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# SANDUSKY BURNING





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*In memory of Bonnie and Larry Conway*

# **Prologue**

**Tuesday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>**



## Todd 1

1:05 a.m.

**T**hat damned railroad crossing got me again! Nobody was around, and on most nights, I could sneak across, maneuvering my Accord around the crossing arms. But when I pulled up the red lights were flashing and the warning bells were clanging, so I stopped and shifted into park. Also, the train horn blasts were very loud when I rolled up, so I figured the train was getting close.

It had been raining on and off for hours, but it was currently just drizzling lightly. I set the windshield wiper cadence to swipe the window every five or six seconds, just to remove the mist that was accumulating.

One of the only advantages of working the late shift at the amusement park was that most of the world was asleep when I left. Usually there was no traffic, it was just the damned train that got me if my timing was bad.

I took out my cell and began scrolling as the train approached. Looking down at the screen, I was reminded that my park security uniform was wrinkled and stained, with big sweat rings under my arms. Being a heavier guy was tough when it came to wearing a black uniform in the summer. For most of my shift that night I had been wearing a clear plastic rain poncho, which seemed to seal in the heat.

Another long horn blast. Then I heard sounds that were unfamiliar. Scraping noises with periodic cracking sounds. I scanned the tracks and didn't see anything unusual. I rolled down the passenger window a few inches to hear a little better.

The train engine whooshed by, causing my car to vibrate. The scraping and cracking noises got louder. I switched my phone to the camera app and started recording a video, capturing the freight cars passing by with a blur. The last car of the train was a few hundred feet away.

There were weird little white and yellow lights blinking behind the last car. I squinted, and realized that it wasn't actually lights, it was sparks. Freakin' sparks were spraying off of the tracks!

The screeching noises became almost deafening. The last train cars were approaching the streetlights and I finally saw what was making the noises and sparks. I gasped and dropped my phone, scrambling to find it among the empty fast food bags and pop bottles.

A large gray camper was being dragged behind the train! Holy shit! It was one of those giant park models, more like a residential trailer than a portable camper. It was in tatters, sliding along on its side, sparks shooting out from where the siding was in contact with the tracks. It was actually bouncing along violently, sometimes as high as a foot off the ground, elevating, and then being pulled back down by chains with a crash. It was like a giant, badly designed rectangular metal kite being whipped about.

How the fuck does an RV get chained to a freight train? Was this some sort of prank? *Were there people inside?*

The train kept rolling west. I watched as the sparks continued to fly, and then it was out of sight. I scanned the tracks and saw that small pieces of debris were scattered about. I stopped the video, switched to the phone app, and dialed 911.

# **Chapter 1**

**Tuesday, June 16<sup>th</sup>**



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## Brady 1

1:15 p.m.

In a rare moment when the wireless signal had a strong connection, there was a knock at the camper door. I sighed, reluctant to step away from my laptop, which had a five-bar signal for the first time that day.

I had been working from the kitchen table with just a pair of black gym shorts on, adhering to my summertime home office dress code. One of the benefits of working remotely. I glanced at the clock at the bottom right corner of my laptop screen: 1315 hours.

My habit of programming our household digital clocks to display military time always drove Marcy nuts. I figured it was useful for the kids to understand it. Not necessarily for the purpose of joining the military, but if they had a civilian job working with the military as I did. A lot of federal government work environments used military time.

It wasn't rocket science. People who struggled with understanding that 1315 hours was 1:15 p.m. were probably not deep thinkers.

The weather was sunny and warm, in the mid-seventies. It wasn't quite warm enough to use the air conditioning, so I had the windows and doors open and my shirt off. The interior of the RV was always a few degrees warmer than the outdoors, even with the large oak tree on our lot blocking portions of the sunlight throughout the afternoon.

Both exterior doors were on the right side of the RV, facing north. The front door was near the main cabin with the back door allowing outside access to the small bathroom.

Maneuvering around the narrow kitchen table, I made my way to the main cabin at the front of the RV. I reached into the small closet on the right side of the room and found a yellow dry-fit t-shirt from a half-marathon I had run a few years ago. I went to the screen door and found Chuck standing on the bottom front doorstep, leaning against the metal railing by the door.

Chuck was one of the more social employees at the campground. I guessed him to be in his late forties, a guy with a Harley-Davidson vibe, long brown hair kept in a ponytail beneath a black Harley baseball cap, bearded and tattooed. He was shorter than me, maybe five foot nine, and heavier by fifty pounds.

It wasn't that the other campground employees were necessarily antisocial, but there was a degree of indifference that manifested itself with working there. The pay was low, the hours long, and the work was often unpleasant. Emptying fire pits, cleaning restrooms, cleaning the shower houses, cleaning the cabins, picking up litter, etc.

Chuck was always in a pleasant mood, having a wave and a smile for everyone. He owned a Harley motorcycle of some sort and there were mornings where he really enjoyed revving it loudly for five to ten minutes before taking off somewhere.

"Hey dude," he said smiling, adjusting his sunglasses.

I disliked the overly familiar manner in which some used in a purely employee-customer relationship. The waiter who called me *champ*. The auto mechanic who called me *chief*. The campground employee who called me *dude*. It was a weird, passive-aggressive alpha male play that never resonated with me.

"Hey," I said, putting on a pair of black flip-flops and stepping out to shake his hand. We shook and I walked down onto the grass.

"Have a seat," I said, motioning toward the patio table, which was surrounded by six chairs. We went over and sat down.

The furniture was starting to show some wear. It was originally our main patio furniture from our back deck at the house, but we replaced it and brought the old set to the campground. The cream color paint on the wrought iron was yellowing. The cloth backing on several of the chairs was wearing thin.

I had un-winterized my camper over a month earlier. It was a thirty-four-foot tow-behind RV, two years old, and fairly well loaded. While we called what we did “camping”, it wasn’t the variety of camping I had experienced in a tent growing up. The RV had indoor plumbing, electricity, central air, television, a refrigerator, a freezer, and a microwave. It was an efficiency apartment on wheels.

Buying it was my wife Marcy’s idea. We had season passes for the nearby amusement park, Gravity Junction, which was about an hour away from our home in the suburbs of Cleveland. Gravity Junction was one of the most popular parks in the country, with dozens of nationally ranked rides that drew in visitors from across the region.

Instead of driving back and forth all summer, why not just camp ten minutes from the front gate? Neither of us had any experience with owning a camper, but how hard could it be?

We went to a local RV show, found a camper, and financed it. Next, we bought a black Chevy Silverado truck with the appropriate towing capacity to haul it.

The first summer we went to several camping destinations in the region and the process of transporting the RV was often stressful and frustrating. Hauling six thousand pounds on the highway was harrowing at times, especially when big eighteen-wheelers would come blowing by and the backdraft would seem to jerk the camper over into the next lane.

Maneuvering the RV onto a campsite was challenging and would take multiple tries to situate it properly within reach of the utility hookups. Backing up while towing an RV was counterintuitive; to back it up to the right you turned the steering wheel to the right, and vice versa. It took some getting used to.

The rental fee at a campsite included all the necessary utilities. There was a power box for electricity, a water faucet that connected to the camper with a hose, and sewage ports.

Most RVs had a propane gas system to power some appliances and provide backup power when an electrical hookup was not available. A set of two propane tanks were fastened to the front of the RV, concealed under a black rounded rectangular plastic hood.

Campgrounds typically offered cable for free. Not everyone utilized it, as some of the more expensive RVs rolled up and raised a satellite dish when they parked. Because there is no way you would want to camp for a few days without having 500 channels available for viewing.

At some point over the past few decades, human beings became unable to exist without the smallest of conveniences. *God forbid you were forced to read a book or engage with your kids at a campground for a few days.*

I wasn't one to lecture on engagement. I was a typical technology addicted parent who spent too much time staring at my cell phone in the presence of my kids. In some ways, it was to preserve my sanity by absorbing information that wasn't transmitted via a kid or spouse.

"Hot out today. Got anything to drink?" Chuck asked. He grabbed the bottom of his shirt and used it to wipe his face, revealing the pink and white skin of his large, hairy belly.

"Sure, what do you want?"

"Got a beer?"

"I do," I said as I walked over to the outdoor fridge. There was an exterior kitchen area along the right side of the camper that had a sink, cupboards, a propane-powered griddle, and a mini-fridge. It was accessible via a sliding panel that could be locked.

Reaching into the fridge, I grabbed a single can and put it on the counter. I perceived a judging look from him and reached in and grabbed another for myself. Although I was on the clock, it mattered little since my supervisor was sixty miles away.

I walked over and handed a can to him. We opened them with loud popping noises and drank long swigs, with perspiration dripping from our cans.

A yellow work cart passed by driving north, driven by a big black man in a campground uniform. Yellow hat, yellow polo, black shorts. The work cart was essentially a mini truck, with a bench seat in the front and a small truck bed in the back. It was towing a series of yellow open-top passenger cars, with open sides for entering and exiting. Each had the capacity for four passengers.

The first three cars had families in them, the next three were empty. It wound up and down the streets across the campground throughout the day. The kids seemed to love this. I didn't mind riding along, I got to just sit there with them and enjoy the ride instead of doing any number of camping chores or trying to corral the kids.

"So whatcha got goin' on today, Brady?" he asked as he leaned back, with the two front legs of the chair coming off of the ground a few inches.

"Working," I answered.

"Really, you can do a full day's work out here in your camper?"

"Yeah, as long as I have an internet connection I can work from anywhere in the world. Which reminds me, can someone take a look at the Wi-Fi? It seems unstable at times and my connection keeps getting dropped," I said.

"I think Travis needs to buy better routers or something. More campers are here so it is stressin' the server," he said. "So what is it you do? I think when we chatted last season you mentioned government work."

"Right, I still work for the government. In Cleveland," I said.

"So you're some sorta government agent?" he asked, laughing. I laughed, too.

"Nah, nothing that interesting. I just work on financial projects." That interested him, he sat up a little straighter.

"So you have a clearance?" he replied. That question should have set off an alarm.

"Sure, all employees do," I said, hoping I could leave it at that. He nodded.

I worked at the Payroll Accounting and Finance (PAF) agency, which serviced all defense financial transactions. I was in charge of managing financial systems projects and thus needed a security clearance. Revealing my clearance was something I had been directed over and over again not to disclose. *A security clearance was not something to be advertised.*

I had a top secret clearance, not because I was working on ultra-sensitive government projects, but because I had access to restricted business and personal information. Working for a defense agency, I had a significant amount of information stored on everyone in the armed forces, defense civilians, contractors, and retirees, as well as acquisition data.

Holding a top secret clearance in that context was much different than the public's perception of what that type of clearance permitted. A top secret clearance allowed access to sensitive information which could pose a "grave threat" to national security. The "grave threat" label was laughable in my line of work.

Action movies about the CIA and FBI lead everyone to believe that having a clearance provided access to information on covert operations. In reality, it was all "need to know" information. If I didn't need to know that there was a particular CIA operative in Budapest engaging in counterespionage, then I wouldn't have access to that type of information, even though I had the right clearance.

"I suppose I know what you do for a living, Chuck. What do you do in the off-season?" I asked, eager to change the subject.

"Actually, I'm a union carpenter, but I'm on workers comp and not able to do that work at all right now. I fell off of a ladder a few years ago and it fucked my back up. I need to have surgery. So I do this under the table. I mostly ride around on that all day, so I don't aggravate my back," he said, motioning toward his golf cart.

A lot of the campers had golf carts to get around. I empathized with those like Chuck who had mobility issues, but that wasn't the case for most. They buzzed around on them because being forced to walk twenty to thirty yards from your camper to the pool or the clubhouse was too strenuous. Many invested substantial money into them, adding custom paint jobs and stereo systems.

Chuck's golf cart was one of those premium ones, light gray with orange flames blazing across the sides, and constantly playing music loudly. His musical tastes were consistently Hank Williams Jr., Lynyrd Skynyrd, Bad Company, and Bob Seger. Country, classic rock, and southern rock.

"Sorry to hear about your back," I said. He shrugged.

Chuck stared down at his beer can for a moment. Patting his shirt pocket, he found his pack of cigarettes. Pulling out the pack, he jerked his wrist several times until one popped free. He found his lighter in his pocket, lit it, and took a long drag. Leaning over, he held out the pack.

"No, thanks."

"Don't smoke?"

"No."

"Never have?"

"Not really. I smoked a few as a teen, that's about it."

"Smart. This is a waste of money," he said bitterly, as though someone was forcing him to smoke against his will. He coughed slightly as he exhaled.

"My parents both smoked, so I grew up in a cloud of secondhand smoke. I never enjoyed that," I said.

"I'm surprised, most kids end up smokin' when they grow up if their parents smoked. I was stealin' smokes from my old man all the time as a teen," he said. Chuck regarded the camper next door to me, exhaling a long puff of smoke.

It was a large, white, fifth wheel model, probably thirty-eight feet long. A clean-cut guy in his thirties with Kentucky plates on his truck stayed there on weekends with his two young boys. We had nodded at each other a few times but never had a conversation.

“I was around smoke constantly until I left home at eighteen and joined the Army. Up until that point, we all thought I had asthma; I could never run long distances without losing my breath and wheezing. When I got away from home and quit breathing all of that secondhand smoke, my asthma went away. It turns out my lungs were fine. I haven’t had a problem catching my breath since,” I said. *Particulars about my anti-smoking journey that you don’t give a shit about.*

“Army, huh? Thank you for your service. I have flat feet. Otherwise, I was gonna join the Marines,” he said. I nodded.

I wasn’t the type to self-aggrandize based on my modest military service, but I always disliked the “I almost joined” bullshit. It was a binary status, either you served or you didn’t. You don’t get credit for an *almost*. And I would have bet money there was nothing wrong with Chuck’s feet.

“Did you finish that race?” Chuck asked, motioning with his cigarette hand toward my shirt. It was from a half-marathon I had completed several years earlier.

“Yeah,” I replied, wondering what sort of follow-up was coming from a guy who didn’t look like he could run 13.1 yards, let alone miles.

