambitious streak to her – but murder? ‘Mr Tort, what is your connection to the case?’

‘Though I am not versed in criminal law, she is my client, as was Nick. He would have expected no less of me than to help her. As to her whereabouts, it is possible I might have a way to get word to her. But before I say more, I must repeat my request: that this conversation is confidential and will not be repeated outside these walls.’

‘Very well, but speak.’

‘I will take that as a pledge. Kat says I can trust you. I pray it is so, for yes, I can take you to her.’

Shakespeare stiffened. Assisting a murderer to evade justice was in itself a capital offence. 'I am a very busy man,' he said. He was Walsingham's man night and day. There would be no respite in the days ahead now that Goodfellow Savage was in the country plotting to fulfil his treacherous vow. But he could not say no to Kat Whetstone. An image of her lying across his bed came to him. The early-morning light slipping in through the shutters and lighting her generous breasts. She was snoring softly, her lips parted to reveal the gap in her teeth. The memory stirred him and haunted him in equal measure.

Tort seemed to take his acquiescence as read. 'But you will go to her?'

'Yes.'

'Let us meet on the morrow. I will come for you and we will ride together. But first you might try to talk to the killer, Cane. He awaits death in Newgate. I believe his execution is to be at Smithfield, and soon. Perhaps you could persuade him to tell the truth. At least you might be able to form some judgement of him and try to discern the reason behind his foul lie.'

'Have you spoken to him?'

'I went to him, but he would not utter a word, nor even raise his eyes to meet mine. He remained slumped in his chains, unmoving. And so I left him to his fate.'

Shakespeare studied Tort, uncertain of him. 'You believe her to be innocent?'

'*Believe* is a strong word. Let us say I *hope* she is not guilty. I confess the evidence stands against her.' He thought about what he had said, then shook his head. 'No, I cannot believe her guilty.'

'I will go to the condemned man directly. As for meeting Kat, how far is she from here?'

'Fifteen minutes' ride, no more.'

'Should we not go this evening?'

'It is impossible. It must be tomorrow.'

'Come to me at midday. I have a meeting in the morning, one that I cannot miss.'

Tort rose from the bench. 'Thank you, sir.'

'You still have not fully explained what she is to you, Mr Tort.'

'As I said, she is my client.'

Shakespeare took his hand again, wondering just how much this attorney-at-law was holding back. He was certainly concealing a great deal more than he revealed.

'And I beg you, be circumspect, Mr Shakespeare, for she is being hunted most strenuously. And Justice Young is leading the pack.'