

Too Good to Hang

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

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a', 's', and 'b' in a white, elegant cursive script, positioned on a solid black rectangular background. A thin white horizontal line is drawn beneath the letters.

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Too Good to Hang

A Bradecote
and Catchpoll Mystery

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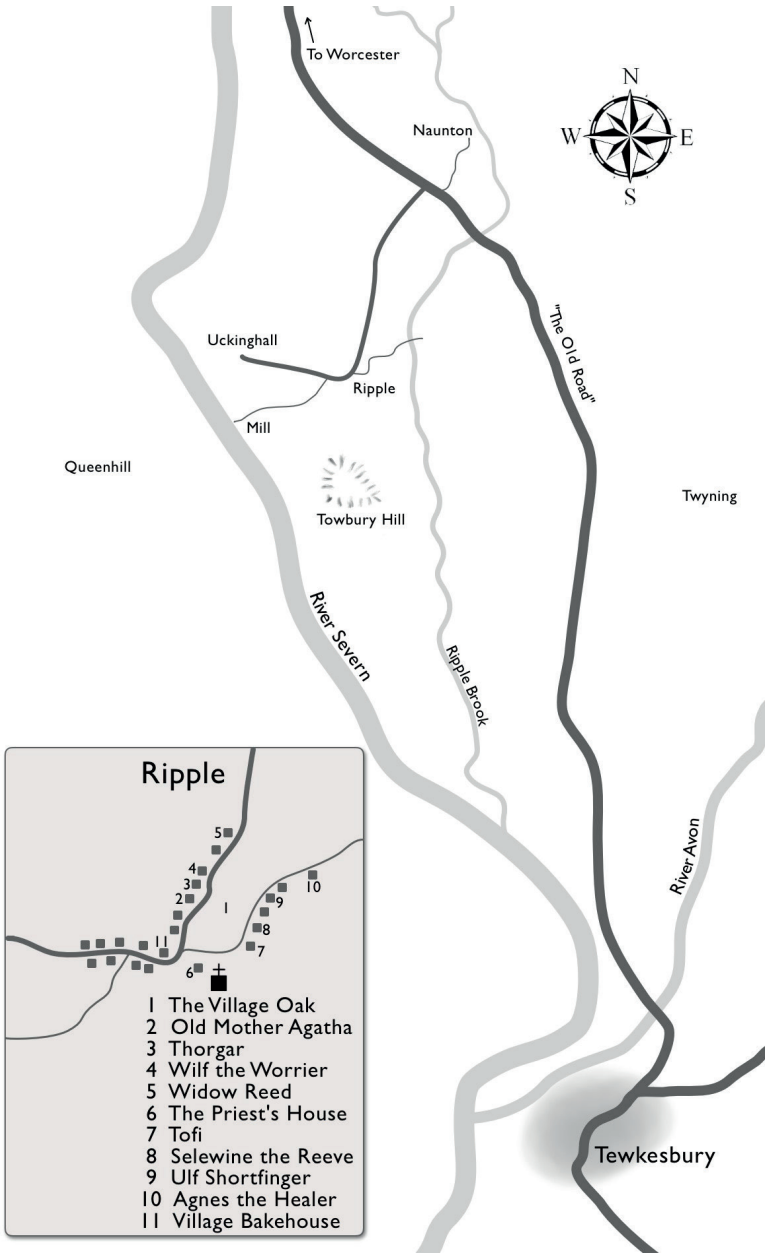
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For H. J. B.



Chapter One

Ten days after Lady Day, April 1145

Spring, everyone agreed, had come a little early this year, and the plough-team had made very good progress in the Great Field. Easter would be late in April, and it was thought that nearly all the spring sowing would be complete by Holy Week. Overnight, however, there had been a storm, with howling winds and lashing rain, and that rain had persisted until noon, nature chastising the eagerness of man to claw the rich earth with blades of iron and bury his hopes of the harvest within the gashes. It had now eased off, but the unfurling leaves of the big oak, vivid in their fresh verdancy, wept sporadic 'tears' upon the scene playing out beneath them. A blackbird sang its sweet and melodious song into the ozone freshness, a song whose beauty belonged to a different world from the angry voices of the crowd that had gathered about one young man. Thorgar would normally have given thanks to Heaven for that song, appreciating God's creation, but right now he was breathing fast, and his desperate gaze passed over the crowd gathered about him rather than to the skies. He was confused, frightened and bruised from being dragged roughly

from the church. He saw the blood lust in the eyes of many and, in some, a relief that what had been done would be paid for and the incident closed swiftly. Perhaps the priest could have held them in check, but Father Edmund was dead, a crumpled heap with lids not yet closed over unseeing eyes that outstared the living; that stare, the angry villagers surmised, was accusing.

