

Ghost Girls Book Three:
The Phantom Ship at Castle Hill

by

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The Beginning

The seas were angry.

Waves churned blue-black under the night sky, breaking over the jagged rocks that seemed to rise everywhere in the small inlet. Above, a full moon shone, lending an eerie light to the shoreline and casting shadows that seemed alive. The howling of the wind was matched only by the thunderous roar of the surf. White spray shot into the air as yet another wave clapped against a boulder.

Paige Parker shivered. The air was warm, but she stood ankle-deep in the chilly water. The swirl of a receding wave dragged rocky sand from beneath her feet, hollowing out the ground under her heels and sending her scrambling to regain her footing. She winced as the tender soles of her feet came to rest on pebbles, shell fragments, and rocks encrusted with barnacles. She felt the sting of salt water and knew she had at least one cut to show for this experience.

But what *was* this experience?

Where was she? And why?

The inlet seemed familiar—not unlike so many of the small, rocky nooks and crannies dotting the Rhode Island coastline—but she was sure she had never seen any beach as she was seeing this one now, at night and in a gathering storm. Another wave sent water rushing at her. This time it came almost to her knees, dragging heavily at the hem of her nightgown as if the sea itself wanted to pull her offshore and into its belly. Paige took a careful step backward, lifting her soggy nightgown so it wouldn't entangle her legs.

Her nightgown?

Paige was suddenly aware of her attire. It was an old-fashioned white cotton nightgown with lace trim that was, now that she noticed it, rather itchy. Paige was certain she'd never worn a nightgown like this in her life. She liked her flannel PJ pants and tee shirts. What was she doing in this nightgown? Or maybe more to the point, what was she doing in the water in this nightgown?

Hope.

The word whispered through her mind like a breeze.

Faith.

Where were these words coming from? Was she supposed to hope for something? Have faith in something?

Movement in Paige's peripheral vision caught her attention, distracting her from her thoughts. She blinked, trying to see through the storm surging around her. Beyond the waves crashing there in the inlet, the shadow of something moved at the horizon. Bracing herself as more water rushed at her feet, Paige strained to make out the shape.

It was a ship, a giant sailing ship with three masts rising above it. But something about it wasn't right. While the sea all around rose and fell in the violent storm, the ship moved steadily, as if it were gliding across the surface of a serene pond. As it rounded the bend, coming closer, Paige realized what else wasn't right. The ship was not solid. It was black and slightly transparent, as though it were made of thick black smoke. It reminded Paige of something, something awful, and her breath caught in her chest.

Another wave crashed at her feet, and Paige realized the water was rising. She looked up again, and in the moonlight she also realized something that must have terrified the captain, crew and passengers on board the ship, if by chance they saw and realized it too: the ship was heading straight for the rocks. Instinctively and as if compelled by a force outside herself, Paige rushed into the sea. She stood waist-deep in the chilly water, waving her arms at the ship. She could feel the salt sting at the cut somewhere on her left foot, she could feel her heart pound in her chest. And then another wave hit her, and she was in over her head.

Paige felt her lungs constrict, cut off from the air they needed. She flailed about, trying to get her bearings, but she realized with horror that she could not tell which way was up and which way was down. The surf tossed her about like a rag doll, and she felt her arm strike a rock, sending pain shooting through her. She saw light above—*moonlight!*—and was relieved as she struggled toward it. Then a shadow moved in, obscuring the light.

Paige knew it was the ship, and that knowledge filled her with an overwhelming and confusing mix of excitement and despair. Her lungs screamed for air, and then she suddenly felt tired. Tired of struggling, tired of kicking, tired of the cold water and the sting of the salt. She drifted into unconsciousness.

Paige woke to a loud humming noise and the sensation of something warm and furry pressing into her palm. She opened her eyes and she was home, with her one-eyed black cat Licorice welcoming her enthusiastically. She sat up. She was in her own bed, in her own flannel PJ pants and tee shirt. She laughed and shook her head.

“There’s no place like home, Toto,” she joked to the cat. “It was all a dream.”

She threw back the covers, ready to dispel the uneasy mood of her dream with a long, hot shower. As she put her feet onto the floor, a chill shook her. She looked down at her feet, uneasily wiggling her toes.

Rocky sand and bits of seaweed fell to the floor.

She glanced back at her bed, knowing what she would see.

There was more sand, and blood stained the sheets where her feet had been. She raised her left foot into her lap, turning it so she could examine the sole. A good-sized gash ran along her instep. She looked at Licorice, who appeared to be watching her intently. Paige found she could hear the cat’s thoughts as clearly as if she had spoken.

It was all a dream, was it?

