

Lea Park Chapter 1

It was dusk as Stephen started out on his usual route home.

It took him past the shelter as always, and at this time of day it was always just a little scarier than it would have been earlier. It was only a building, but it cast shadows in formless shapes across the park. Unusually, this evening there was just one light on inside, glowing weakly from an upstairs window.

He quickened his step just slightly. A shadow seemed to move with him. Almost certainly his own.

As he reached the path that took him across its frontage, he noticed a downstairs window starting to open. It was the sound that stopped him first - a cartoonish squeaking of wood scraping on wood. As he glanced over he saw the window, which was the kind that slid open, slowly move upwards. Whoever or whatever was opening it from within was having difficulty. It opened no more than six or seven inches and then got stuck, slightly crooked.

Stephen pulled himself forward a few steps into the shadows of one of the stands of scrubby trees next to the front yard. He dared a glance backwards, and shivered slightly - despite the warmth of the evening.

Probably twenty yards from where he now crouched, a small figure eased itself out of the window, head first, followed by a gray or green shirt and baggy pants. Shoeless feet followed and jumped softly onto the ground. It seemed to pause briefly in the half-light, as if uncertain where to go.

Stephen watched mesmerized as the little figure, skating close to the building as if avoiding a searchlight, shimmered across noiselessly, and then disappeared from view. Stephen stood stock still and shuddered.

The window remained crookedly half-open, a black void beyond it.

Later that night, the shelter burned down.

Lea Park Chapter 2

It would have been unusual to go the park at the weekend anyway. Stephen's Mom and Pa sometimes tried to organize something for him to do on weekends, but the heat often put paid to too much activity. Sometimes a friend would come over, but the apartment was small and the room that he shared with his grandfather was not really suitable for any teenage gossip or loose talk. He always had the feeling someone was listening in, even if they were all in the parlour.

Occasionally they might venture out as a family to buy ice-cream from the store on the corner, but that tended to be the height of their ambitions. Stephen would sometimes go visit Ryan, who lived in the neighborhood adjoining their own. Ryan lived in a house, with a little more space and a back yard. It had a big umbrella over the patio and a small pump-up pool. They spent hours cooling off in there.

The fire seemed to have started just after Stephen had left that Friday afternoon. It even crossed Stephen's mind that he might have been somehow responsible, or at least a suspect. *Scene of the crime* and all that. His Mom had somehow amassed a stack of cheap crime novels which for a period he had read obsessively, and there always seemed to be someone caught up in a situation beyond their control, even if they had not been directly responsible. He thought back to what he had seen that evening, and to whether he might have inadvertently witnessed the perpetrator.

What did he look like again? What was he wearing?

Stephen tried to remember. It was Sunday night already and he realized he had not fixed in his mind what he had seen. He tried again.

How tall? Black or white? An adult, or just a kid?

His mind then turned to the re-enactments of crimes he had seen on TV. Where they revisited the scene and used actors to jog people's memories. That's what he would do. First thing Monday he'd go back to the shelter and try to dredge up some meaningful thoughts, like a proper investigator.

After all, there was nothing much else to do.

Lea Park Chapter 3

The Fire Department had spent much of the weekend securing the site.

The shelter, once home to an unspecified number of people, was now a brick and stone shell, its wooden roof structure and most of its windows burnt out.

Stephen stared through the chain link fence that had been erected around it, trying to imagine what it might have been like inside. There were the remnants of furniture and fittings visible through the windows, but nothing organic could have survived the heat that had built up and consumed the building from within. At various points on the fence were signs warning of the danger. *Sunnyside Homeless Shelter - Keep Out.*

The talk over the weekend had been about the building and those who had lived there.

'Life's throwaways,' had been his grandfather's assessment. *'Never did anything useful with their lives. Sat around doing nothing.'*

Stephen had looked at his grandfather and wondered what exactly *he* did most of the time, but he had not said anything.