‘I found him, that is all. I saw the blood on his face and knelt to see if there was any slight breath to ’im, but there was none.’ Thorgar’s voice had urgency. He held up his hands in a futile plea for mercy, or at least a delay for consideration. The gesture looked as if he had just released a dove from his hold, for he could not spread them wide now that his wrists were bound. ‘That was when Widow Reed saw me, and made the same mistake you all do now. It was not me.’

‘But I saw you, heard you, Thorgar, this mornin’, at the door of the priest’s house. You was right angry.’ A raven-haired young woman spoke up. ‘I never seen you that angry afore, not ever. You raised your voice to Father Edmund, you did. Deny it not.’

‘It – I-I was surprised, that is all.’

‘About what?’ It was Selewine the Reeve who asked the question.

‘I had given ’im something to keep for me, and he would not give it back.’

‘So you went and killed ’im. Was you checkin’ that he was dead, or searchin’ the body for what he kept back?’ Selewine glowered at the young man, his face grim.

‘I did not kill him. I went to Tewkesbury and on my return went to tell him I had been wrong.’

‘What cause could you have to be there?’ ’Tis not a market

day.' A pock-faced man, with a resemblance to the reeve that shouted his kinship without need of words, came straight back at him.

'I went to the Abbey and came to speak with Father Edmund when I returned. I found him as I said. If Widow Reed had not raised the cry, I would have done so.' The bound man tried to catch the eye of others who might see good sense, but every man dropped their gaze as his found theirs.

'You says that to save your neck, but no good will it do you. The Law is clear, brother. If you will not act you are not worthy of your position as reeve.' The pock-faced man turned to Selewine, and the look between them was not fraternal love.

'I knows my duty, Tofi. Caught in the act you 'ave been, Thorgar, with the blood of Father Edmund upon you, and hang you must. None will swear oaths for you.' This was an assertion, almost a threat to any who might think of it.

'I simply found the body. You would see me hang because I said you nay, Selewine, that is all.'

'Nay to what?' The Widow Reed enquired, curious.

'He wants to marry Osgyth, and I said no.' Thorgar spoke with a sudden hint of hope. They would see reason, yes?

'Marry her? What foolishness is that?' the reeve's brother scoffed.

'But it is true.' A young woman, scarcely out of girlhood, let go of the hand of a weeping woman with a shawl pulled tight around her and three small children about her, and stepped forward. 'I did not want to marry him, what with Mother as she is. And besides, he is older than Father when he died.' She glared at the reeve. 'I will never marry you, upon my good oath.'

This divided the men between those nearest Selewine's age, who felt their manhoods insulted, and the younger men who quite saw how a maid would far prefer their looks and virility. There was muttering by both groups.

'I say again I had no cause to kill Father Edmund,' cried Thorgar.

'You says that, but 'e lies in the nave, dead,' came a voice, and the ripple of sound became one, and it was agreeing.

'Look, it was not my hand that killed him. I swear my oath upon my hope of Heaven.'

'Little hope you have of goin' to Heaven, killin' a priest in his own church,' a sharp-faced man snarled.

'Eternally damned, that is what 'e will be.' That was a woman's voice.

Thorgar's small flame of hope was snuffed out.

'Go home, Mother, Osgyth. I promise you I did no wrong. I am *unscyldig*.' He tried to keep the tremor from his voice, and his eyes pleaded with them to obey. Osgyth opened her mouth to remonstrate, and he repeated his command and vow of innocence.

Tears ran down her cheeks, and she held his gaze for a moment. Her mother set a trembling hand upon her arm, and the pair, with the frightened children clasping their skirts, turned and made their way back through the throng, which drew back as though they carried contagion. Once clear of them, Osgyth turned back one last time, and cried out to her brother and to the crowd.

'I will see justice done, Thorgar, upon my oath.'

'Stay a bit longer and you can see it now, right enough,' came a man's voice, and another laughed without mirth.

