

## 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.