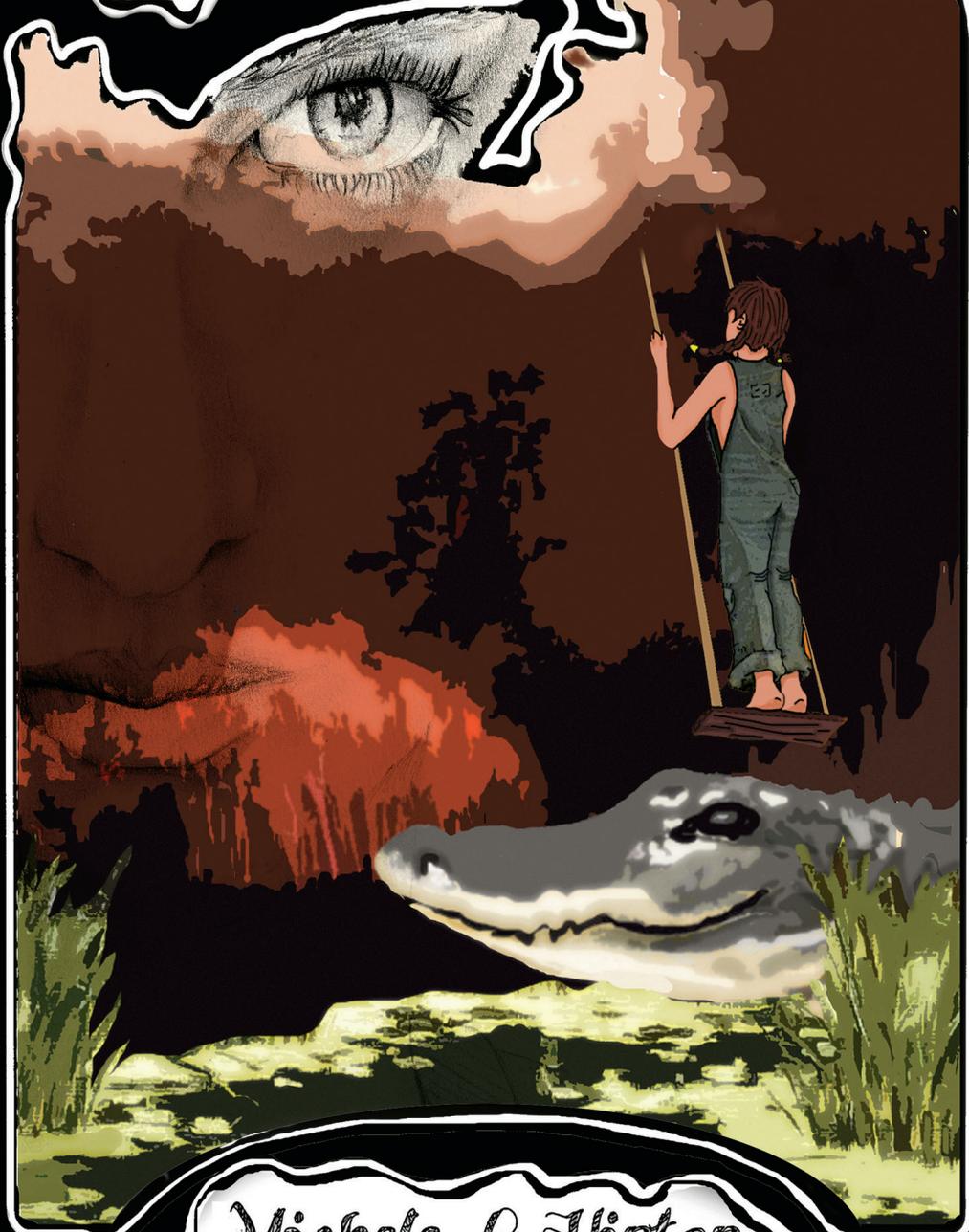


*The Sin-Eater's
Daughter*



Michele L. Hinton

The Sin-Eater's Daughter

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Dedicated

To

Kim Bussey

AKA Purrfect Tale

A wonderful author and friend.
Though we've never met face to face,
she followed this story with great interest and
became involved with the characters.
Thanks for your valuable comments.

A Very Special Thanks

To Michael Smith Hester
and Brian Durski for their
touching comments about this novel
as well as their contributions
in assisting me to polish it.

The Sin-Eater's
Daughter

By: Michele L. Hinton

Chapter 1

Year 1847 – Black Water Swamp

The sounds of the night filled the cool air of Black Water Swamp. Bullfrogs croaked their love songs to any female that would listen. The hissing of a snake echoed in the breeze as it was about to acquire a meal. Leaves rustled on the trees, and dead branches fell to the ground. The chaos of the night sounds blended together as a soothing noise. Suddenly everything stopped. The quiet was deafening.

Paloma awoke from her sleep and drew a deep breath. She sat up and looked at her husband, Benjamin. He was sleeping peacefully. She slipped out of bed and headed for the kitchen. After taking a small pouch of herbs from the cupboard, she put a shawl around her shoulders and went outside. The moon was full and a dark, thin cloud, shaped like a crooked finger, stretched across its face and pointed downward.

Benjamin was aroused from his sleep by the smell of smoke and found his wife missing from his side. He adjusted the patch he wore over his dead right eye, got up and went to the door. He saw her sitting on a log bench looking into a fire. As he leaned against the doorframe and stared at her for a moment, he thanked heaven for her presence in his life. She was the only bright spot in his existence. Though he was a man kept at a distance by the town's people he served, he was also the envy of every man in it, for Paloma was the definition of beauty, whereas he was the beast - just as in the fabled story. He left the porch and sat down beside her.

"Something's bothering you." Benjamin brushed a strand of black hair behind her ear and put an arm around her. "I've seen this look on you before."

Paloma looked lovingly into his good right eye and caressed his scarred

cheek with her hand. She turned back to the fire, took a pinch of herbs from the leather pouch and tossed them in. They sizzled and crackled in the flames, and a ringlet of smoke circled upward. "A child was born tonight." She looked up at the sky. "He was born under a bad moon. Life will be hard for this boy."

Benjamin watched the finger-like cloud dissipate. "I'm sure there were several children born this night. Does that mean all of them will have misfortune?"

Paloma took another pinch from the pouch and threw it into the fire. "No, I just see this one."

He didn't doubt what she said. They had been married for fifteen years, and her predictions were, for the most part, spot on. She was rarely wrong. Being of Gypsy descent, he figured she came by it naturally. Her family had come to America years ago and traveled most of her childhood. She had inherited her grandmother's gift of prognostication. Her father had been a physician of sorts, who had taught her all he knew about healing and medicinal herbs. They would go from town to town telling fortunes and selling her father's remedies. Most people called his elixirs and powders "snake oil," but Paloma had told him that her father's medicines had true curative abilities, unlike the other peddlers whose remedies were equivalent 90 proof gin.

"Will this child of misfortune have anything to do with us?" Benjamin asked.

Paloma threw another pinch of herbs into the flame. She closed her eyes momentarily and hesitated before answering. She gave him a sad smile "It's unclear."

Benjamin felt a chill in the air and shivered slightly. "What do you say we go back to bed and warm each other? I don't want you to catch your death out here." They both stood. "You go on in. I'll put out the fire."

Paloma did as her husband asked. She put away her pouch of herbs and leaned against the cupboard. A single tear rolled down her cheek. She couldn't bring herself to tell him that his death would signal the arrival of this boy.

New Orleans – Same Night

A child was born under the light of a full moon in the city of New Orleans. The mid-wife put the child in his mother's arms. Hattie was counting his

little fingers and toes as her husband came into the room. He knelt down beside the bed.

“He’s beautiful!” exclaimed the new father as he kissed his wife on the forehead.

Hattie kissed her son. “Have you decided on a name?”

John Lucas took his son in his arms. “I’ll call him after my father – Jedidiah Lucas.”

For the next five years, good fortune and happiness smiled on the Lucas family, until John came down with a fever. Upon his deathbed, John made his wife promise to remarry. Even though he’d secured enough money for his wife and son to live modestly for many years, he wanted her to give his son a father who would teach him how to be a good man.

Hattie was a comely woman with light, curly brown hair and green eyes. A year after John’s death, she put away her black mourning dress. Though she would have been content to stay the widow of John Lucas, he was right. Jedidiah needed a good father figure to emulate.

Several men came to call on the Widow Lucas. One of her suitors was very persistent. Homer Bedlam, to her, seemed to be a good man. He lavished Hattie and Jedidiah with gifts and never uttered a harsh word to either of them. Her other callers seemed to be shy or standoffish where her son was concerned, so she consented to marry Mr. Bedlam when the boy turned seven.

Shortly after the wedding, Homer Bedlam showed his true nature. He was a harsh and jealous man. If another man ventured to say good-day to Hattie, Homer would accuse her of infidelity, and she’d receive a beating. Eventually, she wasn’t allowed out of the house without him accompanying her. Jedidiah often tried to protect his mother from Mr. Bedlam’s wrath, but would receive a smack from the back of his hand whenever he tried.

Jedidiah and his mother did their best to not upset Mr. Bedlam, but as time passed, he became angry with Hattie for not producing him a son of his own. Nothing she did pleased him. He’d started drinking more, and the small fortune that Hattie’s deceased husband had amounted was practically gone. It had become evident to her that Mr. Bedlam only married her for her inheritance, but there was nothing she could do about it. To others, he presented himself as a loving, devout husband and stepfather, but such was not the case. He was a cruel and unforgiving man.

In June of 1861, Jedidiah turned fourteen. He was forced to quit school and went to work for Haskill & Son's Wheelwright. He figured it would take him about a year to save enough money to take his mother away. He saved a few cents from his pay and gave it to his mother to hide for safekeeping. The rest he was ordered to turn over to his stepfather. "You're old enough to pay your own way in my house," is what Mr. Bedlam had said.

The day after Jedidiah received his first week's wages his stepfather came to Mr. Haskill's shop and inquired about the amount of money he'd paid him. Mr. Bedlam told the man that he just wanted to make sure his stepson was being paid fairly, but Jedidiah had already foreseen that possibility and asked his employer to tell his stepfather the amount – less the few pennies he'd set aside for his mother. Mr. Haskill didn't like or trust Homer Bedlam and agreed to the boy's request.

Homer Bedlam kept a close eye on the boy. Jedidiah was becoming taller and stronger, and he predicted that one day, he would no longer have control over Hattie's son. When war broke out between the states, the heartless man saw his opportunity to be rid of him. Soldiers were in New Orleans enlisting the aid of men to join the Confederacy. Homer slipped a few dollars into the pocket of one of the officers, and Jedidiah was forced into the army.

Chapter 2

1865 - Four Years Later...

Jedidiah fought in the war for almost a year. After being shot in the leg during the battle at Mill Springs in Kentucky, he was captured by Union soldiers. He was thrown in a prison without much medical attention. A week later, a portion of his leg just below his knee had to be amputated when gangrene set in. He lived through the surgery, and when he had recovered, he was transferred to a prison camp in Louisville, Kentucky for three years.

Life was harsh for the young man. He was fed only enough to keep him alive. Many times he wished for death, but the one driving force in him, were thoughts of his mother. He had to keep living for her. Upon his eventual release, he planned to take her away from Mr. Bedlam, even if they had to steal away in the night and work in the cotton fields to earn their way.

When the war was over, Jedidiah and other prisoners were set free. They were being sent home by rail and loaded into boxcars like cattle. But when he returned, Jedidiah found his mother under the doctor's care. Her face had been severely burned, and she'd been unconscious for the past three days. His stepfather had told him that he was awakened by the sound of her scream, and he found her lying on the floor by the fireplace with a kettle of water over turned on the floor beside her. He suggested that perhaps some type of flash from the fireplace had caused her injury; however, Jedidiah had seen a skeptical look on the doctor's face when Mr. Bedlam gave his explanations. He had his doubts also, but no proof.

Jedidiah spent the next two days keeping vigil at his mother side, but the doctor said he doubted she would live long. She was wasting away, and infection had set in. The doctor said there was nothing more he could do for her. In the last few minutes of her life, his mother finally regained

consciousness.

Hattie couldn't see her son, for her eyelids were swollen shut. But she could hear his voice and that eased her tortured mind about his wellbeing. Her husband had confiscated and burned his letters to her. Though she wasn't allowed to read them, just the knowledge that her son had written to her meant he still lived, and that gave her some measure of relief.

"My beautiful son," Hattie managed to say, for the slightest movement of her mouth gave her excruciating pain.

Tears came to Jedidiah's eyes when she mumbled the words. "Don't try and talk, Mother, just be still and rest so you can get well." He pressed her hand to his cheek.

"Did they treat you well, Son?" She tried to see his face with the touch of her hand. "Your face feels thinner."

"It wasn't bad," he lied. "I was treated tolerably." He didn't tell her about the stump he had for a leg. He didn't want to give her cause for any more grief than what she had already.

Hattie felt she didn't have much time left. A tear trickled from her eye and burned as it rolled down her scared face. The memory of what Mr. Bedlam had done to her weighed heavily on her mind. "I need to tell what happened."

"You need your rest, Hattie," said the doctor.

"There is no rest for me until Mr. Bedlam pays for what he did to me!" she gritted out through her pain. "I want others to hear what I'm about to say. Is there someone else in the room that can bear witness?"

The doctor called his nurse into the room, and Hattie told them what had happened. She was pouring Mr. Bedlam his morning coffee. Her hand trembled slightly, and she accidentally poured the scalding liquid on his hand. Though she apologized whole-heartedly, it wasn't enough for him. Homer wanted to teach her a lesson. He smacked her and forced her to the floor. He'd straddled her, stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth to muffle her cries, and poured the pot of coffee over her face.

Hattie gripped her son's hand and concluded, "And then he asked me how it felt."

Jedidiah felt a lump in his throat. Tears rolled down his face. What Mr. Bedlam had done to his mother intensified one hundred fold. "I'll kill him!"

"No!" she gripped her son's hand to keep him by her side. "I can't go to my rest if your life is compromised. Let the law deal with him. He'll be guilty of my death." She turned to the doctor and asked him to write down

what she'd said. Afterward, she'd signed the paper.

"I'll see to it on your behalf," the doctor replied.

Hattie spoke again to her son. "Swear to me you won't seek revenge."

Jedidiah crossed his fingers behind his back. "I promise," he lied.

With her last breath, Hattie told Jedidiah she loved him. He wept and the doctor consoled him.

"Justice will be served, son," said the doctor, holding up Hattie's sworn statement. "This paper and our testimony will assure Homer Bedlam a long prison sentence – or a hanging!"

Jedidiah wiped the tears from his face. He picked up his crutch from the floor and stood. He looked back at the doctor before leaving the room and repeated coldly, "Justice will be served!"

"Now don't do anything rash, Jedidiah!" the doctor shouted, but it fell upon deaf ears.

Jedidiah saw his stepfather talking to a group of men across the street at an outdoor café. He wanted to beat Homer Bedlam with his own two hands and choke the life out of him, but he literally only had one leg to stand on. Where once his body was strong, prison had turned him into a thing that resembled a hobbling skeleton. He crossed the street to the general store.

"How's your mother, Jedidiah?" the elderly shopkeeper asked. "Is there any hope of recovery?"

Jedidiah smiled sadly. "Her life is in the Lord's hands."

The shopkeeper nodded in agreement. "So true, so true." He cleared his throat and changed the subject. "What can I do for you today?"

"I'd like to test one of your best pistols. I thought I might do a little hunting."

"A rifle would be more effective," the shopkeeper replied.

Jedidiah tapped his stump of a leg with his crutch. "A rifle would be a little hard for me to manipulate."

The shopkeeper stammered slightly and replied, "I – I see your point."

The older man handed him the most expensive weapon, some bullets, and said the target was in back. Jedidiah loaded the gun and walked to the front door.

"You can cut through the storage room," said the shopkeeper.

He gave the man a stone-faced look. "I have a target in mind."

Homer Bedlam was still talking and laughing with his friends. He couldn't take the chance that his stepfather wouldn't be convicted. He'd

heard of guilty men getting off scot-free. It would be his mother's statement against his stepfather's declarations.

The time Jedidiah spent in the army, before his capture, had made him a crack shot. He had a clear line of sight on his stepfather. "HOMER! HOMER BEDLAM!" he shouted angrily.

His stepfather looked up, and the laughter spewing from his mouth instantly ceased. His friends scattered when they saw the boy raise a pistol. Homer was stunned momentarily, and then he grinned, self-assured that Hattie's son was a spineless weakling and wouldn't pull the trigger. He laughed. "You won't shoot, you piece of white trash. Your mother is a useless whore and..." but that was the last word from his mouth. Homer Bedlam fell instantly to the ground - a bullet went right between his eyes.

When the shopkeeper saw Jedidiah raise his weapon and heard the shouting, he nervously fumbled the bullets as he tried to load his own gun. But he was too late to stop the killing. He pointed his weapon at the young man. "Put it down, Jedidiah!"

"Justice is served," Jedidiah said, as a tear ran down his cheek. "My mother went to heaven. I just sent Homer Bedlam to hell!" He lowered his arm, handed the man the gun and sat down on the step. "I'll wait here for the law."

Jedidiah spent a week in jail before his trial. He felt at peace with what he suspected would happen to him. Even though he had a lawyer to speak on his behalf, he knew he was going to hang.

The streets of New Orleans were usually teeming with activity during that time of day; however, that day was different. Several shopkeepers had closed their doors temporarily, and only a few wagons rolled down the street. Everyone gathered in one place - the courthouse.

The room was crowded with people anxiously awaiting the jury to return with a verdict. Jedidiah looked around at the faces of the spectators who were vigorously fanning themselves. He heard the lady sitting behind him say to her husband, "I wish they'd hurry up and come back. I'm about to melt!"

The young man laughed inwardly and thought: *Why don't you just go outside then?* But he knew she wouldn't. Like everyone else, she didn't want to lose her seat to someone standing in the back of the room.

Jedidiah turned his gaze forward. He agreed with her. It was sweltering

in the building, but to wish for the jury to come back any sooner would be like wishing his life away a little faster. While he waited, he closed his eyes and prayed for the soul of his mother. His lawyer had arranged for him to be released temporarily for her funeral. The owner of the general store had been a friend of his mother's since their school days, and he gave Jedidiah a new, black suit to wear for the service when he'd heard the true story of how Hattie had died. The truth had spread quickly, and the young man received several messages of condolence from people his mother knew and gifts of decent food while he was incarcerated.

Jedidiah's musings were interrupted when the door opened to the jury room. The twelve men entered the courtroom and took their places. The bailiff came out a few minutes later and announced, "All rise for the Honorable Judge James Harcourt." The people in the gallery stood until the judge was seated. He pounded his gavel twice - everyone quieted and took their seats.

"Court is again in session." The judge looked toward the jury. "Gentlemen of the jury, how say you?"

The foreman wiped the sweat from his brow and stood. "We find the defendant guilty of a – justifiable killing."

The people in the gallery mumbled among themselves. Jedidiah looked behind him and saw some heads nod favorably, and a few mumble their disappointment, shaking their heads in the negative.

The judge banged his gavel again, and order was once more restored. He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. "Will the defendant rise and face the court," he said stoically.

Jedidiah swallowed hard and stood with his arms behind his back. His heart beat steadily in his chest. He knew what the sentence would be, for Judge Harcourt was renowned for his use of the rope. Now all he had to do was wait for him to announce the day of the hanging.

The judge looked at him with a stone-faced expression. "Jedidiah Lucas, the jury finds you guilty of murder. According to the dictates of New Orleans' law for murder, you are hereby sentenced to hang by the neck until dead."

With that announcement, several people from the gallery stood and shouted their objections. A few of Homer's friends applauded.

The judge banged his gavel several times. "Quiet!" he shouted, "Or I'll fine every man-jack in this room for contempt of court!" When everyone was reseated, Judge Harcourt continued. "The law dictates that sentence."

He looked at Jedidiah. "Though you are guilty of killing Homer Bedlam, this court is not without compassion and understands what brought you to violence. The way this court sees it, you saved the taxpayers of this city the expense of lodging Mr. Bedlam in jail, for it was only a matter of time before his dishonest dealings with people would have brought his sorry ass before this bench." Then his voice softened. "Your mother was a good woman. Hattie will be missed." His face became ridged. "I suspend the sentence under the condition that you leave New Orleans and seek life elsewhere." The judge banged his gavel again and dismissed the court.

Several people, including the doctor, patted Jedidiah on the back and wished him well. He sank in his chair. He was shaken by the sentence and expected to join his mother in death. Now he was alone in the world and knew barely anything of it. His life had been filled with violence and misery with his stepfather's maltreatment of him, the war, and prison.

Jedidiah left the courtroom. He headed for home to collect his meager belongings. Homer Bedlam had borrowed money against the house so the bank basically owned it. Everything else was to be auctioned off to pay for his mother's entombment, the lawyer and court costs. He was now practically a pauper.

He went to the fireplace, removed a loose stone and pulled out a small sack in the niche. It contained about twenty dollars in coins. It was the secret hiding place where his mother hid money.

The judge had given Jedidiah a week to settle his affairs and leave town. He visited Mr. Haskill, the wheelwright, before he left. The man had fashioned him a wooden leg. During the war, Jedidiah had seen several men wearing wooden pegs in place of a lost limb, but the one Mr. Haskill had fashioned actually looked like a leg and even had a shoe on it. It felt awkward and slightly painful to use, but he figured that in time he would get used to it. He thanked the man for his thoughtfulness.

Jedidiah hadn't a clue where he would go, so he went into the stage office to purchase a ticket to anywhere two dollars would take him. He needed to conserve as much of his limited funds as possible. The man in charge said there was a stage heading for Baton Rouge, and it would take him that far; however, the man had heard Jedidiah was an excellent shot and told him that if he'd act as shotgun and ride with the driver, he could have a free ride to the end of the line. Jedidiah graciously accepted.

The first few days went well. They stopped at several small townships to pick up and drop off mail and passengers, until they left the town of Laplace. The only passengers were a man and his wife. They also carried a sack of mail and a strong box with an undisclosed content. As they approached a bridge they needed to cross, the driver quickly reined in the horses. He and Jedidiah climbed down from the driver's box. The passengers looked out the window.

"What's the hold up?" the man asked.

"The bridge is out," the driver shouted back.

Jedidiah looked at the bits of mangled wood scattered about. "It looks like someone blew it up."

"I crossed this bridge last week," the driver said. He bent down and picked up a piece of wood and sniffed the burnt edges. "This was recently done."

Jedidiah cocked his rifle to make sure there was a round in the chamber and looked about.

The man got out of the coach. "What do we do now?"

"Take a detour. We can't cross here - the water's too deep. There's another bridge about ten miles downstream to the left..." he pointed, "... or a shallower crossing about three miles to the right, but it's a rough ride. It's an old road full of ruts and rocks."

"My wife and I are anxious to get to Baton Rouge. Take the shorter route," the passenger ordered.

"I don't know, Mister," said Jedidiah. "Whoever blew it up might expect us to take the shorter route."

"As I see it," the man replied, "It's a crap shoot either way. If you have an extra rifle, I'll take it just in case."

The driver went to the coach and pulled another rifle from the front boot and threw it to him. "Let's get out of here." The driver spat the juice from his chaw of tobacco. "I don't like it here. The hairs on the back of my neck are standin' on end." They headed back to the coach.

They left the well-traveled road and drove down a rough, rarely used path. The driver said that this was the old road to a township called Black Water and hadn't been used in years. The newer road was several miles back. They were about a mile down the old road when a band of ten raiders came galloping up behind them firing their guns. The driver snapped the reins and the horses took off in a gallop. The coach bounced and pitched along the rough path, but Jedidiah still managed to hit three of the riders. He heard

the man in the coach firing, but he was a poor shot.

"I'm hit!" the driver suddenly shouted. But as soon as he spoke the words, the man dropped the reins and slumped over in the driver's box – dead.

The horses ran uncontrollable, and before Jedidiah had a chance retrieve the reins, the coach hit a rut in the road and turned over. Jedidiah was thrown to the ground, and his head struck a rock, knocking him out.

The sun was setting when Jedidiah came to. He sat up and felt dizzy and a little disoriented. There was dried blood on his shirt, and he felt the gash on the side of his head. He made his way to the overturned stagecoach. The lock had been shot off the strong box and was empty. Letters from the mailbag had been opened and littered the area. He figured the raiders searched them for money. He looked inside the coach. The two passengers were dead. The woman's neck was broken, and the man had been shot in the head. He was surprised that the robbers hadn't shot him as well, but surmised they thought him dead also and didn't bother to waste a bullet. He checked his pockets. His money pouch was gone.

He looked at his surroundings. The area was wooded on both sides of the creek. The driver had told him that they were close to Black Water Swamp. Jedidiah decided he couldn't leave the bodies lying there for the buzzards or any other wild creature to feed on, so covered them with a tarp he found in the rear boot of the stagecoach and gathered stones from around the creek bed to cover the driver and two passengers. After gathering his things, he took a canteen, filled it in the creek and then washed the dirt and blood from his face. He wasn't sure how far the town of Black Water was, but that's where he decided to head. The authorities there would be able to send a wire to either New Orleans or Baton Rouge when he told them what happened, if they had a telegraph office.

Jedidiah walked as far as he could while there was still light in the sky, but when darkness fell upon him, he settled down by an inviting tree for the night. Thoughts of his mother filtered into his dreams and he woke. He leaned against the tree and closed his eyes. The realization that he was alone weighed heavy on his mind. Tears streamed down his face, and his loud cries reverberated in the night. A short time later, a noise came from deep within the woods. It was as if someone had answered his cries. The words, "I'll be here for you," came to his ears in a whisper. He knew it was just the

wind blowing through a hollow log or something, but it also gave him some measure of comfort, and he was finally able to lay his head down to sleep.

Chapter 3

BLACK WATER TOWNSHIP

It was almost dark when Dr. Jackson was summoned to the Welch residence. He listened to the heartbeat of Alvin Welch and then held a circle of glass up to his mouth and nose. He turned to Erma Welch, and the friends who'd gathered at the old man's bedside. "I'm afraid he won't be with us long."

Erma held a handkerchief to her eye and cried. "Is there nothing else you can do?"

"It's in the hands of the Maker now. I can only do so much," said the doctor as he put away his instruments.

A slightly plump woman put a comforting arm around her friend. "His will be done," said Sally Gooch. "Your husband led a good life."

Dr. Jackson had his doubts about how good Alvin actually was. He'd been a secretive man during his life, and it was a mystery as to how his wealth had mounted so quickly. But he was the Mayor of Black Water and the town's leading citizen who was also instrumental in its growth and prosperity. The elderly doctor looked by the door and saw Henry, Alvin's only son. He thought the young man looked like Alvin when he was a man of twenty-seven. Henry was tall and thin. He had light brown hair and sported the same style of thin mustache as his father.

The doctor approached Henry and whispered to him softly, "I suggest you have someone ring for the Sin-Eater. His services may be required shortly."

"How long?" Henry looked toward the bed of his dying father.

"Who can say?" Dr. Jackson replied. "A day - an hour. His breathing is shallow and his heartbeat is faint. The venom from the snakebite was too

overpowering. I'm surprised he's lasted this long."

Henry smiled sadly. "It doesn't surprise me. He's a stubborn old bird." He folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe. "I told him he needed to stay out of that damn swamp - that he wasn't a spring chicken anymore. But he never listens to me."

"Besides Benjamin Day, why would anyone want to go there?" Dr. Jackson shivered.

Henry shook his head. "I don't know. He would never tell me. All I know is he'd be gone for a day or two ever-so-often and return happy as a meadow lark."

Henry Welch had no great love for his father, but neither did he disrespect him. He was a busy man with the affairs of the town and had little time for him while he was growing up. But he doted on his mother, and Henry wanted for nothing. Only when he was older did his father pay any sort of attention to him. Alvin had started grooming his son to take his place as leader of the town after him. They weren't like father and son. Henry felt it was more like businessman to apprentice.

Henry turned to the household servant. "Fetch the Sin-Eater."

BLACK WATER SWAMP

Paloma stood on the porch of her small cottage that was in a clearing of the swamp and looked out into the night. Her beloved Benjamin had now been dead for a week. She missed him terribly. She was now sixty-two, and though she was fairly healthy, she hadn't the strength to take care of her husband's remains. She secretly went into town and sought out Alvin Welch, Benjamin's only friend. He'd helped her carry her husband's body from the house to the funeral pyre she'd prepared. Burying him would have been pointless, since anything buried in the swamp wouldn't stay buried for long. She also doubted the town's people would allow his body in their cemetery. Alvin Welch had just visited her again the other day and brought her a supply of coffee, tea, sugar and flour from the general store. He'd told her that he would come back every-so-often to see how she was getting along, but when he'd given her a friendly hug good-bye, she had a sense of foreboding. She'd warned him to be careful, but she had an uneasy feeling that she would not be seeing him again.

Paloma sat in her rocking chair and thought about Benjamin and Alvin Welch. She laughed slightly. The two friends had a still set up in another part

of the swamp and would spend a couple of days out of every month getting drunk together. She remembered Alvin telling them that in his younger days, he secretly made and sold bootlegged whisky and had amassed a tidy sum of money. His bootlegging career ended when he entered the Calvary. She'd thought it funny that the town of Black Water was dry as far liquor was concerned. He only drank when he visited them. Alvin thought it wouldn't do for the citizens of Black Water to know that their Mayor indulged, especially since he was largely responsible for the ordinance that kept liquor, saloons and houses of ill repute out of the town.

Suddenly, Paloma heard two sounds that were carried on the wind. The first was a familiar sound she'd heard many times over many years. Someone was ringing the bell at the edge of the swamp. They were summoning the Sin-Eater for someone who was either dead or about to die. But this time the bell would go unanswered. Benjamin Day, the town's Sin-Eater, was also dead. Neither she nor her husband believed in the practice of sin-eating, for they were brought up differently. However, the people in the town did, and it provided them with an income of sorts for things that the swamp couldn't provide for them. Paloma figured she would leave a note at the bell in the morning. The people feared her, and she rarely entered town. Except for the occasional boy who entered on a dare to look for the cabin of the swamp witch, Alvin Welch was the only person to pay them visits.