“Good for you! I only run if someone is chasing me!” he said with a laugh. I gave the dad joke a halfhearted courtesy laugh.

After sneaking a quick look at his big stomach, I couldn’t help but feel that he should definitely consider running, regardless of whether or not he was being chased. Hell, at least walking part of the day instead of carting himself around on that ridiculous golf cart would be helpful. Then again, maybe his flat feet continued to plague him.

The back injury he mentioned could have been a factor. I experienced a brief moment of guilt about judging him without fully knowing his situation.

“Is the family comin’ up?” Chuck asked. I flinched a little before I caught myself. He noticed. I forced a fake smile.

“Sure, soon,” I said.

“So why are you up by yourself?” Chuck asked bluntly. I felt my face flush a little. I took a swig of my beer and wiped my mouth. *Drop by for the free beer, stay to inflict an interrogation.*

“I’m working on an important project and needed a little uninterrupted time,” I finally said.

“And look at me, over here interruptin’ you! Do people interrupt you during the day when you are workin’ from home when you are in Cleveland? Your kids are home for the summer, right?” he asked coolly, taking a toke from his cigarette and then a drink of beer. I slouched back a little, realized that I was slouching, and straightened my back.

“They are. I do get interrupted by the kids during the summer when I work from home. I also have to work later into the evenings on this project, so I just don’t have time to take care of the kids.”

“Right, that is all on your wife now,” he said, grinning widely. I tried to match it but was falling short of mustering an actual grin. It felt like a grimace. I hid it with my beer as I took a drink, finishing the last swig. Chuck crushed his can lightly and placed it on the table in front of him.

“Another?” I asked, hoping my lack of sincerity wasn’t apparent.

“Sure, Brady! I’m on break,” he laughed, winking at me. Chuck’s career at the campground appeared to be one long, continuous break. I got up and walked to the fridge, retrieving two more cans.

“What do you have going on the rest of the day?” I asked, hoping to permanently change the subject from my domestic situation.

“I have to take a look at all of the fire pits and shovel some out. A few trees need to be trimmed over on the south side. The usual shit.” He popped open his can and took a swig. “Here’s to drinking on the job!” he said loudly, leaning across and clicking his can against mine. He belched softly. I nodded and took a drink.

“The boss doesn’t care, I take it?” I asked, gesturing toward my beer before taking a drink. He shook his head.

"Nah, day drinkin' is one of the fringe benefits! How are things on your lot here? Everything good?" he asked, looking around as if noticing my campsite for the first time.

"Sure, everything is fine."

"Need some firewood?"

"I think I have enough for tonight, I may drop by the office and buy a bundle."

"Don't bother. I will drop some off later when I make rounds, we cut down a few trees the other day."

"You don't have to do that, Chuck."

"No problem, I insist," he said laughing. "Are you plannin' on being here through the weekend?"

"Yeah, I should be."

"So you said your family is joinin' you?" I paused a few seconds. *Why do you care?*

"I'm not sure yet," I replied. The kids were potentially coming up. But I didn't feel the need to elaborate.

"Great! Until then, it is just us bachelors holdin' it down!"

"I didn't realize you were a bachelor, I thought you had some female company in your RV over there," I said. Chuck laughed and shook his head.

"Technically I am, no ring on this finger!" he said, holding up his left hand. "Sharon and I just hang out, I don't have time for no girlfriend."

I wondered if Sharon knew that. I recalled seeing the heavy woman with graying black hair going in and out of his camper at site 57, which was one street over and about five sites north of mine. He owned a Starcraft model with an aluminum paneled exterior, about thirty feet long. It had definitely seen better days. I estimated by the antiquated aerodynamics of its design that it was built in the 1980s, as the modern ones were less angular and more rounded.

"If you are around later I will drop by. I may be pullin' a double, the campground is short-staffed."

He chugged the rest of his beer and put it down by the other empty.

“Great. I plan on working late, but maybe I can break free for a beer,” I said. *Unless I was able to avoid it.*

“I may have a few friends out one night soon, probably in the next few days. We build a fire over at lot 21 after dark. I’ll let you know, you can drop by and socialize. You live like a hermit over here!” he said as he stood up.

“Great!” I said, realizing I kept saying “great” over and over and how awkward it sounded. We shook hands, and he waddled over to his golf cart, settling in behind the wheel. He smiled, nodded at me, and took off.

I took a final swig off my can and tossed it in the garbage. Glancing at my watch, I noted it was 1410 hours. I had a few hours of work I should reasonably do, but drinking had sapped me of some of my motivation. Grabbing two more beers from the fridge, I brought them inside.

## Chuck 1

2:35 p.m.

It took every bit of self-control I had not to belch in his face as I left. *Uptight jerkoff*. I needed to play a game of cash poker with him, his face didn't hide a damn thing.

He had been stayin' at his camper alone for weeks. Last summer he was mostly up on weekends with his family. Family vacationers were a waste of time for Randy's side business interests. Solo male campers had potential. Brady had gone from the *family* category to *solo*, so he was worth keepin' an eye on.

Loopin' around Starling Street toward the office, I knew it would be easy to avoid Travis for the rest of the day since he was back supervisin' work at the tent sites. Asshole kept naggin' me about the fire pits and the trees, but why am I always the one doin' the hard labor? About time Patrick got his feet wet and did something besides ridin' around in a work cart chattin' up the female campers.

I drove over to Cabin F at the southwest corner of the campground and let myself in. The cabins were all the same, fake wood siding painted light brown with dark gray shingles on the roof. They were prefabbed and cheaply built but were in decent shape. Two bedrooms, furnished, and not a bad place to hide out and kill time, if I could stash my golf cart around back before anybody saw it. Definitely a lot better than the dump I lived in.

I lit a cigarette. These were nonsmokin' cabins, but fuck 'em.

The location of the cabins made them perfect for Randy to set up the side jobs. They were away from the seasonal campers and the sites around the cabins were transient sites, so it wasn't unusual to see strangers comin' and goin'. The seasonals were nosy as hell, a lot of 'em just sat in lawn chairs all day watchin' other people.

I had been ignorin' my text messages while drinkin' with Brady but took a look as I sat on the couch, kickin' my feet up on the coffee table. My burner phone had a few. Viktor. Randy. My regular cell had texts, too, a bunch from Travis, the usual shit, "where are you?", "I need this or that done", "blah blah blah." A few from Sharon, too. *Nag alert.*

I checked the time and it was 2:40 p.m. It was unusual to get a text from Viktor before dinner time.

*Call me, ASAP.*

Everything was hot with this guy; it was probably some cultural mix-up again. Dude had been in the states for months, and he still got confused by basic shit. I could hear that terrible Romanian accent in my head when I read his broken English texts.

I thought I heard Randy's motorcycle across the grounds. He had it ratcheted up to blast everyone's eardrums, a lot louder than mine. I wasn't complainin', it was a warnin' that he was around.

Another message came in, Travis again, *Jesus*. I flicked my ash into the sink and ran the water. I peeked out the door before leavin', walkin' around back to my golf cart.

## Patrick 1

4:00 p.m.

Calling it a “security booth” was a joke. At the beginning of the season, they had someone in the security booth all day, but that happened less and less as the summer wore on.

The seasonal people were allowed access to the campground in late April to start setting up for the season. During the offseason, the entrance was blocked by picnic tables that Travis would stack with a forklift.

Sure, you could still get in if you wanted to badly enough, but who wanted to rob any of these RVs? There was almost nothing of value. It was just a bunch of winterized RVs sitting empty from November through April. It was Ohio, half of that time they were buried in snow. What could you possibly steal that would make it worth unstacking heavy picnic tables? Nothing.

It was only June, and they already stopped manning the booth full time. On Fridays, there was someone in the booth to direct incoming weekend campers to the office, but by Sunday, nobody was around.

Security was random. Service was random. People who worked there didn’t care about any of that after a week on the job. *Nobody Cares* should be the slogan sewn on the front pocket of our stupid yellow work shirts.

Sometimes security was needed. Campers routinely got wasted and raised hell past 11 p.m., well after the posted “quiet hours” began at 10 p.m., and nobody on staff did anything about it. People shooting off fireworks at 1 a.m., revving their motorbikes, or generally just being loud.

Travis didn’t care. A lot of his employees were also campers, so why bother complaining? Who was going to break up the disturbance? Chuck? Right, he was most likely one of the drunks causing the disturbance.

I played it a lot straighter my first year on the job. Since I was the only Latino guy, I walked a straight line. I introduced myself as Patrick, although my real name is Patricio. Patrick was better for relating to Anglos and getting jobs than Patricio.

When I turned in applications with the name “Patrick Correa”, I actually got interviews. I sounded white on the phone. When I showed up brown I had disappointed a few employers, but also gotten the job a few times with a good interview.

My dad barely spoke English but my mom was lily-white, so I was able to communicate good in either world. If I was at a day labor site I could banter with the Hispanic guys. If I was working around Anglos I could speak without a Spanish accent. It was about picking the right culture for the right situation.

I had black friends who did that all the time. They were perfectly capable of sounding educated but chose not to if there was an advantage to speaking broken English. I have seen college-educated blacks do it. They want to be “down”, so they pretended to regress. Seemed like some phony shit, but I had done it, so I couldn't judge.

Travis liked hiring rednecks, but he did have some darker people on staff, usually the black variety. Last year I played the quiet Latino boy who appreciated his job, but this season I didn't care as much. I played the hiding games, the hook-up games with the females, and the drinking and smoking games like everyone else. If they fired me, they fired me, it was just a shitty seasonal job.

I passed by Chuck on my work cart as we drove by the basketball courts. He motioned with his cigarette hand for me to pull over, a weird waving motion he did without looking directly at me. I backed up until I was alongside him. This area of the campground was quiet, only a few lots were occupied.

“Hey Chuck,” I said. Chuck ignored me, looking off to the side and taking a drag on his cigarette.

“Where have you been, dude?” he asked angrily.

“I was at security. I'm heading back to see what Travis needs in the back.”

“Tell Travis I'm checkin' on the electrical box at site 66.”

“Who called that in? There hasn’t been no one camping there,” I said. He glared at me.

“From the last time someone was there. I’m followin’ up,” he said, blowing out a puff of smoke.

He drove off and I kept heading toward the back. I could see Travis from a distance. He was wearing his usual black t-shirt and black shorts, black shoes, black socks, and a black hat. His long black hair spilled everywhere over his big round back and shoulders, he was an all-around big guy, offensive lineman big. If an offensive lineman had let himself go for a few years. But just a high school caliber lineman, he wasn’t that tall. I pulled up to him as he stood by a fallen tree, staring down at his cell phone.

## Travis 1

4:30 p.m.

**S**till no response from that waste of air Chuck. I could have guessed at which of the multiple hiding spots he was at, but I didn't have time to play hide and go seek with him.

If it were up to me I would fire his ass. I could have done it a dozen times for cause. But I was told to keep him by Randy. I didn't want to think about what would happen if I fired him without Randy's approval.

If I needed some work done I called Patrick and it got done. I wished I could pay him more. Actually, I could pay him more, but never mind.

I walked over to Patrick as he pulled up on the work cart. I had a few trees taken down and the wood needed to be moved over to the north end near the trail to be stacked. It was an exercise in futility, as campers would help themselves to all of the wood within a few days. Half the shit would be behind Chuck's camper at some point, no doubt.

Meanwhile, we were selling firewood retail in the office. I supposed I could pay someone to sort and shrink wrap small bundles of wood we cut from the sites.

"Hey Patrick, would you mind stacking this along the trail?" I asked. He nodded and pulled up closer to the pile.

"Who is on security?" Patrick asked.

"Nobody. I will man it for a while," I said. The security booth was generally a waste of resources. I was always juggling between having a security presence and better utilizing my people. "Have you seen Chuck?"

"Yeah, just passed him, he is on his way to 66 to take a look at the electrical box," Patrick said as he started stacking the wood in the back of his cart.

Patrick didn't look very strong, he was about five foot nine with an average build, but he never had a problem with work that involved heavy lifting. I was trying to recall how old he was from his application but couldn't. He had a shaved head and some preteen looking facial hair, peach fuzz above his lip and on his chin. I thought he was around thirty, but it was hard to tell with Mexicans.

"66? Something is wrong with 66?" I asked, irritated. Patrick shrugged.

"I have about fifty things I need addressed out here today and Chuck is out making shit up to avoid real work. Unbelievable," I said angrily. *By unbelievable, I meant totally believable.*

## Mike 1

6:45 p.m.

I was standing at the sink in my RV when I saw the flamboyant golf cart pulling up. Big bad flames along the side, he must be a rebel.

I had actually heard the music first and then saw the pudgy, long-haired white guy with the cigarette in his mouth pull up to 66. Was that Grand Funk Railroad he was playing? What year was it, 1974? Better than boy band music, for sure.

The guy began fiddling around with the electrical box. It appeared that he wasn't really doing anything. It was like he was messing with it because he thought someone may be watching him, and he wanted to be able to claim he fixed a problem.

Odd. But not entirely surprising. If you spend enough time at these campgrounds, you began to understand the labor dynamics.

Campgrounds were only open for part of the year up north. Therefore, you got temporary seasonal help. Teens, immigrants, and general slackers who needed some sort of income, but didn't care to work *too* hard at earning it. The kids who were home from college would have been good hires, but they all chose to work at Gravity Junction since the pay was better.

It was easier for shady people to work at the campground because managers didn't bother with expensive criminal background checks. Otherwise, half of the clowns on the payroll would have been disqualified. That was disturbing, given these campgrounds were marketed as "family-friendly" places.

I had been staying in Ohio at the Sandusky Shores campground for a few weeks and had been making all kinds of observations. I called it being observant, others may call it being nosy.

Twenty years in the Army will make you into an observant person. My outstanding observational capabilities were one of the many talents that advanced me from a private to a Sergeant First Class very rapidly. But then I hit a wall.

