

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.