

My  
So-called  
Phantom Love Life



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# Chapter 1

I knew the boy was different when I saw him walk on water.

Me and my mates were on the Serpentine in Hyde Park, messing about in a rowing boat. The April sun was burning off the afternoon clouds and Megan was daring Charlie to splash a group of French boys with the oars.

‘Go on, Charlie,’ she urged, stretching out a foot to kick him lightly on the shin. ‘My family is descended from French aristocrats murdered in the revolution. They demand that I avenge their deaths.’

I grinned. That was a good one; Megan was about as French as a Cornish pasty and if the ghosts of her ancestors were demanding anything, it wasn't that she flicked algae-filled lake water over some innocent teenage tourists. In fact, as I gazed around the lake, I could see

there was only one ghost nearby and he didn't look like he was auditioning for *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. He was wearing a killer pair of ripped jeans for a start. And did I mention he was walking on the water?

Megan was still nagging at Charlie. 'Where's your sense of patriotism? Stand up for your country!'

Charlie pushed his fringe carefully out of his eyes. 'How is starting a water fight in any way patriotic? The pond police will just kick us off the lake.'

I let their bickering fade into the background as I studied the ghost. He was now hovering near the island in the centre, watching the boats circling around him with an expression of amusement on his face. It was hard to be sure but I guessed he was a couple of years older than me – sixteen or seventeen. He looked relaxed and I wondered if he'd died in the park or whether he was drawn by the people who were enjoying the spring weather.

'No one is flicking anything at anyone. If you two have finished squabbling, do you think we could go that way?' I said, pointing over at the island as curiosity got the better of me.

Charlie dipped the oars into the water and we moved slowly away from the French boys.

'I might have known you'd side with them,' Megan grumbled, jerking her head towards the receding boat. 'Didn't Miss Pointer say Scotland and France were practically married in history last week?'

I pulled a face. I'd lived in Edinburgh most of my life, until my move to London six months before to live with my aunt, but I didn't have strong feelings one way or the other towards the French. Their language was another thing entirely, though; I'd give up Krispy Kreme for a month to drop those lessons. '*Où est la gare?*' with a soft Scottish burr was pretty much incomprehensible.

'I'm not siding with anyone. I'd just rather you didn't recreate the Battle of Trafalgar in the middle of Hyde Park. And since there are five of them and only three of us, we'd probably lose.'

Megan shook out her chestnut hair and let her fingers trail in the water. 'What's so interesting about the island, anyway? You know we can't go on it.'

She was right; there was a spiky chain linking the frequent metal posts, presumably so no one landed and disturbed what looked like birds' nests in the wooded undergrowth. It didn't matter. All I wanted was to get near enough to the ghost to figure out if he needed my help but I could hardly tell Megan that. She had no idea I was psychic and I had no intention of letting her find out. Instead, I pretended to peer at the trees and watched Mr Ripped Jeans. Now that we were closer, I could see that his brown hair gently curled against his head and that he was quite good-looking, in a Disney-Channel way. Charlie pulled at the oars again and we drew closer. I squinted in the sunshine, barely able to

make out the distinctive blue glow the dead had; forget quite good-looking, this ghost was gorgeous. And the puckered scar which ran from one ear down to the corner of his mouth gave him an attractive roguish air.

‘Hello? Wake up, Skye.’ Megan waved a hand in front of my face. ‘Do we have to go this way? Only there’s a swan coming and it doesn’t look too friendly.’

I followed her nervously pointing finger. Rounding the island behind the ghost was a large swan. Its beak was open and I could hear a low hissing noise. It definitely did not look happy.

The ghost heard it too and turned, just as the swan passed through him. Briefly, I wondered if he was the reason it was looking so menacing but Megan’s agitation drove the thought from my head. She pulled at Charlie’s sleeve. ‘Row the other way!’

‘Get off, Megan!’ Charlie said, grappling with the oar as she tugged at his arm. It slid out of his grasp and the boat rocked as Megan wriggled around in her seat.

The ghost was watching the swan approach us now, frowning.

‘Calm down, Megan,’ I said, clutching the edge of my seat. ‘It’ll just go around us.’

Her eyes were wide with fear. ‘No, it won’t. I’ve heard about this. Swans can break your arm if you get in their way.’

I was pretty sure that was a myth but the swan was

opening its great white wings and suddenly the idea that it could hurt us didn't seem so unlikely. I could see why she was scared.

'Megan, sit down —' I began but it was too late; Megan was on her feet. The boat lurched crazily. Her arms flailed as she struggled to stay upright. Charlie lost his grip on the second oar and it splashed into the water.

'Nice one, Megan,' Charlie said, scrambling towards the side of the boat and thrusting an arm deep into the water. 'Are you trying to tip us over?'

Megan's eyes were still fixed on the swan, which was rearing up, its wings scything through the air. Its beak was wide as it bore down on us. A look of terror on her face, Megan craned backwards. The boat dipped with her weight. She screamed as we tilted towards the surface of the water and then we were over.

The lake was glacial, in spite of the warm day. Shock coursed through me as the chill savaged my nerve endings and, for several long seconds, I plunged into the murky depths without doing anything to stop my descent. Then survival instinct took over and my legs lashed out to propel me upwards. I gasped as I broke the surface and gulped in a lungful of air before looking round for my friends.

