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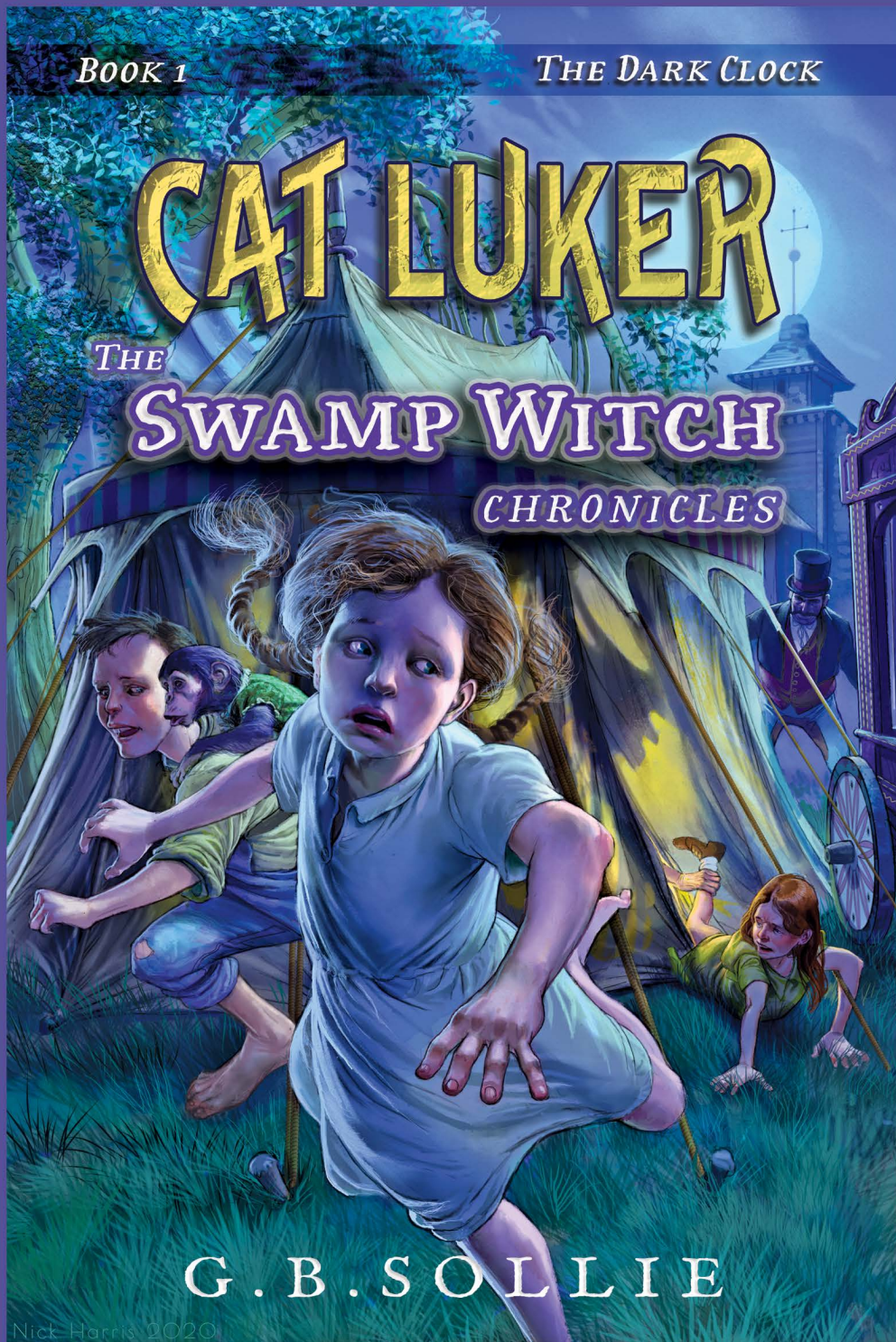
THE DARK CLOCK

CAT LUKER

THE

SWAMP WITCH

CHRONICLES



G.B. SOLLIE

Nick Harris 2020

TESTIMONIALS

The Swamp Witch Chronicles

In my process, I first look for the story. Whether it's music, a book, or a painting—anything, really—there's always a story. In the case of *The Swamp Witch Chronicles*—box checked. It's an adventure/fantasy involving three kids from rural 1930s Alabama, enthralled in an epic battle of good vs. evil. As I read, my mind was filled with images of classics like *The Chronicles of Narnia* mixed with the folksiness of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Everything a middle-grade reader could ask for. But, as with any great surface story, there's also something more profound, something bigger, lurking underneath.

-Monroe Jones

Grammy Award-winning Producer



A Journey to the Light

Bible Study Guide and Companion to-

Cat Luker: The Swamp Witch Chronicles

It's really great! I think students who attend a study like this will really benefit from the ideas you lay out in the guide. So excited for you and the ways God is leading you through this project.



Cory Osborne

MIDDLE SCHOOL: MS Group Director

Woodstock City Church

CAT LUKER

THE
SWAMP WITCH
CHRONICLES

BOOK 1 THE DARK CLOCK

G. B. SOLLIE



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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

To my grandchildren: Always remember!

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AFTERWORD

FOREWORD

When I was approached about the possibility of narrating *The Swamp Witch Chronicles*, of course, I was honored to be considered for the task. But as I hadn't yet read the book, I prepared myself for the (almost) inevitable let-down. You see, after three decades of helping artists and bands bring their stories to life through the music they create and engaging in all of the "art-meets-commerce" battles along the way, it's hard to emerge from those experiences without baggage. I can be cynical and jaded. I remained hopeful that there might be something inspiring out there to throw myself into, but more often than not—you get it. So, proceeding cautiously with all the mechanisms in place to protect myself from disappointment and armed with questions like, "What if there's nothing there? What if I have nothing to bring to the project?" I waded in.

In my process, I first look for the story. Whether it's music, a book, or a painting—anything, really—there's always a story. In the case of *The Swamp Witch Chronicles*—box checked. It's an adventure/fantasy involving three kids from rural 1930s Alabama, enthralled in an epic battle of good vs. evil. As I read, my mind was filled with images of classics like *The Chronicles of Narnia* mixed with the folksiness of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Everything a middle-grade reader could ask for. But, as with any great surface story, there's also something more profound, something bigger, lurking underneath.

When I met the author, I learned that he had been working on this project for several years and was clearly in the process of giving his life to something that was important to him. It had started as a gift to his grandchildren and a tribute to his parents, who were part of the Greatest Generation. The idea was that his parents were the perfect role models for future generations who

will face a critical fork in the road at some point in their lives. It's true and perhaps even more true for today's generation than for any other in history. I'll go further and say that, regarding today's generation, their whole lives are a fork in the road. Okay. I was intrigued, and I signed up for the mission. But still—there was a deeper story.

Initially, I was drawn in by the foundational, clear presentation of the Gospel—something today's kids desperately need to hear. That alone validated my involvement. But there were other themes woven in throughout the story as well, such as the theme of sacrifice—a purpose, or mission, in service of others. We know it characterized so many from the Greatest Generation. But there's an even greater example. The Bible says, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45 NIV). What about the notion of striving with passion and enthusiasm to offer our God-given talents for the good of others? Or, as John 15:23 states, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (NIV). These are truths that so desperately need to be passed on to the next generation. And in this book, they come beautifully wrapped in a well-written, captivating story.

As I progressed through the chapters, I felt each scene coming to life in a profoundly visual way. So much so that I found myself driven to take the listener's experience to the highest level possible. For hours on end, I continued to add layers of sound and texture to the story, with the goal of making it as immersive as possible. In a way, it felt like I was “giving my life” to some degree, and, well, that felt wonderful!

Looking back over my years as a producer in the music industry, I've noticed something. The projects that impacted my career most profoundly and affected others in a positive way were those that no one saw coming. They were done quietly, with no expectations, no fanfare, and no execs looking over our shoulders. In most of those cases, I was simply drawn in, along with the

other members of a small ragtag team, by the special nature of the work. Sure, I loved what was there, but at the heart, there was also a purity and honesty, a compelling story, if you will, wrapped in a purpose we could rally around. I sense those qualities in this project as well.

While young readers may simply enjoy the thrill of immersing themselves in an adventure, a well-written page-turner that captures their imagination, we know there's more to the story. My prayer is that God will use this book, all the people involved, and the resources created around it to present the Gospel—in an artful, powerful, and transforming way—to a generation that so desperately needs to hear it.

Monroe Jones

Grammy Award-winning Producer

PROLOGUE

THE GREAT SNAKE

A shadow passed over the Swamp Witch's face, and she started to giggle like a little girl who was up to no good. When she was a child growing up in the swamp, her mother had tried to feed her to the Great Snake as a peace offering. Her mother had called her by her given name, Maggot, or Mag, for short.

"Mag, where are you, baby girl? I have a sweet surprise for you!"

