

The Swamp Ghost

Old New Orleans Bookshop Mysteries Book One

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Swamps Outside of New Orleans

1833

Chapter One

Sean Leery smacked his own cheek with such force that he felt like he was back in Ireland, on the receiving end of a blow in one of his many pub brawls. He missed County Cork and his cottage there. It hadn't been much, but it was certainly better than his present circumstances, trying to catch some sleep in a sweltering Louisiana swamp. The pitiful cypress log hut that was his temporary home while he was out digging the New Basin Canal offered little comfort and couldn't keep out the water from the daily rainstorms, let alone the mosquitoes that swarmed him and his fellow diggers.

He wiped a smear of blood from his face, slightly mollified to see this one had a full belly, judging by the sizable blood splatter. Hell, most of it was probably his to begin with, but at least the menace would feast on him no more this evening. Not that it would do much good. Ridding the Louisiana bayous of one mosquito had about the same effect as plucking a snowflake off an avalanche. God, he even missed the snow and cold of his homeland, though he still recalled shivering next to the stove, trying to extract the last bit of warmth from the feeble coal remnants. It was just so hot here. And not only during the day. In the summer, which seemed to last most of the year, it was

equally unbearable at night, especially in the swamp. Even now, in October, the air was so thick he felt he needed to chew it before he could breathe it in.

He stretched his feet past the edge of his cot to restore circulation before tucking them back under the mosquito netting. Tomorrow, he'd have to find the hole where they were getting in and stitch it up. Cagey little suckers, they were. They'd weasel their way through the tiniest opening. He flopped onto his side, hoping sleep would envelop him again. He needed to rest if he had any hope of performing the arduous labor his job required. The sooner they finished their digging, the sooner he could high-tail it back to New Orleans and civilization.

Though the working and living conditions were less than ideal, Sean considered himself lucky to be on Aiden Doyle's digging crew. Aiden was a fair foreman, much better than some of the others. He treated his "ditchers" well, as the men digging out the swamp were called.

They were the lead crew on the project, an ambitious plan by the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company to dig a navigable commercial waterway from Lake Pontchartrain to the American Sector of New Orleans, located behind the Vieux Carré, or the French Quarter, as the Americans called it. The canal was to be six to ten feet deep, sixty yards wide, and six miles long. It was being dug by a workforce composed mainly of Irish immigrants wielding picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows, slowly making their way through the swamps outside the city.

It was dangerous, backbreaking work. Ditchers, even young ones, often did not fare well. Because Irish immigrants were arriving in New Orleans in large numbers and were willing to toil for low wages, the company hired them as "expendable labor,"

knowing that excavating mosquito-infested swampland meant losing many workers to yellow fever, cholera, and malaria. Some of the foremen joked that to dig a canal, at least four things were necessary: a shovel, a pick, a wheelbarrow, and an Irishman.

Aiden Doyle was Irish, so Sean supposed that might explain his more compassionate nature. Most bosses wouldn't have taken on someone as old as Sean, let alone someone with his less-than-stellar reputation. Sean would be forty-two on his next birthday, but he looked far older. Hard living took its toll on a man. So did drinking too much whiskey and trying to live by his wits for too long, especially since he hadn't been blessed with an abundance of them. His bulbous nose was a testament to his love of drink, and its crookedness to the brawling that generally followed.

Sean also loved cards, and he owed debts to the sort of people who expressed their displeasure at not being promptly reimbursed in unfortunate physical ways. So when his debts began piling up and he feared the threats of bodily harm were no longer mere threats, he sought employment out of sheer necessity. He would work until he could pay the most pressing debts to the most violent of his creditors, then quit and resume his life of gambling, drinking, and enjoying the company of disreputable women. Such was his pattern, and Sean was eager to return to it—if he survived this present job.

Sean flopped onto his back, blowing out a frustrated breath. In addition to the stifling heat and swarming blood suckers, his ability to fall back asleep was being hindered by Darren's snoring and Murph's farts. *Might as well take a piss while I'm awake.*

Sean grunted as he shifted to his feet. They were sore after the day's labors. Every inch of him hurt, but the worst was his shoulders. They ached and throbbed, adding to his insomnia. He needed to sleep if he was to get up the next day and do more digging. If he couldn't work, Aiden would have to replace him on his crew. Sean wasn't keen to find another crew. He didn't particularly like any of the men he worked with out here in this godforsaken place, but he figured he had less than a month to go before he would have enough money to quit. What could be worse than having to beg your way back onto a job you hated? He needed to tough it out.

He pulled on his boots and left the shack. The sliver of moon did little to dispel the swamp's stygian darkness. As he made his way to the temporary privy the crew had erected, he was careful not to trip over the cypress knees poking out of the semi-solid earth and to avoid any snakes that might be hiding in the tall grass. No doubt there were alligators to avoid as well. He shuddered at the thought of disturbing a sleeping gator as he swatted futilely at the mosquitoes buzzing around his head.

Suddenly, his hand froze in front of his face. Were his eyes playing tricks on him? The sight before him shouldn't be there. A bright blue orb was dancing in the distance, just beyond a copse of water gum trees. Could it be his imagination? It was easy to think so. After all, this landscape was eerie and otherworldly at night. It occupied a nebulous space between water and earth, always wet and only sometimes solid. The densely packed cypress trees, dripping with tattered Spanish moss that reminded Sean of ghosts caught in the branches, crowded out the sun during the day, making it perpetual dusk at its brightest and forcing the humid air to hover over the swamp dwellers like a hot, moist blanket.

Sean had seen some unusual sights out here, but this went beyond any of them. Could it be the moonlight illuminating some swamp gas? He knew this wasn't it, but he was desperate for a logical explanation. Sean was not superstitious, unlike some of the men he worked with, fools still clinging to their Irish folklore like a lifeline in this strange place. Yet the sight before him sent chills down his body, straight through his aching arms and into his cramping feet.

What was he looking at? There should not be a blue light shining in front of him out here in the desolate swamp. It was not a fire or a lantern, of that he was certain.

Sean was not a religious man, yet he crossed himself in an unconscious, protective gesture. He needed to get back to the safety of the shack and the other diggers, but fear froze him in place. There was a terrifying moment of stasis, and then the blue orb advanced rapidly toward Sean, as if sensing his presence and locking onto him, preparing to give chase. Sean heard a scream and realized it was coming from his own throat. He turned and ran back through the swamp, trying to stay upright as he stumbled over the cypress knees and deep eddies, all thoughts of sleeping gators and rattlers driven from his mind. He burst into the shack, waking the rest of the crew.

As they rubbed sleep from their eyes and sat up in astonishment, trying to make sense of what was happening, they took in the strange sight before them. Sean Leery, the ornery old bastard they had assumed feared nothing and no one, was gasping for breath, sputtering about something he'd spotted in the swamp. His face was as white as if he'd seen the very devil himself, and a dark, wet spot spread across the front of his breeches where he'd pissed himself.