'Wrong side of the tracks,' his mother had opined, not for the first time. Stephen's mother was a woman of immovable opinions, and she often classified people this way. Stephen had looked around the miserable, steaming apartment, and wondered which side of the tracks they were on. Their side certainly didn't have a lot to recommend it.

Standing in front of the shelter on that sweltering Monday afternoon, Stephen momentarily caught himself thinking of the inhabitants. During every summer vacation he could remember, he had passed the shelter on his way to the park. Regularly one of the residents would call out from a window or the stoops which served the three or four front entrances to the building, often demanding cigarettes or a lighter. Stephen had always put his head down and hurried past, trying not to be noticed or to pretend he had not heard. Occasionally he would get a sarcastic *'Thank you, bro! Have a nice day!'* Occasionally something a bit more fruity.

But he thought about them now. Real people, down on their luck. The shelter had been their home. Daydreaming turned to horror as he realized no-one had even mentioned whether they had all got out. How many people lived there? No-one probably knew that either. So how would they know if everyone got out? He moved further along the fence until he was standing directly in front of what had been the grand front door. It was gone now of course, and through it he could see the iron frame of what had been a staircase to the first floor. He found himself looking up and then right and left, searching for unseen victims.

Looking left, he realized that the western side of the building had escaped some of the destruction, or least had gotten away with some charring and scarring. Perhaps the Fire Department had arrived just in time. To his astonishment, the window he had seen open the previous week was almost untouched, and still stood open at its crooked angle, just like it had been left. It even still bore some of its flaking white paint. Stephen strolled along the frontage until he was opposite the window. He crouched down to see what he could make out inside.

As he suspected, the inside was burnt out - he could just about discern the shape of what had perhaps

been a bed frame in the blackness. He reached up to the top of the fence, a feeling of helplessness washing over him. Despite what folks said, these had been actual living people. They had had lives. Had they gotten out?

The exterior of the fence was perhaps twenty yards from the window. Stephen strained to see what was through it, but he thought he could discern movement. Not possible. But when he saw the silhouette of a person, a girl maybe, crouching down in the faint light illuminating the back of what had been one of the ground floor rooms, then standing up, then staring back at him, he ran.

Faster than he had ever run before, grabbing at his baggy pants as they slipped off his waist. His shaggy hair bobbing along behind him.

It was the summer vacation of 1996.

A hot one. Memories - of boredom, and biking. Of dust and drama. Of camping, confusion and Kathy.

The summer that Stephen first felt what he thought might be love.

Lea Park Chapter 4

Stephen let himself back into the apartment. The family was sitting around the kitchen table as usual. He grunted a greeting, and went to his room.

He had not known anything other than the apartment. It was warm and often damp which, considering the dryness of a Texan summer, was unusual. Stephen's father was a scientist, or perhaps an inventor, he never quite knew which. All he knew was that the apartment was also his father's laboratory, which often involved water and steam, and a variety of foul-smelling equipment. Stephen's father was 'good with his hands', so his mother said, but that didn't ever seem to result in an experiment or an invention which worked. She often presented him with a 'to-do' list at weekends. Those jobs tended not to get done. Occasionally Grandpa would have a go at one of the jobs. As a result, the to-do list often got a bit longer.

Everything in the house revolved around the kitchen. The dining area was part of the kitchen too, where they all gathered at meal times. Grandpa had a chair in front of the tiny TV, where he parked his bony body for *Jeopardy* and *The Price is Right*. Stephen's father never seemed to sit down, and was thin and wiry as a result. Only Stephen bucked the trend in the Neppetz family.

The bedroom Stephen shared with his Grandpa was large enough for the two of them, even if it didn't help Stephen avoid Grandpa's snoring, which was a nightly (and sometimes daily) occurrence. The walls were painted a dull magnolia (as were the walls in every room) and were improved only a little with Stephen's beloved posters. There was a small bookshelf which hung precariously over Grandpa's single bed, even though in Stephen's memory there were only ever two books on it.