Charlie was about a metre away, clinging to the boat and coughing. The swan fired baleful glares our way as it glided back towards the island. There was no sign of Megan.

‘Where is she?’ I called, casting around to find her.

‘D-Don’t kn-know,’ Charlie sputtered in between coughs. ‘Under the boat?’

Other boaters were heading our way. Some were laughing but a few mirrored my concern. I twisted around in the water, desperate to see Megan’s head break the surface. When seconds ticked past and there was no sign of her, I started to panic. Hadn’t she said she could swim when the boat attendant had offered us life jackets? I bit my lip as I trod water. Now that I thought about it, there’d been a faint look of revulsion on her face when she’d eyed the orange plastic; what if she’d lied? I’d only known her for six months but Charlie had known her longer. Why hadn’t he said anything?

Plunging back into the brown depths, I peered around. The lake wasn’t that deep, she couldn’t have gone far. Even so, fear flowed through me and my blood pounded in my ears. It had only been a minute since the boat tipped over; how long did it take to drown?

Charlie’s legs swam into view as I cut through the water. Dark shapes loomed overhead – they’d be the other boats, I guessed. I couldn’t see Megan anywhere. My lungs started to burn. Feeling the sting of tears, I kicked upwards.

Above the water, Charlie had got his breath back and was now looking as panic-filled as I felt. He was ignoring offers to climb into one of the boats and was

shouting Megan's name as he scanned the lake. I could see one of the lake attendants heading our way in a motorboat but his progress was hampered by the other people on the lake. If Megan was drowning, he wouldn't reach us in time.

Then I saw the ghost. He was peering down at a patch of water about fifteen metres away, thrusting an arm into the water and drawing it out over and over. His expression was a tense mix of sorrow and anxiety, as though he wanted to pull something out but couldn't. Instantly, I realised why; Megan was there.

Swimming faster than I ever had before, I ploughed towards him. As I got closer, I could hear his feverish muttering. 'Take my hand, just take it. Please . . .'

Our eyes met for a second and surprise flickered in his. But I had no time to explain. Sucking in a deep breath, I forced myself back under the surface. Once again, my vision adjusted to the greenish-brown half-light and I caught sight of something dark red floating below me. I kicked down hard. It was the end of Megan's silk scarf. Spreading my fingers, I waved an arm beneath it and almost sobbed when they entangled in a web of fine strands; her hair. I closed my fingers and tugged. The strands became taut as her weight pulled against them. She must have felt the drag because she struggled and one of her flailing arms caught my ankle. I could have sobbed with relief – she was still alive. Forcing myself further



down, I groped around for her face and slid my hands under her chin, pulling her towards me. Her eyes latched onto mine, wide and desperate, hands clutching at me as she writhed. Her added weight only dragged me down and we sank further towards the bottom of the lake.

My lungs were on fire and every cell was screaming for oxygen but there was no way I was leaving her. Summoning one last burst of energy, I wrapped my arms around her and thrust downwards once more. Mercifully, my feet thudded into the lakebed and the impact sent us catapulting through the water. The momentum only carried us so far, though. My feet flapped furiously as I strived to reach the precious air above us. It was so tantalisingly close but I couldn't seem to get there. Feeling as though my heart was about to burst, I kicked frantically. It was no use. Megan was wriggling in my arms and I struggled to keep hold of her. The last of my strength faded and we started to sink.

Something latched onto the back of my shirt. I shot upwards, my fingers clutching onto Megan. Then my hands lost their grip and she was dragged away from me. I opened my mouth to scream at the exact second my head broke the surface. Water rushed in and filled my lungs. I coughed as a pair of strong arms hauled me into a boat. Eyes streaming, I shook off the blanket someone was trying to wrap around me and scrambled to a sitting position.

‘Megan —’ I croaked, leaning over the edge to stare into the water.

‘She’s safe, don’t worry,’ a voice soothed and I looked up into the eyes of the lake attendant.

I refused to believe him. ‘Where is she?’

He pointed to another boat a short distance away. ‘She’s there, bringing up what looks like half the lake.’

I peered across the water. Relief flooded through me as I saw Megan’s soaking chestnut head retching exactly where he’d said she was. ‘And Charlie?’

‘He’s on dry land, being checked over by paramedics. Which is where you’re going now,’ he said, and a hint of a smile hovered around his mouth. ‘The Serpentine is clean but it’s not meant for drinking. Next time you’re thirsty, stick to Evian.’

It was the worst joke I’d ever heard but I didn’t have the energy to tell him so. He nodded at the other man in the boat, who I hadn’t even noticed was there. The engine gunned and we started towards the shore. Huddled on the floor, the last of my adrenaline drained away and I began to shiver as the realisation of what could have happened sunk in. How close had we come to drowning? And what would have happened if the ghost hadn’t shown me where Megan was? My shuddering intensified as my thoughts darkened. Teeth rattling against one another uncontrollably, I forced myself to scan the lake for the ghost but I couldn’t focus well

enough to see very far and everything seemed blurred. I'd find him later and say thanks, I told myself, forcing my twitching fingers to hold onto the blanket. It was the least I could do, after all. Without him, my best friend might be a ghost too.