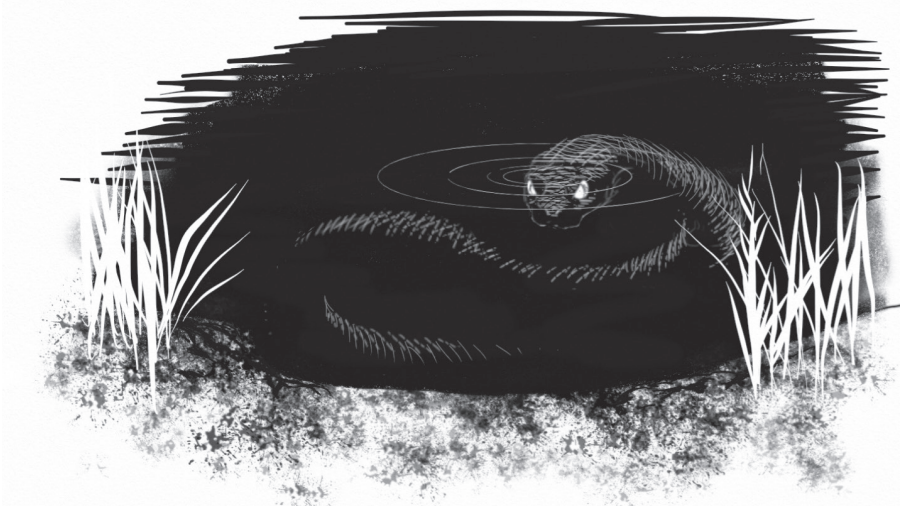
The Great Snake was yellow and glowed in the sun like a bar of gold. He was 25 feet long and strong enough to crush a cow if one happened to wander into the swamp. Mag's mother's job was to lure victims to the Great Snake. But she had failed to deliver as ordered so the Great Snake demanded she bring Mag as a feeding punishment. But Mag's mother underestimated Mag; she knew what her momma was up to. Her witch powers had already started to form in her young body and she could feel the evil in her mother. After more beatings than she could count, she knew to expect the worst but played along.

She skipped over to her and innocently asked, "What is my sweet surprise, Momma?"

Her mother glared at her and told her to follow her to the creek. "Don't lag, girl, get on over here!"

As they reached the creek bank, her mother tried to get Mag to look down into the murky water while she stepped behind her.

Mag could faintly see the Great Snake's eyes glowing in the dark water. He blinked at her, and she blinked back in agreement.



At that moment, as her momma started to push, Mag spun around, looked her in the eyes, and calmly told her, “The Great Snake decided he wants you instead, Momma.”

The memory of her mother’s screams made the Swamp Witch giggle and brought her back to the problem at hand.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DARE

Many have tried to record what happened in that God-forsaken swamp, just as it was handed down from the beginning by those with first-hand knowledge. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything, it seemed a good idea for me to write an orderly account for you, most dear Catherine. My prayer is that others may know with certainty the wonderous things that you have done for your beloved.



A long time ago, at the bottom of the Great Depression, Cat Luker lived in the backwoods of Alabama, down a red dirt road on the edge of a little town called Aimwell. She had six brothers and a momma named Gertrude Leafy Flowers. Her daddy, Johnny Luker, was a farmer and worked for the county doing roadwork from time to time. The family lived in an old house that wasn't painted and needed work. Her daddy called it a shotgun. It had an open breezeway in the middle where Cat liked to read, daydream, and draw pictures for hours on end. She was only ten years old but was already a talented, natural artist with a vivid imagination.

Her brothers—Otto, Cecil, Raymond, John, James, and Curtis—called her Sister but all her friends called her Cat. She had long, wavy, black hair and green eyes, and her nickname fit her to a tee.

Cat liked to climb trees and talk to the birds and squirrels, and she could run like the wind. Her brothers loved her dearly but thought she was crazy. After all, she had learned to fight just so she could get by in a house full of mean ol' boys who enjoyed

picking on her. She was like a wildcat when she got mad, and if she got angry enough, she would punch them in the nose—not too hard, mind you—and then take off running. Anyone who saw her flying by with her brothers in hot pursuit would laugh, knowing that they were wasting their time trying to catch her.

For most of the summer, Cat wore a white flour-sack dress and went barefoot. She laughed as she ran, making her brothers all the madder. She found trails through the woods that no one else knew about and had secret hiding places, some that were close to the swamp, where her brothers were too afraid to go.

On this sunny morning, Cat had run away from her troublesome brothers in the usual way. Out of sight of them, she darted up the trunk and into the safety of some huge branches of an old oak tree that stood off the main path from the house. Her favorite tree, the Big Oak, had a knotty stool that sat in the fork of its two twisted limbs, high above the ground and out of sight of anyone passing by. As she settled into her seat, she heard her brothers rush by, whooping and hollering, still thinking they might catch her this time. She smiled and thought she'd give them time to cool off before she headed home. She reached down, gathered a handful of acorns, and made a chirping sound, as she called her friend Tubby the Squirrel over for a visit. They had not talked for a while.



“Tubby, did you miss me?” Cat purred, knowing he had. He grabbed an acorn and made quick work of it before

offering his thoughts on her long overdue visit.

“You are always welcome here, Cat,” he said, in his most important-sounding voice. “And of course, we most certainly missed you, dear.”

Tubby fancied himself to be the mayor or some other high-ranking official of the forest. He was renowned for his frugal values and took pride in his food supply that had been gathered, in his words, “by hard work and focus on the task at hand.” He looked down on the other creatures that didn’t work as hard as he did. He didn’t think much of those that always wanted a handout during the winter, or, God-forbid, tried to prowl around and steal his hard-earned supplies. The other squirrels looked to him for leadership, and he gladly obliged.

“It is tough out here alone, Cat. And you know very well that I need your help to keep things in order around here.”

Cat knew that Tubby tended to exaggerate in his own puffed-up way, but at the same time, she saw concern in his eyes and knew he must feel threatened.

“Are you worried about something, little buddy?” she asked.

Tubby gravely nodded his head. “But we must not discuss it here, my dear. The leaves have ears, you know.”

As if on cue, a breeze blew through the leaves of the tree, rattling a denial, as if to say, *How dare you*.

Cat didn’t have much time, so she told Tubby to let her know when and where they could meet. “Just leave a signal by my window when you think it is safe,” she said. She gave him a poke on his proud belly and headed for home.

Her momma met her at the gate as she was running up the walk.

“Where have you been, young lady?”

Cat gave her a hug and told her she was simply out enjoying the day.

Her brothers were sitting in a line on the porch shelling peas under stern orders to behave. Cat waved and smiled, and

they gave her the evil eye in return.

“You boys look tired. Did you run out of gas today?” she asked as she breezed by, holding her momma’s hand.

“Time to get supper going, girl. It will be dark before you know it,” said her momma as she guided Cat into the kitchen.



The next morning, Cat was sitting on the front porch swing with her sweet friend, Jane Alice, her first cousin on her momma’s side, when she heard Little Preacher yelling to her from down the road.

“Cat! Is Cecil home?”

Cecil and Little Preacher were best friends, but Little Preacher always went out of his way to talk with Cat whenever he came over.

Jane Alice loved to mess with Little Preacher. “Only her friends call her Cat, Little Preacher!” she taunted.

He blushed a bright red and stammered his reply as he stood before them on the front porch. “Uh, I, uh, well, shoot, I thought...”

Jane Alice started to giggle, but Cat jumped in. “Hush, Jane Alice. Little Preacher is one of my best friends.” She hopped out of the swing and gave him a hug.

“Cecil is out back helping Daddy, Little Preacher,” Cat said to him.

Little Preacher’s usual confidence was back, and he beamed a big smile at Cat. He thanked her for the help and then turned to laugh back at Jane Alice, knowing she had gotten him again. He raced to the end of the porch and jumped off in full stride, finding Cecil and Mr. Luker in the garden.

“I think he’s sweet on you, Cat,” Jane Alice commented quietly without taking her eyes off the book she was reading.

“Don’t be silly, Jane Alice,” said Cat, rolling her eyes. “Let’s

go play. Get your nose out of the book before I take it from you!”

“Just you try! You are one to be talking anyway—drawing animal pictures all day!”

They both smiled at each other, as if giving in at the same time, and started to head down the steps.

“I’ll race you to the watermelon patch!” Cat dared Jane Alice, and they both took off running.

Jane Alice knew she couldn’t win, but she enjoyed trying to catch Cat, who seemed to glide across the yard without regard to friction or strain. They saw Little Preacher and Cat’s brothers in the distance helping Cat’s daddy weed the garden. For that, they secretly gave thanks.

Both Little Preacher and Jane Alice had to head home early that day, after a morning of playing with the Luker kids. Little Preacher’s daddy, Preacher Sollie, kept Little Preacher busy around their place and Jane Alice needed to help her momma.

Cat, never at a loss for things to do, worked on her drawings. In her world, the animal characters she drew could leap off the page and play with her—and they could also talk up a storm. That morning, she had been working feverishly on a donkey with a straw hat and a red, paisley handkerchief around his neck. She had named him Donkey-La-Don because she liked the name.

Just as Cat focused on drawing his nostrils and the fine hairs around it, Donkey-La-Don suddenly sneezed and came to life. He ran down the porch like Little Preacher did a few hours before, leaped to the front yard, and kicked up his heels as if wanting to play. Cat laid her art pad aside—the one that her momma had given her for her birthday—and ran to play with the donkey.