'Books are for schools and libraries!' his Grandpa had often declared, and it was true, Stephen had never seen him reading either volume. Stephen himself had tried. In his most tedious teenage moments, having been through his Mom's trash crime novels, he had tried to read both books. The first was called *Be Your Own Attorney*, which Stephen figured his Grandpa had probably gotten hold of after one of his occasional brushes with law enforcement. The other was something complicated-looking about psychology, with a title he didn't understand.

Stephen shuffled into the hall, the events of the day still playing with his mind.

'Where've you been today son?' It was Grandpa's familiar vacation-day greeting, laced more with accusation than welcome.

'Oh y'know, just down at the park. We were looking at the shelter again. You seen it?' He knew for a fact that they wouldn't have shifted from the apartment.

'Nah I saw the pictures on TV. No-one died. They'll rebuild it.' Stephen was surprised at his Grandpa's attitude to what could have been a tragedy.

'You sure? How many people lived there?'

'Oh just a handful.' Stephen was sure he was going to say *life's throwaways* again, but he was actually surprised by what he heard next.

'There's too much history in that place already. This is just another chapter. Probably for the best.'

'I saw someone down there this evening, inside.' Stephen tried to sound cool but his voice betrayed what he had felt just a few hours earlier.

'Oh don't be ridiculous Stephen!' called his mother from the kitchen, *'everyone's out and accounted for.'*

'Yes, I know. But I saw someone in one of the rooms. I couldn't make out the face.'

'Typical!' replied his mother, *'just a looter or some glory hunter! There's always one.'*

'They always used to say it was haunted,' croaked Grandpa, a nervous kind of chuckle in his voice.

'Don't be ridiculous! The only person who's ever said that is you!' called Stephen's mother.

'Well that's not true,' replied Grandpa, placing both his liver-spotted hands on the table and staring down at them. He sounded serious, *'not if you remember like I do.'*

They had noticed recently that Grandpa's memory was fading, and he was prone to these occasional pipedreams. Stephen looked at him a little sadly, but tried to help him out of it, wondering perhaps if something might emerge from the old man's mind that might help him understand his own thoughts.

'So what do you remember about the shelter Grandpa?'

The old man looked up at the ceiling, as if trying to drag a memory from somewhere. After a long pause he turned sadly to his grandson. *'Come with me boy.'*

Stephen took his arm and they shuffled towards the bedroom.

Lea Park Chapter 5

Sitting slumped forward on his bed, Grandpa pulled at the far corners of his memory.

'Well, I knew someone who lived there,' he began, *'Harriet, or Hattie or something. She was a friend of mine.'*

Stephen's grandfather had been brought up in the same neighborhood, in a large house almost on the site of where the apartment now stood. His own father had made some clever investments and the family had not been short of money, so it seemed unusual that the old man would have had a friend who was homeless. Nevertheless Stephen imagined a tale of teenage romance emerging from the old man's memory, or from his imagination, or probably from a cocktail of both.

'Yes, Hattie or Katty or Kathy we called her. Colored girl she was. Beautiful.' He looked down and seemed to be wringing his hands, in prayer or in sadness.

This surprised Stephen. They were a close family - they had to be - but he had not heard his Grandpa talk this way before. He had never heard anyone in his family talk directly about African-American people like that. He knew his Grandpa was out of date with his language, but he let it go.

'Always had this red ribbon in her hair. Saw her almost every day on my way to school. She'd sit on the stoop of the shelter and we'd chat awhile.'

He lifted his head up and Stephen saw the deep veins straining against his grandfather's weak translucent skin. He shut his eyes and took a shallow breath through his nose.

'She smelled good.' He emphasized the word *good* and took a deeper breath this time, as if seeking out her scent from all those years ago.

Stephen had never heard this story before, despite all the hours sitting around talking that they did at the kitchen table. He pressed for more detail.

