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**Opening Extract from...**

# Martyr

Written by Rory Clements

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# *Martyr*

RORY CLEMENTS

JOHN MURRAY

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# *Chapter 1*

Rose Downie sat on the cold cobbles, cradling a swaddled baby that was not hers.

She leant her aching back against the wall of the imposing stone house, close to its arched oak door. Under any other circumstance nothing could have brought her near this building where baleful apprehension hung heavy in the air like the stink of tallow, but the man who lived here, Richard Topcliffe, was her last hope. She had been to the court of law but the justice had merely shaken his head dismissively and said that even had he believed her – which, he said, with a scowl, was as unlikely as apple blossom in November – there was nothing he could do for her.

The constable had been no more helpful. 'Mistress Downie,' he said, 'put the baby in a bag like a kitten and throw it in the Thames. What use is it alive? I promise you, in God's name, that I will not consider the killing a crime, but an act of mercy, and you shall never hear another word of the matter.'

Now, outside Topcliffe's house in the snow-flecked street, close by St Margaret's churchyard in Westminster, Rose sat and waited. She had knocked at the door once already, and it had been answered by a sturdy youth with a thin beard who had looked her up and down with distaste and told her to go away. She had refused and he closed the door in her face. The intense

cold would have driven anyone else home to sit at the fireside wrapped in blankets, but Rose would not go until she had seen Topcliffe and begged him to help.

The bitter embers of sunlight dipped behind the edifices of St Margaret's and the Abbey and the cold grew deeper. Rose was fair, young, no more than seventeen, with a face that, in other times, sparkled with smiles. She shivered uncontrollably in her heavy gown and clutched the baby close to share what little warmth she had. Occasionally, she lifted out her large, well-formed breast to feed the infant; the milk was free-flowing and rich, and her need of relief was almost as insistent as the child's hunger. Steam rose in the icy winter air as the child sucked with ferocity, and she was thankful for it. Monstrous as she considered the baby, some instinct made her keep it and feed it. The day moved on into darkness, but she was as immovable as stone.

# *Chapter 2*

JOHN SHAKESPEARE STAYED up late into the night and when, finally, he crept into bed he slept fitfully. Like all Englishmen in these terrible days he was fearful for the safety of his queen and country. At night these anxieties spilled out in dreams and he woke bathed in sweat.

Before dawn, he was out of bed, breakfasting alone at his long table. He was a tall man, six foot, but not powerfully built. His eyes were hooded and dark and carried the cares of the world in their depths. Only when he smiled, and that had been rare enough in these past few months, did he appear to shake off the worries that permanently clouded his face.

His maidservant, Jane, was bleary-eyed in her lawn coif and linen nightdress as she lit the fire. He liked to see her like that, unkempt, buxom and still warm from her bed, her breasts loose and swaying beneath the thin material. He guessed from the way she looked at him that she would receive him with warmth, energy and generosity, should he ever climb the stairs to her attic room and slip under the covers with her. But there would be a reckoning. Such nectar always came at a price, be it the parson's knock at the door demanding the banns be called or the wail of a babe no one wanted. And Shakespeare was too cautious a fox to be so snared.

Jane served him three small hen's eggs, boiled hard the way

he liked them, good manchet bread and salt butter, some Dutch cheese, common saffron cakes, which she had bought from the seller the day before, slices of spiced rump beef and a beaker of small beer. The room was lit by beeswax candles that guttered in the draught through the leaded window. This winter of early 1587 was cold and Shakespeare ate well to fill his belly and stir life into his limbs.

While Jane cleared away the remnants of the meal, he knelt briefly and said the Lord's Prayer. As always, he spoke the words by rote, but today he laid emphasis on 'Lead us not into temptation'. He was twenty-eight; time to be married. These feelings – urges – were too powerful and needed an outlet other than those to be found in the comfort of a single man's bed.

At first light his man, Boltfoot, was waiting for him in the panelled ante-room of the ancient house. He was talking with Jane but she scurried away to the kitchen as soon as Shakespeare entered. Shakespeare frowned; surely there was nothing between them? He shook his head dismissively. A young woman like Jane would never see anything in a grizzled former mariner with a club foot.