Sergeant First Class wasn't a bad rank. It was a career rank, but it wasn't spectacular.

I stalled at E-7 because I had squandered several critical years of upward mobility floundering in a state of stagnation. I should have been seeking more rigorous leadership opportunities and competing for developmental schools to make myself promotable. But those were the years that things fell apart with my wife Kelly. The hard-drinking years, the years where things got blurry. I was lucky to keep my career together satisfactorily enough to make it to retirement, let alone worrying about climbing the career ladder.

So many regrets. Maintaining my sanity each day required that I just focus on what went well for me and hope the negatives would eventually fade away. *But they never seemed to.*

I was born on a military base in Italy, but was primarily raised in the US south. There were times throughout my Army career when I played up the whole "black country boy from Georgia" persona, but in reality, while I was southern, I was not *country*.

I spent my childhood in the suburbs of Atlanta and had a similar upbringing to most suburban kids throughout the country, southern, black, or otherwise. Maybe we did hunt and fish more than kids in other regions, but then we returned to our middle-class neighborhoods with houses on quarter-acre lots in the small town of Smyrna.

If it was to my advantage, I could pour on the southern. I could drop *y'all*s with the best of them, chew tobacco, and knew the lyrics to most country songs. Most of my black friends preferred rhythm and blues or rap, but I had always favored country. I could blame that on having a white father from the south.

My dialect was fluid. If I was around northerners, I could strip my accent down to nothing, which was what northern accents were, the absence of an accent. If I was around blacks, I could adjust to a more urban way of speaking. Know your audience.

Growing up, I always knew I would be a soldier. My dad was a soldier and so that was what I wanted to be. I didn't have a lot of other options following high school, having been a fairly poor student. I knew I was joining the Army and didn't try particularly hard. The Army didn't care if I got a C in English or math, as long as I had a high school diploma. I didn't seriously entertain the thought of attending college and I didn't even apply.

My father was pleased with my decision to enlist; my mother, less so. She took me aside several times before I left and reminded me I could live at home and go to a junior college for a few semesters and establish a good GPA. Then, I could transfer to the University of Georgia or Georgia Tech. But my dad would have hit the roof if I backed out of my enlistment contract.

He was a legit country boy who escaped poverty in rural Georgia by joining the Army. Growing up in a household of six siblings with an alcoholic father who couldn't hold a job, there was never enough to eat. The first time he saw a doctor or dentist was in the Army. He would need those medical benefits throughout his enlistment for a wide range of issues, ranging from having pieces of shrapnel extracted from his back in Vietnam to having a compound leg fracture set following a sky diving accident in Alabama.

My childhood was so much easier by comparison. There was the stress of moving a few times when I was very young while my dad was wrapping up his military career, but we never had to worry where our next meal was coming from.

My father was a hard man, and he had to be. In the 1970s, when he married my mother, mixed couples had a rough time. Especially in the south.

I was an only child. My parents had me in their late thirties, where by some miracle I was conceived despite the fact that my mom was told she could never have kids after being injured in a car accident as a teenager. I was only five years old when my dad retired and moved back to Georgia, so I had little recollection of my Army brat days.

I had it better than most dark kids in the south, entirely because of my dad. I was generally allowed to fight my own battles, but if an adult was mistreating me, there was a visit from Sergeant Clemmons. And it wouldn't be pleasant. The stone-faced combat veteran got his point across by any means necessary, and even the most racist of rednecks thought twice about attracting his attention.

One of the greatest lessons he taught me was that flaws are individual traits, not cultural norms. He would not accept excuses from me merely because my skin happened to be darker. He had high expectations of me as a *human being*.

There were some rough moments growing up, and many of those involved being mistreated for being black. But I never allowed myself to believe I was a victim. I was raised to have morals and character, and that allowed me to thrive through the tough times in my childhood.

My mom was also an Army brat. Her dad retired in the Midwest, where she met my dad at Fort Riley, Kansas. Although she never went to college, she came across as educated, intelligent, and well-spoken. She worked clerical civilian jobs at the various bases where my dad was stationed throughout the years.

Although she knew my enlistment was inevitable, she broke down and cried when we said our goodbyes at the Greyhound station in downtown Atlanta. It was only a short bus ride from Atlanta to Columbus, where I would then be transported to nearby Fort Benning for basic training and several other military schools over the years.

There was a fair amount of racism in the Army, but it was much less prevalent than in general society. Affirmative action was firmly rooted in the military by the time I joined, so promotions and other preferences were afforded to minorities across the board.

Basic training was a great equalizer. Boys were mixed together from different races, regions, subcultures, and economic backgrounds. We discovered we weren't all that much different in most respects.

During my first ten years in the Army, everything came easily to me. I was physically fit, highly teachable, easy to get along with, and did what was asked of me. I volunteered for every school I could and found my way to the Airborne, Ranger, and Pathfinder schools.

I was even a drill sergeant for a few years. I didn't fit the stereotype of a drill sergeant, as I wasn't brash, loud, or aggressive. That made me stand out in a positive way. Sure, there were times when the job required that I rant and scream a bit, but comparatively, I was level-headed. And the drill sergeant hat was pretty cool, there were times I wished I had saved mine for laughs.

I met a nice girl named Kelly while I was stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado, and we got married. We had two kids, a son, Mike Jr., and a daughter, Sadie. Life was good.

I was in the right place at the right time with the right skills when the 9/11 attacks happened in 2001. As a staff sergeant with all kinds of credentials, I found myself in Iraq with my Ranger unit.

I did a few tours there and a few more in Afghanistan. It was tough on the family, but we made it through.

I survived combat with only a few scratches. The closest call was while traveling in a Humvee in Fallujah in a convoy directly behind a truck that ran over an improvised explosive device. A soldier in that vehicle died and another lost his legs. It would have been me rolling over that bomb if our vehicles happened to be sequenced differently that morning.

After all of these schools and deployments, my Class A dress uniform was pretty damn colorful, with a lot of patches and ribbons. I had the right resume to keep advancing. I was sergeant major material, maybe Pentagon material.

Everything began to unravel after my daughter died. It was sudden and unexpected. It was especially devastating because it was my fault.

My resilience was what got me through life during the challenging times, and in a moment, it was gone. I couldn't be there for Kelly. I couldn't be there for Mike Jr. I wasn't there for myself. I faded away and never really returned.

It was only the momentum of my early years in the Army that allowed me to remain in the service far beyond my usefulness. I rotated out of the forward infantry units and received main post assignments. During my final enlistment contract, I was basically just a supply sergeant. I received mercy waivers from sympathetic commanders for PT tests and rifle marksmanship requalification.

I lived on post in the barracks with the junior enlisted. Although I was given the courtesy of having my own room, beyond that, I was essentially another private.

Except I was out-drinking the lower enlisted. I was a solitary drunk and so when I was into the bottle, I remained in my room. People suspected I had a problem, but there was no real evidence I had a problem. As long as I was subtle about bringing the full bottles in and getting rid of the empties while staying off the radar of my leadership, no one was going to confront me about it.

I was a moderate drinker before my daughter died. Going out and tying one on with the boys would happen here and there, but I was never a daily drinker. I devolved into being a daily drinker. It took all of my willpower not to drink while in uniform, but the moment I was on my own time the alcohol began to flow. It was the only way to numb my despair.

My career ended where it began, at Fort Benning. With my twenty-year service date approaching, the first sergeant called me into his office and laid out my options. I was to retire immediately or the process would be set into motion to discharge me for failing to meet basic standards.

On my last day, I loaded up everything I owned into the back of my little green Chevy S-10. It had a lockable bed cover so no one would be tempted to steal my worthless possessions. After twenty years of service, I wasn't leaving with much more than I had arrived with as a teenager.

I left the fort and drove north on I-85 without a final destination in mind. I had a modest military pension coming, but no savings, and no civilian skills that would earn me more than minimum wage. At thirty-nine years old, and with potentially another thirty-nine plus years to live, I was without use or purpose.

I drove through Atlanta and continued north. My parents were both dead. I had no siblings. I hadn't communicated with my childhood friends in decades. What would be the point of returning "home"?

I had also lost touch with my Army buddies. At one time my Army friends were my family. Now I didn't even know where to find them. Not that I was going to try.

When I pulled off for gas near the Tennessee border, I passed by a little dealership with used cars and RVs for sale. Intrigued, I drove over and took a look at the RVs.

The salesman came over and chatted me up. He was a good ole' boy and was condescending at first. I was just a dumb black boy driving a junky little truck that he could take advantage of. His respect level increased when I mentioned I was active duty Army. I was still in the military, *technically*. I was able to take my unused leave in advance of being discharged, so I was on what was known as "terminal leave."

As far as anyone knew, I was still fully employed by Uncle Sam. The salesman ran a credit check, and I was able to get a line of credit for ten thousand dollars. A beat-up twenty-seven-foot aluminum Airstream RV was soon mine.

The lot had a supply store and I bought most of the RV supplies the salesman recommended, while their service department installed a hitch kit on my truck. A short time later I was towing it out of the lot.

I found a campground along the highway a few hours north, paid the lot fee for a week, and set up. There was a Walmart nearby and I picked up groceries and the general supplies I would need. Blankets, pillows, linens, a lawn chair, tools, and a toolbox. I also bought a cheap mountain bike and a bike rack that fastened to the back of the RV.

There was a county liquor store down the street from Walmart. I bought a bottle of vodka, a bottle of whiskey, a two-liter of tonic water, a two-liter of Coke, plastic cups, and a bag of ice.

On my way back I stopped at the campground office and bought a bundle of firewood. I made myself a turkey, cheese, and mayonnaise sandwich on white bread, with Doritos and a pickle on the side. I also made myself a very stiff Jack and Coke to wash down my first dinner as a camper.

I assessed my financial situation. My current expenses were the RV payment, truck and RV insurance, campsite fees, fuel, food, and drink. This was balanced against my last active duty paycheck and future pension payments. I owned the truck and the camper payment would go away in five years. This was sustainable indefinitely.

My pension checks would be automatically deposited into my bank account, so I didn't need a permanent address to receive funds. I could be totally transient and still get paid regularly.

This was the kind of freedom and anonymity I needed years earlier when my life had gone sideways. I had found escape in the bottle when I lost my family, but now I was capable of being physically secluded in my own world whenever I wanted to be.

As tough and resilient as I was perceived to be, as established by all the military patches and medals I earned throughout my career, I lacked emotional resilience. I had folded after the first major serving of personal adversity in my life. Sitting beside my first campfire as a retiree, none of that mattered. The Army was out of my life. My ex-wife, son, and deceased daughter were out of my life. I only remained in my life because I couldn't physically walk away from *myself*.

Five years had passed since I was discharged from the Army. Driving the same truck and living in the same RV, I had traveled a lot of miles and picked up a lot of camping experience along the way. I had stayed at hundreds of campgrounds, migrating back and forth to different regions of the country according to the season.

The Midwest in the early spring had the best camping. I loved the trees. It was amazing how they all transformed so quickly from skeletal at the end of winter to completely green by late spring. The weather was great and the bugs, snakes, and rodents were generally out in much smaller numbers than in the south.

I camped across Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin in May and stayed around that region until late September. Then I would move slowly southward, sometimes heading a little westward. I wanted to head toward the west coast at some point and camp along the ocean in California and the Pacific Northwest, but I hadn't made it there yet.

People were generally nice and tolerant at the campgrounds. A middle-aged black man camping by himself definitely concerned some people. A lone male traveler of any race was always a little unsettling. Although I received a few glares from time to time, most of my fellow campers seemed fine coexisting with me.

Colorado was occasionally on my mind. That was where Kelly and Mike Jr. likely were. Her parents were still there, assuming they were still alive. But I could never work up the courage to re-engage.

I had the same general daily routine. Each morning I woke up with some degree of a hangover, depending on how deep into the bottle I was the night prior. I would have breakfast according to what my stomach could handle and usually ate outside in my lawn chair. If there was a chill in the air, I built a fire.

Sometimes I would walk or ride my bike to the campground clubhouse and get a newspaper. My cell was a basic flip-phone without data and I didn't own a computer, so I got my news the old-fashioned way. Aside from the newspaper, I also listened to local radio here and there. After breakfast, I would spend an hour or two maintaining the camper.

I took a short nap each day to help recover from my hangover. If things were real bad, I would sweeten my morning coffee with a few splashes of whiskey to take the edge off.

Lunch and dinner were random. I might explore the area and find a diner or cheap Mexican cantina to eat at. Otherwise, I would make a sandwich or cook a burger on the grill. At dusk, I would build a fire and have a few drinks. Some nights I remembered going off to bed, other nights I didn't.

These five years hadn't changed me too much physically. I probably gained ten pounds. My fitness level had decreased, but maybe some of the walking and cycling kept me from slipping too far.

I stepped away from my RV window and walked to my small bathroom. After I splashed water onto my face, I took a look at myself in the mirror. I had aged a bit in the past five years. Most of my dark hair was still present, cut short enough to be within military regulations. My hairline had crept back and gray was starting to appear at my temples.

My brown eyes seemed to have faded a shade, but that was probably just my imagination. I had crow's feet, small black bags under my eyes, and the skin from underneath my chin was a little too loose. No one had ever accused me of being handsome, but I had always been considered average looking, at worst.

I went back and gazed out the window again. Being in the military for so many years made me feel as though I could read people. A new soldier would arrive at the unit and after observing him for a short time, I could get a feel for who he was. Sure, I was wrong occasionally, but for the most part, I was effective at sizing people up.

Looking at this fat Harley guy fiddling around with the electrical box at lot 66, I was able to conclude a few things. He was a scammer. He was lazy. He was shifty. He didn't know what he was doing. What could he possibly tell by staring at an electrical box? He was flicking the breaker switches back and forth, but since nothing was plugged in, how was that helpful? The guy was just killing time.

Then he turned around and caught me staring at him. I had the irrational urge to duck but didn't. He faked a smile and waved. I faked a smile and waved back.