Cat’s momma had witnessed countless such events and always covered for Cat by discussing her vivid imagination. She had also seen and heard telltale signs that made her wonder if Cat really could see things that others couldn’t—like unexplainable animal footprints in the sand, faint animal sounds that she couldn’t quite put her finger on, and so on. Some of Cat’s drawings seemed

beyond creative; they looked like visions of the future.

During one such episode, Cat turned to her momma and said, "You are not just a person, Gertrude Leafy Flowers. You are like a Flower Garden."

Gertrude felt a warmth spread in her heart that made her choke up.

"Beautiful flowers will spring from your garden. The Lord has told me and shown me these things!" Cat said.

All Gertrude could do was hug Cat and hold her tight as she sobbed softly.

Donkey-La-Don had a beautiful white spot on his forehead. Cat told him it was a mark from God. The two had stopped playing, and Cat petted him and spoke softly to him to calm the young donkey down.

"You have too much energy, little buddy," she cooed. "The Lord has plans for you."

While Cat's momma could watch the sweet imaginary scenes play out around the house and not give them a second thought, Cat's brothers were a different story. They normally moved around the yard like a tribe of monkeys looking for mischief. It never ceased to amaze them when they stumbled upon their sister talking to herself and waving her hands around like a crazy person.

"Cat!" they yelled in unison. "What the heck are you doing this time?"

Donkey-La-Don scampered off into the woods, and Cat spun around to scold her brothers.

"Mind your own business!" she sputtered, upset that they had broken the spell. She saw them as the monkeys they were and laughed, pointing, calling them Monkey Ears.

The boys almost started another chase, but James, the peacemaker, jumped in.

"Calm down, Cat!" he shouted. "We just want you to play Hide-n-Seek with us!" The boys all agreed, hoping to avoid

another sprint around the countryside.

“Well, that’s fine,” Cat replied, “but just keep your dumb comments to yourself and don’t expect to win!”

Otto rolled his eyes and smiled, appreciating her feisty attitude. He knew it was just a matter of time before they were all fighting again. *You have to love her*, he thought.

Brother John, never one to back down in a competition, decided to add his two-cents’ worth to the discussion.

“Cat, you don’t always win!” he countered.

Little Curtis, the youngest, added, “Yeah, you aren’t the boss-around!” This brought a chuckle from the whole group, as baby-boy Curtis tried to defend his brothers.

“Well, it looks like I always win and that would make me the boss-around here!” she gently replied. She quickly turned and tagged Raymond. “You’re it!” she said to him. “Now, everybody hide!”

The game went on for about an hour. The boys couldn’t find or catch Cat, and everyone eventually had to be It, except her. It didn’t improve the boys’ attitude when she appeared out of nowhere, time and time again, and then sprinted to base. Her brothers even tried to trip her up, so she would be caught but to no avail. Eventually, they had enough and shifted gears to picking a fight.

Otto, the oldest, started it, but Cecil joined in the taunt, having conspired with Otto earlier. They were tired of losing.

“Cat, have you ever been to the Swamp Witch’s shack?” they teased.

“She’s too scared to go down there, Otto! You know better than that!” Cecil added.

This brought laughter from all of the brothers while a couple of them pointed at Cat while they covered their mouths and made chicken-clucking sounds.

Raymond delivered the final blow. “I guess she’s just a Fraidy-Cat!”

The remark made half of the band of brothers roll on the ground laughing. "Fraidy-Cat! Fraidy-Cat!" they chanted together. "Never seen a bigger chicken than that!"

Cat had taken all she could. She shouted, "Well you've never been to the witch's shack! You ain't been there, and I know it!"

"Oh, yes we have! We knocked on the front door!" they said, extending the fib. "But you're too scared to go down there yourself and knock and run! So, go ahead and do it! We DARE you!"

All six brothers started chanting, "We dare you to go down to the witch's house!"

That's all it took.

Cat took off running towards the woods. She wasn't about to let them get the best of her or let them think that she was scared of anything. She was fearless. The brothers looked at each other. Cat had darted off so fast they hadn't had time to tell her they were kidding.

"Cat! Wait! Wait! Waaaaaaaaait!"

But it was too late.

She was out of sight and out of earshot and into the woods faster than their words could reach her. They took off running after her, but they couldn't even see her anymore. There was no way they were going to catch up with her. Once in the woods, she darted down one of her secret trails and was soon deep into the swamp.

All the boys fell to their knees in distress, knowing they had made a terrible mistake, worrying that she might not come back. They each offered up silent prayers.

"Get up!" Raymond insisted. "We have to find her now!" and they headed towards the swamp.

Cat ran, fuming mad, and her mind was running just as fast. She wondered if the Swamp Witch was really a witch and moaned when she realized that some people didn't even believe she was down there. But Cat had a strong feeling she was because she had

been around the area before and she had heard the animals talk about her. Cat liked playing in the woods, so she had an idea of where the witch's house was and how to get there. But she started having reservations. She looked at the swampy woods and the moss on the trees and all the water pools and the algae. It was all yucky. She was worried that maybe she had made a mistake and started worrying about what was hidden around her. She had heard there were alligators and snakes and spiders—and all kinds of other things lurking in the swamp. Since she was little, she and her brothers had been told not to ever, ever go down into the swamp. But she had run down there anyway. Now she was having serious second thoughts.

Suddenly, through the trees, she saw what appeared to be a wisp of smoke curling up from the chimney of an old cottage-like shack. It looked like it might have been a decent place at one time—perhaps a nice tidy home—but now it was run down and scary-looking.

She knew what it was. She knew it was where the Swamp Witch lived.

She took a deep breath. She was bound and determined to do what she'd said she would do to beat the dare. She'd knock on the front door. It didn't look like anybody was there anyway, so she was a bit relieved. It looked dark inside although there was smoke coming up from the chimney. She thought, *What is that?* Maybe it was just fog in the dark woods. Or maybe her eyes were playing tricks on her.

Then she saw a faint light in the shack. As her heart started pounding, she crept up on the front porch. The old boards creaked as she went up to the door. She hesitated, frozen with fear, and then knocked.

Slowly, the door started to open. The hinges and boards groaned along with clawing sounds. She couldn't move with fright. She didn't know what to do.

An old, evil-looking eye peeked around the edge of the door.

It was the old Swamp Witch.

“Who are you?” she asked.

Cat didn’t know what to say, so she just uttered something that sounded like, “I’m a cat.”

The old Swamp Witch said, “Are you a black cat?”

Cat said, “Yes I am,” and tried to act brave.

The witch poked the rest of her head around the doorway, which scared Cat even more. The witch was terribly ugly all the way down to her big warty nose.

“I’ve been lookin’ for a black cat,” said the Swamp Witch. “Will you come into my cottage so we can talk?”

Cat was scared to death. She didn’t know what to do, but she mustered her courage and let herself go inside, shaking like a leaf. She sensed the Swamp Witch was doubtful that she was really a black cat. She was smart enough to see that it scared the witch somewhat. She knew she had to get herself out of there, but she needed to wait for the right chance to escape.

Cat decided her best defense was to act like a crazy cat, so she made a hissing cat sound and, in one leap, jumped onto the Swamp Witch’s kitchen table, baring her claws. The Swamp Witch stumbled back and gasped in fear, totally taken off-guard. She believed that Cat was under some undetermined spell and was there to do her harm. Why else would she brave knocking on her door?

“What do you want from me?” squealed the Swamp Witch.

Cat purred for a cup of warm milk, which confused the witch further. She was thinking of putting a sleeping potion in some tea for Cat in order to take back control. But since Cat wanted milk, she needed to regroup. She scrambled to pour cream from her icebox into a pot and set it on the fire.

“Of course, my sweet little kitty. You can have whatever you want, dear.”

But Cat knew it was a trap. She watched as the witch blocked her view of the fire while secretly pouring a dose of the sleeping

medicine into the milk. The witch even cackled as if she were enjoying the task.

“I like it steaming hot,” Cat purred as she jumped to the floor and brushed up against the witch like a cat making nice. The stench of the Swamp Witch made her gag.

Cat’s movements gave the witch a bit more confidence as she started to believe she would soon have Cat right where she wanted her. *She would be a black cat indeed when she was finished with her*, she thought.

Cat couldn’t stop looking at the Swamp Witch’s hat, which had two peaks with tassels on each tip. It almost looked like a snake tongue, and it mesmerized her as the tassels swayed with the witch’s movement.

As the creamy milk started to steam and foam around the edges, Cat could see a slight swirl of purple in the pan.

“Would you like this in a teacup, darling?” the Swamp Witch asked, licking her lips as if she were about to eat something. “My dear Mum brought this china from England.”

Cat gave her the best English reply she could imagine, playing the part of the tea party guest. “That would be lovely. A large cup, please. I am famished!”