‘Go. It is best,’ murmured an older woman at the back of the crowd and now near to Osgyth, and there was at least compassion in her tone.

Thorgar begged for a priest to be called, but was met with a refusal. They would not wait for Father Ambrosius to be fetched from across the river, and the Severn was running too high for him to come this day.

‘Father Edmund’s death is not upon my soul. My death will be upon yours.’ The tremor was in Thorgar’s voice now. ‘I am *unscyldig*.’

His pleas of innocence did not prevent a noose being placed about his neck, the rope cast over the oak bough, and Thorgar the Ploughman, son of Alvar who was ploughman before him, being hauled up and hanged.

Osgyth wetted her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. It had seemed so clear and simple when she had set off, in the predawn half-light, filled with righteous determination and no small degree of desperation. It had taken her all morning to cover the night on dozen miles northward to Worcester from Ripple, and she had been very aware that she was a maid walking alone, and at risk from the travellers upon the road from Worcester to Gloucester who might take advantage. She was tired, stressed, her feet were blistered, and now she was unsure of herself. Everything was too big and noisy and imposing. She had never been anywhere bigger than Tewkesbury, and certainly never seen a castle. She stood in front of its open gates, which she felt would crash closed behind her if she entered, and offered up a little prayer to the Holy Virgin to give her courage. Tears pricked her eyes, and she felt suddenly as

if the burden not just of carrying out her promise to Thorgar, but of grief at his loss, crushed her so that she might fall to the ground.

‘What is it, girl?’ A woman’s voice, half challenge and half-sympathetic enquiry, caught her unawares.

Osgyth turned to the woman with a besom who had appeared at her shoulder, and whom Osgyth would call old.

‘I have come all the way from Ripple, mistress, to seek justice, and now I am here, my heart fails me a little. None will listen in a place like that.’ She nodded at the castle gateway. ‘I asked at the priory about the lord Bishop as our overlord, not knowing where he lives, and then them at ’is palace told me he were north at Hartlebury, and I cannot get there and back to Mother this day. I thought to ask for the lord Sheriff, but . . .’

‘Well, they will not hear you at all if you stays out here.’ The voice was brisk, but then mellowed. ‘And you go in at the gatehouse and ask for Serjeant Catchpoll, who will hear you, aye, and listen also, whether the lord Sheriff does or not. If he asks how you know of him, tell him there’s bream goin’ in the pot tonight. He’ll understand then.’ Mistress Catchpoll pushed Osgyth towards the gateway.

‘Speak slow, and think first,’ Catchpoll held up a hand, his voice calm. The girl who had been brought to him at first flooded him with words, though she did not need to give Mistress Catchpoll’s message.

‘My brother was hanged yesterday for a killin’ he did not do, and the last thing I promised ’im was justice.’ Osgyth tried to slow down.

‘Very sisterly, but it tells me little. Where did this ’appen, who

is he meant to have killed, and why do you think 'im innocent?'

'I knows it. He said it, and he would not lie.'

'Child, faced with a rope's end, most men would lie, and no blame to 'em for tryin'.' Catchpoll had heard such professions many times.

'No, no. He did not do it. I come from Ripple.'

'That's the lord Bishop's holding?'

'Aye, and it is our priest, Father Edmund, as is dead, yesterday, after noon.'

'So what 'appened?'

'I was bringing in turnip from the clamp when Alsi Longshanks came running to the house, yellin' that Father Edmund were dead and that my brother Thorgar killed him. He said they found 'im by the body with his hands all bloodied, and they was goin' to hang Thorgar from the Village Oak.

'So it was a knife that did for the priest?'

'No, no, he was beaten and Thorgar found 'im, and then Widow Reed found 'im, Thorgar that is, and cried murder.'

'He was not seen actually beating the priest then?' Catchpoll wanted detail.

'No, but it did not stop him bein' hanged for it. He swore he was *unscyldig*, but Master Reeve and his brother said he was guilty, and had to be hanged and so they . . . they hanged 'im. They said it was the law, and they had to do it. They buried 'im without a priest and up by the Old Road, not in consecrated ground, Serjeant, and 'tis all wrong.' Osgyth began to weep, in part from relief that she had told her tale to someone in authority.