At least I thought I smiled. Since I rarely smiled, I was never sure what the expression on my face was when I tried to feign friendliness. My expression was generally one of a soldier in formation, entirely neutral.

I figured I needed to go outside and talk to him before he showed up at my camper door. There were liquor bottles on the kitchen table that I didn't want this guy to see.

I had also been cleaning my Beretta M9 and had it laying out on a cloth by the bottles. Campground policies usually forbade firearms, and I didn't need a hassle over it with this guy. I walked out the door and met him as he was walking over.

"I'm Chuck," he said as he walked up, extending his hand.

"Mike," I responded, shaking it.

"Wow, this thing is a beauty! What year is it?" he asked, stepping back as he glanced up and down the Airstream.

"1974."

"Been out here a few weeks, huh?" he asked. His hand twitched to his shirt pocket where his smokes were, but he didn't go for the pack.

"Yeah, a few weeks," I said.

"Where are you from?" Chuck asked. "I see you got Georgia plates on your S-10."

"From Atlanta."

"Here by yourself?"

"All by myself."

"So what brings you to Sandusky Shores?"

"I have some family in the area," I said, lying. I wasn't sure why I was lying, other than as a push-back to being prodded with questions by this stranger.

"Really, where at?" Chuck asked. I paused and surveyed the street. A giant mobile home was rolling slowly north, towing a white Land Rover behind it. Of course, it was driven by an older guy with white hair. People who owned extravagant toys had money to burn and those with money to burn were generally not youthful.

"More toward Cleveland," I said.

"So why would you stay in Sandusky, that is an hour away?" Chuck asked, smiling. He squinted a little as he sized up my campsite again.

"I didn't have any interest in camping in Cleveland, with the Cuyahoga River burning and all. It didn't seem safe," I said without cracking a smile. He stared at me with a blank look on his face for a few seconds then started laughing.

"Haha, right. That happened in the late 1960s, I think they got that under control," he said.

"I'm not taking any chances. Anyway, this area is nice. It has a resort town feel to it, near Gravity Junction and the islands," I stated. He touched his cigarette pocket again.

"Why don't you just have one?" I asked.

"One what?"

"A cigarette. You keep touching your pocket there. I don't mind," I said, folding my arms. I had smoked at various times during my military career but had kicked the habit years ago.

"Nah, I'm good."

"I used to like a smoke when I drank back in the day, too," I said.

"Except I'm not drinking," he said with a smile.

"That wasn't you over at lot 31 drinking a few hours ago?" I asked.

"You caught me, a little bit of a liquid lunch," he said, raising his hands up in an "I surrender" pose and laughing nervously.

"No harm in that," I said, showing off my fake smile again. "What is it you are looking at over there at 66, some sort of electrical issue?"

"Yeah. The camper from last week said the fuse kept popping," Chuck said as he walked back toward his golf cart.

"Let me know if you need a hand, I know a little about electrical," I said.

"I'm good, but thanks," he said as he turned the key. He waved without looking at me, speeding off north toward the dumpster.

It seemed like a good time for a drink. Who was I to judge the guy for having a few beers at lunch? It was petty, but getting interrogated about my personal business annoyed me. I went back into my RV.

I wasn't intentionally surveilling lot 31, but I had a direct view of it if I stood in the right corner of my lot. The guy in 31 didn't look like he belonged in the company of a guy like Chuck. He was too clean-cut, there was a definite square look to him.

His camper was newer and well kept. But why no wife or kids at a seasonal lot? He didn't have the look of some solo dirtbag loitering at a campground. Then again, I could reasonably be mistaken for a solo dirtbag loitering at a campground.

Across the street, the camper door at site 51 opened and a man stepped out, holding a big, colorful energy drink can. I had been under the assumption he was there by himself until I saw a woman walking out of his dump of an RV with a basket of laundry a week ago. They looked like the type of people who lived at a campground by necessity rather than for recreation. She appeared to be malnourished, skin and bones, with reddish-brown hair and freckles, wearing black yoga pants, a white tank top, and flip-flops.

The guy had thick dark hair, cut into something resembling the Beatles' early mop-top cuts, but a little longer. He usually wore a backward baseball cap, mirrored tea shade sunglasses, shotty clothes, and tennis shoes. He always appeared like he just woke up.

The few times we crossed paths, his eyes had the distant look of someone who got high regularly. I saw him chatting with Chuck here and there, maybe there was a drug dealer/buyer relationship. I overheard he was a construction worker and hoped he wasn't operating heavy machinery while under the influence.

As I thought about it, site 15 also had a solo camper as well. That site was across from the shower house and down a few lots. The guy generally wore a Gravity Junction uniform and had a foreign look to him. Some sort of Eastern European vibe. He reminded me of some of the guys I encountered while I was deployed to Bosnia. Super pale and super gangly. He constantly had a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

I heard Gravity Junction recruited internationally, so I guessed this guy got a visa to work for the summer and was getting a big helping of Americana at the amusement park. The tacky, overweight, loud, often drunk park goers probably left a lasting impression on these foreign workers.

I heard a thundering in the distance and recognized it was the motorcycle of the Euro guy from site 15. I thought it was a Yamaha Virago, one of the bigger models. My commanding officer rode a similar bike at my last unit, but I wasn't sure if it was the same model.

You could hear it from across the campground, but like most bikers, I guess he didn't mind the attention. He drove it down Starling a little too fast, and as he passed the gazebo structure in front of site 12, a woman's shrill voice boomed, yelling at him to slow down.

The owner of that voice was a short, round, thirty-something year old, wearing flip-flops, a bikini top, and cutoff shorts that revealed way too much pale skin. Her dark brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, wearing dark sunglasses with white rims, her makeup-less, pockmarked face contorted into a snarl. It wasn't the first time she cracked down on him, along with several other bikers and car drivers. I figured she corrected violators at a rate of one or two per day. The campground's unofficial audio speed bump.

There was usually a small crowd gathered by that gazebo. I assumed its construction was a collective effort, where several families pitched in and built it on the cement pad at site 12. It was a decent-sized wooden structure, a square that was ten feet wide on each side.

The back part was open, with bar tops built on the other three sides. There were various decorations, including large Ohio State and Notre Dame flags and several signs:

*If you wanted to stay sober, why'd you come over?*

*Home is where we park it!*

*Today's soup: whiskey with ice croutons.*

*Happy camper!*

*If you are looking for a sign that you should have a glass of wine, this is it!*

Tiki torch sconces were built into each corner post and track lights ran along the outside just beneath the roof, so it was fairly well lit at night. So were most of the occupants. There were usually drinkers sitting on barstools placed along the bar, morning, noon, and night.

The Euro guy pulled into the lot and got off his bike. There wasn't a helmet law in Ohio, so his only safety equipment was a pair of wraparound sunglasses. His camper was small compared to most seasonals, maybe twenty feet long, a white Starcraft model from the 1990s. It was curious that he was staying at the campground, being a foreign worker and all. I had assumed room and board was part of the amusement park compensation package. He lit a cigarette as he walked up to the front door. Long, gaunt face, dark hair thinning in the front with a narrow widow's peak. Wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, but probably only in his early thirties, prematurely aging from vodka and cigs. He turned and glared at the woman who yelled at him and went in his camper.

## Viktor 1

7:00 p.m.

**S**hut up, big-mouthed tramp," I *mormăit*...mumbled to myself but did not say it too loudly.

I did not speed. Well, I did not know for sure, sometimes the miles and kilometers mixed me up. But if I did, I did not speed badly. Three times she has screamed at me, this woman. She needed a punch to shut that mouth.

The idiots at lots 10 to 13 were always watching me. Watching everyone who passed by. There was no RV at 12, they built a stupid wooden *chiosc* where they all sit on their big asses all day and drink beer. And let their kids run wild and ride bikes in traffic. One day one of these little shits was going to be a speed bump. They sit there with sour looks on their faces when I go by like I'm the only one on a motorbike in this campground.

I unlocked my camper and went in. It was hot and smelled of *beție*...booze, dirty laundry, a full waste water tank, and two days old pizza. I heard something moving back in the bunk area. I still had mice and bugs. Until I did something they were not going away, but I had no time. A mouse chewed some of my blankets and shit in little piles in the bedroom.

A bottle of Stolichnaya was where I left it on the kitchen counter. I looked for a cup, found a used red plastic one in the sink, and rinsed it. The water was pooling in the sink because the gray water tank needed to be *golit*... emptied.

I poured a shot and drank it quickly. I poured another. The smell was too bad and it was too hot inside the RV, so I walked outside with the cup. Before I would bring the bottle out, but Chuck told me to be careful about drinking vodka straight from the bottle outside. It may upset my fat neighbors.

I sat in the lawn chair I found by the dumpster. A good lawn chair, it was a little dirty and the bottom sagged. I had to rinse it when I had time.

I leaned back and looked down at the stupid uniform I was wearing. A blue polo with the Gravity Junction logo and a name tag: *Viktor, Romania*.

Nobody at the park cared about Romania. Nobody asked about Romania. People from Columbia and Argentina got other *Spaniolă* speakers to talk to them. Even the *Rusi* and *Polonezi* got interest. Not Viktor, no one knew what to think of Romania. No American could find it on the map.

One tourist asked me what language they speak in Romania. *Chinese, you dumb shit*. America is supposed to be educated, yet they know nothing.

The rest of the uniform was khaki pants, black socks, black sneakers. I went back inside and changed, putting on a pair of gym shorts and a white Gravity Junction t-shirt I found in the laundry pile. Stupid cartoon dog by the logo. I threw the uniform in the pile. It had no stains, so I would wear it again.

I was told I was lucky to be at the campground and not in the Gravity Junction employee wing at Cloverleaf. Rodents and cockroaches worse than *București*. No one will complain because they are foreign. What are they going to do, go home? Are you going to walk from Sandusky to Columbia or Croatia? *Good luck*.

Gravity Junction, the biggest park company in the country, puts foreign workers in the ghetto by the dirty trailer park and dirty campground. Some of these workers never see anything but the stupid park and ghetto for the season. This is America to them.

I drank again and the heat from vodka in my stomach began to calm me. Spending ten hours in the park did nothing but annoy. Spending ten minutes in the park would annoy. Stupid adults, stupid kids, stupid questions asked. Stupid bosses, stupid coworkers. *All stupid*.

Then I come back to this stupid campground. Fat, lazy people riding everywhere on motor carts. Get your big butt off the cart and walk.

I looked at the watch, it was 1915 hours. Forty-five minutes until the meeting. I had to be at the Taj on time or Mr. Randy would have a goat. There was no excuse for being late, I was just two sites away.

Calling the trailer the “Taj” was stupid. It had to be a name made up by Chuck. The RV was good, but to *comparație* it to the Taj Mahal was the usual American *aroganță*.

Mr. Randy was the American dream guy. By a campfire at the Taj late one night, he told me his story, how he started from nothing and built businesses and bought land. His key to it all was knowing the tourist *cultură* and to *pârghie*...leverage that to find new *oportunități*.

The business he was known for by the locals was his bowling alley. Fat people throwing balls down the lanes and drinking pitchers of bad beer. Everywhere in the US, they loved watery beer. Bud, Coors, Miller. All the same. Blue Moon my ass. Squeezing oranges in the beer? What I would give for a Timisoreana, I should have brought some. Maybe Elena would send some. But with what? She had no money, that is why I took the job in America, to make money.

But no foreign worker left Sandusky with money. Everything costs too much. Everything in the park had criminally high prices, and yet the fat tourists all pack in, paying four dollars for a bottled water and twelve dollars for a burger and fries. A cheap t-shirt made in China was twenty-five dollars. So much stupidity.

I would leave Sandusky with money. I had to listen to Mr. Randy and do as he asked. The money I was making from his work would be a lot more than the money made at the park.

## Randy 1

7:35 p.m.

**W**alking out the back door of Glory Bowl, a text came through on my phone. I was wearing my typical biker wear of boots, jeans, a white t-shirt, and a black leather vest.

I could afford to dress better, a lot better. The boots and vest were expensive, but only another biker would know that. I saw no point in trying to dress like a businessman since that would add nothing to my business bottom line.

The bowling alley was doing good business for a Tuesday night. It was a little early in the season, so the full tourist surge wasn't happening yet. Being busy meant there were a few more dollars for Sam to skim off the top.

Sam was a reliable guy, but there was no question he was skimming money. I underpaid him, so from that angle, if you included the skimings, maybe he was getting paid what he deserved. I knew what I was getting when I hired Sam and most of his value to me was from things you didn't put on a resume.

Sam was a menacing guy, even as he was pushing forty. He was six foot four and close to 280 pounds. About fifty pounds of that was flab, but he still had big arms and shoulders from when he played high school football. He was too slow to make it beyond high school ball and too dumb to go to college without an athletic scholarship, so when the Marine recruiter took interest in him, he went that route.

Sam's dad died when he was a kid, an overweight factory worker who suffered a heart attack in his forties after a twelve-hour shift racking fenders. I doubted Sam cried a tear about it, since his old man tended to beat the shit out of him on a regular basis. That left Sam without a father figure, as poor of a father as he was, so it was believed the Marines would be a solid option for a kid with few prospects.

Sam's mom bowled in a league at Glory and I got updates on Sam from time to time. He seemed to be doing good as a Marine.

The next thing I knew he was back home. I walked into the bowling alley one day and there he was, sitting at the bar, watching a football game.

The bowling alley had never been what people would consider a nice place. It was a dump when I bought it and I hadn't done much with it since. I replaced the roof and renovated the women's bathroom with insurance money after it flooded, but beyond that, I spent just enough money on the business to get by. I replaced the bowling shoes and balls when they were unusable and not a minute sooner.

I did invest in my office, which was originally two storage rooms on the second floor. Walls were knocked out and a big window with one-way glass was installed so I could view the lanes. I had the remaining walls soundproofed. Later, I had a full bathroom and a small bedroom constructed. Sometimes I would let friends crash there if they drank too much or if I decided it was safer for me to stay at the alley instead of returning home.