The second sound she heard was an eerie cry. It too was familiar, but from a past dream she'd had seventeen years ago. Paloma stood and walked to the edge of the clearing toward the cry. "I'll be here for you," she shouted into the night.

Jedidiah wondered if he'd made a mistake going to Black Water Township. The road had disappeared after several hours of walking. It had been over taken by the woods and was swampy in areas. He stopped several time on his journey to rest, for he wasn't used to walking on the new wooden leg.

Day had turned into night, and that meant another night in the woods. He was cold and hungry. Water barely satisfied his empty stomach. He'd seen a few bushes with berries but feared to eat them, for even though animals may be able to, that didn't mean it was safe for people. During the war, he'd seen a hungry man eat from an unfamiliar plant, and he'd watched him die in agony. Jedidiah didn't fear dying. It was the agony part and dying alone in

the woods, with the possibility of some animal devouring him while he was still half alive, that didn't set well with him. He shivered at the thought.

The next morning, Jedidiah woke and started on his way again. His stomach thought his throat had been cut. He didn't know how much further he could go without food. But then he came upon a wall of stone that blocked his way. It was stacked just about eye level, but it was still too high to view over. He put his hands on top of the wall, balanced himself on his wooden leg and found a foothold in a crevice to push his self upward. He looked across a vast field of young soybean plants, and in the distance, he saw a town. "Finally!" he said. "This must be Black Water." He looked down the expanse of the wall. It stretched for as far as he could see in both directions. He figured it was built to keep the woods and whatever creatures lurked in them at bay. After gathering his things, he climbed over to the other side and looked down at the soybean plants. He sighed, wishing those precious beans could be eaten straight from the plants, but unfortunately they were poisonous until processed.

The soybean field ended at the edge of town. Jedidiah thought it a good-sized town and was impressed by it. It seemed quiet and orderly as opposed to the hustle and bustle of New Orleans. He passed shops of various types, a nice looking hotel and a couple of restaurants which made his stomach rumble. But the first order of business he figured was to notify the law about what happened to the stagecoach.

As he hobbled down the main street, he saw people staring. But that didn't surprise him. He probably looked like something the cat dragged in, not to mention he was a stranger. It didn't take him long to find the Sheriff's Office. He looked through the window before entering and saw a middle-aged man wearing a star on his three-piece suit, sitting at a desk reading the newspaper. He went to the door and opened it.

Sheriff Hiram Wright sat back in his chair reading the paper he'd just received from New Orleans. It was a week old, but that was normal for the news that came from outside Black Water. He read the headline:

HANG'EM HIGH HARCOURT SHOWS LENIENCY

In an unprecedented decision today, Judge James Harcourt resends his own sentence. Accused of murdering his stepfather....

His reading was interrupted when the door opened. He put down his paper and looked up to see a haggard young man enter. "Can I help you, boy?"

"I want to report the holdup of a stagecoach bound for Baton Rouge," Jedidiah replied.

"Where?"

"About a mile or so from the bridge on the old Black Water road. Raiders blew that up too."

Jedidiah introduced himself and told the story of what had happened to the sheriff. Afterward, he asked the man if there was any place around town where he could work for a decent meal and a place to sleep for the night. Suddenly, he saw a strange look come over the sheriff's face. He jumped up from his chair and called to his deputy.

"Sam! Get out here!"

A young man came out from the back room and leaned his broom against the wall. "Yeah, Sheriff?"

"Sit down and make out a report," the sheriff ordered. He turned back to Jedidiah. "Stay right here, sonny!" He grabbed his hat off the hook by the door. "Repeat everything you said to the deputy, in detail, so he can write it down. I'll be back shortly."

He didn't quite understand why he had to repeat it all again, but the man was the sheriff. The young deputy pulled some paper from one drawer and an apple from another. Jedidiah watched him take a bite and felt his stomach rumble. "Have you got another one of those?"

"Sorry, only one I got. You know the saying, *Apple a day keeps the doctor away*." He took another bite, dipped his pen in the inkwell and posed it over the paper to write. "Okay fella', shoot!"

Deep in the recesses of his mind, Jedidiah thought, *If you don't hurry up and finish that apple, I will shoot you and take it!*