A Shroud of Snow

By Sarah Hawkswood

Servant of Death
Ordeal by Fire
Marked to Die
Hostage to Fortune
Vale of Tears
Faithful unto Death
River of Sins
Blood Runs Thicker
Wolf at the Door
A Taste for Killing
Too Good to Hang
Litany of Lies
Feast for the Ravens
A Shroud of Snow



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A Bradecote
and Catchpoll Mystery

SARAH HAWKSWOOD

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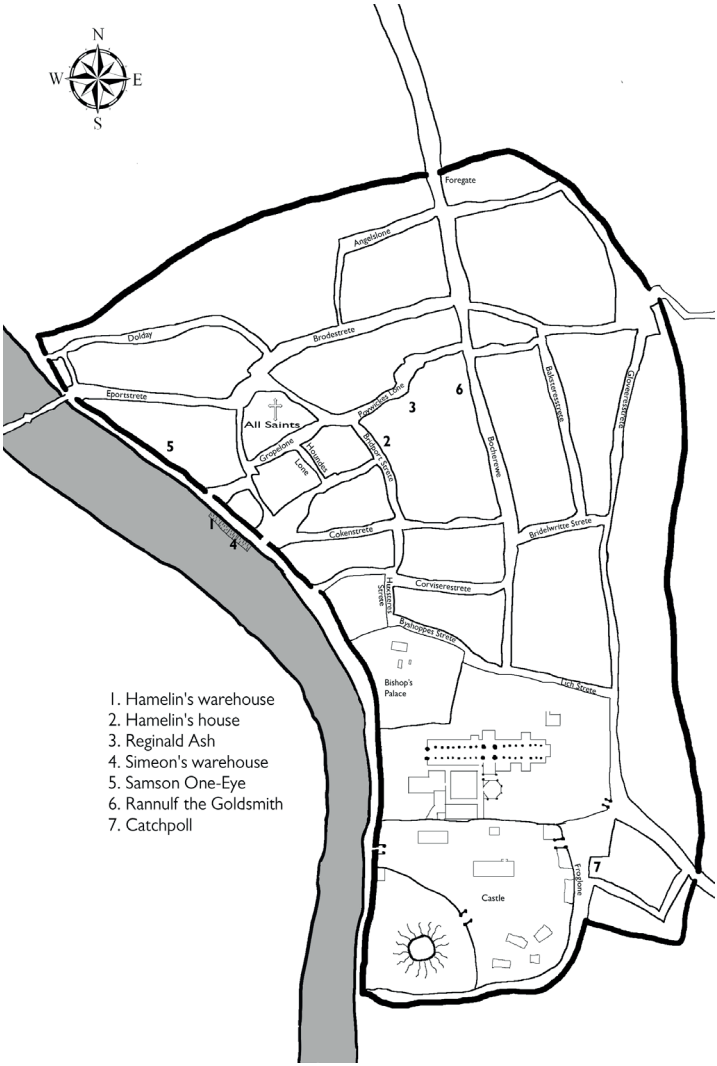


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EU GPSR Authorised Representative
LOGOS EUROPE, 9 rue Nicolas Poussin, 17000, LA ROCHELLE, France
E-mail: Contact@logoseurope.eu

For H. J. B.

Map of twelfth-century Worcester



Chapter One

Third week of Advent, 1145

The wind was a cruel easterly that bit with icy teeth into any bare skin that it could find, and carried with it snow flurries that had already masked the dirty streets, and gave a ghostly light to the gloaming. The temperature was still dropping, and Father Anselm drew his cloak tightly about him as he closed the door of his church after Vespers, and prepared to take the blessedly short number of steps to his own dwelling. He could understand why so few of his flock had joined him for the Office, and felt that it showed even more the piety of the man who stood beside him, pulling on his thick gauntlets.

'I fear it be cold enough for the river to freeze, Father, and that will delay both my craft and my own return to Gloucester.' The man, rather better dressed to face the weather than the little priest, and with a hood of fox fur framing his ruddy, round face, had to raise his voice to be heard in the wind-howl that chased through the streets.