The alley had twenty lanes, a small arcade, and a bar area with a few old TVs mounted above. Most modern lanes installed fancy digital systems with color monitors to track scores with the bowlers' names, but mine were at least twenty years old and were black and white. People come there to throw a bowling ball down a lane and drink, they didn't need all those bells and whistles. Besides, I owned the only alley in Sandusky, so good luck taking your business elsewhere.

That afternoon when I saw Sam sulking at the bar when he should have been at Camp Pendleton in California, I did a double-take. He was trimmer and had a military buzz cut, but beyond that, he was the same Sam I knew before he enlisted.

"Hey Sam! Home on leave?" I asked, sitting next to him at the bar. "Genie, the next one is on me."

"Uh, thanks Mr. Gorey," Sam said sheepishly, taking a drink from his clear plastic cup and setting it down next to the empty pitcher.

“When you going back?” I asked. Sam paused, looking down at his hands.

“Never,” he mumbled. I sat up a little straighter.

“What happened, kid?” I asked, motioning for Genie to bring me a drink. She brought me a bourbon on the rocks.

Genie had been a decent looking gal when I hired her back when she was a teen, but decades of drinking and smoking had not treated her well. She was still my main bartender, as reliable as they came, and honest, as far as I could tell.

“I was discharged,” he said softly.

“Discharged?” I said in disbelief. “You signed up for four years.”

“I know. I was accused of stealing,” he said, taking a big swig that finished off the cup. Genie had taken the pitcher and was refilling it at the tap.

“Stealing what? From who?” I asked.

“At Walmart. I found a credit card in the barracks parking lot. I have been broke, nobody ever sends me no money,” Sam said sadly.

“How much did you steal?” I asked, annoyed.

“I bought a bunch of groceries, fishing poles, a cooler, a Hoyt bow, a few other things. They never asked for I.D., I left the store with it all and thought I was good. The guy who lost the credit card reported it, and they traced the charges. They saw me on the store camera and busted me.”

“Dear Lord, Sam, you got a dishonorable discharge for that? How fucking dumb are you?” I asked angrily.

“I was always so broke. And the credit card companies pay the customer back, I don’t understand why they came down on me so hard.”

I let that bit of stupidity go unanswered. From what I understood, military on military crime was a sin that would be punished severely. I learned later he also spent thirty days in the stockade.

“You had food, you had a place to live, you had a job. You had a purpose. *You had respect*. You needed a fishing pole and a bow to make your life complete? Are you kidding me?” I asked, raising my voice.

There was a flash of anger in his eyes, then it went away. He took another drink.

“What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. Mom is real angry, I don’t think I can stay at her place for long.”

His eyes were glassy, like he was ready to cry, but the tears never came. I took pity on him and offered him a job at the alley. He was a flawed man who would soon become a desperate man if he didn’t catch a break. Sam would see me as the guy who pulled him out of a bad situation and that would make him feel a degree of loyalty.

There were a few empty storage rooms above the alley down the hall from my office. He cleaned one out, set up a cot, moved in there, and never moved out. There was a second-floor bathroom that was seldom used that we added a shower to.

Since that time, Sam had justified my faith in him. He did what I asked unquestioningly, most of the time. He didn’t mention my name during the times he found himself being questioned by the cops when he was out doing an errand for me. Sure, he lost his temper and went too far from time to time, but that was his nature.

I continued along the back of the alley and hopped on my bike. It was a new maroon Harley CVO Limited, a top of the line motorcycle.

I always parked around back, because I didn’t want to advertise I was on-site. There were ten other spots for employee vehicles and other random vehicles I tended to acquire here and there.

My latest ones were a blue 2012 Ford Explorer and a gray 2007 Chevy Express van, which had taken instead of cash from guys who owed me a lot of money. Cash was king, but I would accept goods and services if a customer was flat broke.

I started my bike up with a roar, rode across the parking lot, and made my way toward the campground. As I drove out onto Cleveland Street, I questioned the wisdom of using the campground for some of my side operations. I could just as easily set up headquarters at the Cloverleaf apartments outside of the campground for six or seven hundred dollars a month per unit. But this was Sandusky and it was a seasonal economy. No one was around in the winter, it was too damned cold, so paying rent on apartments that would not be used was a waste of money. A seasonal RV could be left at the campground year-round and was much more cost-efficient.

The seasonal nature of the area used to be a big economic disadvantage until a few local businesses had the vision to build indoor waterparks. It kept people coming to the area all winter, but that type of tourist was generally locked down where they were staying. A lot of the summer tourists who come to Gravity Junction stayed on the grounds at the park hotel, an offsite hotel, or at the campground. But those were mostly just a place to sleep and shower. Most of the time they were elsewhere. *We operated in the elsewhere.*

Waterpark tourists stayed at the waterpark. They ate, drank, played, and slept on-site. Most of these parks had a colored wristband system to show who was authorized to stay there on a particular day. Having my employees do business there on the regular was too risky.

I passed Cloverleaf after I turned onto Nickle Lane. Cloverleaf was the international melting pot of a village that Gravity Junction plopped right next to a grimy trailer park and a dilapidated campground. Did anyone in human resources think this through? No, and I was glad for it.

Once inside the campground, I rode slowly up Starling, being extra careful at the gazebo. There was a woman who always screeched at speeding bikers and drivers. I saw her sitting on a stool out at the outdoor bar area and smiled at her. She ignored me, staring at her cell phone. She lost interest when she recognized I was going the speed limit and wouldn't get a chance to scream at me.

An older white couple was pulling a little black girl in a red Radio Flyer wagon near the shower house. Grandma and grandpa camping with their granddaughter. Things sure had changed since back in the day. It used to be that seeing mixed families was a rarity, but they had become commonplace. The integration breakthrough had been made possible by rebellious young white girls.

Some from the older generation were never going to accept blacks as equals. But what happens when your daughter brings home a black child from the hospital? Sure, there were a few stubborn old sticks-in-the-mud who would disown the daughter, but the rest adjusted. Who is going to reject a cute little baby with his blood flowing in the baby's veins? Suddenly the black kid is part of the family, which made it hard as hell to maintain their racial biases.

The Taj camper was at the end of the street, backing up to the fence that separated the campground from the trailer park. A destination camper, it was designed to be parked semi-permanently rather than to tow to different locations. It was more of a residential trailer than an RV. At forty-six feet long, it was much longer than most trailers.

It wasn't just an ordinary stock RV. I spent a decent amount of money having it customized. There was a layer of reinforced steel across the entire exterior, including the roof and floor. It was supposed to be able to withstand high caliber firearm rounds and the floor could absorb a small detonation if an explosive was planted underneath.

The windows were also reinforced and close to being bulletproof. They could be busted with a significant amount of gunfire, but they would hold for a while. I had enemies and would have been vulnerable in a regular RV. The extra protection also provided a degree of soundproofing.

I decided to turn the trailer into a bunker when it became obvious I couldn't rely on campground security. If somebody wanted to come on-site and shoot up my trailer, nobody would be there to stop them. I had considered putting people in the booth with professional skills, but that would be expensive and a bad fit for an easygoing family recreation spot.

Directly behind the Taj, on the other side of the chain-link fence, was Trailer Alpha. That was where my IT operation was headquartered.

It was a plain gray doublewide with a small deck built out back. On top of the deck was a small table and two lonely lawn chairs that had never been used. There was also a medium-sized shed on the north side of the backyard with gray siding that matched the trailer.

The grass needed cutting; I would have to get someone over there. That was a detail Chuck should have been taking care of. The less attention that place attracted the better.

As I rolled up, I saw that Viktor was sitting on a chair on the porch deck of the Taj, drinking from a red cup. He looked greasy and worn out like he was fighting a summer cold or something. I parked my bike, walking up to the deck. Viktor stood up and shook my hand. He had a sour smell to him like he was sweating out alcohol.

He was about the same height as me, but I had a good hundred pounds on him. Unfortunately, most of it was in my gut and ass. Sitting in a chair in the bowling alley all day, eating bowling alley food, and sitting on that motorcycle throughout the summer took its toll. I had a financial interest in a gym on Milan Road but rarely set foot in it.

“You smoke cigars?” I asked.

“I do,” he replied. I unlocked the camper and went inside. If you didn’t know you were in a camper, you would think you were in a nice, furnished apartment. Full kitchen, full dining room, large bedrooms at either end, two bathrooms.

I opened the cupboard to the left of the sink and pulled out a cigar box. I was not wasting a Cuban on this guy, so I pulled out a couple of Macanudos instead of my favorite Montecristo Platins. I opened a drawer, grabbed the cutter, and went back out.

I fixed up my cigar and handed the cutter over to him. I pulled out my lighter and lit my cigar.

Viktor didn't know what the fuck he was doing with his. He was spinning it around like he didn't know which end to light. I thought about helping him but decided against it. He figured it out after a minute.

I lit his cigar and sat back, watching him. He took a deep puff, gasped, and coughed. The cigar went out. I leaned across and lit it again. More gasping, more puffing. His face became even more pale, which I didn't think was possible. But he was a trooper and kept at it. We sat in silence for a few minutes. Sometimes I didn't have the small talk in me.

"Hey fellas!" came Chuck's booming, raspy voice. It startled me a little. He had come up from the east on foot, a rare bit of walking for him. Viktor stood up. I remained seated.

"Got an extra one of those?" Chuck asked, motioning toward my cigar.

"You know where to find them," I replied. Chuck entered the RV. I could hear him open the cupboard and mill around. He came out with a Montecristo in his palm. Just as I figured, he chose one of the more expensive ones.

"Put that back and get a Macanudo like the rest of us," I said annoyed.

Viktor was coughing softly, just holding his cigar in his right hand. We sat in silence for maybe ten more minutes. Me and Chuck finished ours. Viktor left his half-smoked cigar out in the ashtray.

I stood up and motioned them both inside. Chuck closed the door behind us, locking the handle and then the two bolt locks above it. I motioned toward the kitchen drawers. Chuck nodded and pulled out a handheld device that looked like a walkie-talkie. Except it wasn't, it was an RF bug detector.

Chuck flipped it on and started waving it around the RV, as I had seen him do many times. Last summer I had Sam pick up a cheap wireless bug set online, and he planted a few in the RV. I wanted to see if the detector worked or not.

Sure enough, Chuck came in, started sweeping, and the thing went off. Chuck's face went pale, I thought he was going to throw up. He found both of them. I let him sweat for a while before I told him they were mine. I was afraid if I didn't he would have a heart attack.

Once Chuck cleared the camper, he went to work wanding all of us. I took it from him and wanded him. After I was done, I flicked the detector off and sat down at the small kitchen table.

Chuck opened the fridge and motioned toward us. I nodded. Viktor shook his head. He took out two Great Lakes Brewery Dortmund Golds, opened them, and passed me one. Sam would have poured me a Woodford Reserve bourbon but I let it go and accepted the beer.

"Okay. Viktor, so has everyone adjusted to their new work duties?" I asked.

"Everyone? Who is everyone?" he asked. I stared at him for a moment.

"The Romanian National Water Polo Team. Who the fuck you think?" I asked coldly.

"Oh yeah, everyone is good. They all know their jobs and...and do them good," he stammered.

"No complaints so far. Well, except for Thomas Polk. Sam and me will go over that later. Ok, Viktor, and we are talking how many again?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Six girls, three men," he replied.

"How much attention have they raised?" Chuck asked.

"I do not understand," Viktor replied.

"Will havin' that many Romanians together seem odd to the other workers?" Chuck asked, taking a swig from his beer. "Don't they spread their recruitin' around to different countries?"

"No. Gravity Junction has many workers from the same country sometimes. It makes recruiting easier and there will be less homesickness."

"Okay. They are all staying at Cloverleaf?" I asked.

"*Da...yes.* We have them set up in basement level apartments as you asked. The girls are in two apartments and the men in the other. The fourth apartment is empty," he said. He was sweating a little, taking a long pull from his drink.

"I have Sam checking in from time to time, but I need you there, too. There may be communication gaps that could use some translating. Stop by tomorrow. Make sure they are keeping the place clean. No drugs. No outside guests. The only people who are entering that wing besides them are people I authorize to be there. Understood?" I asked.

Viktor nodded. He took a drink, tilting his head back, finishing it.

The train horn could be heard faintly outside. That meant it was around 8:30 p.m. I felt the vibration as it approached.

There was a rumbling within the trailer that gradually built. It wasn't powerful enough to knock my beer bottle over, but I grabbed it off the table anyway. The train passing by always killed whatever conversation was happening. The rumbling decreased and then it was down to a slight vibration again. The train horn sounded from farther away.

"Do you have anything stronger than this?" Viktor said, pointing at my bottle of beer. "Do people get drunk off of that?"

I glared at him for a moment, then pointed to the cupboard by the fridge. He got up, studied the liquor selection, and pulled out a bottle of Absolut. He brought it to the table and poured it into his red cup.

"Rocks are in the freezer," I said.

"Rocks?" he asked, puzzled.

"Ice," I said impatiently.

"No, thank you," he replied, lifting the cup in a sort of saluting motion and taking a long swig.

I took a final swig of my beer, stood up, walked over, and tossed the bottle in the sink. I peered out the windows through Venetian blinds to see if anyone was around. I saw the guy at 31 walking up the street carrying a bag of garbage, heading toward the dumpster.

“What do we know about the stiff at 31?” I asked, sitting back down. Chuck cleared his throat

“Interestin’ you should ask, Randy. I mentioned before he works for the government, we talked a little last season. I had a chat with him at lunch and it turns out he works as a federal. Bragged about havin’ a security clearance. He is workin’ from his camper on a laptop,” Chuck said.

“Any dealings with him last year beyond a conversation or two?” I asked.

“Not really. He was always kind of a familiar face. His family was around all the time last year, comin’ and goin’ from the campground to the park. He has been up here for weeks now, I haven’t seen his family at all. I think he is having domestic troubles.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah. Last year he never came up alone, except to maybe open and close the camper for the season. Now he lives here solo,” Chuck said, finishing his beer.

