

## 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 spun 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.