The building John Shakespeare called home was a handsome four-storey wood-frame house, which had creaked and moved and bent sideways with the passing of the years. At times he wondered whether it might fall about his ears, but it had lasted two hundred years so far and was conveniently close to Mr Secretary Walsingham's fine city house in Seething Lane. Though not large, it served as office and home.

'Is Slide here?'

'Two men, Mr Shakespeare,' Boltfoot said, in his habitual perfunctory manner. 'Slide and a constable.'

'I'll see Slide.'

Boltfoot Cooper was like an old oak, thought Shakespeare,

the sinews and raised veins of his face weathered and rutted like bark. He watched his servant as he turned towards the door, his body short and squat, the left foot heavy and dragging, as it had been since birth. He was in his early thirties, or so he believed: his mother had died of childbed fever and his father could not recall the year or month of his son's birth. Somewhere around 1554 seemed most likely.

'Wait. What does the constable want?'

Boltfoot stopped. 'Says there's been a murder.' His brusque voice, deepened by years of salt air in his time as a ship's cooper, revealed him to be from Devon.

'Just that? A murder? Why come to me? Why not fetch the justice or the tipstaff?' There was an unmistakable edge of irritation in Shakespeare's words. At times, these days, he felt as if he would seize up like rusted iron, that the pressure of responsibility laid on him by Walsingham was simply too great for one man.

'Says the woman killed looks high-born,' Boltfoot said. 'Soft hands. Says there are papers and strange letters, and the house where she was found was burnt down. He's scared.'

Shakespeare sighed in resignation. 'Tell him to wait while I see Slide.'

Harry Slide bowed low as he entered the ante-room, sweeping aside his sable-edged cape with extravagance and, as he rose, extending his fingers like the neck of a swan.

'All right, Slide. You're not at court now.'

'But I *am* in the presence of greatness, am I not? The magnificent Mr John Shakespeare. I have a hundred marks says you will be a minister of the crown before too long.'

'If you had a hundred marks, Harry, I doubt you would be here.'

Shakespeare eyed Slide's glittering clothes, his taut collar and stiff doublet with gold and black slashes in the Spanish style.

With such expensive tastes, it was hardly surprising he was always impoverished. 'So, what can you offer me?'

'I hear *everything*, as you know, Mr Shakespeare. Today I heard that the Archbishop of Canterbury was caught in the vestry on Sunday last with his cassock round his waist swiving a member of his flock.'

Shakespeare raised a disapproving eyebrow. Such irreverence could cost a man his life or, at the very least, his ears.

'Nothing very strange about that, you might think,' Slide continued, 'but the next day he had her for dinner with carrots and some garden mint.'

Shakespeare couldn't help laughing.

'At least she was a ewe, not a ram, so I suppose that's all right. Isn't it?' Slide said. 'I'm afraid I'm not sure of the teaching on such matters in the new church.'

Shakespeare laughed again. He was grateful to Slide for lightening his mood. There had been much darkness lately: plots against Her Majesty, a pending death sentence hanging over Mary, the Queen of Scots. 'You will get yourself hanged if you don't take care, Harry Slide.'

'Perhaps. But, for the present, could I interest you in the whereabouts of two priests of the Society of Jesus?'

Shakespeare suddenly paid attention. 'Two Jesuits? Garnet and Southwell?'

'The same.'

'Well, yes, of course, that would be a big catch. You have them?'

'As good as in the net, Mr Shakespeare.'

'Tell me more.'

Slide was a slender man with open features beneath fair locks. It was said he could charm eels out of rivers or bees from their hives. Even those he betrayed, and there were many, found it difficult to dislike him. 'I want a hundred marks for my information.'

