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THE NINE LIVES OF KIT MARLOWE

By Jay Margrave

Prologue

'All the world's a stage..

and one man in his time plays many parts.'

I gave them clues. I said one man *plays many parts*, which should have told those willing to discover the truth, that I, and my alter-ego - or my living nom-de-plume or alias or what you *will*, I - and he - played our parts well.

All through the Sonnets - those playthings we devised to keep in touch through code - all through the plays, I double-entendred. I punned at the reality but, so far, no-one from my old life has discovered me hidden in my lady's robes. In a way, I wanted to be found out, although it was dangerous, for how else could I attain the lasting fame I craved?

Yet despite that, it was too dangerous to be centre stage and let someone else take the limelight. Now I am glad I wasn't discovered in my multi-disguises. Dear Will lived on tenterhooks with it, for he was really a lowly peasant who wished for nothing more than an Alderman's robes and a large house in his local swans-town. Which he

has now acquired in his dotage thanks to my whisperings in his ear and scribblings in secret.

But I must away soon, too, for as I age and reach that time women become men with straggling beards and thinning white hair revealing white pates, sans teeth, etc., the big fear is that, sans mind as well, I'll give myself away - when a government spy will see through the mist of my created illusions and I'll be assassinated *again*.

After nearly twenty years of living like this, so much in my role, it would be a great shame to give my enemies what they thought they had achieved many years ago. And poor old Shakespeare would be discovered for the old country bumpkin he is - and the biggest fraudster of all time. But maybe that will be no bad thing for his old retainer Kit, catty kit, the old maid, who shambles through the attics of Will's London lodgings. The only measure of luxury I have is Will's best bed; he can leave his second-best to that witch his wife, with whom he never lived. Indeed he *lived* with me and fed off the food of my brain far more than he ever was fed by her. So if I was to be discovered? Kit would then be known for what she is truly: a magician of sorts trapped like the old namesake, Merlin, (some said another old spelling of the family name) not in a cave but in constricting robes of womanhood - and truly - Christopher Marlowe. He who should have died at Deptford.

Forget the upstart crow and see the graceful merlin, then, bird of prey, silently swooping on the most apt word, the exact pentameter; so that all who hear rejoice in the excitement of the structures built in the air of anonymity.

Chapter One

London, 1593.

'Murder, murder! Fetch the constables - Mister Marlowe has been stabbed!'

All was noise and screaming from the house of Widow Eleanor Bull, in Deptford Strand. Mistress Bull's voice was the loudest. In the street, men looked at one another and started running. There was confusion before her house, no-one knowing what to do. At the bottom of her garden two men hurried away to the quay, unnoticed.

'Well killed, Kit?' the taller of them asked his companion.

'Indeed, I have been, no thanks to you, my dear friend Priedeux. There was a clean eye-view of the knife and my first life gone - but eight more of my nine lives left.' Kit Marlowe laughed as he stepped into the boat as Priedeux loosened it from moorings and jumped in opposite Kit. It was a small Thames craft, with a waxed covering at one end where provisions or wares could be safely stored from the weather. Priedeux took the oars and used one to push the boat from the jetty as Marlowe bent low and was lost beneath the dark awning. The dusk aided his disappearance.

As the boat moved slowly out into the mid-tide, he stripped off his men's clothes and shivered in the chill spring sun of the English late afternoon. Cries of panic still reached them in eerie echoes across the river. Tom Priedeux set to, rowing quickly away from the mayhem. If truth were told he was also rowing away from the horror of the dead body, putrid with plague, that they had pulled out of the bushes of Mistress Bull's

neat garden and heaved over the shoulders of Skeres and Poley. The horror of the dead weight which had been dragged back into the house would stay with him as nightmares for many a year. Marlowe's substitute had not been a pretty sight.

They could see nobody scanning the river even though the hue and cry continued; a woman screaming, men arguing and the crowd goading, the voices fading as the little boat headed towards the north bank of the Thames.

'Now let's go and live a true life without watching for traitors. I'll find my foes, kill them, too. There's too many men telling tales.' Kit's voice was muffled as he struggled with the women's clothes. He added, as he looked out, adjusting a wig, 'Prison is not good cheer, dear Tom, and I'll never want to be there again.'

He grinned. 'Thank God for those fellows, Skeres, Poley and Frizer. They surely played their parts well in our life-giving plot.'

Priedeux did not answer, using all his energy to row the boat across the tide. Marlowe continued to speak in a staccato manner as he stretched his neck and scraped the man's shadow from his chin and chest with a cut-throat made deadlier by the unsteady liling of the rowboat.

'And we'll find those who betrayed me. *Me*, who truly served the Queen well. And, Tom, I cannot understand why Cecil did not believe I was loyal to her Majesty, but, God preserve me, I will *not* spend time in jail again even if it was meant to make the Catholics believe I was one of them.'

‘Shush, Kit, we’re coming now to the north side. There may be listeners.’

Despite the high tide, they soon crossed the river to the safe spot at Limehouse, called, appropriately, the Devil's Tavern.

As they approached the great loop in the river, Kit sat down, acting the woman now, and stared forward, thinking of the lime that quickened the bodies of the dead. He likened it to his situation; *he* would be no more and a young lady of uncertain heritage would be born as he carried the beginnings of her before him in the guise of a farthingale and numerous skirts, bodices and wigs. The land they headed towards, the Isle of Dogs, was a flat outcrop, mainly marsh land, with a few buildings along the river bank, a dead piece of land, fit for losing people. Before he landed on the steps of the Devil's Tavern, he would have to forget that he was the man Christopher Marlowe, scholar, playwright, and a roustingman about town. Instead, a young lady would be helped up the slippery slopes of a new life by Tom Priedeux, once a Cambridge scholar, but now the shadowy servant and tutor to this young charge. They both knew the game would be risky and perhaps questions asked about the strangeness of a male tutor with a young girl to care for but hoped it would not be so bad in other countries. Kit knew that the woman he hoped to become, would have to trust Tom Priedeux.

‘You have to be careful here, Kit, this inn is used by all sorts of reprobates, sailors, pickpockets, and others, usually waiting a sailing to escape from something,’ Priedeux whispered as he eased the boat to the mooring. After securing it safely against

the swell, he helped his companion, a delicate, green-eyed lady, bewigged and richly clothed with flowing robes, to step on land. On the boarding platform, *she* - now called Christabel - waited. Priedeux held out his arm which the young lady leaned against gratefully. She seemed to have difficulty walking in the heeled pattens she wore. Apart from this, the only clue that this *woman* was not a lady born was the deep chuckle which came from the throat.

‘Aah Priedeux, a great freedom floods me. No longer prey to my debtors; no longer a person with hidden enemies, perhaps one of them the great Raleigh. It was said I spied on him, but it was not so. There’s no more need to rely on the Queen’s goodwill, fickle as she is. Now I will find those who betrayed me, who forced me to flee like this, if I have to chase them half-way across Europe and back again to the new Amerikey-lands in the west.’

Priedeux was about to hush his companion, as they neared the inn, but Kit continued, in a savage whisper, ‘I’ll be avenged for betrayal of me. And I *will* write more great plays. A new life - a different life - awaits us.’

Chapter Two

'Look, try that man over there; the one with the buckskin boots. I'll wait here in the shadows. I know my place now that I'm a woman.' Kit pushed Tom forward, towards a group of men, one of them obviously in charge.

It would not be difficult to get a passage on board, leaving the next morning. Amongst the bustle of a merchant ship taking on parcels of good English wool, of pewter pots and plates, a couple of passengers would not be thought unusual. The Devil's Tavern was a place where captains took on extra loads without their merchant owners knowing, so long as sufficient gold passed palms.

Kit watched as Priedeux negotiated. Playing his part, he shrank into a corner, seemingly cowed by the rough language and boisterous laughter of the inn's customers. Eventually the negotiations were completed and Tom returned.

'The captain is in charge of a small craft which slips up and down the coast of England and, luckily for us, will brave the Northern Sea to the Netherlands tomorrow. He has agreed to take us. We sleep here for the night. We will, of course, have separate rooms, and you, poor Kit, must go to bed now, for women don't stay up drinking, unless they expect to earn a penny or two from the rough sailors hereabouts and,' Tom continued with a wicked twinkle in his eye, 'they may have quite a surprise if that occurred. Go on, bed with you, woman.' The last was said loudly and Kit, fuming, obeyed. He was surprised at Tom's sudden authority but realised he must have learned

this in his job as tutor. He had certainly changed from the adoring youth who had always fawned around Kit at Cambridge.

The next morning they headed for the harbour to find their ship. Kit eyed it from the quay; he had travelled before and was well acquainted with the different types of vessels that sailed across the Channel. He saw before him a well-kitted merchant ship, not one of the great sailing ships that took part in the new trade, loaded with hoards of English merchandise, pewter platters or glass beads, to bribe the Afrique Moors for slaves to transport across the dangerous wastes of the new ocean in the wake of Drake and Hawkyns. No this was a small barque that sailed the Channel, transporting bales of cloth from one member of a family to another for a special occasion; that took samples from the wool merchants of East Anglia to the weavers of Fleming to tempt them to buy more; that brought small loads of coal down the long coastal eastern routes before risking the Northern seas to reach the flatlands of the nether-lands, hiding from Spanish warships.

Jetsam of humans, a young man and his companion, a young, shy woman, would not be noticed amongst the many labourers running hither and thither.

It was cold and drizzly and there was no officer checking passengers, only an old sailor supervising the labourers. All hands were busy rigging the ship and stowing the wares. A quick exchange of silver, instead of the gold that was paid to the captain, and

they were aboard, the weathered seaman hardly glancing at them as he tried the coin between broken teeth. He pointed them to the tiny cabins reserved for passengers.

Before they went below, they both lent on the prow and watched the men working. Priedeux turned to Kit, 'I've been thinking in the night. It is dangerous to head for the Netherlands, what with the Spanish constantly on watch. We may be safe; you as a woman would deflect any curiosity, but we must be extra careful. You'll be guided by me?'

Kit laughed, 'Of course, I'll be as docile as you like.'

Priedeux looked sharply at his friend, as they moved on, Kit stepping carefully over the sodden ropes that snaked across the deck. Was his friend being sincere? How could he tell? They passed a family group, the mother holding a wailing babe, being herded by the father towards the stern. Tom had no time to think before Kit pulled on his arm, 'I don't want to share with others, Priedeux, I hope you have asked for a private cabin.' He sounded like a petulant woman.

Tom laughed. 'Of course, already arranged. We must, get you out of the country in secret.' He lowered his tone, 'we can't have others seeing your early morning stubble, can we?'

Kit stomped forward, annoyed at his friend's teasing. It was hard enough for him to learn to walk and uncomfortably hot wearing a wig; he didn't need to be ribbed about it. Tom followed and stopped him.

'Come Kit, dear, you are displaying unladylike temper.'

He then became serious and pulled Kit to the seaward side where there was less activity. 'How do you know our ploy will work? Will a stab in the eye, a distortion of half a face, be enough to fox your enemies? Will all the world believe you are dead? They are not fools. I hope you can trust your friends to put up good evidence.'

Kit said quietly 'My so-called friends will persuade the coroner with gold and silver, what will he care about a body that is too disgusting to touch or investigate?' He shrugged and, looking towards the family which was not far from them, said, 'Let's get below, it's drizzly here; I don't know yet how this powder on my face lasts. I'll explain when we're alone.'

When they were settled in their room, Tom stared out of the thick glass of the ship's tiny window; it was mottled green and dirtied with globules of dried seawater, so he could see little of the activity on the quay except vague shadows moving quickly. He turned back to his friend.

'You need to trust me now, Kit, and explain. All I know is that you are in trouble with the authorities. And what you said yesterday, about not going to jail again? What did that mean?'

Kit sighed, hesitating. 'I realise I owe you an explanation. I know you eagerly agreed to help when you thought it was just a matter of escape. I think you suspect there is far more to it than that.'

'Now what have you got into? I have always believed in you Kit, you know that. Remember, it was I who warned you about that scheme to discredit you.'

'Oh, yes, the question of my not paying my buttery bills, how clever of you to spot that it was quite another person – even the name was different – Marley. Yes, Tom, I will ever be grateful for that. And I will ever forgive you for invading my privacy.'

Tom was surprised when the woman in front of him came and kissed him on the cheek, and then stepped away quickly. His surprise turned to annoyance. Kit was always teasing him as if he was an oaf.

All right, he might be a year or two younger than Kit, but he had always been one of his prime admirers among the students. So much so, that Kit had once told him to stop following him around like a pet dog. This Tom had forgiven because he was grateful that, when there were secret meetings, Kit had invited him. Now it was Tom to whom Kit had turned when he needed a confidante and fellow conspirator. But the thrill was rapidly wearing away. He grabbed Kit by the shoulder and forced him to face him again.

'Come, tell, tell me all.' Tom knew he sounded sulky.

Kit put his arm round his shoulder, 'Oh, dear Tom, don't become an unpleasant companion. We are in this together.'

Tom turned away this time. 'I only promised to get you out of England. I have made arrangements with my relative in Flushing, and after that, it depends on your future plans – I might just go back to my tutor's post, and be safe.'

Kit laughed. It was an unpleasant laugh and made Tom remember that Kit had a hold over him, as Kit was quick to remind him. 'But Tom, there are favours on both sides. You owe me – not just for saving you from your dull little post but what about all those gambling debts? What about those roughnecks who visited your rooms at Cambridge and threatened to get you? They could as well find you in that dull country mansion in Yorkshire, as I did.'

'Are *you* blackmailing me now Kit? Will I never be free?'

'Blackmail. In faith, Tom, you underestimate me. I'm your friend remember? You were eager enough to take up the challenge of our little escapade at Deptford, and run from your dull life. What else was there? Back to the manor house in Walthamstou, to care for your father's farms?'

Tom sighed. He was aware that he could never become the country squire his father wanted him to be, nurturing the lands his father proudly explained the mother of the Queen, Anne Boleyn, had given him, 'for services rendered.' Kit was far cleverer than Tom, and he knew he was outwitted every time by his older, more sophisticated friend. 'Very well – remember you promised to explain – let me hear it.'

Kit approached him and rested his hands on the taller man's shoulders making him sit. Kit remained standing, folding his arms as if he were to commence a soliloquy in one of his plays.

'You ask if I trust my conspirators in Eleanor Bull's house. I trust them only because they have an interest in the result. All three, Poley, Skeres and Frizer have something to hide, and will do what they think is right for themselves. Of course I'm not safe, and can ask for nothing. But they have been heavily bribed and their association with me was getting a little too hot for them as well. They will have enough to retire now. I'll wager they'll not be seen in London town once the inquest has finished.'

'Yes but who paid them? Surely not you?'

'Tom, you're a good pup and I'll not put your life in danger; best not to ask. You never did ask questions when I kept coming and going when we were at Cambridge.'

'But that was different. I was not involved in what you did then, now I am. I think I deserve more than that. I know there's nothing for me in England except a tutor's life but at least I had a roof over my head, and food on the table. We have no idea where our next meal is coming from...' He added peevishly, 'And don't call me a young pup.'

Kit moved towards him, 'Tom, it was meant as a sign of affection. I asked you because I knew we could work together.'

Kit stepped away at Tom's look of distrust, and walked around the cabin, leaning against the sloping walls, where he pushed himself off to eventually sit on the bunk next to his companion. He pulled off the high heels he'd been wearing, and loosened the ribbons as he continued. 'Even so, I would not trust them to take the Queen's purse if it was offered.'

'So it was not the Queen?'

Kit shook his head, and carried on. 'They would betray me if the price was right; perhaps only the Queen can afford to so pay. I cannot tell you who provided the silver for this enterprise, dear Tom, and even if I did you would not believe me.' He paused, and then said brightly, 'We will find a way to live.' He said it with such confidence that Tom was not reassured. He was suddenly suspicious of what Kit had arranged.

Kit was now adjusting the wig. 'So, I had to protect myself with one more ploy. Those three "murderers" do not know about the women's clothes. Only you know that, Tom, and I thank you for it. It is a good disguise even from them, if they think to come and find me and use blackmail against me, they would never dream that I am now a woman. That's why I don these frowsy clothes and must practise my walk.' He minced up and down the tiny cabin, barefoot. Tom smiled, it was such an affected action that he wanted to laugh aloud. Kit turned to him and raised a hand in a flourish and curtsied. 'Do what they will, dear friend, and I will pray to the Devil to help us.'

Priedeux winced at the reference. He remembered Marlowe's play *Dr Faustus*, and knew that his companion had already been condemned by the Queen's spymaster as a necromancer and atheist. He turned away, to hide his fear and made himself busy, setting their things in some order in the tiny space they had.

Then he stood, set his face in a light smile and said, 'Very well, I've burned my boats. I have agreed to follow you in this enterprise, and now I'll stick to it.'

Marlowe tapped Tom's sleeve in a peculiar feminine manner. His previously elegant moustache had given way to a pinkish tinge beneath his well-shaped nostrils, and he was smiling so that his pouting lips looked every inch that of a flirtatious woman's. Tom realised it was *that* smile that made friends give in to him every time.

'Come, friend, we will have a great time on the Continent, wherever we go. Do you know when we sail?'

'Aye, when the tide turns at ten; it hoves over to Flushing first, where we will disembark if you agree to my plan to stay with my coz, Bridget, but if not, we can remain on the boat as it follows the coast down to Calais. We can choose whichever port you wish, *dear lady*, and I will bow to your desires.'

Kit stopped practising, his hand held arched in the air in the comical way that an actor would use to depict a flirty woman.

'To Flushing. But we must watch the Sidney faction. Even there I have enemies.'

He lowered his voice so that Tom leaned forward to hear what he was saying. 'But it could be good. Perhaps I can call on a few friends, to even the score with false coin.'

He faced Tom. 'Take no note of my ramblings. I forget, I am to be dead to the world and Christabel must cover for me. Even so, I would not want to meet my cronies in that little scheme again. Though they might be skeletons, they might blame me for their lack of skin.'

Tom had turned away, and was helping himself to wine but looked over his shoulder and gave his friend a quizzical look. He had no idea what he was talking about. Kit was known to ramble so, as if he were constantly hatching plots. That was another reason why Tom had agreed to accompany his friend, whatever it might entail. He loved to hear Marlowe speaking – and then find, some time later, the very words transported into drama on the stage. But this made no sense and he hoped Kit would elaborate. Kit saw the look, smiled and said,

'As I said, dear Tom, just ignore my ramblings, let us look to the future.

Tomorrow our adventure starts.'

* * * * *

In the night Priedeux woke suddenly to find the cabin door banging and Kit gone. He swung his legs over the bunk and headed outside. He knew Kit was unpredictable, but Tom was worried that he had forgotten he was a woman and was now roaming at will

amongst the sailors. What was he up to now, even before they had arrived in a new country?

Outside, the night was chill and the ship was scudding through white-tipped waves. Priedeux held on as he lurched along the deck. It was his first time at sea and he found the movement deeply unsettling. He concentrated on avoiding the ropes and other paraphernalia. At first he could see nothing except the night lamps swinging on the prow but then, as his eyes adjusted he could see land on either side and realised they were still on the Thames. He felt unsettled by the slight sway. If this was what it was like in the wider reaches of the river what would it be like in open seas? Then a dim light in the furthest cabin caught his attention. The captain's cabin, he guessed. Would Kit be there? And why? He decided to approach. The door was ajar as if someone had hastily entered and had not bothered to latch it. Priedeux stepped to one side and pressed his ear in the gap between the hinges and the door-jamb. He strained to hear. The roar of the sea in the sails and the creaking of the ship meant that there was no way an eavesdropper could hear. Nobody else would be about at this time of night, except for the watchmen, one high up in the rigging, another at the prow. Their jobs would keep them away from the captain's cabin and besides they would think nothing of the captain having a visitor.

As the door swung further open, Tom peeped through the gap. Sure enough there was Kit, talking to the captain. The same man Kit had pointed out in the inn. So

Kit had known who to use to plan his escape and had guided Tom to his accomplice. Tom was not surprised; he knew Kit was always good at such plans. The two men were drinking together. Priedeux realised now why their boarding had not been questioned. He watched, and guessed from the way they moved that a deal was being negotiated. The captain bent down behind him and handed Kit a wide leather belt on which hung several pouches. It was obviously heavy and Kit took it gingerly, pulling it around his waist, hitching his skirts awkwardly. Priedeux watched as Kit hitched up his heavy skirts and positioned the pouches on his hips and stood up, pulling the heavy skirts down over them. He glided away to a part of the cabin where he could not be seen, the walk a parody of a mincing harlot, the belt enhancing the feminine shape.

Priedeux waited and, after a while, Kit came into view again, standing in front of the captain, who had been grinning at the little parade before him. Kit nodded and shook hands. Priedeux turned and hurried away, reaching their cabin and hiding behind the door. He waited, holding his breath. He noticed that dawn was breaking, giving the cabin a shadowed hue. When Kit returned he gripped him in a lock around the neck and whispered, 'Oh now my pretty, you are going to tell all.'

Kit went limp and did not struggle as Priedeux threw him onto the bunk, and fell with him, loosening his neck hold and spinning Kit round in one rapid movement so they faced one another. Tom held fast, his knees either side of Kit's hips, pinning down the skirts and holding him by pushing his shoulders into the hard base of the bed. Kit

breathed heavily and for a moment stared at Priedeux. Then he lunged upwards.

Priedeux had anticipated the move and shoved him down again and held him fast.

'No! Don't make me give you bruises on that comely face. You speak. Now.'

Kit taking another deep breath, protested. 'What you don't know can't hurt you. Let it go, its private business. You said you trusted me.'

'Kit, I need to know what's happening. How can I protect you as a woman if I don't know what you're going to do next?'

There was a pause while both men stared at each other. Tom tightened his grip. 'I may be only a poor scholar, but father took great pains to teach me how to fight, how to protect myself, and- if I need to - use a knife. So, Kit, now tell all.'

His captor looked away and then sighed. 'Very well, I suppose I do owe you an explanation.' He tried to take a deep breath, and then said, 'I know the captain of old, and he granted us passage in exchange for a favour.' He then said rapidly, 'We act as couriers...'

'No, you act as courier – go on.'

'I act as courier, then. But dressed like this, as I must, not only to keep myself safe, but also the items I carry, you have to help me.'

'Exactly, so when were you going to tell me?'

Kit did not answer the question but continued. 'If I deliver my package to Antwerp safely there will be a reward. You must trust me on this one Tom, it will mean

we can travel anywhere on the Continent, have money to buy fine velvets, brocades, good wines, and bribe our way into good company...'

'What is it you carry?'

'That I will not tell – it could put your life in danger.'

Tom lifted one arm to slap Kit around the face but Kit, suddenly free on one side, jerked his shoulder and Tom nearly fell off him, unbalanced. It was not just Kit's movement though, he realised the ship was now sailing in the swell of open seas. Tom suddenly took fright realising they were crossing the Channel. He could not turn back. He fell heavily beside his friend, and lay there, subdued. What could *the package* be? Letters probably. The belt seemed too heavy for letters though. Gunpowder? Letters could be dangerous for the carriers if discovered. Gunpowder, even worse. But who would lift a woman's petticoats to search for such?

Kit watched him, a small smile on his face, as if he were the very devil waiting to see if the temptation he offered was good enough.

'You promise me it is nothing that would have us hanged?' Tom asked.

Kit laughed. 'I cannot promise that, I know not what could happen.' Then he voiced what Tom had already realised. 'But think, who would dare to look under a young lady's petticoats? We are as safe as we could be.'

Tom gave in. After all, he was as trapped as Kit was now, he couldn't jump ship. Now the adventure had begun, he would have to go on, at least as far as Flushing. He

pulled himself off the bunk and walked to the window, not facing Kit. Resigned, he said, 'Very well, Kit, I have come this far, I cannot leave now. You win. You are the very devil. But, I insist you tell me all, before you get into any more scrapes.'

Tom could hear Kit approaching him and when he spoke, Tom heard glee in his companion's voice. 'I will tell you all you need to know, dear Tom.'

'That is not enough. I know you. You must promise to tell me everything.'

'But that's the only answer you will get from me tonight. I'm dead tired; having to be a woman is exhausting.' As he spoke he removed his outer garments, but left the petticoats which hid the bulky packages on the belt. Tom threw himself onto his bunk, exasperated, and faced the wooden bulwarks, away from Kit.

They settled down. Whatever Kit carried around his waist was heavy, but it didn't seem to affect him for he soon fell into a deep slumber, his staccato snoring disturbing his companion.

It was a long time before Priedeux managed to sleep. As he drifted off, great waves of fear, accentuated by the noise from Kit, made him alert again. With whom and what had Marlowe got involved?