Cat loved to read and tell stories, so it felt like it was just another role to play. But she knew the stakes were high. In her astonishment, the Swamp Witch had failed to latch the door behind her, but Cat sensed her edging in that direction. The witch did want to latch the door and trap her prey, but she waited, having been put to work by Cat. She reached for the larger teacups on the high shelf, secretly happy that Cat would have a larger dose.

When the steaming-hot milk concoction was ready, the Swamp Witch filled the large teacup to the brim and set it on a saucer with a slight clatter that betrayed her nerves. “Just take a sip. Just take one sip,” she almost begged.

Cat had been pacing around the table trying to play her part like a curious cat exploring her new home.

“Could I sleep in that corner?” Cat purred, making the witch’s heart pound in her chest with sinister glee.

“Oh, we will see,” the witch muttered breathlessly, hardly able to contain herself.

Cat knew she had one chance. When the Swamp Witch handed her the hot cup of milk, she looked up into the Swamp Witch’s eyes to gather her full attention. She asked, “Do you want some?” and quickly tossed the whole cup of hot fluid directly in the Swamp Witch’s face.

The scream was horrifying. Cat barely avoided a slashing swipe of the Swamp Witch’s nasty fingernails. Cat threw the cup at the witch, hitting her right between the eyes, causing the witch’s head to snap back and her cherished hat to fall to the floor. Cat grabbed the hat for some unexplained reason and bolted for the door, not daring to look back, even as she heard the witch crumple to the floor. Her gaping, slobbery mouth had taken in enough of the sleeping potion to daze her and send her to her knees.

It would take several minutes for her to recover from her shock, but it didn’t stop her from screaming vile threats as she watched Cat escape.

“I will get you!” she snarled. “Aimwell will be a ghost town! The church will be crushed, and I will destroy your precious Christmas!” she said, unwittingly revealing her secret plans in anger.

Cat was through the door and down the trail so fast it was almost as if she had disappeared, but the threats echoed in the swamp. It dawned on her that this must be what Tubby was trying to warn her about. She knew she needed to talk to him again.

She was running so fast and was so scared that she didn’t realize she was gripping the witch’s hat in her hand. Then the reality set in and she smiled. *I have proof!* she thought, and she jumped in the air, thrusting the hat over her head in celebration. She couldn’t help but think of the verse Little Preacher had told

her:

“Let the wicked fall into their own net, while I escape!”

She couldn’t wait to tell both Little Preacher and Jane Alice about her adventure, but she could feel the snakes and alligators watching her as she ran, and the panic returned. She clutched the witch’s hat as hard as she could.

She started to get winded from the strain of running so hard. It felt like a tight rope was wrapped around her lungs keeping her from breathing. She continued to look over her shoulder, expecting the Swamp Witch to appear on a broom or riding an alligator, and that slowed her progress even more. She would find out soon enough that the Swamp Witch didn’t need a broom to get around.

Cat’s thrill of escape turned to terror as she feared she would never get out of the swamp. There was no doubt in her mind that the Swamp Witch was a real witch.

Further down the trail, she heard splashing sounds and a growling noise that she was convinced was a gator, and it frightened her so much more that she nearly stumbled to the ground. She made a pitiful attempt to call for her brothers.

“Brother, brother,” she cried, weakly at first. Then it dawned on her that they would never let her come down there alone and that gave her strength to yell louder.

“Brother, help me! Help me! Brother!”

Any one of them would be a welcome sight, but she prayed they would all come to help her. She continued to run, hollering as loudly as possible, frequently looking over her shoulder.

Her prayers were answered. John was the first to hear Cat’s voice calling for help. He changed the group’s course to move in her direction.

Cecil bellowed, “Cat, we are coming! Hold on, Cat!”

Cat had never been so happy to hear their voices, and it didn’t take her long for her to find her brothers. Her heart was still beating so fast she could hardly breathe, but she righted

herself and showed them her trophy. At first, they just wanted to hug her and give thanks for her being alive. They really didn't hear what she told them or pay much attention to the hat. When she finally got their attention, and they heard what she had to say, they were skeptical at first. But the detail she described was so vivid and unheard of that they couldn't doubt her anymore.

"Don't tell Momma and Daddy!" she pleaded guiltily as they took turns holding the witch's hat and studying the mystifying details.

The boys were astonished and kept saying over and over, "Cat, you did it! I can't believe you did it!"

Realizing that they were still quite close to the Swamp Witch's cottage, Cecil prompted, "We better run to the house before she comes out of the swamp to get us!"

They all took off running, with Cat leading the pack, the witch's hat clutched in her hands.

Cecil yelled, "Wait a minute, Cat! Wait a minute! Before we get home, don't you think that if Momma sees that hat, she might figure out that you went to the swamp?"

The group stopped at the edge of the yard. An old wooden work table set on posts in the ground stood nearby. They all gathered around the rough table, the brothers looking at her, waiting to hear what she wanted to do. They were proud of her, and they looked to her for direction. After all, she had stolen the witch's hat.

It's true. They had been told repeatedly, "DO NOT GO INTO THE SWAMP!" by their momma and daddy. Gertrude Leafy Flowers had routinely made her feelings about it very clear. "You do not go into that swamp because it is dangerous, and I don't want anybody to get hurt," she insisted.

The more they thought about it, the more they realized they didn't want to get punished. Cecil didn't want to be the one to get blamed for it, thinking, *Cat wouldn't have run down there if you hadn't-a-been teasing her, Cecil!* Raymond and Otto were actually

thinking the same thing. So they huddled for a minute to decide what they were going to do.

They had been raised to do what was right, even if they might get in trouble. But they had to think about it because they were all in shock that Cat had the witch's hat. They couldn't believe how scary the hat looked with its two peaks. It was a blackish green color and had little tassels on both tips. And it had some special, tiny symbols and designs on it, too. They had no idea what the symbols meant, but it stoked their imaginations. They collectively and reluctantly decided they needed to show their momma and daddy the hat and tell them what had happened.



When they laid the hat on the table as they talked it over, the table started to vibrate, and right before their eyes, the Swamp Witch's hat vanished.

It just disappeared.

James was the first to react. "The Swamp Witch has come back to get her hat!" he squealed, which sent them all running in a panic for the safety of the house and their momma's protection.

Cat took off with her brothers, thinking, the Swamp Witch is mad at me for taking her hat. I am in trouble now!

Raymond was the first to confess their sins to his momma, but Gertrude Leafy Flowers was in the middle of her daily chores and not in the mood to listen to a bunch of nonsense from her children.

"Cat, have you been tricking these boys again? You know

what I told you! None of you better get close to that swamp again, you hear me? There is no such thing as a Swamp Witch, and hats just don't vanish! I have never heard such a thing! Now, get out there and sweep the porch!" she said, shaking her head and her finger at the same time.

"Yes ma'am," they all muttered at once, secretly happy that their confession had been dismissed, and looking at each other like they had dodged a bullet.

CHAPTER TWO

AN UNWANTED VISITOR

Cat was worried to death that the Swamp Witch might try to hurt the town of Aimwell and the church. It broke her heart that the woman might be able to destroy their Christmas, too, and she couldn't get the thought of it out of her mind. But Little Preacher had a way of bringing her back to earth.

"Cat, you worry too much, girl. Christmas is months away, and she can't hurt Aimwell!"

But Cat worried anyway; she always did.

Little Preacher told Cat she needed help from the Christmas Spirit.

"You know why it's called the Christmas Spirit? Because there's something good in the Christmas Spirit that can help you, and you need all the help you can get to have a wrestling match with that old Swamp Witch!" He laughed at the sound of his own advice.

Little Preacher and Jane Alice spent a few hours with Cat discussing her visit to the Swamp Witch and her subsequent fears. Jane Alice tried to reassure her that they would help and that things would be all right.

When Cat went to bed that night, she left her window open to allow the breeze to blow in, because it was a bit hot in the house. In the summertime, Cat always opened her window just a little bit to bring fresh air into her room so she could sleep. She loved being under her quilt when the room cooled off, feeling snug and cozy. When she felt good, she fell asleep.

But she awoke in the middle of the night, and the Swamp

Witch was standing there, staring at her. She wasn't sure if she was dreaming or if the image was real. The Witch was pointing and hissing her fingers at Cat like a snake. She was as green as green could be, saying some ugly stuff. Cat sat up in her bed with her back against the headboard and clutching her quilt under her chin. The Swamp Witch stared at her as she came a little closer and closer.

Cat and Little Preacher had discussed splashing the Swamp Witch with holy water from the church baptism pool, but Cat had not done anything to prepare for such a moment. *Why didn't I think about the water?* Cat thought, her mind racing with fear. *If I had just thought about the water!* She had not imagined needing it in her own room. Now the witch was there, and Cat was so scared she tried to scream, but her voice was nowhere to be found. She tried to think what she could do before the Swamp Witch took her, but all she could come up with was, *I wish Little Preacher was here and I wish my momma was here! I wish my Daddy was here. I wish Jane Alice was here!* That's all she could think, over and over again. She was in pure panic.

The Swamp Witch got right up in her face. She crawled up on the bed, got her warty old nose centered on Cat's nose, and stared into her eyes.

"You're in trouble now, little girl!"

BOOM! The door flew open.