'We must hope the icy blast is merely the good Lord's short reminder to us that all our preparations for winter should be made by now, my son.' Father Anselm found the positive in almost everything. 'And thanks to your generosity, the poorest

and weakest of this parish will be able to face it the better.' He paused. 'And that you should have increased it in the name of a departed soul . . .'

The man raised a hand, brushing away any suggestion of greater goodness. 'Say an extra prayer for that soul is all I ask. She were a good woman, and I respected her, as I know you did also.'

'I did, and she is in my prayers already. Ooh!' The priest's foot slipped upon the snowy ground as he stepped out, and the man put out an arm to steady him.

'Let me come with you, Father, and each will be a support to the other.'

Father Anselm knew this to be the kindest of lies, since all the support would be from the younger man, who would reach warmth faster on his own. They trod with a degree of care, and even though doorstep to doorstep took less time than the reciting of the *Nunc Dimittis*, the priest's bare fingers began to numb and he fumbled with his door latch.

'Now, I will delay you from your hearth no longer, my son.' Father Anselm smiled at his companion.

'And glad I will be to sit beside it, once I has checked my warehouse for the evenin'.'

'But surely you have a man to do so.'

'Ah yes, but in weather like this, most men is inclined to be too swift in that checkin', Father. If I do things myself I know they be done well.'

'True enough. God be with you.' The priest lifted his hand in blessing, and Hamelin Isenmongere bowed his head and turned down Grope Lone as Father Anselm entered into the

comparative warmth of his simple home. It was typical of the man, the priest thought, that he had accompanied him rather than take the shorter way along Quay Strete.

It was not far to the quay and warehouses, and at least the wind and snow were to Hamelin's back. The good folk of Worcester were within doors until the morrow, and even most of those who would not be considered as righteous had decided that keeping within doors was best this night.

Godhild did not have that luxury, though she was swiftly realising that her chance of passing trade was almost non-existent. However, if she did not earn she did not eat, and takings had been poor these last few days, as the weather had closed in. She shivered, pulling the sacking closer about her narrow shoulders, and trying to move toes that had all but lost feeling in her thin shoes wrapped in rags. The man walking down Grope Lone made her step out from under the eaves of a house, ready with the smile of her trade, one that never reached the eyes, and the false words of admiration and the offer, but they died upon her lips, and the smile altered.

'If you stays there, girl, you will freeze as sure as the sun rises with the dawn,' admonished Hamelin, in a fatherly way, clumsily removing one gauntlet so that his hand might reach into his scrip and bring forth two silver pennies. Her eyes widened as he held them out to her.

'It be generous of you, Master 'Amelin, mighty generous. Thank you.'

'Only thanks I needs is you to keep indoors and keep fed these next couple o' days.'

'God bless you, master, I will.' Godhild dipped respectfully and took the coins, gripping them tightly in her cold fist. Two silver pennies would keep her on the right side of survival for several days. There would be nowhere to buy food this evening, but she could have fresh bread come morning, and dried pease for a pottage. Her smile was a real one, but Hamelin just nodded and went upon his way. She watched him for a moment, and then made her way to Osbert the Wheelwright's in Houndes Lone. He sometimes put scraps of wood, left over from fashioning the felloes, to the side of his workshop as charity for the poor. If she was going to be indoors all night, it would be good to have a decent hearth fire. As she returned, cradling wood as a mother might cradle an infant, Master Hamelin passed her as he came back from the waterside, but his head was bowed to avoid the wind and snow whipping into his face, and he was gripping his fox-fur hood tight about his throat, so he did not hear her repeated thanks, nor see her a second time.

Dawn came quietly, a gradual softening of the darkness into an opaque, almost milky sky. The wind had dropped and the snow had ceased to fall, though it lay like a thin shroud upon a silent Worcester. There was a natural reluctance to set about any activity out of doors, or for the traders to open their shutters, so the day began slowly, with neighbour acknowledging neighbour with a nod of the head and perhaps a short greeting where their warm breath showed in the chill air. Walter went to see if the river was ice free so that he might take out his boat. The chance of finding fish was small, but Walter was a man of habit, and

every day he took out his boat to fish, whether or not the fish obliged. His mother, glad to have him from under her feet, thanked Heaven that the quality of her tablet weaving meant that the braids she sold fetched a good price and would keep mother and son above abject poverty.

