



River of Sins

A Bradecote
and Catchpoll Mystery

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Chapter One

The Feast of St Mary Magdalene, July 1144

The woman moaned, very softly, as consciousness returned. Her head ached. She was moving, and in a boat, for she could hear the soft sound of water parting and closing as the paddles dipped. She was gagged and bound, and wrapped in some cloth which she felt she knew. Yes, it was the feel of the coverlet of her bed. She did not struggle, and part of her wondered why. For a moment she questioned whether this had been some form of kidnapping, to sell her to a foreign trader. It made no sense, but then none of it did. The boat seemed to glide through the water as though the world had no cares in it and was at peace. Her captor spoke not a word, beyond the occasional grunting breath as he rowed.

They did not go very far, she thought. She wished they had, for then she would have had more precious time. There was a scraping of wood, a splash and a muttered oath as a line failed

to catch at the first attempt, then the rope tightened, and the boat juddered and stilled. She was more dragged than lifted onto dry land, and her aching head was bumped again. She was rolled out of the cloth onto dewy grass and found herself gazing up into a softly lit sky, just past the sun's full rise over the horizon. A skylark was singing.

The gag was removed from her mouth, and she was pulled into a sitting position, but her hands were kept bound behind her. She looked at him, and at the axe in his hand. She ought to be afraid. She was not, and she thought that unsettled him. He wanted her to plead? Well, she would not, because she had seen men look like that before. They wanted to hear the pleading, and then do what they wanted anyway. Even at the last she would not give a man that satisfaction, whatever other satisfaction she had given men over the years.

'Why? And why here? Where is here?' she mumbled, her mouth still dry, and looked about her. They were on some small islet in the river, and it was familiar, but from long ago. She frowned as she dragged the memory from the depths.

'Do you not recognise it?' The voice was hard. 'No, perhaps you were too young. You do not know why either, but I will tell you that. Your mother was found floating down the Severn, but that was just the end of it. This is where it happened, where he discovered her whoring. The other man escaped by diving into the water, but she did not. He had the right to punish her for her faithlessness, and you are as bad. It must be in the blood from her. He dragged her to the water, down one of the slopes, and held her under till she stopped struggling. Then he let her float away. Why do you think we left? Grief?'

The headache was replaced by spinning – but spinning of thoughts. It was impossible, surely it was impossible? And if it was not . . . She felt sick then. There were some deeds too repellent.

‘No.’ She refuted the thought with the word.

‘Yes. I did not recognise you either, otherwise I would not . . .’ His face contorted.

‘But you have lived in Worcester all these past years and . . .’ She shook her head. Her memories were hazy, of a boy teetering upon the edge of manhood, about to change but still gangly of limb and indeterminate of voice.

‘Why should I link The Whore of Worcester with a little girl I last saw when she was a snivelling brat of five summers.’

She ignored the question. ‘When did he die?’ She wanted to know that at least, how many years the man she recalled as big and brutish, and always angry, had lived with a taken life upon his soul.

‘A year after we left. Some inflammation of the lungs took him. He had me apprenticed in a good craft, so I was secure. I worked hard, hard enough to earn the hand of my master’s daughter, and when he died, well, I had my own business.’

‘So he sort of drowned too.’ She was glad. ‘Fitting, I would say.’

He struck her across the face. It hurt, but what did it matter. Soon there would be no more hurt.

‘If I am like my mother, then you are like him, a bully who blames others for his own failings. You will kill me to take the “taint” of our sinning together from you, blame me, but it was you who came to my door, you who paid the coin.’

Yes, as always, the man blamed the woman. It was the woman's fault for tempting, the wife's fault for not tempting enough. They thought themselves better, but they were simply bigger and more powerful. He was a *nithing*, a bully's whelp, for all he held the axe.

She did the last thing she could do to show he did not have command of her; she laughed. Her laughter was a little ragged, and in her head were a jumble of urgent thoughts: she would be alone, without comfort, but she had always been alone all her life; better this sudden end beneath the blue heavens and with a skylark's song in her ears than old and raddled and cold in the dark. Then there was the desperate rush of thought. She did not want to die, not yet. She prayed silently as he grabbed her by her dark chestnut hair, and the laugh grew shrill. *Holy Mary, pray for us sinners . . .* She was still laughing as the axe struck home.