Cat's daddy stormed into the room. But nobody was in the room except Cat.

"Girrrlll! What are you screaming about?"

She whispered, "Daddy! There was a Swamp Witch in here!"

He laughed. "Girl there ain't no Swamp Witch in here. You're just having a bad dream. Now go on back to sleep." He tried to calm her, and then he slipped out of the room.

Cat was too wide awake to go back to sleep. She lit her lantern, opened her window a bit more, and stuck her head out

a ways. She chirped for the bluebirds, and they flew up to the windowsill. That made her feel better. The bluebirds were not very dependable, usually. They didn't always do what they were supposed to do, but she liked them because they had some good qualities, too. They could sing and make her feel better.

The birds started chirping a little song just to try to calm her down. She asked them nervously, "Did y'all see the Swamp Witch?"

They said, "She was here, Cat. She was here! And we have secrets to tell."

Cat listened to what they had to say. With her lantern in hand, she looked down to the ground below her window and saw the footprints the Swamp Witch left behind. But as quickly as she looked at it, it cleared away, just like magic.

It sent goosebumps washing over her skin.

"Okay, bluebirds, you've got to go!" And they flew away.

She slammed her window shut and ran over to get in bed. All of a sudden, she felt really, really cold and began wrapping herself up in her quilt. She thought, *The Swamp Witch was just that close!* and she held out her fingers an inch apart. Cat's favorite bluebird, Pokey, had told her that the Swamp Witch was trying to touch the wart on her nose to Cat's nose. She had gotten really close before Cat's daddy came in and saved her.

Cat was overwhelmed by what Pokey and the bluebirds had told her. She hadn't fully grasped what they said until she took the time to think about it all.

"You know what happens if you get touched by the witch's wart?" Pokey had asked. "Listen, she puts a curse on you from her spell book, and she can make you turn into one of her little ghosts. That's what happened to poor Alfred, the little boy from Demopolis that came up missing. She snuck in his room and touched his nose with her wart nose, and he faded into a ghost! He was having a bad dream too. That's the thing about the Swamp Witch. You know, the window wasn't wide open. It was open, just

a little bit, and some sort of swamp-vapor came in through the window, just like magic. Just driftin' in to get you!"

Grownups didn't believe in the Swamp Witch; they just thought she was an old hag who lived out by the swamp and didn't like people coming around to see her. They didn't think that she was a witch at all. But most of the little kids knew that she was—and some had seen her. She was always trying to sneak into the kids' dreams and make them do bad stuff. The kids who weren't nice were her easiest targets, but Cat was really sweet.

Cat's momma thought Cat was special because she helped so much and was so talented. She loved to cook, she helped clean the house, and she did all her chores without being asked. But Leafy—that's what Cat's daddy called Cat's momma—also knew Cat had secrets. She'd watch Cat go off into the woods and talk to the little creatures, imagining all sorts of things. She thought it was kind of peculiar, but not in a bad way, just in a curious way. Cat was always inquisitive about stuff, and she loved to play out in the woods by herself. She was different. Leafy just hoped that it all was just a phase that would pass.

When Johnny came back from checking on Cat, she asked, "What was all the hollerin' about?"

"It was just a bad dream, Leafy," he replied.

"Is she okay, Johnny?" she said sleepily.

"Yep. Just thought there was a Swamp Witch in her room," shaking his head, climbing back into bed.

"Lord help her," Leafy sighed. "That girl's imagination is going to drive her crazy," she said, as they drifted back to sleep, not giving it another thought.

But as much as Cat always tried to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, she knew that the Swamp Witch was up to no good. She figured she was going to try to hurt Aimwell and the church by taking the Good Spirit of Christmas away. The Swamp Witch wanted the Bad Spirit to take over. But Cat made up her mind that she, Jane Alice, and Little Preacher were going to stop the Swamp

Witch, no matter what. She wasn't going to be intimidated.

There had been enough talk, she decided, and it was time for action. She knew from the bluebirds that the Swamp Witch used a spell book, and figured it had to be the source of her power. She determined that the best course of action was to go on the attack and somehow take the spell book from the witch.

She knew she couldn't do it by herself, but she was afraid to get her brothers involved for fear they would tell her momma and daddy. She also knew that none of the grownups in town would believe her. Cat had already sworn Jane Alice and Little Preacher to secrecy so she could talk to them about her fears.

We need to form a secret club and make a plan to go on the attack against the Swamp Witch, she thought. They might decide to add other members later, but the core would start with the three of them.

Her first step would be to sell Jane Alice and Little Preacher on the idea. She felt certain that Little Preacher would be excited about the idea but was worried about Jane Alice, the practical one in the group. Cat thought, *She's almost like one of the grownups sometimes*. She shook her head and laughed as she imagined the look on Jane Alice's face when she pitches her the idea.

After breakfast—a small feast of sausage, biscuits, eggs and grits, fig preserves and butter, and a tall glass of cold milk—Cat gave her momma a hug and told her she was going to go play with Jane Alice.

Gertrude Leafy Flowers instructed her, “You be careful now, you hear? Don't be gettin' Jane Alice in trouble!”

“Yes Ma'am,” Cat replied, thinking, *We aren't going to get in trouble today!*

Cat didn't mention her plans to go see Little Preacher because she didn't want to invite questions and she wasn't sure she could even convince Jane Alice to visit him with her in the first place.

Jane Alice's eyes about popped out of her head when Cat

told her what had happened with the Swamp Witch. Her eyes got even wider when Cat shared her thoughts about planning to attack the Swamp Witch. She had to place her hand over Jane Alice's mouth to keep her momma from hearing her squeal with concern.

"Cat, have you lost your mind? That is the craziest thing I have ever heard you say!"

Cat whispered in a harsh tone for Jane to hush, but Jane Alice's momma had heard them. Aunt Sadie said, "Y'all don't be fussing in there, girls! What in the world are y'all talking about anyway?"

Cat pointed at Jane Alice with her best threatening look. Jane Alice called out to her momma, "We are just play-acting, Momma. Cat wants to be an actress when she grows up!"

Cat shook her head and rolled her eyes as Jane Alice's momma praised her.

"Thank you, Ma'am!" Cat replied, and Jane Alice grinned.

Cat gave her the *let's go outside* gesture, so Jane Alice let her momma know they were leaving as they headed towards the back door.

With a little more arm-twisting and sincere pleading, Cat convinced Jane Alice that what she was proposing would be a noble cause. Saving Aimwell and the church was more than enough reason for them to take action, never mind that Christmas was at stake, too. The idea of starting a secret club was her best selling point, and Cat, seeing Jane Alice respond favorably to the idea, put more emphasis on that detail to close the deal. She also made a mental note to lead with that point when they went to talk to Little Preacher. She didn't think he would be as tough a sell as Jane Alice, but she never knew with him. He could be unpredictable.

"Let's go see Little Preacher before it gets too late. We'll see if he has ideas about where we can hold our secret meetings!" said Cat.

Jane Alice let her momma know where they were going and whispered in her ear, "Little Preacher is sweet on Cat!" The remark put a big smile on her momma's face and a look of concern on Cat's.

"What did you tell her, Jane Alice?" Cat demanded as they headed down the road on foot to Little Preacher's house.

"I just told her you were sweet on Little Preacher and you wanted to go see him!" she said, laughing, and then she took off running down the road.

Cat stopped and put her hands on her hips, sputtered a little, and could only yell, "That's not true!" as she watched Jane Alice run for her life.

Cat gave her a reasonable head start and then chased her like a cheetah after a rabbit. The race got them to Little Preacher's in no time, and all was forgiven by the time they arrived. Jane Alice admitted she was just teasing in order to avoid a sharp punch in the arm from her friend.

Little Preacher's house had a simple fence around the front yard and sat across the road from Aimwell Baptist Church. They ran around to the main gate and entered the front yard of the house, slowing down as they approached the front door. Both of them knew Preacher Sollie and Mrs. Sollie very well, so there wasn't an ounce of concern as they asked to see Little Preacher. They just wanted to collect themselves and catch their breath.

"Well, hello girls! What a pleasant surprise," Mrs. Sollie said with a smile. "Are you here to see Little Preacher?" she asked even before they could explain themselves.

"Yes ma'am," they both replied. "We want to see if he has time to play."

"Well come on in girls, and I will find him for you."

They made themselves comfortable in the front room and waited. They could hear Little Preacher's momma calling for him out the back door, and it wasn't long before they heard him coming up the back steps.

Little Preacher could tell the girls wanted to talk in private. “Hey, let’s go outside and play!” he said right away. “I want to show you what Grand Paw Sam and I are building.”

Preacher Sollie’s daddy lived with them and ran a woodshop they had on the property, at the foot of a hill and to the right of the house. When they were out of earshot of his momma, Little Preacher asked, “What’s up?”

Cat had already told him most of the story surrounding the Swamp Witch, so when she launched into the story of the Swamp Witch coming into her room, he wasn’t totally taken aback.

“You’re lucky to still be here, Cat!”

“Well, I agree, and that is why I am here. I need your help,” she began. “Jane Alice and I want to form a secret club. We want to find a hiding place where we’ll be safe to discuss plans to take the Swamp Witch’s spell book.”