“So somebody is most definitely having marital problems,” I said, shaking my head in mock sadness.

Chuck laughed. Viktor didn’t laugh at first but decided to when Chuck did. It was an odd, almost mechanical sound.

“Does he drink?” I asked.

“Yeah, had a few beers with me. He was on the clock at the time.”

“Shit, you are an expert on that, Chuck. Take a closer look at him,” I said.

“Sure, should I use Data?”

“Yeah. I’m thinking I see some opportunities here. Get with Data,” I said.

“Will do,” Chuck replied, getting two more beers from the fridge.

## Brady 2

9:15 p.m.

I was walking back to my camper from the garbage dumpster, which was about forty yards north of my site. Campground employees came by on work carts a few times per day to collect garbage bags left out by the street, but since it was evening, I walked it there myself.

The garbage dumpster was located within sight of the fishing pond. The campground had dug the pond and stocked it with different fish species, including catfish, bluegill, and perch. It was “catch and release”, so they were supposed to be thrown back. Unfortunately, a lot of the campers let their kids fish there alone, and when they caught a fish, they were unable to remove it from the hook properly. Occasionally a kid would rip the hook out through the side of the fish’s head and throw it back as if it could somehow recover from that type of trauma and live to be caught another day.

The most unusual part of the campground layout was its vicinity to the train tracks. They ran just north of the pond, coming so close to it that a train passenger could probably cast a line from the caboose. There was a fence around the pond, but otherwise, there was nothing between the campground and the tracks. If my kids were younger, I would have been concerned about one of them toddling out onto the tracks.

Instead of returning to the camper on Starling, I decided to loop around and walk down Sparrow. The seasonal campers were to my right, with the transients to my left. The campground’s transient sites seemed to be at about a quarter capacity. At the height of summer, all of the sites would be booked.

I cut through the back of lot 51 and entered onto my site at 31. The people at 51 weren't out; otherwise, it would have been bad etiquette to cut through. I went in and washed my hands in the kitchen sink. My red cup was on the kitchen table, still half full of frozen margarita, sweating water rings onto the surface. I made it from a mix earlier and then added a few ounces of Cuervo so that it would have more impact. *It did, indeed.*

I turned on the stereo, pushed a button to broadcast it to the outside speakers, and walked out with my drink. I grabbed a few pieces from the small stack of firewood stored beneath the camper and arranged them in the pit.

I sat down and selected a music app on my phone. I was able to connect to the stereo via Bluetooth. After selecting a 1990s rock station, I adjusted the volume so it couldn't be heard beyond my lot.

I opened the compartment at the front right side of the camper and found a box of synthetic fire-starting material, taking out a brick of the crumbly brown substance and breaking it in half. I found a lighter, and within a few seconds, the fire began to take off.

I grabbed my drink and pulled a chair closer to the pit. The weather was still fair, in the low sixties, the perfect temperature for an evening fire. I guessed it would drop into the low fifties overnight.

A giant motorhome with Illinois plates cruised by. That vehicle costs about half as much as my house in Medina. Campgrounds were the ultimate in socio-economic integration. There were huge, lavish motorhomes that cost more than a hundred thousand dollars. These were parked a few rows down from people camping in thirty dollar tents. Regardless of where they camped, everyone mixed together in the common areas like the pools, basketball courts, horseshoe pits, and playground. For the most part, everyone got along.

The view from my camper on the north side of the campground varied, depending on the volume of campers at the time. Directly in front of our seasonal lot was a row of campsites that were full hookups, the cement pads set out at angles so the RVs could be towed efficiently into the lot and then connected to water, electricity, plumbing, and cable. Each site featured a tree, a patch of grass, a patio, a paver stone fire pit, and a picnic table.

These types of sites comprised the next five or six rows. An equal number of rows east of that were sites without utilities, for either popup campers or tents. This section of the campground was delineated from the other by a yellow cinderblock shower house, identical to the one a site over from my RV.

There was an elevated dirt trail along the northern part of the campground that ran east-west through a narrow range of woods. It started near the fishing hole, ran east about a quarter-mile along the shore, then ran south along the basketball courts, ending beside the east shower house. It was adjacent to a swampy bog with a greenish film covering almost all of it, littered with lily pads, cattails, and dead trees. To the north of that was Lake Erie.

About fifteen yards off of the coast was the train bridge. It was over a half-mile long, running parallel to Columbus Road and then hooking north to go out above the water, reconnecting with land at the west side of the campground by the fishing pond. The tracks were elevated high enough to allow small boats to pass beneath.

The urban legend associated with the costly iron bridge was that it resulted from a pissing contest between the previous landowner and the railroad company. The landowner fought and won an eminent domain battle with the city, which forbade them from bisecting his land with the train tracks. They responded by building a train bridge over the water and across his lake access, reconnecting to the railroad's land near the spot that would later be the fishing pond, greatly diminishing his land value. He was unable to develop the land into a marina as he intended and sold the land at a loss.

The northeast shore beyond the trail curved north, ran east for a few yards, and then straight south, forming a small peninsula. This area east of the north-south trail leg contained a paintball course, an archery range, and a grassy field for playing games and staging outdoor concerts. Worn wooden picnic tables were scattered throughout the field.

The area south of the trail tended to flood, so there was a sump pump expelling the excess water through a PVC pipe running beneath the trail and dumping into the boggy area. Halfway down the trail was a weathered wooden gazebo that the trail ran beneath.

There was a geographic segregation of the different socio-economic camper statuses. The west side was the “haves” and the east was the “have less’es.”

Even though my family had been camping at Sandusky Shores for a full season and we were permanent seasonal campers, we remained outsiders. There was a barrier to acceptance we unintentionally built ourselves, based upon the way we conducted ourselves when we camped.

We didn’t stay up all night drinking. We would have a few drinks while sitting out by the campfire at night but pulling an all-nighter with our kids running around screaming into the early hours of the morning never appealed to us. I recognize that statement as thinly veiled virtue signaling, but that didn’t negate the truth of it.

We accounted for our kids at all times. We didn’t allow them to disappear in an environment filled with migratory strangers from around the country for hours at a time.

The people over at lot 18 had a four-year-old and a six-year-old who were generally on their own. We would see them at different places around the campground without parental supervision. Someone could take them and be hours away before anyone noticed they were missing.

Also, we were clearly white-collar people. My wife and I worked in offices and from home, we didn’t do manual labor for a living. We both possessed advanced degrees, so the “getting to know you” conversations tended to reveal the gulf between us.

No particular difference between us and the seasonal campground culture was insurmountable. But the sum of all the minor differences contributed to the totality of us being *significantly different*.

I'm sure we could have made friends if we tried, but we didn't. We lined up family events all day that took us away from the campground. We were there because of the campground's vicinity to Gravity Junction. The camper served as a hotel room to shower and sleep and less as a hangout spot.

There was a part of me that yearned to fit in, because it was a place where my family would have fit in back in my childhood. My parents were extroverted, socially oriented people, who always made friends easily. When we vacationed we would effortlessly mix with other groups, and have fun hanging out together. Neither Marcy nor I had that skill set.

There was also nostalgia for the minor degree of lawlessness that was pervasive in the pre-digital era. At Sandusky Shores, kids didn't always wear helmets. Sometimes a truck would pass by with a half-dozen kids in the truck bed, traveling to the pool. A thirteen-year-old would zip by behind the wheel of a golf cart. Packs of kids ran around without shoes on.

It was my childhood in the 1970s and 1980s. It was drastically different than the ultra-cautious, over-thinking, virtue signaling, hand sanitizer-saturated, enfold your child in bubble-wrap environment where our kids were being raised. So while I didn't let my kids participate in it (beyond occasionally allowing them to cycle helmet-free), I enjoyed watching it happening around me at the campground.

I heard the train horn and felt the beginnings of the rumbling that would eventually be so loud it would be difficult to hold a conversation. This was almost a deal-breaker the first time we heard it.

The kids and I got used to the trains pretty quickly, and they didn't disturb our sleep after a few days. Marcy was another story. She never got used to it and complained about the trains incessantly.

I sat back in the chair and took another long drink of my margarita as a blast from the train horn filled the air. As I reached the bottom of the cup, I could taste the added tequila that settled there. I could feel its boozy tendrils slithering through my mind and welcomed the numbness and detachment.

I poured myself another margarita. I tossed another log onto the fire. The train had passed and was rolling off into the distance, the lights a soft glow as it disappeared.

I wished I could say I missed Marcy. If anyone asked if I missed her, I would certainly lie and say I did. But I didn't. For the first time in years, I could breathe. I could exist without the constant anxiety she imposed upon me.

We concocted a story about me temporarily relocating because of a critical work project requiring my full attention. Marcy's parents knew the truth and everyone else most likely suspected I moved out because of marital issues. Luckily, no one had called us out on it yet.

I was only buying short term peace by relocating there. If the current living situation continued the marriage would come to an end. Marcy had proven herself to be an excellent manipulator and game player, and I was sure that I would end up losing on multiple levels when the relationship officially fell apart.

At best I would be awarded partial custody of the kids at a rate substantially less than fifty percent. I would take a big financial hit. Visitation and custody arrangements would be constant battles, and as the male in the relationship, I expected to lose most of them.

Marcy and I had been in a relationship for six years and married for four years before our first child Jason's birth. During that time, we had a pretty solid relationship. I don't know if it would be considered a model relationship, but I felt we were pretty happy. We possessed similar values. We got along. We had fun together.

When Jason arrived, he was diagnosed with having a primary immunodeficiency disorder. There were issues with his B and T cell counts. It was a very stressful, scary time, having a baby that spent his first month in a plastic box in the neonatal intensive care unit. This stressful period of our lives triggered a personality change in Marcy that she never recovered from.

She became radically overprotective and an extreme germophobe. I was on board with this and willing to do whatever was necessary to protect Jason. We brought him home, and he fought off one infection after another.

The months went by and miraculously his body began creating more white blood cells and attacking bacteria and viruses more effectively. He became indistinguishable from a “normal” baby after the first year.

Sure, there were minor side effects of his condition, and we were very overprotective of him. Overall, he was a normal kid. But in Marcy’s mind, he was still at risk and required an excessive amount of precautions in everything he did.

I figured her personality switch would wear off because it was exhausting for her as well. But it never did wear off. She was driven by anxiety and obsession with Jason. I never felt it was to the extent where it was harming him, but I could see that a Munchausen by Proxy type of mindset wouldn’t be a stretch if she slipped a few degrees mentally.

We decided to have another kid. I thought the pragmatism of raising our first child and the continued healthiness of Jason would alleviate her anxiety, but it actually worsened.

Katie was born with a severe nut allergy. If she ingested almost any type of nut, she would go into anaphylactic shock. The risks associated with Jason’s immune system paled in comparison. Marcy’s overbearing ways got worse.

The reality of the danger of Katie’s allergies was not enough for Marcy, she would spend hours scouring the internet for allergy articles and forwarding the horror stories to me. Children dead or in comas from peanut exposure. Allergy bullying by kids who intentionally exposed an allergic classmate to peanut butter.

By having Katie, we essentially doubled down on the anxiety. Marcy was on a full anxiety Jihad at all times. I worked extremely hard to accommodate it, but everything I did was wrong. Furthermore, everything I did for myself was considered selfish. Fitness was self-indulgence. I had to push my exercise to either early in the morning or late at night. There was zero support.

Everything I enjoyed before having kids slowly faded from my life. I quit attending sporting events. Then I quit watching sports on TV. I lost friends. I communicated less with my family.

I truly related to life in prison. *Minus the conjugal visits*. I lived to eat and go to sleep. I got my “hour in the yard” at the gym a few times a week. The rest of my life was a continuous grind of work and chores. I looked forward to the day ending the moment I awoke.

After years of this, my soul was being crushed. It all came to a head with an epic argument and my relocation to the campground. I was scheduled to work remotely the following day and I packed everything I needed and left for Sandusky. It was the equivalent of sleeping on a buddy’s couch. I didn’t have a buddy with a couch, but I had an RV.

It wasn’t a permanent solution. Could I really spend an entire summer there? What happened when the place closed for the season?

## Data 1

11:15 p.m.

**T**here was no better time than the present. Minutes after hanging up with Chuck, I was getting dressed and putting together a game plan. I was practically salivating at the thought of spending time at Trailer Alpha.

I dressed in a pair of black cargo shorts, a yellow campground polo, a black and yellow campground baseball cap, black socks, and a black belt.

Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I frowned at what I saw. Generic glasses with ugly black frames and ridiculously thick lenses. I needed a haircut, which was evident even with the hat on. Strands of greasy black hair hung out on the sides and at the back.

Some idiot in undergrad called me a poor man's Michael Moore and I hated that comparison, essentially because it was fairly accurate. I had a chin or two less than Moore, but I was also a lot younger. In due time I'm sure we would be indistinguishable and that was unfortunate. But not so unfortunate that I was motivated to take measures to avoid that fate.

Physical fitness was an elusive condition I had never achieved. I never even made a reasonable attempt at it, other than the humiliation of being forced to participate in physical education at school. The painful memories of being teased in gym class made me wince and appreciate the distances of time and geography from my gloomy upbringing in Anaheim, California.

Sandusky was Podunk and bland compared to California cities, but it provided a wonderful degree of anonymity to me. No one knew me or my past, and for that, I was grateful. I was just some dumpy little nobody that no one paid any attention to.

Moving out to the Midwest to live in Sandusky with my grandma was a dreadful prospect at first. My brief glory in Silicon Valley had shown me how amazing life could be as a founding partner of a rising software company. One minute I was in a basement with a few friends creating software and the next I was part of an initial public offering (IPO) that made me a great deal of money.

My amazing tech skills helped launch some great software products. Somewhere along the startup journey, the other nerds began calling me “Data”, after the android in the Star Trek series. I took it as a compliment, although it could have been a dig at my lack of emotions. I brought the nickname with me to Sandusky, since I always hated my real name, Henry.