'So you had a homeless friend? Who lived right there in the shelter? When was that?' Stephen tried to seem supportive as this long-forgotten story emerged from the old man's mind.

It was probably long enough ago for that sort of thing to be frowned upon. Stephen remembered some of his US history classes which had covered the topic of segregation in the South, and Grandpa's generation would have been right in the middle of all that. He looked across at the old man.

'Oh I don't know son. It was a long time ago. We had a friendship, see.' Grandpa gazed a little into the middle distance. *'She wasn't exactly homeless. It wasn't for the homeless in those days. More for troubled youth. Colored kids. Some called it the asylum, but it wasn't bad. We never got no trouble from it or nothing.'*

'Black children, Grandpa,' Stephen corrected him. The old man ignored him.

'But they bullied her. She used to tell me these stories. She had such a beautiful sadness. They chased her. Said she was a witch.'

Before Stephen could register his reaction, Grandpa reached up to the bookshelf above his bed.

'Have I shown you this before, boy?' As he had not shared the books with Stephen before, Stephen was going to pretend this was all new. As it was, he pulled down the psychology book which Stephen had only glanced at given the complicated-looking title. Grandpa sat on the edge of his bed holding the book with a degree of reverence. He opened the text and pulled out a fraying piece of yellowing paper. He held it out gently to Stephen.

'Take care of this, son.' It seemed to Stephen that this was something important. He carefully unfolded the newspaper cutting he had just been handed. It was from the *Texas Sentinel*. Not a paper Stephen had ever seen or heard of. He searched out the date before reading the headline. 17th August 1936. Over sixty years ago.

The feature was an article on the disappearance of a young girl called Katherine 'Kathy' Jefferson. There was a grainy picture - a close-up image of a young black girl sitting on the stoop in front of the shelter, which was unmistakably the same building as the one that had just been gutted by the fire. Stephen's mind agreed with his Grandpa's - even from the picture he thought she was beautiful. She had the looks of a nice person. Stephen read the short article.

The girl was twelve years old when she had disappeared. The article reported witnesses from the shelter as having seen her running towards the forest. *'I saw her that day. She just kept right on runnin,'* reported one eye-witness, while another interviewee questioned her thinking. *'She wasn't right in the head. Dressin' like a man an'all. And just runnin' off barefoot like that.'*

'Did they ever find her? What was wrong with her?' asked Stephen. His mind suddenly squirmed with a mass of contradicting questions, and the sweatiness of his palms suggested an unseen link between what he had seen that evening and what he was now reading.

'There was nothin' wrong with her!' Stephen's grandfather made to get up off the bed in frustration, but instead sank back down onto the mattress, his head in his hands. *'Nothin' wrong at all. They chased her out, she was last seen running towards the lake. Didn't even have no shoes on. She couldn't swim. They just gave up on her. They let her go. Let her disappear. The police came down on the morning it was reported. Looked out over the water. And left before lunch. That was it. Black girl, no close relatives. That was my friend. She had no family. Apart from her twin sister. For all I know, she's still out there.'*

'C'mon Grandpa, you're scaring me now. I saw someone.'

'Sorry son. Let's not be stupid here. You saw some low-life in the ruins. Kathy was never found. I often looked around those woods to see where she might have gone. There were a few little ponds. But I never found her.' Stephen thought he was actually going to see his Grandpa cry. Instead he took the paper from Stephen and folded it carefully back into the book. Stephen resolved to take another read of it when he next could.

He patted the old man's knee affectionately and headed back out to the kitchen.

Lea Park Chapter 6

Lea Park had been at its most vicious that July and August. Unrelenting heat had turned the central area into a dust bowl, with only the scrubby trees and the deeper forest beyond offering any relief.

Still people came.

The PlayPark in the center was a wooden marvel of environmentally-conscious engineering, with a myriad of different activities for the suburban kids who came each day. Despite the heat, they would swarm noisily over it until the sun got the better of them and the Moms took them home. It was usually the mothers. The fathers mostly worked in the factories and sweatshops that lined the main highway and the overpass. Men's men for sure.