Little Preacher cocked his head to one side, making sure he heard Cat right.

“What can I do to help? I am ready!”

Cat and Jane Alice beamed their biggest smiles and hugged Little Preacher, making him blush. “We knew we could depend on you, Little Preacher!” they said at once.

They decided to hold off on any further discussions until they had visited the shop and visited with Grand Paw Sam. The girls wanted to see what was going on in the shop. Grand Paw Sam and Little Preacher were always making neat things for the kids to play with.

Cat loved going in the shop. It always smelled of fresh wood and of coffee brewing on a wood burning stove. She especially liked the cedar wood smell; it made everything feel clean. When they reached the main shop area, there was a shop table in the center of the room with the neatest go-cart the girls had ever seen, almost finished and ready for paint.

Little Preacher called out to his Grand Paw Sam and told him Cat and Jane Alice were here to visit. Grand Paw Sam laughed

when he saw the girls' faces as they spotted the go-cart.

"Do you want to take it for a spin?" he asked, pointing to the small vehicle.

"Heck, yeah!" they replied. "As soon as it is ready."

They spent the next hour looking it over and oohing and aawing about all the details. It had a chain drive, a sprocket with pedals to drive the rear wheels, and a real steering wheel to make turns. And a horn! The spoke wheels were brand new, and the body of the go-cart was sanded perfectly smooth. It was a one-of-a-kind masterpiece as far as the kids were concerned, and Grand Paw Sam was loving all the praise.

"When can we drive it, Grand Paw Sam?" Jane Alice asked in excitement.

"Well," he told them, "I have another couple of days' work to do with the paint and the seat, but it will be ready soon."

The kids took another circle around the shop table and then told Grand Paw Sam, "Good job!" as they headed out the door.

"Let's go up The Hill to The Spot," Little Preacher suggested. With that, they turned around and ran out the door to the back side of the shop, climbed the fence, and started working their way up the steep slope in the direction of The Spot.

Cat had been to The Spot on The Hill with Little Preacher and her brother Cecil several times before, but she wasn't sure if Jane Alice had. It took some doing and some experience with the path to get there, or it would be too hard to find since a huge hedge surrounded it.

"Jane Alice, have you been up there before?" Little Preacher asked.

"No, but I've heard about it from Cat."

Little Preacher cut his eyes at Cat. "She was sworn to secrecy!" she responded.

"Okay, I was just checking," Little Preacher grinned as they continued to make their way. "Not many folks know about the place, and I want to keep it that way."

“Are you thinking about it for our secret meeting place?” Cat asked.

“Not exactly, but I want to talk to you about the place I do have in mind and make sure we have an understanding. We can also discuss the plan up there today, while I work on the other place. I need to give it some thought, though, because I might get in trouble with Daddy if we aren’t careful.”

They worked their way up The Hill and found a narrow path through the briars and hedges. To Jane Alice, it felt like they were going around in a circle. When they were done climbing upward, the path opened to The Spot, a small circular clearing with a nice carpet of grass. The hedge and surrounding pines were so thick, it felt like an enclosed room with a perfect window to the sky.

Jane Alice was taken by the beauty of it all and thanked Little Preacher. “This is a perfect place!” she gasped and squeezed Cat’s hand. “Thank you for sharing this with me. I love it here.”

“You should see it at night when all the stars are out,” chimed Cat. “Now you understand why Little Preacher is so protective of this place. It’s as if God touched His finger down right here, just for us! That is what Preacher Sollie told us,” Cat continued.

“Well, I promise I will never tell a soul,” Jane Alice affirmed. “I am just happy to be here. Promise you will bring me back to see the stars?”

“We will,” Little Preacher and Cat promised together.

“Okay, let’s get down to business,” Little Preacher commanded, taking a page from his daddy’s script that he had heard umpteen times before.

They sat cross-legged in the center of the circle and faced one another in a perfect triangle around a center stone that had been meticulously placed, decades before, by some unknown party.

Little Preacher took on a serious tone.

“What I am about to tell you is never to be shared with anyone at any time. Is that clear?”

Cat and Jane Alice nodded their heads. Neither of them could remember Little Preacher being so solemn.

“I just want to make sure you understand that I could get into big trouble—we all could—if this gets out. If I am going to be part of this mission, I want us all to take an oath that we will never let each other down.”

As he made his speech, he pulled a pocketknife from his overall pocket and opened it up, exposing a sharp-tipped blade.

“I’ll prick our fingers and we will each place a drop of blood on the center of the center stone. This will be our contract with each other, our promise to one another that we are a team, forever, and that our secrets are safe. After this is done and agreed upon, I will tell you my biggest secret.”

Cat looked over at Jane Alice to see her reaction. It was clear from her raised eyebrows that she was a bit scared, but, to Cat’s surprise, she stuck her finger out and said, “Me first!”

Cat laughed, “Look at you, being brave! I’m in too!” she declared.

“Well, I guess we have a deal,” said Little Preacher.

The small blade had a pin-point tip that made the smallest of punctures in their three fingers. The tiny drops of blood that they squeezed out were placed on the center of the stone, making an interesting heart shape that Cat couldn’t help but point out.

“Look, this is a sign for us! We must maintain hearts of love in all that we do.”

As the blood promise dried, Little Preacher took a deep breath and confessed, “I never intended to tell anyone about the secret place that I found—but it’s in the church!”

Cat and Jane Alice both clasped their hands together and almost shouted, but they hushed themselves just in time. “Did you find the secret room that everyone says is just an old-wives’ tale?” said Cat.

Jane Alice jumped in before he could respond, saying, “That will be perfect, Little Preacher! That is amazing. How did you

find it?”

Little Preacher was pleased with himself and briefly told them how long it had taken to locate it. “It would take all day to explain how I found it, but I promise I will give you all the details when we have time. Maybe we should just go on over there so I can show you. We still have time before it gets dark. I was thinking about waiting a few days before I made the decision, but I know I can trust you both and this is for a good cause. It’s God’s work, so let’s get started! We can discuss the specifics of our plan in our first meeting in the secret room!” They jumped up, took one last look around The Spot, said a silent prayer of thanks, and dashed off to the church.

It was common for kids to play in the large front grounds of the church. It was a gathering place for all sorts of sporting events, from football to baseball and everything in between.

Little Preacher reminded them, “No one will give a second thought to us playing around the church or visiting the cemetery or going inside to pray or play. We just need to be careful to guard the entrance to the secret room when we enter. It will be easier now that there are three of us to stake out a watch for unwanted visitors.”

The girls were impressed with Little Preacher’s thought process. He had clearly labored over the details of how to get in and out of the secret room without being detected, and they didn’t want to let him down, so they followed his instructions to a tee.

Given the age of the church and the number of times it had been added on to, Little Preacher had reasoned that the original hidden room entrance might have changed to a different entry point. He figured that the space would be located at the foundation or basement level and that its entryway might start upstairs to make it even harder to find. It took some time and some luck, but his hunch was eventually proven correct. He located a narrow passageway behind a decorative panel that didn’t look like it could

possibly connect to a larger space. Being narrow, anyone passing through would have to be rather small. However, once inside the room, one could open a large panel, which looked like a masonry wall, from the foundation level outside to allow larger people to enter. It was quite sophisticated for a small country church and probably the work of some of the German and Norwegian settlers in the area at the time.

Little Preacher made a great show of guarding the key positions in the church while Cat and Jane Alice gave “all clear” signals and then they slipped through the panel and moved down the dark, narrow stairwell to the secret room. Little Preacher had a candle ready to guide them through the dark, and he quickly lit a lantern when they reached the room. They had to be silent as they descended the steps, which had been cleverly padded and were thankfully squeak-free.

Once they were in the room and the stairwell door was closed, Little Preacher gave the signal that it was safe to speak in a hushed tone that he demonstrated.

“Oh, my goodness!” Jane Alice exclaimed. “This is just unbelievable, Little Preacher! Good job!”

Cat was equally excited. “This is perfect.”

“Let the meeting begin,” smiled Little Preacher. “Let the meeting begin.”

After thanking Little Preacher for the tenth time, Cat took the lead. “After the Swamp Witch came into my room, I was scared to death, but when I woke up the next morning and prayed about it, I felt a calm peace come over me. I knew it was time to act. We can’t sit here and let the Swamp Witch attack Aimwell and the church and destroy Christmas in the process. We need to go on the offensive and try to take her spell book away from her because I think that is the source of her power. We need a plan!”

Jane Alice and Little Preacher were past the point of trying to change Cat’s mind. They told her they needed to give serious thought to all the dangers in the swamp, not to mention the

Swamp Witch.

Little Preacher illustrated the point by discussing his own fears. “Cat, I am with you all the way, but no snakes. No snakes!” He was nearly shouting as he waved his arms in front of him. “You know I can’t stand snakes, and I know they’re all over the place in the swamp!”