'That may be, or mayhap it ain't, but you wait here. Better still, go out the gate and over to the door next to the cooper's

with the barrel outside, knock and tell my wife I says for you to wait with her. Whether your brother did it or not, there has been a killing, and of the lord Bishop's appointed priest at that, and it would be worth me comin' to see how things stand, if the lord Sheriff agrees.' Catchpoll did not say 'allows'. 'Go and rest your feet, and I will see what is to be done. Off you go.' With which he turned and headed across the bailey.

'I don't see as it makes much odds, Catchpoll. The man is dead, or rather both are dead and buried, and it is likely that this Thorgar was guilty anyway. It looks very like it.' William de Beauchamp had turned his attention from a letter being read to him by his clerk, and listened to Catchpoll's recounting of the situation.

'It looks it, aye, my lord, but I would feel the happier just checkin'. Also, if the lord Bishop asks you about his dead priest, you can tell him it was looked into.'

'True enough, though I prefer to keep away from Bishop Simon. He always manages to sound so disappointed about whatever I do, and prattles on about charity.'

Catchpoll hid a smile. William de Beauchamp was not a charitable man, in thought or deed.

'If you says as I can, my lord, we will go to Ripple today, and report back to you tomorrow. I doubts it will take long.'

'Fair enough, Catchpoll. But not just you and Walkelin. If we are to make a show of this, in case of Bishop Simon asking questions, I want my undersheriff to accompany you, since the dead man was the priest.' De Beauchamp gave a wry smile. 'Prising Underserjeant Walkelin from his new wife will make you popular with him.'

‘Bein’ sheriff’s serjeant isn’t about bein’ popular, with anyone, my lord.’

‘Except perhaps, me, Catchpoll?’

‘If I happens to bask in your pleasure, my lord, rare as it is, that pleases me no end.’ Catchpoll’s face did not betray him by a single muscle, and de Beauchamp raised a sceptical eyebrow, then smiled. ‘I will ready a horse and warn the wife. I doubts the fish she went to buy for this evenin’ will keep beyond the morrow so it would be nice if all we has to do is confirm the right man was strung up.’ Catchpoll sniffed, made obeisance, and left William de Beauchamp to the monotone of the clerk. He also sent a man-at-arms to bring the underserjeant from the quayside, whence he had been sent to sort out a dispute.

Walkelin did not know whether to feel worried or important when the man-at-arms tracked him down, and returned at speed, arriving a little breathless and with the hint of a furrow between his brows, though he looked happy otherwise.

‘You sent for me, Serjeant.’ It was both question and statement in one, somehow indicating obedience to an order as a subordinate, yet hinting at something closer to equality. Walkelin also knew that if he asked it as a pure question, the answer he would get would be pithy, since of course Serjeant Catchpoll had sent for him.

‘Aye, just could not bear to be without that grinnin’ face o’ yours any longer today.’ Catchpoll’s expression was of mock relief, but the tone was bantering. It was, thought Walkelin, far better than being told not to ask fool-headed questions. ‘We is off to Ripple, ’bout as far south as we can go in the shire, to find out

if a murderer has been hanged already or an innocent man taken, by chance or evil intent, for another's crime. You sorted out the problem between the two shipmen?'

'I did that, Serjeant. They was happy to see sense.'

'Never tell me they did because you threatened to take a spike and put a hole in both their boats? With the witless grin you goes around with these days, you could not "persuade" anyone. Troubles me, it does, for in all else you is becomin' a good serjeant, but . . .'

Catchpoll sucked his teeth with a hiss.

'I did not threaten them, Serjeant. I just said as you would come and put a spike through both their boats, and mayhap someone's foot if they did not come to an agreement.' Walkelin's smile broadened into just the grin Catchpoll had bemoaned. 'Worked a treat, it did.'

Catchpoll was divided between pride that his reputation was such that even two men who plied the Severn, but never stopped long in Worcester, feared his retribution second-hand, and concern that Walkelin needed to be developing a reputation of his own, and not as everyone's cheerful and friendly face of the Law.

'Tis all very well and good, Young Walkelin, but you needs folk to do things 'acos of you, not me. If'n I's said it the once, then I's said it an hundred times; it is important that you can make folk think the better of doin' bad things for fear of upsettin' "the Serjeant", rather than us chasin' about after them when they has gone and committed a crime and faces worse than even what they thinks we could mete out.' Catchpoll shook his head. 'Gettin' wed has made it worse. You go about lookin' as happy as a rat in a granary, or rather as a man as has forgotten that night is

for sleep, and 'alf of Worcester would like to put their fist in your face just out of plain jealousy.'