Shakespeare knew he was dissembling, that he did not know as yet where the notorious Jesuits were hiding, but if anyone could find them it was Slide. He claimed to know what was going on everywhere in the capital and said he had at least one informer in every prison in London and Southwark. Shakespeare didn't doubt it. Slide had played a major part in exposing the recently foiled plot to murder Elizabeth and replace her on the throne with the Scots Queen. It was the Scots Queen who now seemed likely to have the shorter life, for she had shown herself to be up to her slender royal neck in the conspiracy against her cousin. Tried and condemned to death, Mary now awaited her fate in the bleak confines of Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire. All that was needed was a stroke of Elizabeth's quill on the death warrant.

Mary's plight was in no small part thanks to Harry Slide for he had infiltrated the conspirators and followed their every move on behalf of Walsingham and Shakespeare. The guilty men – Babington, Ballard and the rest – never stood a chance. Their short lives had ended in torment and butchery at Lincoln's Inn Fields, hanged by the neck but not allowed to die, their bodies sliced open, entrails drawn from them, beating hearts tossed carelessly into the cauldron, then their carcasses quartered and spread about the capital. Finally, their heads were thrust on pikes and raised above London Bridge to warn other would-be traitors.

If Slide felt anything for these hapless, tragic men, whom he had come to know so well and whose friendship he had encouraged, he did not show it. He was an expert in the art of projection, feigning sympathy with a cause to draw its adherents to their doom. It might be impossible to trust Slide but, like a sharp kitchen knife that could slip and cut you, he was necessary. And, as far as Shakespeare was concerned, he was good company.

'You will have to tell me more before I can even *think* of parting with such a sum for a couple of Jesuits.'

'Well, I have sound knowledge that Southwell is living close by the city.'

'Where exactly?'

'I will know within forty-eight hours.'

'And Garnet?'

Slide grinned disarmingly and shrugged his well-padded shoulders. 'Garnet is not here, I think. Gone travelling among his flock of traitors in Norfolk, I believe.'

'Well, that halves the price to start with.'

'Mr Shakespeare, I have expenses . . .'

Shakespeare took his purse from his belt and removed two coins. 'You mean you have tailors, vintners and whores to keep happy. Gaming debts, too, I don't doubt. Three marks now and twenty-seven more if you bring me to the Jesuit.'

Slide took the coins and jingled them jauntily in his hand. 'You are a hard man, Mr Shakespeare.'

'Luckily for you, I'm not as hard as I might be, Harry, or you'd spend half your life in the pillory. But keep alert as always. We need intelligence.'

'Your will be done, O master . . .' Slide departed with another sweep of his expensive cape.

The constable could not have been more of a contrast as he bent low beneath the oak lintel of the door. He was big, with longbowman's arms that bulged through the woollen smock beneath his oxhide jerkin, yet he was shaking with something akin to terror. He smelt of fire.

Shakespeare called Jane to bring ale to calm the man's nerves and then the officer blurted out his story of a woman found murdered. Shakespeare listened intently. It was a grim tale and one that Walsingham would expect him to investigate without delay.

The three of them – Shakespeare, Boltfoot and the constable – took horse and rode through the busy morning streets up through the Bishop's Gate, beneath the piked heads of thieves and murderers.

Ten minutes later they arrived at Hog Lane, close to Shoreditch and just north of the theatres where the old Holywell Priory had stood before Great Henry pulled it down. Their horses stood in the cold winter air, steam rising from their flanks and hot breath shooting from their nostrils. In front of them was a burnt-out house. The depressing stench of soot and scorched straw hung round them. Blackened debris lay at the horses' hooves on the hard, icy earth.

Shakespeare huddled into his black bear cloak, a welcome gift from the New World presented to him by Walsingham at Christmas last. It was a generous gesture and typical of Walsingham in his dealings with those he loved or for whom he felt responsible. He had taken Shakespeare into his employment nine years earlier, when he was a young lawyer newly arrived in London from the Midlands. Shakespeare's master at Gray's Inn, Paul Ballater, was a friend of Walsingham and had recommended his pupil for the post, thinking him more suited to practical work than endless dry books. 'I see you looking out of the window when your mind should be on precedent law, John,' Ballater had said. 'Take my advice and go with Walsingham. You will find no better patron in all of England.' Shakespeare had seen the truth in this and had not hesitated in accepting the post. He had suffered few pangs of regret, though Walsingham – the world called him Mr Secretary – was an unbending driver of men.

The constable brought him back to the present. 'I believe the fire was set deliberate, Mr Shakespeare,' he said. 'When it caught, at midnight, the house and thatching suddenly went up into flames. I am told it was as if a taper had been put to powder, sir. George Stocker, the bellman, was here very quickly.'

'Where is he now?'

'At home not far away, sir, abed. He sleeps by day.'

'Fetch him.'

The burnt house stood on a row of a dozen or more frames that had clearly been thrown up quickly on three or four acres of uncultivated land. Shakespeare recognised it as part of the expansion outwards from London into what had been until recently open country to the north of the wall, past Spital Fields towards Ellyngton Ponds. The encroachment was everywhere. The ruined house had not been well built, but hastily erected by the landowner. Shakespeare guessed its purpose was to accommodate incomers from the shire counties; there was good money to be made providing lodging for skilled men who had any sort of work. London was growing fast, with men moving from all parts of the country and from over the water, either seeking wealth or escaping persecution in France or the never-ending war in the Spanish Netherlands. The city could no longer contain all those who would live there.

Under the eaves of the stabling near the house, four vagabonds, all men and sturdy beggars by the look of them, lay beneath woollen rags on the bitter ground, sleeping off a night of strong ale. They looked the sort of people no one wanted, the sort who could not get a bed without thieving the wherewithal, and then, most likely, swinging on the fatal tree at Tyburn for their trouble.

'Wake them, Boltfoot. But keep them here. I want to question them.'

Boltfoot dismounted from his horse and approached the gang. With his good foot he kicked them one by one in the ribs and pulled them to their feet, ordering them not to move on pain of a flogging. They stood stiffly in the cold but made little protest; the sight of Boltfoot's short-muzzled caliver slung round his back and the cutlass hanging loosely from his right

hand was enough incentive to keep them standing obediently in their tatters, shivering.

The bellman, George Stocker, arrived with the constable from the direction of Shoreditch. He was still adjusting his smock, having been raised from his slumber, and his bell clanked as he walked. He was a well-fed man with a belly like a pig ready for the shambles.

'Tell Mr Shakespeare what happened, George,' the constable ordered.

Stocker removed his hat. His beard was thick and full of goose grease, and his brain was clearly as slow as only a bellman's could be. He grunted some indecipherable greeting, then began his story. 'I did ring my bell hard and loud, sir, and called out. Folk came from their beds in the houses around, sir, and drew water from the well in pails. We did douse it quite quickly, sir.'

Stocker glanced at the constable, who nodded. 'Go on, George. Tell the master what you told me.'

'I did find . . . Sir, I do not know whether I should say this for it feels like a sin to talk of it.'

'I believe you found a body. Is that right?'

Stocker tensed and looked down at the rough earth beneath his paltry-shod feet. 'There was the body of a young woman, sir. Unclothed, sir. And most terrible dealt with.'

'And what else, bellman?'

'Papers, sir, with writing on, I know not what.'

'You can't read?' Shakespeare asked.

'No, sir.'

'And you, Constable? Can you read?'

'No, sir. Though my wife's brother knows some reading. Should I fetch him?'

Shakespeare ignored the question, slid from his grey mare and handed the reins to the constable. 'I shall go inside. Hold

my horse and stay out here with them.' He nodded towards the beggars.

The neighbours had done a good job of dousing the fire; London was built largely of wood, and fires were frequent, so every husbandman had to be proficient at fetching and carrying pails to douse them. The walls of this house were still standing, though blackened. Shakespeare allowed the bellman to lead the way through the gaping hole where the door had been kicked in. He was conscious of the time. One of Walsingham's post riders had arrived late the previous evening saying Shakespeare was wanted at Barn Elms by midday on a matter of urgency. The Principal Secretary would not wait.

Shakespeare looked around the gloomy shell of the house. It was remarkably intact, given the ferocity of the fire described by the constable. Something caught his eye on the sodden floor. He picked it up. It was a paper, wet and unreadable. Then he saw that there were more papers lying around among the burnt stubble of thatching. Some bore distinguishable words and all were unfolded, which meant almost certainly they were new printed. He signalled to Boltfoot. 'Gather them all up.'