“Listen,” said Cat, “there are dry paths—they’re narrow in places, but they’re still dry—that we can follow all the way to the Swamp Witch’s cottage. We can wear boots and dress appropriately to protect ourselves. If we move fast, we can be in and out of there before anything happens. I’ve been there and back and survived. After the scare she gave me the other night, the last thing she expects is for me to come back. It will be like a surprise attack!”

Jane Alice supported Cat’s logic but didn’t have the same degree of enthusiasm. She started to think about her own fears. “Maybe we can wear black so we’re not seen and put on our fastest running clothes,” she offered weakly.

Little Preacher started coming around, muttering something about anti-snake gear with boots and gloves, but Cat knew she had her work cut out for her to get them both on board.

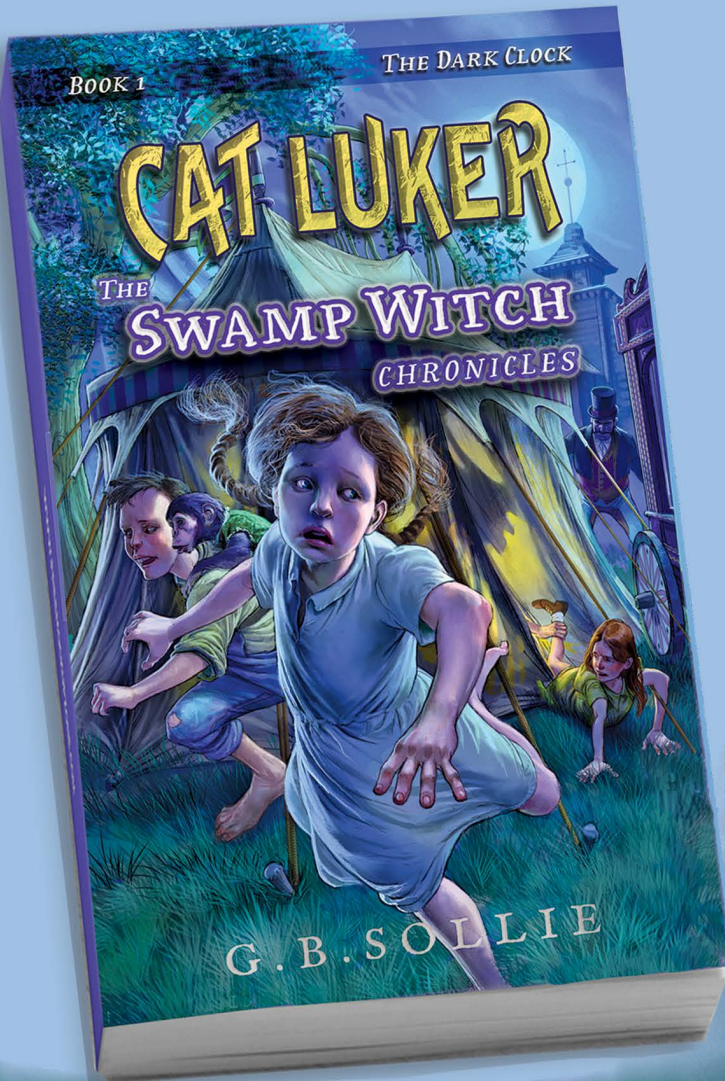
The three of them debated the plan for a couple of hours and agreed to do some “homework” before they charged into the swamp. Then they headed for home.

G.B. Sollie

A Journey to the Light



Bible Study Guide and Companion to



TESTIMONIALS

A Journey to the Light *Bible Study Guide and Companion to-* **Cat Luker: The Swamp Witch Chronicles**

It's really great! I think students who attend a study like this will really benefit from the ideas you lay out in the guide. So excited for you and the ways God is leading you through this project.



Cory Osborne
MIDDLE SCHOOL: MS Group Director
Woodstock City Church

A Middle Grade Reader-

Cat, Little Preacher, and Jane Alice felt like friends by the time I finished the book. It was an amazing adventure!

Lucy

A Mother's Feedback-

I enjoyed talking to my daughter about this story as she shared bits and pieces of the adventures. It has sparked questions about God and creation, and good versus evil. She loves Cat!

Whitney

From a Big Fan-

Some memories are fleeting while others are chiseled in stone. Values are fleeting these days, and the ones you pray your children hold close and remember are being pulverized to dust by our current culture. Our children need a sound foundation in this shifting world, and it is waiting for them in Aimwell. This book and companion Bible Study Guide provides a hard link to the past and the values of the Greatest Generation. Please don't let your kids miss it!

Continue to Seek God!

Pastor Pete

A Journey to the Light

A Bible Study Guide and Companion to

**Cat Luker: The Swamp
Witch Chronicles**

G. B. SOLLIE



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Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Seek God!

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Bible Study Guide for *The Dark Clock*, Book 1 of *Cat Luker: The Swamp Witch Chronicles*, Christian Fantasy series.

Let me warn you: this is not a typical Bible study guide! Here, you will need to use your imagination and place yourself in the characters' shoes. As you do, you will be faced with situations that might be scary and confusing. Your mission is to grasp the Christian symbolism and opportunities for understanding and relate them to your life's journey. Those that do will thrive!

I love to read. I've enjoyed many adventures in my life—through the books I've read—and they have inspired me and given me confidence and courage to take daring steps in my real life. For example, the book *The Hobbit* begins with a step into an adventure. That is how life works: you have to take that first step.

From a very young age, I wanted to read the Bible from front to back. I tried a few times, but I inevitably ran out of steam. I had not prepared myself for the journey. I did not realize that I needed to do more than read; I needed to seek God. What a wonderful life it has been since then.

As you go through this Guide, please realize that you are seeking God.

Did you know that the Bible is filled with fantastic creatures? From giants and terrifying cherubim to leviathan sea monsters and dragons, not to mention witchcraft, wizards, and magicians, the Bible is rich with strange and amazing characters. You will find that amazing characters will appear in your life as well—and not all will be fantastic. The world is filled with good and evil. At some point in your life, you will have to confront evil and make decisions about what action you want to take to deal with it. It's a good idea to surround yourself with those things that might help you face these situations—friends, family, scripture, education, and good habits. Many excellent examples of these are illustrated in this book, but they are not always obvious. So, be on the lookout!



The people that were the inspiration for *Cat Luker: The Swamp Witch Chronicles* grew up in the Great Depression of the 1930s, an extremely difficult period of time in America. It was even more difficult in the rural South, where times had already been hard. Without jobs or much money, people had to live off the land, raise their own food, and make things by hand. The children had to use their imaginations to entertain themselves—and going on adventures was a popular option. When those children grew into adulthood, they became known as the Greatest Generation because of the many difficulties they had overcome. It is clear that God was with them, and they prospered, but it was not easy. There are lessons to be learned

from these strong souls. They built their lives on a foundation of faith, with seven foundational elements:

- Courage—Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The courage to believe.
- Focused discipline—Hard work, patience, perseverance, and self-control. The discipline to seek God.
- Honesty—Integrity, fairness, trust, and truthfulness.
- The value of freedom—Understanding and appreciating their Bill of Rights.
- Personal responsibility—Being a good team player. Owning up.
- Ambitious ingenuity—Taking risks, trying to grow, and being creative. Using their God-given talents.
- Love-based compassion—Embracing the teachings of Jesus. Standing up for others.

These are attributes we should all embrace and strive for.

Aimwell, the town where *Cat Luker* is set, is a real place. Many now call it “God’s Country,” but back then, evil was at work there, trying to destroy what God had made. The area’s history is amazing—so much so that it is sometimes hard to tell where the history ends and the fantasy begins. But you will discover that as you take the journey!

In this fictional story, Cat Luker, the title character, and her two closest friends, Little Preacher and Jane Alice, lead the journey to the light and the battle to save Aimwell. But the characters are inspired by real people in real life. Their names and nicknames stuck with them, and although some of their exploits in this story are fictitious, their lives were equally astonishing.

As I've asked you to be mindful of seeking God as you work through this Guide, know that the real-life Cat and Little Preacher remained faithful to that practice for as long as they lived. I got to see it firsthand, since they were my parents. And they made an amazing difference in this world, and I know you can as well.

God be with you!

Note: If you are reading this on a device, grab a pen and paper!

LESSON #1



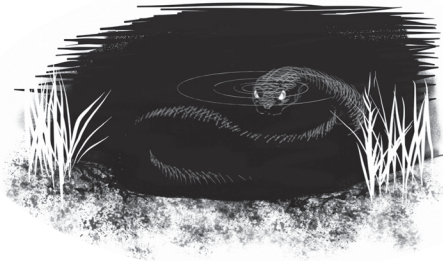
READING ASSIGNMENT:

Before starting this lesson, read PROLOGUE —
THE GREAT SNAKE in *Cat Luker: The Swamp Witch
Chronicles* and the Introduction to this Bible Study Guide



PROLOGUE THE GREAT SNAKE

Before the story of *The Swamp Witch Chronicles* begins, the Prologue makes it clear that there is evil in the story and, symbolically, in this world. The Great Snake is introduced in a fashion similar to the introduction of the serpent in Genesis. In Genesis 3:14, after the serpent tricked Eve into eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and then gave it to Adam, the Lord confronted the serpent.