Just as I was wrapping my head around my new economic status with the tech startup, it crumbled. The majority partner cut corners, did some deceptive advertising, and misled the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC). Meanwhile, I had stolen patented software information and hacked several of our competitors to steal trade secrets. We got caught. We lost our company. We lost our money. We went to prison.

Mine was a short sentence at a minimum-security facility in Dublin, California. I was granted an early release for good behavior and sentenced to house arrest. My lawyer negotiated to have my house arrest served at my grandma’s in Ohio because I had nowhere to go in California since my parents had disowned me.

Relocating across the country to a trailer park in the frozen Midwest sounded awful. And it was at first. *But nowhere near as awful as prison.*

So, I went from living in my parents’ basement to an upscale downtown studio apartment to prison to a 1970s era mobile home in the Midwest during the course of four years. It was still difficult to wrap my head around it all.

The trailer itself was in decent shape, about one thousand square feet, two bedrooms, and one bathroom. It was situated on a tiny parcel of land, with neighboring trailers so close you could hear their toilets flush and smell what they were cooking for dinner. Grandma kept it tidy, but it needed a refresh. I wished I possessed home renovation skills, but I didn't.

Luckily, I never acquired the expensive tastes that many of my fellow IPO-enriched techies had during my short stay at the top of the tech world, and I found the simplicity of this lifestyle agreed with me. I heard stories about how Grandma was an overbearing and nosy person when mother was young, but she had slowed down as she aged and now slept so much that her trailer was almost a bachelor pad for me, albeit a bachelor pad without any female company other than Grandma.

My house arrest ended, and I was put on probation. While I was no longer confined to the trailer legally, I had nowhere else to go. I would remain there until I figured out the next step.

Grandma had a car, a little blue 1980s model Buick Skylark. The paint had faded, and it had some rust here and there, but it still ran, and I was able to use it every once in a while to run errands. Otherwise, everything I needed to do was within walking or biking distance. At least in the summer.

I had arrived in late October and spent the winter and the icy early spring indoors with Grandma. It was fine at first, but by April I was climbing the walls. I was not looking forward to the end of summer when the campground job ended. I would have to find a new job to keep my sanity.

The lack of technology in Grandma's trailer was maddening. As ordered by the United States District Court for the Northern District of California and enforced by my local probation officer, my living and working environments were to be one hundred percent technology-free. Of course Randy provided me with a fully functioning cell that my probation officer didn't know about.

I was allowed to have a stripped-down cell phone without any data capabilities and that was it. There wasn't a PC in Grandma's trailer, which was causing me to suffocate. There wasn't even cable or satellite TV, just a few channels received through a rusty antenna mounted on top of the trailer.

I found my sandals by the door and slipped them on. I grabbed my backpack and walked out, locking the door behind me.

It was a clear night out with no moon, very dark. The lack of city lights always made the nights unusually dark, unlike Los Angeles or Anaheim.

I walked behind the trailer to the shed and grabbed my bike, a rusty ten-speed that was probably salvaged by Grandpa while digging through junk on garbage day decades ago. Grandpa thought discarded junk was like buried treasure, and he was always bringing it home, if only to stack it on top of his other useless junk. Grandma mentioned that nothing he salvaged had ever earned him a red cent. I was trying to recall how long ago he died, it had to be at least twenty years ago. Grandma was still living off of his railroad pension.

Mounting the bike, I headed south toward Trailer Alpha. At this hour there wasn't much traffic, just a car or two passing by. I should have grabbed my helmet, but the last time I showed up for work at the campground wearing it I was ridiculed mercilessly. I would need to stop by the campground after finishing this part of the job and didn't want to get caught wearing a helmet. Understanding that the average campground worker didn't see the need for a helmet because there was so little to protect within their skulls.

Then again, there would only be one or two people working by the time I arrived. The security booth should be empty, it typically was. I turned into the gravel driveway of Trailer Alpha.

I dismounted my bike and walked it up to the front door. I found the keys and let myself in, which took a moment since there were multiple bolt locks. The door was heavy, made of reinforced steel. I wheeled my bike in and locked the door behind me.

Once inside, I was happy to see that the place was in the same condition I left it, nice and neat. One time Chuck let himself in and had some sort of one-man party, leaving fast-food wrappers, plastic cups, and cigarette butts and ashes everywhere. I complained to Randy and he added the security cameras to better control who was coming and going. There was a lot of expensive equipment and sensitive data in the trailer, no one should be in there partying.

Adding the cameras was beneficial for security but ruined my unfettered use of the trailer. If Randy noticed me there for long periods of time he wanted to know what I was doing. I suspected there was another tech guy he consulted with, but I wasn't sure. Sometimes he seemed tech ignorant and other times he seemed to know exactly what was happening.

The sliding glass door at the back of Trailer Alpha had a large piece of reinforced steel covering it. A dark brown curtain had been closed and left in place before sealing it off, so it appeared to be a normal, functioning sliding glass door from the outside. The window above the kitchen sink facing the Taj was bulletproof.

I went to the door on the west side of the trailer and unlocked it. There had originally been an open hallway along the south side, but a reinforced door was added by the kitchen wall. I walked in and turned on the light. It resembled a legit security control room at a corporate building. There were over a dozen monitors mounted along the western wall. A series of laptops were set up in front of the monitor bank.

The area that was once a full bathroom and spare bedroom was now just one room. There was still a sink and toilet to the right, but it wasn't enclosed, as the walls were removed to allow more space. Across from that were three safes, four feet tall by two feet wide. I was told that two contained weapons and ammo. I only saw the contents of the one closest to the north wall because it was used to store data storage devices and documents.

I was given the combination to all of them, and was told that if “the shit went down” that I was to extract a weapon and use it to defend the trailer. When I mentioned I had no weapons experience, Sam promised to take me out to the range and get me up to speed. That hadn’t happened yet.

All the windows had been fitted with thick, dark shades that were pulled down. Metal plates had been fastened over the window, with the exterior of the plates painted white. From the outside, it appeared to be an ordinary window. I was assured by Randy that the steel plates could stop bullets. I didn’t ask why anyone would want to shoot bullets at it.

Setting my backpack down, I went over to the monitors, turning on each one of them. Different live camera angles filled the screens. The front door of Trailer Alpha, the exterior of the campground office, a view from the campground security booth, two cabin exteriors, two cabin bedroom interiors, one clubhouse interior, three from within the bowling alley, two from the bowling alley exterior, and two from Randy’s boat.

I shook the mouse attached to the center laptop and its screen illuminated. I placed my pointer finger on a pad that was connected via the USB slot. After I was authenticated, I entered the password.

I launched the dark web browser and went to work. I was blessed with an amazing memory. I never needed to write down passwords or URLs, I just remembered them. My memory was not photographic, but pretty damn close.

I found the site I needed, typed in the requested access information, and a search box appeared. I typed in “Brady Sullivan, Medina, Ohio” and pressed *send*.



# **Chapter 2**

**Wednesday, June 17<sup>th</sup>**



## Chuck 2

1:25 a.m.

**W**ell, look at ole' Michael Moore peddlin' up the drive. Dear Lord, and he didn't have no helmet on this time. Seems like he would wear it at this hour, seein' how dark it was.

I don't think he saw me as I sat in my golf cart down by the pool. Some people called me a loudmouth, but I could be real quiet if I wanted to.

Good for Data, gettin' his Sullivan research done right away, Randy would like that. He liked people who moved fast when he told them to move.

I looked down into the red cup and saw it was close to empty. Pulling it up close near my eyeball, I figured there was another swig in there. Should have gotten a refill before I left the Taj.

I needed some music. Figured I could play it real soft while I sat here and gathered my thoughts. I turned the stereo on. Clearance Clearwater Revival came on, not bad.

I was off work but decided to stay out a bit longer. I didn't want to go back to the camper totally wrecked and have the old lady lay into me. But I didn't want to stop drinkin' either.

I had work at eight in the mornin', but what did I care? I could just show up and keep a low profile for a few hours, maybe find an empty cabin and take a little nap. I drank my last bit of vodka and tossed the cup into the grass. Let Data or Patrick pick it up in the morning, some busy work for 'em.

I got out of the golf cart and looked around, makin' sure no one was there. I took a piss off to the side, splashin' the chain-link pool fence.

Data workin' early wouldn't be a big deal to him. He wasn't drinkin' that night or any night, he was just gonna' be a little tired, but not hungover.

I decided to take a spin around the hood. I didn't put the headlights on. That would normally be unsafe, but it didn't matter that late, there wasn't no traffic. I was careful not to go up Sparrow, in case Sharon was out waitin' for me.

I went down a few streets to Dove, headin' north. Most of the campfires were out, with a few still smolderin', but a few people were sittin' out. It was a nice night for it. People were bein' quiet, which was good.

Damn I was thirsty. I remembered Viktor drank vodka and so I looped a left along the trail and headed west to Starling. Damn Ruskie should have some vodka on hand. It would be the cheap shit, but whatever.

Sharon would likely see me as I crept past Sparrow if she was out. I turned off the stereo and squinted to see if I could see her cigarette cherry when my golf cart clipped the fire pit at 24 with a screech. It jolted me and the cigarette in my hand flipped down and into my lap. I jerked and patted at it, flicking it off of me and onto the ground.

I stopped and got out. The cigarette was only half gone, so I relit it. There wasn't a fire in the pit and the crash wasn't loud, just a scrapin' noise from the bricks grindin' the fender. I would take care of it tomorrow. Or some other time.

I rolled past Viktor's RV and it looked dead. I kept driving until I saw the shower house between 33 and 32, then pulled over in front of it. None of the gazebo crew was out.

I walked back toward Viktor's. Every step was gettin' to my aches and pains. Damn back, damn hips. I felt myself waddlin' and hated it. Sittin' in that cart was makin' me fat. Not bein' able to walk a lot because of my injury was makin' me fat. Eatin' and drinkin' so much all summer was makin' me fat.

As I was walkin' past 31 I stopped. The fire pit in front of Sullivan's still had some embers smokin'. I paused for a minute, lookin' for movement. The RV was quiet. His truck was there so he was inside. I focused on the outdoor kitchen at the back of the RV. The slide-up panel was still up. I looked around carefully and walked toward it.

Brady had more beer in the fridge earlier that day when he gave me a couple. Hopefully, there were a few more left.

I walked around the patio table and stood in front of the fridge. I scanned the lots around me again. No movement in 50 directly behind me. I stood real still and listened. Nothin' but crickets.

I opened the fridge and the light inside came on. There was a half dozen cans of beer and a pitcher of green somethin'. It was one of those pitchers mounted on a blender he pulled off and put out in the fridge. Since the liquid was green, probably a margarita.

I figured if I drank a little he wouldn't notice. 'Specially if he was buzzed when he put the pitcher in there. I took a long pull off it. Yup, margarita, and it was pretty damned tasty. It was really cold, the top layer was still slush. I took another small sip and grabbed a few beers, puttin'em down in my shorts pockets.

I closed the fridge and gasped as I saw a black face starin' back at me from where the open door just was. Mike was standin' there. I let out a grunt and damn near fell over. I felt my heart skip and my lungs wouldn't work for a second. A pain shot along my chest and arm on the left side.

Mike didn't move. He was standing there holding a big unlit black flashlight like he wanted to beat me with it. His face was blank.

I thought about sayin' somethin' but nothin' came to mind. I didn't want to wake Sullivan up and have to explain I was stealin' from his fridge. I stared Mike in the eye for a spell. Neither of us moved.

Finally, I nodded at him. He didn't nod back. I turned around and started walkin' back to my golf cart.

I got in and sat for a minute. It took a long time for my heart to stop hammerin'. I thought better of goin' to Viktor's. It was almost time to face the music at home. But first I was gonna cruise around and drink Sullivan's beers.

## Mike 2

2:30 a.m.

The train lights lit the northern part of the campsite as it approached, and I felt the familiar vibration of it as it headed west. There were times I was enjoying the quiet and was ambushed by the train's intrusion. But after a few weeks, it wasn't as disruptive as it had been when I first arrived.

I figured out that there was a cadence to the trains. One would pass by about every ninety minutes. If it was on the half-hour it was heading east, on the hour, west. You could almost set your watch by it.

My heart was still beating rapidly from my encounter with Chuck. *Scumbag*.

I was sitting out in the dark when he drove by on Dove. I didn't think he saw me when he passed by since my fire was out.

Instead of keeping my fire going, I had let it die and put on a black Atlanta Falcons sweatshirt. While I was inside the camper retrieving my sweatshirt, I poured another drink. I wouldn't be able to fall asleep any time soon, so why not have one more?

Chuck was slinking along on his cart as quietly as possible. No headlights, no music, just driving up Crane in stealth mode. I saw him turn toward Starling.

There was a functioning bathroom in my camper, but I occasionally opted to use the shower house facility. Why not let someone else clean up instead of having to clean my own bathroom? I decided to go use it and maybe get a better look at where Chuck was going. I went into my camper to grab my flashlight.

Stepping outside again, it took a minute for my eyes to readjust to the darkness. I liked to have my big Maglite when I was out and about at night, in case I needed to see my way in the dark, or alternatively, to defend myself if necessary. Not that the campground was a dangerous place, as far as I could tell.

A friend who was a military policeman told me that they regularly used their flashlights on unruly drunk soldiers who would not listen to reason. A thump on the head with the solid metal flashlight would certainly make an impression.

I glanced over at 51 and paused for a moment. The shaggy-haired guy was sleeping in a lawn chair. His white hat was on backward, and he was still wearing sunglasses. There was a bottle of liquor at his feet, maybe Jim Beam.

His one-man party ended with him passed out and dead to the world. He had been drinking from a red cup earlier but must have just ditched that formality and started hitting directly from the bottle.

As I walked out of the shower house after relieving myself, I saw the golf cart roll-up. Chuck parked it alongside the building. He didn't notice me, since I was on the other side of a stockade fence that shielded the shower house from lot 49.

I walked up Sparrow to see where he was going and caught sight of him standing in front of 31. I cut across lot 50 to take a closer look.