Towards the evening, the PlayPark became somewhere the teens could then hang out, even if they felt well beyond such things. But sitting on a swing, running round the walkways, gossiping about girls? There were worse things you could do. Like scrawl graffiti inside some of the installations. Or use terrible language. They did that too. Especially Ryan.

Stephen didn't want to admit it, but even at fourteen he still liked the little castle that had been built on the top of the wood-framed cabin at the center of the site. It always brought back memories, and from the top he could look out over the park, and dream of future possibilities.

Stephen had been down there almost every day for most of the summer. He had his routine.

Get up (late). Eat breakfast (if there was any). Go to the park (almost always). Meet friends - well Ryan at least. Eat a hot dog, sometimes two or three. Do some scout stuff (like, what?). Hang out. Check the time. Go home. Eat dinner (except if he was late home, when there wouldn't be any).

The Friday the shelter burned down had shaken them temporarily out of these endless habits, and of course it became the talk of the town, or at least of the park.

It had lit up the whole park like a beacon, standing as it did on a slight incline to the north side. There had been some concern that it might have spread to the woods and wrought wider destruction, but the Fire Service had soon damped down most of the routes it could have taken, and it remained contained. Stephen had been able to see it from the apartment, and had to concede that it was impressive, with vibrant yellows and oranges dancing out of the windows, smoke billowing overhead, and the noise! A deep-throated roar as the dry wind fanned the flames leaping out of every orifice. Crackling and hissing as pipes boiled and burst. Cracking and thundering from the distance as the structure gracefully ate itself from the inside, bringing its supporting beams crashing on down.

Although there were multiple reports in the local news of people being trapped inside, the reality had been that the few ragged residents had managed to gather some of their belongings before the fire took hold, and had emerged safely into the night. The only minor casualty had been a firefighter who suffered some smoke inhalation injuries when he had rushed to the aid of a child who had seemed disoriented and was wandering back towards the flames. Both had been taken to hospital, but reports suggested that both firefighter and child were doing well and would recover fully.

The city had rallied round and found them places to sleep. A small donation had even kick-started a fund to help the residents. It currently stood at one hundred and fifty-seven dollars.

And now, a few days on, the building stood there.

A gray, malevolent presence behind its high fence, daring them to engage with it through the gloom.

Stephen swung gently, as an early star twinkled overhead.

'Time to go, right?' said Ryan, who was standing on the seat of the next-door swing.

'I guess.' They were the last ones there that day. The other scouts had had enough at least two hours earlier.

Stephen's non-committal answer was shaken by a banging noise from the small wooden bathroom block which stood alone fifty yards or so away from where they stood. They stopped. Ryan strained, from his vantage point, to see over the rest of the installation.

'What was that?' Stephen sounded concerned.

'Dunno. The wind I guess.' It was true that, for once, a gentle wind was hastening the lifting of the day's oppressiveness, as the evening drew in. Stephen caught himself drawing in a deep breath, perhaps with a trickle of apprehension. He smelled something sweet on the soft breeze.

'Hey, wait, look! Get down!' Ryan jumped off the swing and crouched down beside the enormous hollowed-out log that was one of the centerpieces. They went into scout-mode, concealing themselves behind it the way they had been trained. If their scout training could really be called training.

'What are you looking at?'

'Over there. He's gone behind the block.'

'Who?'

'Some kid. I saw him.' They crawled along the side of the trunk, trying to reach a better vantage point.

'He just kind of disappeared. Where is he now?'

'You sure D? I didn't see anything. What'd he look like?'

'Small, t-shirt and pants. Hair.'

'Could be anyone, right? You sure?' Stephen was looking for reassurance.

'I'm kinda sure. He was quick and quiet though.' It did not sound convincing.

At all.

10

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.

Lea Park Chapter 8

Stephen and Ryan were unlikely scout-mates, but were thrown together each summer.

The scouts served only as a focal point for each day, and even then a weary teenage half-heartedness was the predominant level of anyone's commitment.

At the beginning of each week, a couple of scout leaders would show up, and try to instil some form of organization into them. If there was any plan or objective, it was that they were making preparations for the annual scout camp, which took place each year, in the last week of the vacation. But other than that, it was endless games of *Capture the Flag*, the occasional camp fire (which weren't exactly allowed in the park), and some community singing. At fourteen, there was only so much singing of *If I had a Hammer* that they could take. The first few games each day were alright, but the more recent ones just seemed to pale. Same stupid teams. Same winners. Same arguments.

Although Ryan was Stephen's utter nemesis at school, during the summer they were forced to get along. Stephen's mother actively encouraged it. She claimed that Ryan came from the *right sort of people*, which usually meant that they were a little richer and better connected than she was. Ryan often boasted about his family's car, their boat on the lake, and their fifty-eight inch TV set, but nobody had ever seen any of those things. The car was always 'in for a service' and the boat was usually 'moored up for the winter'. Even in summer. So Ryan coming from the right sort of people simply meant that he came from reasonable, working people from just about the right side of town.

But taking Ryan anywhere was actually unsafe.

He wasn't a bad kid, he just wanted to be, so he had developed a habit of doing the wrong thing. At school it was all contained within the campus, and although he had once managed to half-incinerate a classroom and partially-destroy the principal's car, he was quite safe there. It was when he was let out that things had a tendency to go really wrong.

Especially if there were girls involved. He just couldn't help himself.

It was mostly showing off really. A bit of stealing. Some minor vandalism. A touch of arson here and there. No-one ever got hurt. He always returned the money. He helped repair the damage. He was that kind of person - a kind person actually, just someone who made wrong decisions quite a lot of the time, and who seemed to like doing it. Oh - and he seldom got caught.

Stephen never made wrong decisions, because he never made any decisions at all. He was a *go with the flow* kind of guy, so when the inevitable drift down towards the park happened each morning, he just drifted with it. He packed up a couple of cheese and onion sandwiches, or took money for a hot dog, dragged himself onto his bike, took the same five-minute route through the suburbs, under the overpass through to the eastern entrance, passed by the shelter, and sat in the same clearing at the north end of the park, waiting for something to happen.

Which it very rarely did.

Lea Park Chapter 9

'Yeah, it went up like fireworks!'

'Are you OK? How close were you?'

'Me? Oh pretty close actually! I could feel the heat as it spread!'

Stephen couldn't see who Ryan was talking to as he approached the shelter that morning. He was half-sitting, half-lying against the fence, a limp cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Stephen noticed that his shirt was undone to the navel.

'Y'know, I guess I kinda wish I hadn't done it, but y'know...'

Even at that moment, Stephen thought that Ryan sounded cool. Way cooler than he could ever sound. He strolled over, trying his best. He spoke hesitantly, looking around.

'Hey Ryan? You OK?'

'Hey man, how're you doin'?' Ryan sounded unnatural somehow.

'What's goin' on Ryan?' Stephen asked again, a note of uncertainty accompanying the question.

'Ah nothin' for you to worry about,' he replied, tossing his head back and flashing a smile at one of the three girls who were sitting three or four yards from him. Stephen noticed her grin right back at him.

'This is Stephen,' Ryan said, with a sarcastic smile and more than a hint of contempt in his voice. Someone muttered, *'Hi Stephen,'* and giggled a little nervously. The others did not. Stephen did not recognize them.

'What were you talking about?' Stephen knew that the very question made him sound uncool and insecure, *'I hope they're trying to find out who did this.'*

'No need, you're looking right at him, Bro,' said Ryan, stretching back a little further and staring upwards. Stephen looked around. There were two indolent police officers, one at each end of the site, frying gently in the sun in their full uniforms. Stephen recognized one of them as the guy who often manned the traffic island just outside the main gate, ensuring that the rush-hour traffic didn't overwhelm the city.