*And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou
hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and
above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou
go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.*

Genesis 3:14

The swamp in the story reflects the Garden of Eden after the fall of man, when Adam and Eve lost their innocence. The Great Snake rules now. The swamp is just the opposite of the garden. It represents all the world's evil; it is the opposite of a place of peace and beauty. The Swamp Witch, still a child in the Prologue, grows into a great evil in her own right and is one of the Great Snake's followers.

In the Prologue, the Swamp Witch's mother tries to sacrifice her to the Great Snake, but the Great Snake tricks the mother and the child. In the world, when evil took root after the fall, it was not uncommon for people to sacrifice their children to pagan gods. Molech is a Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice—also known as Baal. The servants of Molech sought favor this way. The laws given to Moses by God forbade Jews to practice this ritual.

*And thou shalt not let any of thy children pass
through the fire to Molech.*

Leviticus 18:21

God was clearly against child sacrifice, but He asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac!

*And it came to pass after these things, that God did
tempt Abraham,
And said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold,
here I am.
And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac,
whom thou lovest and get thee into the land of
Moriab; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon
one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*

Genesis 2:1-2

This was a test of Abraham's faith and a clear prophecy of Jesus, the Lamb of God, coming to die for the sins of mankind. God provided his Son, Jesus. Abraham was prepared to provide Isaac. Both Jesus and Isaac carried the instruments of their death—a cross and a bundle of firewood—on their backs up a mountain to be sacrificed. In the end, God provided Abraham with a ram instead of Isaac, and scripture shows that Abraham knew God's goodness would prevail. But Jesus died for our sins and served as our substitute to give us everlasting life.

Symbolism is used throughout the Bible to communicate important principles and to point to the future—to the coming of Jesus, the Promised One. Before we begin to study the main story, our journey to the light, let's review a few important points and questions.

REVIEW

Points from Reading Assignment:

1. In all things, we should _____ God.
2. There are _____ and _____ in the world.
3. _____ is used throughout the Bible.

Questions: (Some of these answers can be found in your Bible.)

1. Is the serpent Satan in the Book of Genesis in the Bible or is it in the Prologue of the book? Or is Satan manipulating the serpent(s) for his purpose? Explain your answer:

2. What are other symbolic ways that God promised to send Jesus in the Old Testament?

3. Abraham's faith was tested. How has your faith been tested?

For this lesson, please use
the **QR CODE** to access the
suggested Journey Activities.



LESSON #2



READING ASSIGNMENT:

CHAPTER ONE —THE DARE

and

CHAPTER TWO — AN UNWANTED VISITOR



CHAPTER ONE THE DARE

Now, let's jump to the New Testament.

Chapter One of *Cat Luker* starts with a vaguely familiar introduction: “Many have tried...” This is a nod to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1, Verses 1-4. To me, Luke is the most beautiful gospel; it tells the story of Jesus like none other. This beginning of the chapter is also a testament to Catherine (Cat), who gave her life to Jesus with her whole heart.

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1: 1-4

Here it is in the chapter:



Many have tried to record what happened in that God-forsaken swamp, just as it was handed down from the beginning by those with firsthand knowledge. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything, it seemed a good idea for me to write an orderly account for you, most dear Catherine. My prayer is that others may know with certainty the wondrous things that you have done for your beloved.

Cat's "beloved" is Jesus, followed closely by Little Preacher and Cat's family. Luke's beloved is also Jesus, and he goes to great pains to tell the story of the Son of God. In both cases, these stories border on being hard to believe. In today's terms, you have to dive deep to fully understand.

Chapter One sets the stage for what is to follow. After being introduced to Cat, her friends, her family, and the story's setting, you learn that Cat faces a dare that will change her life forever. As the Luke-styled preamble indicates, the God-forsaken swamp is waiting. This is a reminder that there is evil in this world, and you never know what circumstances might put you face-to-face with the dark side.

In Cat's case, a simple dare from her brothers ignites her pride and anger (two of the seven deadly sins) and plunges her into a battle for life itself!

Cat is gifted with a variety of unique qualities—speed, keen eyesight, amazing artistic abilities, the power to speak with animals, and visions that defied understanding, among others. In Biblical times, Jesus demonstrated his own amazing abilities and, in turn, gifted his disciples to perform miracles. In modern times, God has gifted people with great skills and capabilities that fit their purpose in life, such as being a doctor, musician, inventor, athlete, or other profession. All gifts can be used for good or evil. Satan has been known to tempt people and to use their gifts—and their ego—as a lever to manipulate them into doing things that are not good. To choose to use one's gifts for the good of mankind instead of using them for selfish gain is an indication of great character.

Still, even with all of her gifts, Cat finds herself nearly trapped in the clutches of evil as the Swamp Witch plots to capture her in the cottage. But Cat escapes.



She was running so fast and was so scared that she didn't realize she was gripping the witch's hat in her hand. Then reality set in, and she smiled. *I have proof!* she thought, and she jumped in the air, thrusting the hat over her head in celebration. She couldn't help but think of the verse Little Preacher had told her:

Let the wicked fall into their own net, while I escape!

Psalms 141:10

This verse rings true through the ages and should serve as a warning whenever wicked temptation creeps into your life. Be on guard because, as another valuable verse points out:

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

1 Peter 5:8

CHAPTER TWO

AN UNWANTED VISITOR

Trouble sometimes comes looking for us. Don't doubt for a minute that Satan can send trouble in your direction in the form of temptation, greed, or any number of other tricks that might be disguised, like a wolf in sheep's clothing, as good. But when the Swamp Witch boldly invades Cat's space, there's no trickery; it is just a full-on assault! Cat isn't expecting the visit, and she isn't prepared for it, either. Her "Holy Water" is not in place to help her defend herself.

There is a lesson here. Knowing you will face the enemy at some point in your life, you need to be prepared. It's no different from making plans in case a tornado hits your home, a fire breaks out, or any number of other possible disasters strike. You need a plan. And you need to put things in place to support the plan. Think about it as "spiritual warfare"—you are fighting for your spiritual life. That is what Cat does as she motivates Little Preacher and Jane Alice to prepare to confront the threat of the Swamp Witch.

But Cat isn't content to be passive and just put things in place to defend herself. She wants to go on the offensive and

remove the threat altogether, and she believes that the Swamp Witch's power comes from her spell book.

It's important to note that Cat doesn't try to "go it alone" in this situation. She wants to form a Christian alliance to solve the problem. That's a lesson for all of us, as well; we should never hesitate to reach out for help when we're confronted with problems, large or small. As the saying goes, two heads are better than one. The Bible advises:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Matthew 18:20

In other words, the more the merrier. But it is even better to bring Jesus into the circle to guide decision-making. Cat, Jane Alice, and Little Preacher put their heads together and pray for guidance. Once they do that, they receive the message that they need to act boldly in the face of evil. Of course, Cat is the one that delivers the message, but it takes some arm-twisting to convince her friends:



After thanking Little Preacher for the tenth time, Cat took the lead. "After the Swamp Witch came into my room, I was scared to death, but when I woke up the next morning and prayed about it, I felt a calm peace come over me. I knew it was time to act. We can't sit here and let the Swamp Witch attack Aimwell and the church and destroy Christmas in the process. We need to go on the offensive and try to take her spell book away from her because I think that's the source of her power. We need a plan!"

Sometimes it's hard to determine what God wants you to do. That's not because God doesn't have a clear message; it's because we often have our own agendas. We want God to tell us what we want to hear, not the hard truth, which can be painful. On top of that, our confusion can be multiplied in a group setting. Don't be surprised if sometimes it takes days or weeks of prayer and discussion to feel that you've clearly gotten a message. But once you do, it's time to act. You might make mistakes, you might stumble, and you might still be confused and scared, but if you move forward, God will be with you.

REVIEW

Points from Chapter One:

1. The devil prowls like a _____.
2. Let the _____ fall into their own net.
3. Cat's beloved is _____.

Questions: (Some of these answers can be found in your Bible.)

1. Do you think God places people in certain situations to move them in the direction he wants them to go? The “dare” Cat’s brothers gave her is an example. Have you had that experience? Write about it.

2. Great personal gifts sometimes seemingly appear at birth, while sometimes they take time to develop in a person. Do you have gifts that could positively impact the world? Spoiler alert: We all do! What dreams like that do you have?

3. Have you ever tried to play a trick on someone, but it backfired? What happened? How did the Swamp Witch's plans backfire on her?

Points from Chapter Two:

1. Sometimes _____ comes looking for you.
2. When disaster strikes, you should already have a _____.
3. Sometimes it is hard to determine what _____ would have you do.

Questions: (Some of these answers can be found in your Bible.)

1. Have you ever found yourself unprepared to face the enemy?

2. Cat and her friends are engaged in “spiritual warfare” as they battle the Swamp Witch. Do some Biblical research in Ephesians and document the full armor of God. What is spiritual warfare, and what weapons are needed for it?

3. Matthew 18:20 says: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” What does that mean to you? What does it mean in the context of its surrounding verses?

For this lesson, please use
the QR CODE to access the
suggested Journey Activities.



NOTES: