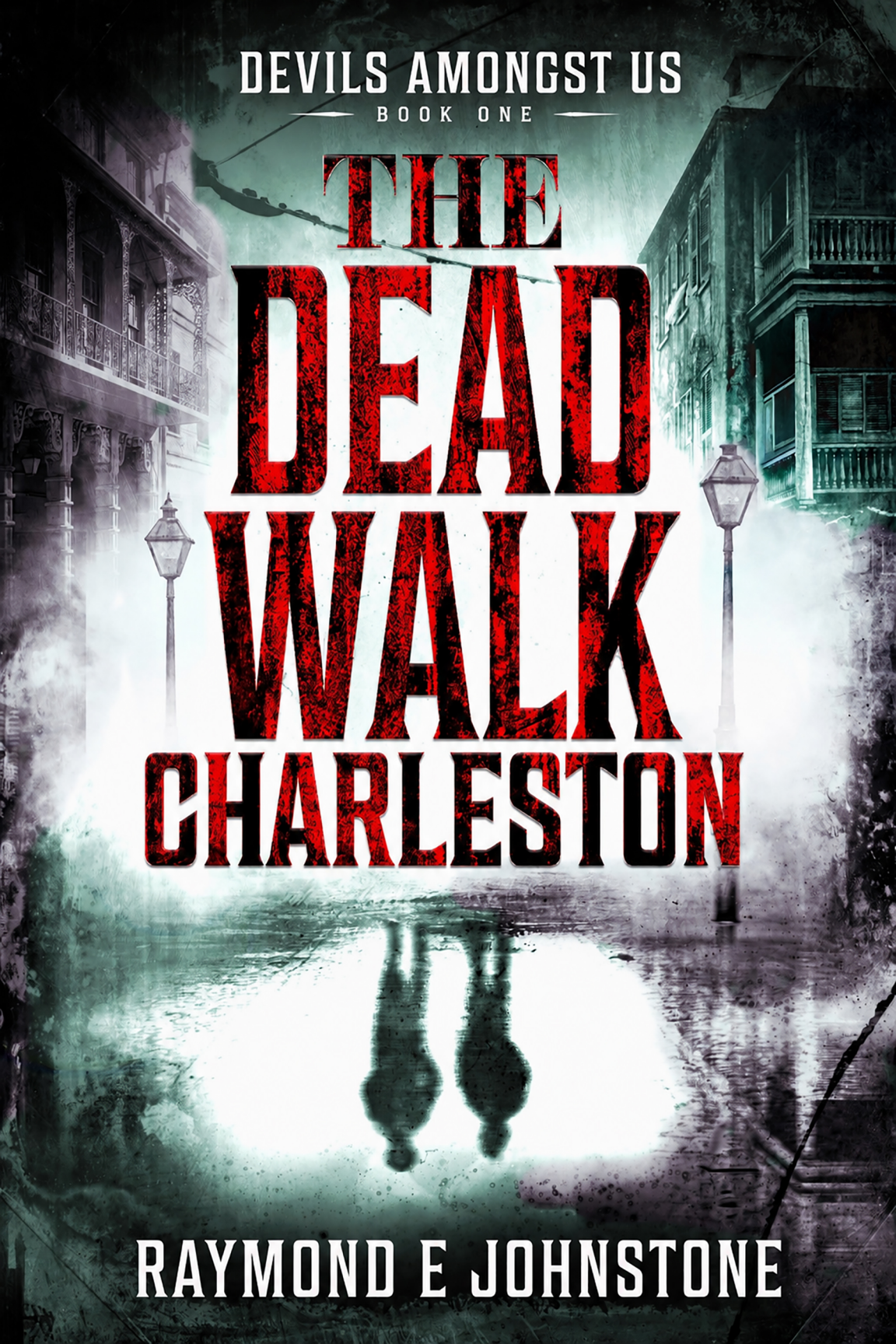

DEVILS AMONGST US
BOOK ONE
THE DEAD WALK CHARLESTON
RAYMOND E JOHNSTONE

DEVILS AMONGST US

THE DEAD WALK CHARLESTON



RAYMOND E JOHNSTONE

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The Dead Walk Charleston

THE DARK BETWEEN WORLDS
PRESS
Stories From Beyond the Veil

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Prologue

January 1, 1837

... she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb;
and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh ...
—Edgar Allan Poe

The cold Mississippi River gave a man his life back.

Frank was dead—or at least he thought he was. He was certain those muddy waters would be his grave.

His body, however, had other plans.

Like a newborn presented to the world, he broke the surface and drew his first breath since falling from the bluff.

Swimming to shore, he collapsed, coughing river water into the mud.

Rolling onto his back, he wrapped his arms around himself and cried.

He was oblivious to the rocks cutting his skin and the cockleburs snagging his clothes.

It took several minutes to catch his breath and gather his thoughts. When he finally lifted his head, Memphis was nowhere to be seen—not the bluffs, the steamboats, or the ferry landing.

All of it belonged to another lifetime, blurred by the river.

Before him lay the river, cypress trees, and animal tracks through marsh and mud.

Not a single farmhouse light. No haze of chimney smoke lingered in the cold air.

At this point, he'd dance a jig to hear a hound baying in the distance.

He managed to sit up—breath vanishing into the cold, dusky evening air—and laughed.

Not because he'd escaped. No, not by a mile.

An invisible thread still bound him to her, frayed yet unbroken. The tug in his gut told him it would eventually lead him back to that monster.

Maybe she'll be mad enough to kill me this time.

Hauling himself upright, he shook with a drunk's tremor as he staggered toward the brush and gnarled roots.

Frank collapsed among the knees of a cypress tree and curled into himself.

The water flowed beside him. The forest animals hushed.

"*Remember, Lord ...*"

His chattering teeth stopped him.

Taking a deep breath, he let it out little by little.

As his breathing slowed, he whispered:

> *Remember, O Lord ...*
> *Thy tender mercies ...*
> *Thy lovingkindnesses ...*
> *for they have been ever of old.*
> *Remember not the sins of my youth ...*
> *nor my transgressions ...*

Every hair on his arms stood on end. *Where'd the hell that come from?*

A psalm, one he hadn't recited since he clung to his mama's apron strings.

Frank searched for anything amiss—wounds or twisted body parts—and stopped when he touched the silk kerchief knotted around his leg.

The gash beneath it throbbed.

The long, terrible wound was a final gift from the dead boy.

He tugged the knot, trying to keep it tight enough to stop the bleeding. Of everything that was taken from him, that piece of silk was the one thing he couldn't lose.

Among the bald cypress trees, the sinking sun lit the tangled branches and hanging brown vines. It slid across the wintry fog that snaked from the river; shapes danced within, looking almost human.

"Andy, that you?" he asked, choking as he tried to swallow. "Told ya not ta go out. Night's when monsters wake."

Frank fell back against the roots.

"Damn drunk."

He banged the back of his head against a tree—repeatedly—trying to knock some sense back into himself.

"No, that's not right. You didn't deserve that. Nobody deserved to die like that."

He scrubbed his face with his sleeves and squinted against the sting of mud.

All around him was wild. No roads, only ragged game trails cutting through the trees and cold puddles.

Mud sucked at Frank's bare feet as he tried to hobble forward. His boots had been sacrificed to the water. Everybody knew they were no good in the river.

Picking his way from stone to stone, he somehow found every sharp thing the mud had hidden. Each toe bore a bruise or a cut.

The wounds marked him, proving where he'd been—

Frank stopped.

Someone stood among the trees where the fog thickened between the trunks.

"Andy?" he called, squinting into the gloom. "You get away, too?"

She's here.

Striking his own thigh with a fist, he tried to force his legs to wake, but both knees had gone stiff and numb beneath him.

"James?" he asked the air. "That you? Best not be playin' no jape on this ol' man."

She's here.

If he could reach that last patch of sunlight where the canopy parted, he might yet survive. He limped toward it, hoping to collapse there.

She's weak in the daylight. I have to—

His leg moved, but it sent him stumbling. When he took another step, he faltered again. Each step took its toll, with the roots and rocks scraping and bruising his feet and legs.

Fog tendrils gathered between him and the safety of the sunlight. The mist took the shape of a girl, maybe twelve years old.

Her eyes were solid black. No whites.

No reflection, just deep pits of shadow.

The blue dress she wore hung loose on her frail frame, stained with river mud and the blood of his dead friends. Raven hair framed her dark face.

To an unfamiliar eye, she might have passed for a Cherokee or Creek child.

Frank knew better.

"Ahyoka," he whispered. "You didn't have ta kill 'em."

"No," she said, flat and cold. "I didn't. But they all warned you, Frank. The Cherokee couple told you stories about us ..."

"Prattle," he said. "Those were just stories."

"You should've listened to that *prattle*." Her voice echoed, slipping in from every direction.

Frank's voice cracked. "Stop wasting my time, girl. You and I both know there's nothing I can do ta stop ya. I'm just too damn tired. So go on. Be quick about it."

"No." Her voice danced around him. "*He* won't let me ..."

As she walked across the mud, she never sank, never left a single footprint.

"Well, mighty kind of 'im. Remind me ta thank 'im, like I did yer brother."

Before Frank could twitch, she appeared in front of him, grabbed his shirt, and yanked him off balance. After slamming him into the tree roots, she slashed his legs with her fingernails, carving deep grooves into his skin.

She let out a low growl. Her teeth—small and ordinary a moment before—lengthened to points as her fingers tightened around his throat.

Mud and blood streaked her cheeks where tears had carved paths.

"Yer brother earned what he got," Frank croaked.

A weak smile tugged at his face as he tried to hide his chattering teeth. He spat at her.

"Now I can be with Alyssa," he said in a hoarse chuckle.

She raised her hand to strike again, but noticed the silk scarf had slipped to Frank's ankle, exposing the other cut along his leg.

She traced the wound with her long fingernails.

"Adahy ...," she whispered.

Releasing him, she let his body slump into the mud.

Frank coughed, struggling to pull air back into his lungs.

"He had it comin'," he said as he managed to draw a breath.