The lad bringing the swine to the water's edge had not seen much, thanks be to God, thought Heribert, the manor reeve of Bevere. It was enough to turn a grown man's stomach, and his had turned as soon as he realised that crows were pecking at human remains. As he had rowed across the narrow channel where the Severn parted about the islet, he had been telling himself that it was some beast that had swum across to Bevere Island and died there, but no natural death would have left the raw and bloodied mess, and he could still see clothing. He coughed, swallowed hard and returned to shore, grim-faced. He strode with purpose to the manor, took the pony from the stable and rode with urgency into Worcester. Although it was

but a few miles, the lord sheriff would expect to hear of this immediately, and four feet were much faster than two. He would have to tell Father Prior also, since the land was in the priory's holding.

It was a solemn man, slightly out of breath and still with a sickly pallor, who presented himself in the castle. He was out of luck in seeking the lord sheriff, since William de Beauchamp was gone three days past to one of his outlying manors. He did, however, find the undersheriff, the lord Bradecote, who had come into Worcester to order new boots, since his lady told him that his complaints at the leaking of his old and very comfortable pair were as regular as the priest saying the offices, and that they were indeed beyond repair. He had spent a half-hour with the man recommended by Serjeant Catchpoll as the best in Worcester and was now back at the castle enjoying an exchange of news before departing for home.

'The swine boy saw it first, my lord, crows fighting over something large on the island. Praise be he is not older and more curious. I took the boat across and' – Heribert the Reeve shook his head – 'I never wants to see the like of it again. A soldier might have seen such a sight upon a battlefield, but no peaceable man would . . .' He wiped a hand, one that shook slightly, across his mouth. 'There was blood, so much blood, and the body hacked about so that it looked like something from a flesherman's block, and the face was . . . gone. I could not even tell you if it was man or woman, for I did not look close to try and find out. I came here, as fast as the pony would bring me, my lord. God in Heaven save us from whoever did this.' He crossed himself devoutly.

‘You did the right thing, Master Reeve. You say there was much blood. Was it fresh, the corpse?’

‘Must be, my lord, for my boys was down at the bank opposite last evening, larking about at the water’s edge. It had been hot, and they had worked hard till an hour before sunset. What is on that island now would have been noticed.’

‘Is your boat always tied to the bank?’ Serjeant Catchpoll, who had been alerted by a guard that a man was come to report a body, had entered the chamber silently and was leaning against the wall by the doorway.

‘Aye, it is, in the summer months. It is brought out of the water come October, afore the winter rains and rising waters swell the channel.’

‘So, everyone in Bevere knows it is there?’ Catchpoll wanted to be sure.

‘In the manor and in Claines itself. There is no secret to it. I do as my father did before me and use it to take sheep across for the new grass in spring, though it does not take them long to crop it short, and I fish, when there is the time.’

‘Do any others use it?’ asked Bradecote.

‘Well, I would say as a good many young couples have “borrowed” it so that they might watch the sunset together without fear of disturbance, if you get my—’

‘Yes, we do.’ Bradecote had no time to listen to local courting customs. ‘We will come back with you to Bevere, and if we may borrow your boat, we will see what has happened for ourselves.’

‘And do I have to . . .’ It was clear that the reeve had no wish to return to the scene of bloodshed and gore.

‘No, you need do nothing except lend us the boat and some sacking, or covering, for the corpse.’

‘I can provide that, my lord.’ Heribert the Reeve sounded very relieved.

‘Then let us be on the move. Is Walkelin about, Catchpoll?’

‘Last saw him by the priory gate being shouted at by Mistress Longstaff for not finding her cat.’

‘We look for lost cats, Catchpoll?’

‘No, my lord, assuredly we do not, but the old woman thinks we should.’

‘Then I am sure he will be delighted to leave Worcester and come to help us.’

‘Help us, my lord?’

‘He can row.’

‘Ah yes, now that is a very good use of an apprentice serjeant.’ Catchpoll gave a fleeting grin, but then his face settled into its usual grim and wary lines. ‘I am already thinking that whatever was used to hack the body is on the river bottom.’

