

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.