'I can't help bein' happy, Serjeant.' Walkelin blushed.

'No, but you can help lookin' like it.'

'And I doesn't like people bein' afeared of me.'

'You will live the longer if they do, and some of 'em also. Think of it as part of the duty, lad.' Catchpoll sniffed. 'Anyways, you won't be enjoyin' a sleepless night tonight unless the reeve of Ripple snores loud and long. Let your mother and that Welsh armful o' yours know you are away, and be back afore the bell for Sext. I wants you to ride first to Bradecote and fetch the lord Undersheriff, since the killin' took place on a manor of the lord Bishop of Worcester and the lord Sheriff has some reason of 'is own to want to keep Bishop Simon sweet at present. Catch me up on the Old Road to Tewkesbury as soon as you can. I will be goin' slower, for I will have the hanged man's sister up behind me, but we should be there afore it darkens.'

Hugh Bradecote made no comment upon Walkelin's demeanour, though he did ask why the Underserjeant had not abandoned his habitual mount, since Snægl had always been a cause of complaint from Walkelin.

'I would have thought you would have selected a more willing and er, less bear-coated, horse now you are established as the lord Sheriff's Underserjeant.'

'I know, my lord. I had intended to take another, but the beast gave me this long look, sort of sad and reproachful and . . .'

'Catchpoll will tell you you are too soft, Walkelin, and I think you will regret it before we are halfway to Ripple.'

‘Oh, I was regrettin’ it afore I even reached Bradecote, my lord.’ Walkelin smiled.

‘And what exactly takes us to Ripple? What do we know?’

Walkelin explained, and Hugh Bradecote sought out his lady with the hopeful expectation of returning home very soon.

Christina looked up from feeding the babe at her breast and smiled beatifically.

‘We shall await your return, my lord, anxious only that you do so in good health. However, you must remember that you promised Gilbert that you would sit him up before you on your horse and ride three times about the bailey because he was a good boy this morning. Might I suggest that you do so before your departure, for I fear that otherwise I may be driven to distraction by his asking when you will be back.’

‘I think that much delay will not be detrimental.’ He bent and kissed her cheek, fondly, and she made a purring sound of appreciation.

It was thus only after Walkelin had seen his superior ride very slowly about his bailey with the infant Gilbert astride the big grey’s withers and clasped tightly by his sire, that the two sheriff’s men cantered out and headed towards the road that linked Worcester to Gloucester.

Catchpoll’s reception from his wife was resigned rather than aggrieved. When he suggested the girl Osgyth sit up behind him on his horse, it occasioned no more than a womanly warning to her that if she was not used to it, sitting upon a horse would have her stiff of rump come next morning.

‘And if you comes not back by sunset tomorrow, Catchpoll,

that fish is all mine.’ With which admonition Mistress Catchpoll sent them upon their way.

He rode at a sedate pace, not wanting Osgyth to either fall off or grip him so tightly that she was snuggled up behind him. She was perhaps fifteen or sixteen, and Catchpoll knew it would be unseemly. If he could still enjoy the visual charms of a good-looking woman, it was always those twice Osgyth’s age. He was old enough to be her oldfather, and it was certain that is how she regarded him.

After a while she began to speak, at first to cover the discomfort of silence. He let her talk, asking only the occasional question about the events of the day before, drawing from her the details without her dwelling upon them, and aware she might give him something of relevance to how things stood in Ripple, not just about yesterday’s deaths.

‘Selewine, the lord Bishop’s reeve, is not a bad man, I suppose, not as a reeve. He just takes the position very serious, perhaps a bit too much, sometimes. Very full of “I be Reeve of Ripple” as though t’were “King of England”, if you understands me. He knows his tasks and responsibilities, but is a right dunghill cock for crowin’. It makes ’im think he is not just the most important man in Ripple, but the best catch as an ’usband.’ Catchpoll could almost feel Osgyth’s blush. ‘He has buried two wives – the second he lost last summer to a fever. The other evening he came to Thorgar, as man of the house, and asked to speak privily with ’im. Turns out he had his eye on me for ’is next wife!’ She sounded suitably surprised in a shocked and horrified way.

‘Some would take that as a compliment,’ suggested Catchpoll, to see what it would elicit.

‘Some might, but not me, not ever,’ Osgyth responded in a low and determined growl. ‘Besides, Mother cannot keep the home and the little ones, her being stricken some years back, and not able to move her right arm. It is sort of curled up to her bosom and stuck there. Until Thorgar weds . . .’ She gasped, and stifled a sob. ‘How can I keep us all? Baldred is two years short of the tithing, and not a big lad, and the twins has but eight years come midsummer. They cannot do more’n lead the oxen, at best, not guide the plough, and Thorgar and Father afore ’im was the ploughman in Ripple. We may well starve. I cannot dig and weed our strips and keep the home with but three young boys to aid me.’

Privately, Catchpoll thought there was a fair chance that a man, less old and off-putting to a girl than the unlamented reeve, might solve the family situation, but he said nothing of it.

‘How old was Thorgar?’

‘Only twenty years he had, and him not deserving to die. There were two more between Thorgar and me, but they died young.’

‘Of an age to be thinking of maids, then.’

‘Oh, I think he thought of them, but mayhap he was not quite sure which one.’ Osgyth sighed. ‘Not that Mildred, who is the fairest maid in the village, did not make it plain she wanted to be his choice. Always makin’ eyes at ’im, she were, and givin’ ’im such smiles as only a wife should give a husband, to my way of thinkin’. Even more than she did to all the other young men.’

Catchpoll could not see Osgyth’s face, but could tell from her tone that she wore an expression of outraged virtue. Then he frowned at her next words.

'I wonders why she spoke up against Thorgar.'

'What did she say?'

There was a pause, and he felt Osgyth tense.

'What did she say, girl?' Catchpoll's voice dropped. It was not threatening but brooked no refusal to give up the information.

'She – she said as she had seen Thorgar very angry with Father Edmund early in the day, afore 'e went to Tewkesbury.'

'You mean the priest went there afore 'e were killed?'

'No, no. Thorgar it was as went.'

'Why did Thorgar go to Tewkesbury that mornin?'

'I does not know, other than it rained hard overnight and was still rainin' well past dawn and the ground was too wet to plough or to sow where Thorgar 'ad finished, so he was free to go. Everyone did things indoors. In the forenoon I mended my brother Baldred's cotte where a bramble had broke a thread and ripped it.'

Catchpoll now had quite a list of Ripple villagers he would like to speak with directly, and matters he would like to mull over with both Walkelin and the lord Bradecote.

He did not have too long to wait, for the sound of horses loping along at a gentle canter made Osgyth turn her head in concern, as though she was about to be attacked by desperate outlaws. Who else, in her mind, would travel so fast and be catching them up? She was not much relieved when Bradecote's big, steel grey horse drew close enough for her to see the quality of the rider. Osgyth had never encountered anyone more important than the village reeve and priest until today, and had found it traumatic enough speaking with a haughty clerk at the lord Bishop's

residence by the cathedral and then Serjeant Catchpoll. When Catchpoll introduced the rider as the lord Undersheriff of the shire she very nearly fell backwards off the croup of Catchpoll's horse as she attempted a sort of crumpling motion that indicated an obeisance. Bradecote found it hard not to laugh, and although he controlled himself well, his eyes danced.

'How are the knees, Serjeant Catchpoll?' Bradecote thought the question a suitable greeting.

'Holdin' me up as sturdily as ever, my lord, though I prefer to let Walkelin do the runnin' around Worcester. They doesn't bend as well as they once did, but then I 'ave made 'em bend a lot all these long years, so I mustn't grumble.'

Since grumbling about his stiff knees was something Catchpoll did upon a very regular basis, this did not make the humorous light in the undersheriff's eyes dim one bit, but it did so with his next question.

'So, we are looking into the death of the priest of Ripple, for which a' – he paused for a fraction of a moment, catching the tensing in the girl on the horse – 'price has been paid?'

'Aye, my lord, we are.' Catchpoll was not going to discuss his thoughts in front of the girl Osgyth, and instead told a somewhat rambling tale of a recent domestic killing in Worcester, which had not needed the lord Undersheriff to be called from his manor. Bradecote caught the look that told him anything on the current death would need to wait.