'Watch what you say! They'll hear you.'

'They'll get me pretty soon, don't worry Bro.'

Stephen looked at his friend with disdain as he span his stupid story. Two of the girls seemed to actually be hanging on his words, and Stephen knew that was exactly why he continued with the charade. Ryan was always like this, but perhaps he had gone too far this time.

'Actually I saw someone running away just before the fire.' Stephen momentarily looked over to the window, and retrieved that little dark figure he had seen from the trees.

'Yeah that was me actually!' Ryan laughed.

'Be serious for once!' Ryan looked across at the girls again. He leaned even further back, almost reclining in front of 'his' shelter.

'OK so I didn't mean to do it, right? I dropped my smoke right over there before I went home, and I guess it must've caught on something.'

He took another amateurish drag and then flicked the damp cigarette out of his hand over towards Stephen's feet. It didn't even seem to be lit, but Stephen made a point of stamping it out. Ryan's effortless cool was beginning to annoy him, and when he got up from his prone position and stood with one boot on the low wall in front of the shelter, a couple of the girls seemed to smile right at him.

Ryan had always been pretty lucky with girls. Stephen had noticed that they seemed to be drawn to boys who got into trouble, and at school Ryan often had the same gaggle around him, and they usually seemed to be giggling or pointing, often at Stephen, or so he thought. Perhaps they were, perhaps not.

'Hey man, how're you doin'??' was his usual hollow greeting from behind a defensive wall of admiring girls during recess. *'It's the Lone Ranger again!'* He was referring to the Texas Rangers hat that Stephen wore most of the time, which Ryan would invariably snatch off Stephen's head and which would often end up somewhere it shouldn't. Like the floor, behind the lockers, or in the toilet cistern.

Or worse.

Lea Park Chapter 10

One of the girls stepped forward.

She was tall, elegant for her age, and towered over Ryan as she approached, her red hair spilling out from under a brown cowboy hat.

'You think we're impressed, you fool?' Her tone was immediately dominant and accusatory. No-one spoke to Ryan like that at school. Ryan seemed actually taken aback.

'People actually lived there, y'know. Real people. Real lives.'

'Er, well...I'm like sorry I did it, right? It was just an accident. Kinda.'

As Ryan dug deeper, he didn't notice Stephen waving his hands frantically in front of him, as one of the officers minding the site emerged from his car and started making his way towards where Ryan was holding court. Ryan's final comment condemned him.

'Yeah well it wasn't worth keeping anyway. I'm glad it's gone.'

Officer Chavez, a man of at least three hundred pounds, stumbled on the loose gravel surrounding the fence, almost toppling over as he struggled to remove his handcuffs from his belt. Stephen gasped.

'You'd better come with us, son.' Ryan's heat-reddened face turned ashen gray as Chavez fumbled with the handcuffs around his wrists. Ryan seemed torn between keeping up the bravado, and resisting being arrested for something he didn't do. Chavez continued.

'These good people have just witnessed you confessing to a clear act of criminal damage by arson.' It sounded serious. The trio of girls turned and started to melt away. Stephen was about to speak in defence of Ryan, who seemed to wait a moment until the girls had dispersed, then said,

'Well, I...y'know I didn't actually...'

'You confessed, son. And I have witnesses.' From what Stephen knew of the law (mostly from *Be your own Attorney*), securing the witnesses was an important part of the process, but Chavez and his colleague (a stick-thin rookie called Liam) seemed in no hurry to question anyone. They bundled Ryan into one of the cars.

Stephen stood and strained to hear what they were saying to him through the open door of the police vehicle. He distinctly heard the words *cells* and *charged*. After what seemed like an hour or more, the car drove off with Ryan inside.

He struggled to turn and held up his manacled hands to Stephen, desperation in his eyes.