‘Unless it was something needed by the killer every day. Wash it clean in the river and walk away with it in clear view as any man might with an axe over his shoulder or a knife at his belt.’

The reeve, whose colour had gradually been returning to normal, went pale again.

‘No. I will not believe it.’

‘Believe what, Master Reeve?’

‘Would not hurt a soul, not him.’

‘Who?’ cried undersheriff and serjeant in near unison.

‘Edmund, son of Gyrth. Bit slow he is, but gentle with

things. I saw him with an axe over his shoulder this morning, and he said as he was taking off a branch of the elm that was lightning struck last week and looks like to fall.'

'Which he might well have done. We are not saying any man with an axe is the killer.' Catchpoll often wondered how his fellow men could jump to conclusions. 'As the lord Bradecote said, let us be on our way.' He ushered the reeve out, and, as Bradecote came abreast of him, muttered, 'If he saw two frogs in a puddle, he would be one to think it had rained frogs.'

It did not take long, at the easy canter of a horse, to reach the river by Bevere Island. The manor, little more than a cluster of dwellings about a wooden palisaded enclosure, was in view but not so close that anyone by the river would be distinguished. They left the horses there, collected some sacking and went the last part on foot, with the reeve showing every sign of being a reluctant member of the party.

'My lord, my boat is for your use but . . . You are sure I do not have to . . . ?' The reeve still wanted assurance.

'No. We will not need you upon the island, but would speak with you again, so remain here.'

'Yes, my lord, of course.' The man's relief was audible, and he stood upon the bank, looking downstream rather than at the islet and the dark shape upon it.

The crows, in attendance like hungry mourners, flapped away with caws of annoyance as the little craft nudged into the bank, and Bradecote, rather more nimble than Catchpoll, jumped ashore. He tied the end of the painter to a sprawling willow bough, and they climbed the bank, noting the bare earth

which had been long trampled into shallow steps. The smell assailed their noses as they drew close, the smell of butchered meat, but no animal carcass ever wore clothes. The ground was dark where the blood had pooled, and the flies were not so easily disturbed as the birds of carrion. What lay before them was obviously human, but beyond that not instantly identifiable. The head was nigh severed from the torso, and where there had been a face there was a face no more. The body had been hacked, more in a frenzy than an attempt to dismember, and with such force that the broad, pale curve of a pelvic bone, visible through the gore, was split in two.

‘Sweet Jesu, he was right. You can’t even say if it was a man or a woman,’ Walkelin muttered and crossed himself, swallowing hard.

‘A woman,’ responded Catchpoll, without hesitation.

‘But how, just glancing at that . . . mess?’

‘You do not need to look at the obvious to tell you man or woman, Walkelin. Look at the ankle, the foot. The lower legs are untouched. That is a female’s leg most like, and the feet are small too. Not final proof, but it pushes you one way. I imagine the hands are under the corpse and tied behind the back, for there are no parts of a hand you can see, and if a person has their hands free they naturally raise them to protect themselves against a blow, even if it will not save them. My guess is the hands will be small too. See also what is visible of the gown cloth looks as if it is a long gown, not a youth’s tunic, and the hair . . .’ Catchpoll’s frown became intense, and he crouched to lift the end of a hank of dark chestnut hair that had not lain in the pooled blood.

‘God forfend,’ he whispered, almost to himself.

‘The body has been hacked about to prevent us knowing her identity. I mean, you could not recognise the face even if you were blood kin.’ Bradecote’s features contorted in distaste.

‘I think that was not the first purpose, though, my lord.’ Catchpoll was still crouched beside the body, drawing knowledge from it even in its mangled silence. ‘This was an odd killing, because there was planning to its start, bringing her here, but then the killer gave vent to hate, to a rage like some bloodlust of battle. I have never seen the two together. Most killing is in hot blood, some in cold. This . . .’ Catchpoll sucked his teeth.

‘Well, we may not be able to give her a name, but we can take her to the priest in Claines for a decent burial and—’ Bradecote halted, as Catchpoll shook his head, his mouth set in a grim line. ‘Why not?’

‘Because I think she may well be out of Worcester, my lord, if my instinct is true, and Father Anselm will give her ground in which to lie.’

‘You mean because a local woman would have been missed already, in such a small place as the manor of Bevere or Claines?’ Walkelin was working things through, methodically.

‘Well, that is good thinking, young Walkelin, but takes us only so far. I think I may yet give a name to her, though it does not cheer me to say it. However, until I am sure . . .’ Catchpoll was almost talking to himself.

‘Then we wrap the corpse as best we can, and we get the reeve to lend us a cart to get it . . . her . . . back to Worcester.’ Bradecote spoke decisively. ‘Is there anything more here? Walkelin, search about and see if the killer left any trace of his

presence. It is unlikely but . . . the axe, and it was surely that, is most likely out in the depths of the river, and lost to us, as Catchpoll feared.'

'Very true if it was one he stole, but if it was his own, and for his trade, he could have washed it in the water and gone back with it, my lord. You had the right of it. A good axe is worth keeping, and besides, it would be noticed if he had "lost" it. We have to keep that in our thoughts too.' Catchpoll was still staring at the remains, though neither of his companions chose to do so.

'True enough, Catchpoll. So, we are looking for a man, a man who can be calm enough to bring his victim here and set about a killing almost as an execution, but then gives in to rage. If he is coming from Worcester then he must also have had a cart, since he could not conceal a bound woman over a horse.'

'Unless she came willingly, my lord' – Walkelin looked up from peering among the long grasses fringing the islet that had dried to barley gold – 'and willing or not, why was she killed here, not in Worcester, if that is where she lived? And there is nothing here, except some animal fed upon another, recently, for there are little tugs of fur. Buzzard, I would say, with a coney perhaps. Less likely to be disturbed if it ate here. There's nothing the killer could have left.'

'You mean she could have had a meeting arranged here and met her killer rather than being brought here? I suppose that is possible . . .'

Bradecote, ignoring the natural history, frowned.

'I do not see a woman walking out of Worcester at the hint of dawn, as soon as the gates were opened, and if she did, she would be noted. And especially not barefoot, not with those

feet.’ Catchpoll was dismissive, but then frowned and looked more closely at the pale feet. ‘Those are feet that do not go barefoot, for the skin is soft except for . . . Now, that is odd.’

‘What is, Catchpoll?’

‘Look here, my lord. Them’s scars. Very old, mark you, like burn scars upon the soles of the feet. I never heard of a child as walked across a red-hot hearth.’

‘You mean it was not an accident, Serjeant?’ Walkelin looked horrified.

‘You, lad, do not know just how nasty people can be. Not only would she not have walked barefoot, I would swear she could not.’ Catchpoll pulled a thinking face. ‘But you are right to ask why the killing was here. It must have some meaning to the killer.’

‘But it is just a small islet in the Severn, Catchpoll.’

‘Aye, my lord, but big enough for the folk of Worcester to seek shelter here once, when the Danish king sought vengeance for their not paying him dues. That was before even our oldfathers drew breath, I should think, but the reeve talked about it as a place for young couples – and coupling too no doubt. What if this was where they first met and exchanged kisses, if nothing more? If she was an unfaithful wife . . . ?’ Catchpoll sounded unconvinced by his own words and shook his head.

‘You do not think that? Why, Catchpoll?’

‘If my guess is right, she was no man’s wife, my lord.’

‘So, if she did not leave Worcester at first light, then perhaps she left yesterday.’ Walkelin still liked the idea the woman came at her own wish. ‘What if she had arranged to meet the man, spend the night with him and then . . . he did this?’

‘It is sense enough, Walkelin, but you see I do not think she would ever leave Worcester like that.’

‘Come on, Catchpoll. However reluctant you are to give us your guess, you need to tell us who you think this might be.’ Bradecote watched his serjeant closely, and for all that Catchpoll was the lord sheriff’s serjeant by title, Bradecote felt that he was his by bond now. The man was unusually grim, as if actually saddened, and Catchpoll disapproved of sympathy for victims. It got in the way of finding them justice.

Walkelin, his search proving fruitless, also looked to his senior.

‘I hope I am wrong, my lord, but I feel it, deep in the gut instinct. I think this is Ricolde.’

‘Ricolde? Should I know her?’

‘Not as a happily married man, my lord. Ricolde is, was, the finest whore in Worcester.’