

Lea Park Chapter 7

Back in the apartment that evening, Stephen was helping himself to sandwiches from a mountain in the middle of the table. White bread and cheap ham. Some fake butter. Mixed with sweat from his hands. He ran his fingers through his dank hair to pull it away from his face. Traces of hair grease now added to the *mélange*.

'Grandpa?' he called out innocently to the old man, whose shiny head was just visible over the back of the armchair, 'y'know that girl?'

'Uh, oh, what?' Grandpa had been pretending not to sleep.

'Hattie, or Kathy, wasn't it?' Stephen pretended not to remember.

'Oh, like I said, son, I don't want to talk about that no more. It was a long time ago.'

Stephen waited, and grabbed greedily at another sandwich, holding it in two hands. The blandness of the bread seemed to reflect his complexion, as if eating it would add to his general pallidness. He leaned forward and slumped his elbows onto the table. His mother instantly slapped his arm, as she always did, and he removed them.

'Where are your manners Stephen?' she said, for the four hundredth time.

'Yup, yup, yup,' sighed the back of the chair. '*She was beautiful, son, just perfect.*' Grandpa had come round.

'Why did she just leave?'

'*Like I said, son, she was bullied. She couldn't take it no more. They used to accuse her of terrible things. If ever anything went wrong in the house, like money going missing, or some bit of damage, they blamed it on her. Said she was a witch. I guess she just flipped one day. They took her twin too.*'

'Who is *'they'* Grandpa?'

'*Those people had no rights, Stephen.*' The old man had turned his chair round and was looking intently at his grandson, his voice rising in a righteous anger. '*Not like today. They were fourth class citizens. After Kathy disappeared, they just took the other girl and moved her someplace else. She didn't talk much. I don't remember much about her. She was taller I think.*'

'*You said she wore clothes?*'

Grandpa laughed. The first time he had even smiled about that memory.

'*Of course she wore clothes! But she was odd like that. Always wore pants. Always.*'

'*Why is that odd? Girls wear pants Grandpa.*'

Stephen's mind was already jumping to an image of the figure he had seen. He didn't want to be thinking what was going through his head at that moment.

'Not in those days, son. It was frowned upon. Girls had to be girls see. Skirts at school, and mostly at home too. But Kathy - green pants. Always. I remember folks distrusted her for that. Said she was strange. That's where some of the bullying came from. I liked it. She dared to be different. It never bothered me. But there was a big fuss about it. They stopped her going to school for it. Go get me the book, son.'

Stephen couldn't make out why wearing pants was so unusual, but he was happy to have engaged his grandfather, so he made off for the bedroom and came back with the cutting.

'You see, even here. Pants. They were green.' The old man studied the photo intently, and ran his fingers gently over her.

Outside, the sun had disappeared completely, and night was quickly developing.

Stephen stood at the window, gazing over towards the park. It couldn't be, could it? Ghosts are just memories, after all. But the old man was describing almost exactly what they had seen. The lake. He knew where that was. He would take Ryan down there tomorrow to check it out. Stephen reached up and pulled the drapes across the window, trying to leave his over-active imagination on the outside.

He shuddered a little.