There were other things, too: type sorts for printing. But no sign of a press. 'All of it, Boltfoot, the type sorts, too. I will examine it later. Perhaps we can discover the letter foundry where it was made. Now, Mr Stocker, where is the body?'

Above them the roof was burnt away and the sky hung a brilliant grey where the ceiling should have been. A few flutterings of snow began to drift down.

The staircase was intact, though charred, and they ascended it to the first floor where, in a jettied chamber at the front, they found a woman's body, naked and bloody, stretched obscenely on a large oaken and canopied bed. A kite was pecking at her eyes but flew up through the skeleton of purlins and rafters as

they approached. The bellman gripped his hat in his hands as if he would wring it dry, and averted his gaze. Shakespeare understood why he would wish to do so and why the constable had seemed so shaken.

Her throat had been slit until her head was almost separated from her body. The pink of the woman's skin had turned a ghastly blue and the blood a coagulated red, like dark rusted iron. Her head hung limply with a gaping wound like a second mouth, but that wasn't what caught the eye. It was her splayed legs and her woman's organs that commanded attention.

Her belly had been torn open and her womb exposed. A foetus, perhaps three inches long, had been pulled from her and lay above the wound, still attached by its cord. Shakespeare shuddered; its little head seemed perfectly formed. Pulling his eyes away from the tiny body, he approached the bed and examined the woman's face. Though twisted and contorted by her death agonies, he knew her features. He turned to the bellman. 'Leave us, Mr Stocker. Wait outside with the constable.'

The bellman needed no second bidding to leave this charnel house; he was gone like a hare from a hound.

'What do you make of it, Boltfoot?'

'Most profane, master.'

'Do you recognise her? She's a Howard. Lady Blanche Howard.' She was, in fact, as he knew well, a close cousin of the new Lord High Admiral and commander of the English Navy, Howard of Effingham. She had been brought up in his household when the plague took her parents. The Lord High Admiral was known to treat her as his own daughter.

'Yes, sir.'

For a few moments Shakespeare was silent. He looked closely at the body, then took in the surroundings. What had a woman like Blanche Howard, a cousin of the Queen, been doing in such a place? Though far from the worst sort of

tenement, this house was a long way from the palaces and great country houses to which she had been born.

'This is a bad business, Boltfoot.'

Shakespeare had seen Blanche at court from time to time, and thought her to be about eighteen or nineteen. She had seemed typical of the younger women of the nobility who made their way to court and fluttered about like butterflies or attended the Queen's chamber until their parents made a match for them and they were consigned to their husbands' country estates. Were there rumours about her? Was she married or betrothed yet, and if not, why not? He thought he recalled hearing that she had fallen in with some of the more loose-living, wanton elements, but there was nothing unusual in that. The young ladies of the court were not known for their purity. Suddenly Shakespeare felt the cold of the morning through the thickness of his long fur cloak and doublet. He held out his gloved hand to Boltfoot, who passed him the papers he had gathered.

'Is that all of them?'

'I believe so, master.'

'Check again. And start a fire outside.'

Shakespeare shuffled through the papers. They were all the same, new printed. The scattering of type sorts seemed to suggest this had been the site of an unlicensed 'wagonback' press, an illegal printing works that could be transported relatively easily from hiding-place to hiding-place. It also seemed certain that whoever had been printing here had left in too much of a rush to gather up the remaining papers and type sorts. What kind of infamy had Blanche Howard found herself involved in? And, more importantly now, with *whom* had she been involved, and who had killed her?

He took the best preserved of the papers and held it away from his eyes under the snowy light. It was headed, 'God's

Vengeance on the Bastard Usurper'. After a short preamble it read:

> Whereas previously we have discussed the deceits, dissembling, lying, flattering, complots and secret practices of the said monstrous Earl of Leicester and his designs for the Crown of England, let us not neglect the wretched sins and wickedness of that same Virgin by which he would have succeeded in his foul and corrupt aims. Withal she had the pox, this great sovereign lady, daughter of the harlot Boleyn and murderer in heart of her father's true-born daughter, yet it was not God's visiting on her but a base man, with the aid of his complice, the self-same Mother Davis, of whom we have heard, that brought her abed. And a strange pox it was that swelled her belly and brought forth another bastard of her abominable line, wet-nursed by the sorceress Davis and brought to her majority in great secrecy . . .

Shakespeare shook his head dourly. 'That same virgin' was clearly the Queen. The curiously phrased tract seemed to suggest that she and Leicester, her favourite courtier, had had a child together. And that it had been suckled by the notorious – almost certainly fanciful – sorceress known as Mother Davis. It was a preposterous accusation, but certainly not the first time that such a publication had suggested the Queen had given birth secretly to Leicester's baby. The problem was, the more often such allegations appeared, the more they came to be believed by the gullible among the Queen's subjects. That was why it was necessary to stamp down so hard on these libels.

This was turning out to be a very bad day indeed. Shakespeare read on. There was more of the usual diatribe against Leicester with additional accusations against Walsingham and Archbishop Whitgift. Finally, it came to the Scots Queen, Mary. The threat

in the paper was clear: should sentence of death be carried out on her, then the 'bastard usurper' – Elizabeth herself – would die, too. Shakespeare's jaw tightened.

Outside, Boltfoot had a fire going. The band of beggars shuffled closer under the watch of the constable to get some of its heat. Shakespeare emerged from the house and gazed at the bleak scene with a dispassionate eye. Those vagabonds were a sorry lot, but he couldn't take chances: they must be held until he had time to question them. One put up his hand and tried to say something. He was a tall, rangy man with bird's nest hair and a bright red jerkin that had seen better days.

'You will have your chance to speak later,' Shakespeare said curtly. He turned away to toss the libellous pamphlets on to the fire. He kept one, the least damaged by water, and thrust it into his doublet, along with a corner of a damaged one that was printed with a good sample of typefaces.

'Boltfoot, make sure all these burn so that nothing survives. Ensure no one reads any of it. Then go through the house again, every nook and cranny. If you find more of these papers, burn them. If you find anything else, hold it for me. Then enlist the constable, the bellman and any other respectable neighbours you might need. Get the body to the searcher of the dead at St Paul's and inform the coroner. Take the vagabonds under guard to Bridewell where you will have them put to work. It will do them good. Leave sixpence for their food. Also, enquire who owns this house. We will meet in Seething Lane at dusk.'

Boltfoot motioned towards the group of beggars, singling out the tallest, in the frayed red jerkin. 'Mr Shakespeare, that one says he would speak with you.'

'I know, Boltfoot, but he will have to wait. I must hasten to Barn Elms.'

Shakespeare remounted and was about to spur his horse towards Bishop's Gate when he heard the clump of hooves on

hard earth. He turned and saw four horsemen approaching. He stopped. They came on fast, halting in a fury of stamping hooves, rearing, twisting necks and flying manes. Shakespeare recognised their leader instantly: Richard Topcliffe, the Queen's servant. He was appalled.

'What is here, Mr Shakespeare?' Topcliffe drew his horse alongside, so he and Shakespeare were face to face.

'A murder,' Shakespeare said slowly and deliberately. He fixed his eyes on Topcliffe's and held his gaze. 'It need not concern you.'

Topcliffe's brow clouded, like an approaching storm. 'I decide what concerns me, Shakespeare. The Queen's life and the security of her realm concern me, and anything pertaining to these matters. Answer me: who has been killed here?'

'You will find out in due course.'

Topcliffe was silent a moment, as if considering his response. Then he said slowly, 'Would you *cross* me, Shakespeare?' When Topcliffe spoke, in his distinct Lincolnshire tone, it was more like the growl of a wildcat from the menagerie at the Tower than a human voice.

Shakespeare breathed deeply. He and Topcliffe had clashed over the recent Babington conspiracy to murder the Queen. Some of the accused had ended up in Topcliffe's hands at the Tower. He had brought torture to bear and muddied the waters. Shakespeare, who had been deeply involved in breaking the plot, had wanted to interrogate them. He was convinced that more could have been elicited from the plotters by gentler means, including the names of other conspirators; Topcliffe, who had done his grisly work with the full authority of the Queen, had simply broken their bodies on the rack. When Shakespeare had protested, he and Topcliffe almost came to blows. Only the intercession of Walsingham had kept them apart. Now Shakespeare could smell Topcliffe's brutish animosity. It was a

stench beyond sweat. Shakespeare held his ground. 'Speak with the Principal Secretary. I report to him, not to you.'

Topcliffe jumped from his horse. He was a man in his mid-fifties with the raw physical power of a fighting ban-dog. In his hand he carried a silver-tipped blackthorn stick, heavily weighted at the silver end like a cudgel. He strode two steps to Shakespeare's horse and casually wrenched him from the saddle.

Shakespeare sprawled on the ground and was dragged by his prized bear cloak like a sack of beet. He scrabbled with his feet against the hard ground as Topcliffe pulled him towards the house. Shakespeare gained a foothold and stumbled upright. Undeterred, Topcliffe reached out, took the nape of his neck and pulled him like a reluctant schoolboy, then stopped in his tracks.

Boltfoot had the slender, octagonal muzzle of his ornate caliver full in Topcliffe's face, primed and ready to fire.

Topcliffe weighed up the position for no more than two seconds, then laughed and let go of Shakespeare. He smacked the silver end of his blackthorn in the palm of his hand menacingly. 'I'll have you, John Shakespeare. I'll sup on your blood. And you, Boltfoot Cooper.' He left them and marched into the house.

Shakespeare was shaken. He dusted down his clothes. They were muddy and damaged, and he was angry. He followed Topcliffe through the doorway. Boltfoot stayed outside, his caliver levelled at the remainder of Topcliffe's band, all still mounted and looking very little concerned.

In the first-floor chamber, Topcliffe stared down at the corpse of Blanche Howard for a moment, then grasped her hair and lifted her head to get a closer look at her dead face.

'Who is she?'

'You'll find out when Mr Secretary or the Council sees fit to tell you.'

'The Council!' Topcliffe snorted with disdain and flung the near-severed head back on the bed. He turned to Shakespeare and rested his broad hands on his hips. 'If we waited on the Council, we would have a Spaniard for our sovereign.'

'I know what I must do, Topcliffe.'

'Do you? You are a boy trying to do a man's job, Shakespeare. And do you really think I don't know who she is? She's a Howard. Now, where are the papers?'

'Papers?'

'I am told there are papers here. Give them to me.'

'There were papers here, but not now. I have had them burnt.'

'All of them?'

'Yes, *all* of them, Topcliffe.' Shakespeare had to restrain himself from folding his arms tight round his chest where the paper was secreted.

'If I find you lie to me, I'll have your head, Shakespeare. I know your father's little secret. And are you any different? You say so – but so do many.'

Shakespeare's skin rose in bumps. 'You know nothing of my family, Topcliffe.' But clearly he did, and the words worried him.

He had entered the service of Walsingham believing that the new religion, this Church of England, was the *true* religion, that the Roman way, with its sale of relics, its superstition, its cruel Inquisition and burning of flesh, was the corruption. In his soul, he could only fight for this English version of Christianity if he believed in it utterly. And yet family loyalties tore at him: his father still clung to the old religion in private, breaking the recusancy laws by not attending the parish church on Sundays. Such knowledge, in the hands of Topcliffe, was like a charge of gunpowder in the hands of a child playing with flint and steel. It could go off at any moment, ruin his father and do little for his own prospects in the service of the Crown.

Topcliffe spat at Shakespeare's feet. 'I know what I know and you know that I know it. And I'll tell you this. The Howard business is Queen's business and I'll deal with it. I know what's happened here. Southwell, the Romish girl-boy, has done this. It's all his ilk know to do with a woman. I will find the Jesuit Robert Southwell, and then you shall see the murderer. I will hang, geld and bowel him myself. I will wash my face in the blood from his heart and there will be much merriment.'