She stood and wiped her chin on her dress, then stomped on Frank's leg, pinning him to the ground. There was a crack, and pain raced up his hip.

"We all have it coming, Frank ... even you," she said as he howled in pain.

That's when he began laughing and crying at once.

He grabbed at the surrounding trees, finding mud and roots. Several broken branches lay around him, some just inches from his face.

Snatching a few, he felt the bark bite into him, splinters driving into his palms as he gripped them like knives.

"You're just a damned puppet ..."

He drove the sharp ends upward with everything he had left.

The branches punched into her belly with a wet crunch. For one impossible second, her body gave way, and her weight disappeared from his chest.

Ahyoka stood and backed away from him.

Then a black, tar-like substance seeped from the wounds—not flowing so much as crawling out of her like liquid shadow, inching out and then pulling itself back inside. There was no blood. The splinters slid free and dropped into the mud, and the punctures knitted themselves shut.

Her black eyes remained fixed on him.

She didn't go for his throat again.

In less than a heartbeat, she leaped onto his chest. Her weight crushed the breath from him. One small, red-soaked hand pinned him down.

And with the other ...

—she plucked out one of his eyes.

Everything flashed white as it came loose. He clawed at the empty socket.

Screams ripped from his raw throat.

The girl's black stare lingered on him as her hands squeezed what she had taken till it burst.

"I'll kill ya!" he hurled the words into the air, cradling his ruined face.

Writhing in pain, he grasped for anything—anything—to fight back with.

She remained on top of him, one hand poised above his face like a snake about to strike.

And with a flick ... she took the other eye.

Just like that, his world was gone.

His screams ripped through the trees. When his throat gave out and no sound remained, a soft, wet pop sounded nearby.

He gripped the tree's roots, holding on tight, grinding the bark into his palm as if trying to focus on anything but the pain.

"I'll show you what a puppet can do," she whispered in his ear.

Swinging his fist—he tried to strike her—but caught only air.

"*Alkam ana ṣērī-ya* ..." whispered another voice, deep and crackled.

It wasn't Ahyoka's.

The surrounding darkness was silent; the whole world was out there, somewhere, waiting and watching.

Splashes in the river—someone had fallen in.

Frank waited.

Only the river made a sound. Its surface rippled too violently. With the splashing and distant voices, it almost sounded like a baptism gone wrong.

Murmurs of speech wafted from the riverside.

"Master, why did you stop me?" Ahyoka asked. "*Va'torel esh*."

"No further harm," said the other voice—a blend of several voices speaking together. The deepest sounded the loudest.

Ahyoka hissed.

"Aw, come now," Frank yelled. "If'n ye're gonna argue, ya mind if I lay here and bleed? Don't think I'm in much condition fer company."

"See? He's of no use to us," the girl muttered. "His mind's gone."

"Use ...?" The voice lingered on the word, testing it. "Drunkard, yes. Useless, no. Leave him."

Stillness settled. No footsteps.

"We are all broken things waiting to be fixed ..." the unknown voice said, close now—too close. Several voices, all in unison.

Cold, dead hands found his face.

"Return not what is lost. But a gift for you. Something ... else."

Hot pain lanced through his skull, echoing in the darkness.

The hands released him.

Frank stared into the darkness—and saw everything.

White lights moved around him. Veins of light threaded through everything: roots, moss, even the insects buried beneath the bark. Some glowed cold and pale beneath the riverbank. Others glowed warm through feathers and fur.

Beneath the river, the blue dots of fish drifted like pale cracks in ice.

In the brush, a rabbit burned hotter—its tiny heart flickering as fast as coal caught in a blacksmith's forge.

Before him, a black spot appeared in the emptiness.

Inside it stood a tall, almost angelic creature, with lithe limbs and eyes that glowed golden, even in Frank's blindness. Veins of light and shadow tangled just beneath the skin.

The light flickered like a magic lantern toy, casting bright light and shadows.

Glowing silvery letters traced the length of the Master's body, fierce in the shadows.

Beside the tall shadow, a smaller one stood, shaped like a little girl made of shadow.

Strings of light intertwined within her.

Frank wanted to reach out and pull those threads; maybe rescue the girl encased within.

But he didn't.

Frank's hands lay like dead weights at his sides.

"We'll be watching," said the Master as he turned and walked away.

The girl lingered a moment before following.

Frank lay there as they slipped away between the trees and brush, vanishing into the black background.

A numbness came over him.

Then the forest filled with the sounds of a gurgling river and the wind through the trees.

Even Frank's heartbeat sounded like a faraway drum.

He flinched as the air erupted into thousands of birds, all sounding an alarm. Cawing and screeching came from all sides; the creatures of the woods were no longer afraid to speak.

Gripping the cypress knees with one hand, he clenched the kerchief in the other—his last piece of reality.

The lights of trees and grass, the sounds of wind and water, and his memories—these kept him company.

A strange, mournful wail emerged from his quaking chest and echoed through the woods.

Frank soiled his already wet trousers and let the shock take hold. Even that shameful heat was precious against the cold.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. It was empty of prayer.

Instead, laughter came out, cracked at first, then loud and lingering ...

And he couldn't stop.