Walter blew upon his fingers and rubbed his hands together. His would be the only boat out this morning, but he thought that was because the other fishermen were lay-abeds. He passed the warehouses, as yet still barred shut, and it was then that he saw the snowy heap that resolved itself into the body of a man, lying at the water's edge, one arm dangling down so that the hand dipped into the water, except that for two feet out into the river, the surface was frozen, and held the hand in its vice-like grip. The body was snow covered, and the face frozen whiter than normal death pallor. Walter swallowed hard, crossed himself and then began yelling at the top of his voice.

Serjeant Catchpoll liked Advent because it was quieter than the latter end of December, when feasting and drinking led to arguments and ale-fuelled violence that necessitated the intervention of the Law, even if just to prevent escalations. There was little likelihood of him being summoned from his bed in the night time or having to wolf down his wife's good cooking when it was far too hot. He still went about the streets each day, keeping eyes and ears open to know the latest strife between neighbours, the loudest matrimonial arguments, so that he was 'one step ahead', as he told Underserjeant Walkelin, who would spend part of the day alongside him, and then go 'a-learnin" on his own, honing the skills he had

acquired. This morning they met in the guardroom, where the brazier gave heat they did not have to pay for, and Catchpoll was disseminating good sense not upon keeping the peace, but impending fatherhood. Eluned, Walkelin's wife, was nearing her time, according to his mother, who noted both the roundness of her belly and her increasingly frequent complaints that she had had enough of swollen ankles, poor sleep and waddling like a goose.

'Mother says as when it gets to this point, it will not be long afore the babe comes, and I doesn't know what to do.' Walkelin was conscientious, even about being a husband.

'Do? Why, this be a thing where you does nothin', and not from idleness.' Catchpoll voiced his surprise at the thought. 'The birthin' of babes be what women knows about and men is as much aid as a bell with no clapper. You ask any woman and they would say that as God's truth, and they is not wrong. Your task, Young Walkelin, will be to keep out the way, and present yourself when all be done and say how beautiful the babe looks, even though at the first they is like a new-'atched chick, scrawny and bedraggled.'

'But what if . . .' Walkelin did not like to even think the unthinkable, but it lurked at the edge of his thoughts.

'You 'as let the lord Bradecote's fears into your 'ead, and you needs to cast 'em out so as you can keep serjeantin' with your mind upon the work. So this mornin' we . . .'

Walkelin was not destined to hear the plan, because a commotion arose outside at the castle gate. A slightly breathless and frightened voice was raised. Catchpoll sniffed, and nodded towards the door. Serjeant and underserjeant emerged to see a

burly man breathing like an angry bull, though there was no anger in his eyes.

'Serjeant Catchpoll, you be needed. A man lies dead at the quayside – and it be poor Master Isenmongere, God 'ave mercy upon 'im, frozen cold.'

This last information meant that Catchpoll did not need to ask if the man had simply dropped dead before folk.

'And you found 'im?'

'No, no, but the man as did be in no state to come and fetch you.'

'Well, best we sees for ourselves.' Catchpoll was as calm as if about to go for a stroll, but his stride was purposeful, though careful on the now frozen layer of snow, and Walkelin wondered if the stiffness of his knees was something that could be overridden in emergencies. The lord Sheriff's men walked side by side, with the messenger slightly behind them, feeling just a little put out, since he had been all ready to bewail the killing and be, however briefly, the centre of attention. He did not grasp that if he had not found the body, he was of no interest, or that Serjeant Catchpoll was in fact 'reading' the town, assessing how far news had already spread and whether the response was the same. As they dropped down the hill to the riverside, the few townsfolk opening up for the day merely glanced at the lord Sheriff's men with the natural curiosity of what might have come to pass that they were needed, but one woman, coming towards them from the direction of the quay shook her head and sighed as they passed by. The wharfage was far busier than normal for a snowy morn when the Severn's fringes were ice-bound, and barely half of those present were

there for work. As they approached the cluster of onlookers, Catchpoll spoke up and called for folk to stand back, and had to almost barge his way forward to the edge of the quay. The low chatter ceased, and the people stood still, but not as still as Hamelin Isenmongere, lying face down as though he had come to listen to the river's murmur, and with one arm dangling over the edge, encircled up to the wrist by ice. He was cocooned in a blanket of snow and the blue-white face was ice-rimed.

'Poor soul', offered a woman, 'must 'ave dropped somethin' valuable and slipped as 'e leant down, then the cold did for 'im as 'e lay senseless.'

'Wantin' to take my place?' murmured Catchpoll, wryly.

'Oh no, Serjeant Catchpoll, but . . .' Colour flooded the woman's chill-paled cheeks.

'Then best you and everyone else gets back in the warm or about their tasks, and leaves us to ours. Except whoever found 'im, and anyone as saw 'Amelin Isenmongere yesterday after the time for Vespers.' Had he died before darkness fell, Catchpoll knew he would have been called from his evening meal.

'You can tell when 'e died just by lookin'?' An awe-filled voice came from in the midst of the crowd.

'Course.' Catchpoll, whose gaze had been upon the corpse, looked up and he turned to face the onlookers, his well-known death's-head smile spreading slowly across his face. Several crossed themselves. 'Now do as I says, and be gone.' He did not need to shout. The crowd dispersed, talking in low voices. In two minutes, Catchpoll and Walkelin were almost alone, bar a tow-haired man sitting nervously upon the edge of a mooring post and shaking, and the crew of a craft that was moored right

in front of Hamelin Isenmongere's warehouse, and who were about their work.

'That'll 'ave folk sayin' as you knows the future and reads minds as well, Serjeant.' Walkelin knew just what his superior had done.

'Aye, since not one in a score would bother to actually think as you and me thinks.'

'And common sense says if 'Amelin were dead afore sunset, anyone workin' by the river would 'ave seen, and raised the alarm, and a man would not reach into the river with a fine gauntlet upon 'is 'and.' Walkelin pointed to the arm in the river.

'Thing with "common sense", Walkelin lad, be that it ain't common at all. Now,' Catchpoll turned his attention to the seated man, 'tell us when you found 'im, Walter, and anythin' you saw. Just do not tell us a swan did it.'

Walter, in whose mind the swans of the Severn were possessed by the spirits of dead rivermen, shuddered, and whether it was from the cold or the fear of the swans was not clear.

'Came to get my boat early, afore anyone else, so I gets most fish, Serjeant Catchpoll,' declared Walter, with some pride at his own forethought. Walkelin had to bite his lip. Even someone who had only fished in the idle way of adolescent boys of a summer's evening knew the fish went deep and ignored bait when the water was cold.

'So you saw nobody else?' Catchpoll made the questions simple.

'Nobody, only Master 'Amelin, a-lyin' as you see, and I did not kill 'im, I swears my good oath.' A touch of panic entered Walter's voice.

'No, we knows 'e were dead afore dawn, Walter. Did you touch 'im?' Catchpoll was very calm.

'I called out as I came along, but then I saw as 'e were all frost-white and must be dead. Then I were frightened and cried for aid. Are you sure it were not a swan as lured 'im to the water's edge and grabbed 'is fingers?'

'Sure as night follows day, Walter. When you called for 'elp, did anyone else move the body?' It looked untouched, but it was as well to be sure nothing had been removed from about the corpse.

'No, Serjeant. 'Twere clear 'e were dead, and so one man came to tell you and another went to find Father Anselm.'

'Who arrives tardily.'

Catchpoll and Walkelin turned to see Father Anselm, his normally cheerful round face weary and sombre. 'I was called before dawn to a deathbed in Houndes Lone and only heard of this when I went to the church a few minutes past. Poor Hamelin, to be gathered to God unexpectedly. His kindness and charity will be missed in Worcester but lauded in Heaven, where he will ultimately reside in Glory, I have no doubt. He came to Vespers yesterday and he was saying he feared the weather would keep him from his home in Gloucester. Now he will return to it coffined.'

'Mornin', Father.' Catchpoll nodded to the priest, who was one of the few men in Worcester the serjeant trusted completely, and then addressed the body-finder. 'You best go and get warm, Walter. A beaker of mulled ale might be good, eh, after a shock.' Catchpoll did not want Walter, however innocent, later passing on as gossip what might be said in front of him, and he clearly had no further information to give.

Walter nodded, promised Father Anselm he would remember 'Good Master 'Amelin' in his prayers, and departed to do just what the serjeant suggested.

'You saw him after Vespers, Father?' Walkelin, who had been holding back, sounded eager for the first real information.

'Well, he was coming to check his warehouse here, which surprised me, the wind being biting cold and the snow coming down, but he said at such times his watchman might not be as thorough, so he would do so himself. Since you are clearly only just alerted to the death it appears he was right to distrust his man fulfilling his duty. Yet Hamelin guided my steps to my door before he did so, though it made his path the longer, down Grope Lone. And before you ask, it was not so that on his way down he might find a woman to keep him warm in sinful lust through the night. He was not that sort of man.'

Catchpoll, who knew many a man presented a virtuous face to their priest that differed from their true nature, grudgingly knelt upon the hard ground, grimacing as he did so, and then directed Walkelin to the other side. Turning the body over was not easy, and somewhat grotesque, since they had first to tug the arm that dangled in the water from its vice of river ice, and when the body was finally rolled over, the arm pointed up to the heavens as if beseeching aid from on high. Father Anselm caught his breath. It did not need a shrieval officer to see that Hamelin Isenmongere had met a violent end. The side of his head that had been upon the ground had been bludgeoned with something heavy, and the boards showed a staining of blood, which, when Catchpoll brushed away the concealing snow with his hand, had spread a little beyond the head. 'Now that does

not surprise me, though it would have shocked that interfering "Mistress Serjeant" who said it must be an accident.'

'And one strong blow, Serjeant, with somethin' weighty but narrow, if you looks at it,' added Walkelin, peering at the damaged skull and cheekbone. 'An iron rod would do it, and there will be plenty in the ware'ouse. Not that we could tell if one alone were gone or replaced.'

'Indeed, though the weapon might well be in the river. I will send you down with a man-at-arms and a grapnel later and see what comes up from the river bottom besides mud.' Catchpoll turned to the priest. 'So, Father, we needs to ask if you saw anyone else at that time? Might someone else who attended Vespers 'ave followed 'im?' The serjeant was wondering whether he should wait until the priest left before forcing the arm down, even if it broke, so that the body could be carried away on a stretcher without drawing even more attention.

'Not many came to the Office, which I can understand.' The little priest sighed. 'All were those whose absence from more than three Offices in the day would have me knocking upon their door to check whether they had met with an accident, and all were of our age or older, Serjeant. I could vouch for every one of them, and indeed, who in Worcester would want to do harm to such a well-liked man as he was. I would go so far as to say he might well have been the most popular man within these walls.'

'Though it 'elped that the man were only in Worcester a few days of the month, so it gave less time for any to take agin 'im.' Catchpoll was wary of popularity, since in his mind it was too often bought, and he was suspicious enough to wonder

what made it worth the price. Father Anselm was probably right, in that had you asked the man or woman in the streets of Worcester who was the person they felt was most beloved, the chances are they would have said Hamelin Isenmongere, even over such a clearly good and godly man as Father Anselm himself, who was beloved of his flock, but came less to mind among those in other parishes. It was this that made Catchpoll's serjeanting sense tingle. If anyone said 'but nobody disliked him', the serjeant knew in his bones there would be someone, and for a deep-seated reason. He looked down at the face of Hamelin Isenmongere, a face rendered almost spectral with its ice-tinge.

''Owsoever godly you was, someone took a swing at you, knowin' it would do for you. So what gave you enemies?'

'Might it have just been thievery that led to killin', Serjeant?' Walkelin was frowning. 'I mean, it were mortal cold yestereve, and yet 'ere be a wealthy man without a good warm cloak about 'im, and I doubts 'e came outdoors without one.'

'A fair question, Walkelin, but see, 'e still wears good gauntlets. A thief, whether wanting the cloak to keep 'imself from death in the cold overnight, or thinkin' to sell whatever 'e could steal, would 'ave taken the gauntlets too.'

'Though one would 'ave been river-wet.'

'It would dry, and be worth keepin', even so.'

'But 'is scrip be empty of all but a few pennies.' Walkelin took the small bag that had been half concealed in the stiffened folds of Hamelin's long tunic, and bounced it easily in his palm.

'Serjeant, he was definitely wearing his cloak when we left the church.' Father Anselm interrupted gently. 'It was one with

a fine hood of fox fur, and I should have noticed its absence straight away but was thinking of his soul, not the body, for which he no longer has a use. And his lack of coin is what I would expect, for he had donated very generously at the end of the service, very generously indeed. He was a great benefactor to the poor of this parish.'

'The takin' of cloak and 'ood might be an afterthought, just 'acos it were cold, or worth silver, but not the reason for the killin',' Catchpoll conceded. 'Which also makes me wonder what other reason might there be to take it.'

'To make a point? If the killer felt 'e 'ad been cheated, that 'Amelin gained from 'is own loss, takin' somethin' personal would be meaningful.' Walkelin thought it a little tenuous, but possible.

'Might be so.' Catchpoll blew upon his cold hands. 'Was this fox fur a thing that marked the man, Father?'

'It was something you would notice, but it was new. He told me he had bought it in Shrewsbury when last upriver, and his wife had been none too pleased, for she said a man should deck his wife in fur before himself. He laughed, and said he was glad he had kept it, despite her carping at him.'

'So it was not so that the killer could pretend to be the victim to all Worcester. A pity, since that would 'ave meant the killer must be a man or an unnatural tall woman to make it work. If the weapon were 'ard enough, a woman could 'ave felled 'im, easy enou—' Catchpoll stopped mid-sentence, looking to where the sound of a raised voice and sudden activity showed the craft that was alongside in front of Hamelin Isenmongere's warehouse was being made ready to depart. 'Hey, hold fast

there! In the name of the lord King's Laws!' Catchpoll yelled, and scrambled to his feet in a rush, swearing under his breath, and found himself a pace behind Walkelin, who had been the swifter to rise.

'No law says trade is stopped when there is a death in a town.' A tall man in a red, felted woollen cap with flaps over his ears, and who was clearly in command, countered them belligerently, in an accent that showed English was not his native tongue. He sounded a little like the shipmen of Danish blood, but there was something else in the voice. His pale eyes were fixed upon Catchpoll.

'But you are moored right next to where a man 'as been found killed, and before 'is own warehouse. We are the lord Sheriff's Serjeant and Underserjeant and we 'as questions that must be answered. You cannot be about your trade until we knows if anyone aboard 'as been involved or saw somethin'.' Catchpoll folded his arms and gave stare for stare.

'You mean Hamelin of Gloucester is dead?' The man looked surprised, and crossed himself.

'And you was not curious enough to have someone find out about who 'ad died when barely twenty-five paces from the body? Everyone is curious about a body.' Catchpoll glared very hard at the man.

'God's truth I did not. We are rivermen, not of Worcester. This was not a matter for us, and we be after getting back downriver in case the weather gets even colder and the ice you see that tries, and will fail, to keep us to the shore, halts the whole river, and just before the Feast of the Nativity.'

'But you knew 'Amelin' – there was a slight pause before

Catchpoll continued – 'of Gloucester. This be 'is craft, yes?' It was a guess, but a sensible one.

'Yes, and yes. Even more reason that we return to Gloucester so that his wife, now widow, can be informed.'

'Ah, so taking the body back to 'er would not be somethin' you thought of, then. Most women would prefer to 'ave their 'usbands buried where they live, not miles away.'

'In my trade men often die far from home and are buried at sea, so no, I did not think of it.' The man spoke boldly enough, but both Catchpoll and Walkelin thought it too easy an answer.

Catchpoll sniffed dismissively. 'Well – you did not give us your name, which is?'

'Ragnaill of Duiblinn.'

'Well, Ragnaill, this craft stays alongside until I says otherwise, and we will speak with every man aboard and see that what they say is true before you raise a sail or dip an oar, and if that means the ice comes and keeps you, that is God's will.'

'Your will, you mean.'

'Let us say sometimes God's will and serjeant's will 'appens to be the same thing. But do not think you is bein' treated unfair-like, for nothin' leaves this wharf until every man 'as been spoken with. You wait 'ere, and I will come back first to you.' Catchpoll did not say that this was actually because it was the vessel most likely to be of interest. He turned to Walkelin, speaking in his normal voice rather than his 'serjeanting' one. 'I will ask Father Anselm to go to All Saints' and get two of 'is parish to do a Christian deed and bring an 'andcart for the body. I wants you to go to the castle and bring back two men-at-arms and a grapnel. One can go fishin' and the other

can keep an eye on Ragnaill and 'is men. We does not want any wanderin' off none-knows-where. I will straighten that arm as best I can before the body is moved. We cannot leave 'Amelin Isenmongere in the street, even if 'is body will go back to Gloucester on 'is own vessel. After that I will begin speakin' with the rivermen, one by one. Meet me 'ere.'

'Yes, Serjeant. And I will keep my eyes open for a fox-fur 'ood, just in case.'

'A serjeant's eyes is always open, so I did not feel the need to say it.' Catchpoll nodded at his protégé, in both dismissal and acknowledgement, and the underserjeant went away feeling rather pleased.

Walkelin did not dawdle, and he was thinking all the way back to the castle. With the chance of the killing being a robbery that ended in a death being small, someone had wanted Hamelin dead. He made a mental list of possible reasons, hoping one might leap out at him as the most likely motive, but none did. Walkelin was getting used to 'listening' to Worcester as he went about its streets, the way Catchpoll did, and when the name of Hamelin Isenmongere came up, it had always been with good things said, or at least none bad. True, Reginald Ash the silversmith said he drove a hard bargain for the charcoal he brought from the Forest of Dean, but it was better than that coming from the Wychwood, and Hamelin knew he could ask a high price. The same was true with those to whom he sold his rods of Forest of Dean iron, the coopers who needed them for barrel bands and the local blacksmiths and wheelwrights. There was no idea that he was cheating his customers in any

way. The very fact he came to Worcester for several days each month and went about all his customers, to see they had all they needed and were happy with the quality of the iron rods he brought ashore, spoke volumes. There were no other men who landed iron for the local smiths, so there was no rival trader, and he could think of no other merchant from outside Worcester who came and stayed on a regular basis. What was more, Hamelin was free with his silver in the alehouses if he went to be sociable, and generous to the poor.

Back at the castle, Walkelin spoke to the commander of the watch, and made his request as an equal and not just 'Serjeant Catchpoll says'. He selected the two men least likely to be distracted from their tasks, and then went to the armoury. Grapnel hooks were offensive rather than defensive, but the castle kept one or two in case of a spreading fire in the town, when they were good for pulling down thatch and even daub-and-wattle homes at need. He gave it to the bigger man-at-arms and the three men set off down to the quayside. It occurred to Walkelin that after they had spoken to the rivermen, it would be a good idea if he and Serjeant Catchpoll looked about Hamelin Isenmongere's house. He did hope that the serjeant had been so occupied with Ragnaill that he had not already thought of it himself. When they turned to walk along the wharfage, the possible next steps were cast entirely from his mind.

Ragnaill's craft was gone, and there was no sign of Serjeant Catchpoll.