He opened the fridge and the interior light revealed he was drinking something from a pitcher. I heard the clatter as he grabbed beer cans and stuffed them into his pockets. A feeling approaching anger came over me.

Who was this guy, a campground employee, to steal beer from a camper's RV in the middle of the night? Someone needed to fire his ass and tow his trailer out of here. Then he needed to have his ass kicked. Before I could think better of it, I found myself walking over and standing alongside the open fridge.

I honestly didn't know what I was going to do when he closed the door. A part of me wanted to grab him and drag him over to the door of 31 and knock on it, telling the owner what Chuck had done. But there was always the chance he was friends with the guy at 31 and it was okay for him to help himself to the fridge. After all, they were drinking together earlier. So, I restrained myself.

When Chuck closed the fridge, we just stared at one another. I gave him my blank drill sergeant look. The one that projected to others that behind the calm was a swirling tornado of anger and violence that was about to be unleashed.

Chuck was pale and sweaty and appeared to be more than a little scared. His eyes were so glassy that I was surprised he could see anything. He had been doing some serious drinking out on the golf cart. I remembered hearing a screeching sound earlier and wondered if he struck something.

After he walked away, I instantly regretted the confrontation. *Why would I do that?* As the only brother in this zip code, it was a bad idea to go creeping around these campsites in the middle of the night. I was going to have to face that clown at some point during the course of staying at the campground. This was going to make for some awkwardness.

Then again, I liked the fact that he knew someone was onto him. He was on notice. A guy who pulls that sort of trivial bullshit would likely be into more serious shittiness.

I walked back toward my camper with my heart still racing. It was late, but I was wide awake, so another drink was in order.

## Chris 1

3:30 a.m.

I had passed out for a short while. The last thing I remembered was hearing a scraping noise, like rock on metal. I had meant to stand up to investigate, but then lowered my head and was out. I had no idea how long.

My eyes suddenly flipped open, and just like that, I was jittery again. *Too damned jittery.* No way in fuck I was falling back asleep. *No way.*

I felt my face and my glasses were missing. Sitting up, they tumbled down from my chest to my lap. I started laughing. Folding them up, I put them on the top of the mini-fridge.

My head was itching, and when I went to scratch it, I realized I was wearing a baseball cap. I took it off and ran my fingers through my hair, which was a mess of tangles and sweat. I tossed the hat aside.

I needed a vape. Glancing over to the right, I saw it was lying in the grass. I tried to take a hit, but it was empty, so I set it by my glasses.

My fire had gone out a while ago and I was out of wood. There was plenty of firewood laying around at the back of the campground, but I didn't opt to pilfer any.

Candy passed out a while ago. She hated the hard stuff and just smoked a little weed. That was usually a sleeping pill for her and tonight I was thankful for it. I had enough going on in my mind without dealing with her shit.

My lack of adult supervision allowed me to get into more serious shit. The shit I wasn't supposed to be smoking anymore. *Shhhhh...*

I leaned forward and looked down. There was a half-full bottle of bourbon by my chair! I forgot all about it. I took a big chug straight from the bottle, but I barely even tasted it. That was an awesome side effect. Whatever I did after smoking up a tin didn't stick, I could have drunk the whole bottle of Jim Beam and still walked a straight line. Too bad I couldn't think in a straight line. *Was it straight line mental depreciation?*

There was no damned moon, that had to mean something. *To moon something.*

A cricket chirped. It sounded like it was almost under my chair. It chirped again and I knew that it wasn't under my chair, it was a few feet over.

Usually dogs were barking this late, why wasn't a dog barking? *Where was the dog?* I didn't have a dog.

I took another drink of Beam. I ran the fingers of my left hand, my non-bottle hand, through my hair again. It was getting long.

I needed a fire, something to focus on besides the stillness and the darkness. *And the quietness of dogs not barking.* I leaned my head back to howl but thought better of it.

This made me laugh, and I actually laughed out loud, a raspy sort of croak. I couldn't remember the last time I laughed.

I swung my head around to the door to see if Candy was there staring at me, but she wasn't. Probably still snoring in the back of the RV.

Looking through my backyard across 30 I saw a glimpse of a golf cart going by. No headlights. If there was one headlight it was probably Jacob Dylan. But it wasn't. Must be Chuck. Maybe he was heading home to be a wallflower for the rest of the night.

I got up and walked across the lots to Starling. Chuck was heading north and taking a right. Was he heading home? Was "heading home" even correct, were these RV's "home?" At least for the summer, they were, for guys like Chuck and me.

I walked back to my lot and out onto Sparrow. He passed the street and was heading east. What the fuck was he out doing this late? I decided to take a walk. *Take a walk on the wild side.*

I thought about the train bridge. The crazy bridge that flared out onto the lake and then joined the shore near the pond. I always had the urge to walk out and take a look. I wanted to do it now. Just hang out and watch for the train and see if I could get off the tracks in time. *Or not.*

I heard a camper door slam to the right. It was the black guy with the shiny metal RV. The Airstream. *His air dream.*

*Mr. Lone Ranger.* The tall dark stranger. He was walking from the shower house. Our eyes met. I nodded. He nodded. He kept walking. Grand-fucking Central Station out there tonight. I heard the racket from the train passing. The trains always ran on time at *Sandusky Grandusky Central Station.*

I walked up Sparrow until I was in front of the office. The office was really dark. I beheld the sky. It was dark, too. The side door opened and the four-eyed employee who looked just like the film maker Michael Moore walked out, wearing a backpack and pushing a ten-speed. He didn't see me.

"Hey Michael!" I yelled, way too loud. He jumped and his ten-speed fell over. This made me jump, too, and I almost dropped my bottle. He stumbled and his backpack slipped off one of his shoulders, spilling papers. Then he fell to one knee.

"Sorry man, shit," I said as I walked over. The guy seemed startled for a minute, then pissed.

"No. I got it," he said, standing up and picking up the papers.

"Let me help," I said, bending over to pick them up. I reached with my right hand but it was holding the bottle of bourbon, and I spilled some on the ground, as well as on him, his papers, and his backpack. Alcohol abuse. I started laughing.

"No!" he said harshly, causing me to lock up for a minute.

"Sorry Michael," I said, standing back up.

"My name isn't fucking Michael," he hissed with an angry look on his face. He shoved the papers back into his backpack. *Back into his backpack.* Was that why they called it a backpack?

"Sorry dude," I muttered, watching him. "What the fuck you doing out here in the office so late? Is the snack bar open?"

He glared at me for a moment as he picked his bike up. He attempted to pedal off, nearly fell, caught himself with his right leg, and then steadied himself.

“You drunk?” I asked him. I started laughing. The guy who was sky-high and brandishing a bottle of bourbon was asking the tough questions.

He ignored me and pedaled off. As he approached the guard booth, I saw movement inside. Someone was actually guarding the campground. I started walking in that direction. As the *guy-who-hated-being-called-Michael* passed the booth, a hand shot out.

“High five!” a voice yelled. The hand connected with his elbow and he veered off to the right, hopping over the speed bump and swiping the storage garage that had the rental pedal carts and the community lawn mowers. He fell again, his backpack opened again, papers came out again. I walked over but didn’t bother to help. The lyrics to the Beatles song about needing help came to mind and I started humming it.

Patrick came walking out of the guard booth, laughing his ass off. This guy was a piece of work. Peace sells. Peace works. Peaceful twerks.

“Help! Data needs somebody!” I started singing.

Patrick just stared at me blankly. Who names a Mexican kid Patrick? I guess his parents were trying to whiten him up or something. We had shared a pipe a time or two, I guess he wasn’t bad. With his shaved head, tattoos, and constant glare, I never felt comfortable with him.

“What happened, Data?” Patrick laughed. “Let me help you, bro.”

Michael jerked back. Not Michael, *Data*. The dude from Star Trek. *Was he an android?* Data was furious now.

“Stay the fuck away,” he said in a squeaky voice. *Away, away, away*. The last word Data said seemed to echo, but it wasn’t that loud, and we weren’t in a canyon, so it was in my mind. He once again picked his papers up and stuffed them in his backpack.

When he pulled his bike up again, he struggled to straighten out his handlebars. They were bent and pointing to the left, even though his front wheel was straight.

“Let me get those bars bent back,” I said as I walked over. He lifted his arm in a “stay away” motion. I stopped again.

“Hey Chris, can I get a hit of that?” Patrick asked, pointing to the bottle. I forgot it was in my hand. *Mr. Hand, you dick!* I did a soft Jeff Spicoli laugh.

Before I could answer he had my bottle in his hand and took a huge gulp from it. He handed it back.

“Whoah!” Patrick shouted. He took a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on. “Wow, that was the missing ingredient, boy!”

I started laughing. “The secret sauce!”

We laughed together. Data had bent the handlebars of his antique bike back the best he could and was pedaling off again.

“Well, this place looks pretty fucking secure, wouldn’t you say, Chris?” Patrick asked, folding his arms and leaning back as if he was admiring his work.

“I would say so. Myself. You got this security thing down to a science. Why do they call him Data?” I asked, taking a drink from the bottle.

“Don’t know. You seen Chuck?” he asked.

“He was scooting around a little while ago.”

“I ain’t seen him in a while. I will be in the security booth if he needs me. Securin’ shit,” Patrick said and stumbled back toward the booth. I lifted my arm in a wave.

I started walking back to my place when I saw some white things fluttering on the ground by the fence. Some of Data’s papers had blown over there.

I heard the train horn. I had missed my chance to dance with the train out on the bridge. A minute later I felt it roaring by with its lights shining on the trees and the RVs. I started singing the song “Night Train” as I swayed back and forth like Axel Rose. Then I moved on to “Train Kept a-Rollin’” by Aerosmith. But that was a cover of a song by some other band...

I lost my train of thought. I turned around to say that out loud but realized I was alone, so I just laughed to myself.

Walking over, I started picking the papers up. I would give them to Data tomorrow. After stuffing them in my back pocket, I started walking back toward my camper.

*Tomorrow.* It already was tomorrow. I had to work in a few hours. The gloom of my life set in and machete'd its way through the good vibes I was feeling. Every day that same urge to escape my life. The grand escape, not just carrying on my life in a new geographic location and fucking it up again.

After a few minutes, I realized I wasn't walking in the right direction. I was in the playground area, standing in front of the deflated jumping pillow. It was this crazy yellow and red monster inflatable pillow the kids bounced on like maniacs. I bounced on it drunk once but got yelled at because I had my shoes on. *Lighten' up, dude.* I shuffled around the pillow looking for a way to inflate it but couldn't figure it out.

The big pile of deflated rubber looked comfortable and I decided to sit on it. I would never get the chance to hang out on it during the day, so this was my time. *Fuck these kids, it belonged to me.* And my sandals were on! After setting my bottle down, I leaned back and raised my two middle fingers up toward the office building.

I took another big swig of Beam and walked into the middle of it. I made sure the cap was on my bottle and sat down. Then laid down. Crickets. *Where was the moon?*

## Brady 3

6:45 a.m.

**R**unning was the last thing I wanted to do. But I hadn't exercised in a while and the weather was fair, so I felt I had to.

My head was throbbing a little from the drinks. In some respects, it was the new normal. I couldn't remember the last time I hadn't had at least a few drinks in the evening, and some sort of hangover the following morning.

My cell phone was my alarm, although I rarely needed it. Unless I needed to get up unusually early, my eyes generally just popped open around wakeup time. I didn't need the snooze function either. Once awake, I didn't drift back to sleep.

I had my phone plugged in and sitting on top of my gun safe. It was a small black safe with a keypad and a fingerprint reader. One swipe of my pointer finger and it popped open. I was never a big weapons guy, but I was a self-defense guy. I had a Glock 23 with a full magazine in it and another full mag lying next to it.

I sat up and tried to get a read on my hangover. It wasn't severe enough to derail my run. There was always a troublesome voice in my head urging me to evade exercise, but I seldom gave into it because I was too unforgiving of my own laziness.

This hangover was a three or four on a scale of ten. I envisioned one of those scales in the doctor's office for patients to describe pain, with cartoon faces displaying emotions ranging from *happy* to *oh shit, I'm dying*. They should make one of those charts with drinking cartoons. The range could be from *buzzed* to *blacked-out*, with *tipsy*, *impaired*, and *shitfaced* cartoons along the spectrum. I was probably in the *tipsy* category the night before.

That morning I wanted to get in a four-mile run. I had set my running clothes out the night before to reduce the chances that I would weasel out. I put on a pair of black running shorts, a gray Warrior Dash dry-fit shirt, a pair of black dry-fit socks, and a pair of gray Saucony running shoes. I grabbed a water bottle from the fridge and drank half of it in one swig.

I slid my cell phone into a black cloth running case and fastened it to my arm. I stepped out of the camper and locked it behind me, putting the key in my pocket.

The heart rate indicator on my watch, a Garmin fitness tracker, reflected a higher than normal reading. Drinking alcohol always caused that, as my heart churned harder to metabolize the poison in my system.

I walked to the back of my lot to stretch and paused. The outdoor kitchen area door was open. *Alcohol-induced carelessness.* I went over and pulled it closed.

I walked out to the street and pushed a button on the right side of the watch. Scrolling through the exercise categories, I selected "Run." It searched for a GPS signal for a moment, then the red indicator changed to green. I took a deep breath, pushed the start button, and took off.

I started off running north on Starling. The campground was quiet. A bit of sun was showing through the clouds. The train horn sounded off in the distance.

I glanced at my watch, which was displaying the duration of the run and my pace. I was averaging about an 8:20 per mile pace. Not bad. A few years ago I was in the low 7:00s, but that was before my family life siphoned away most of my training time.

The train barreled by as I ran up to the trail, heading east. I wondered how I slept through the continuous train traffic by the campground, but I actually seemed to sleep better in Sandusky than I did in Medina.

The view from the trail was scenic, with glimpses of sunlight shining through the trees and the cattails waving in the breeze along the surface of the water to the north. I emerged at the east end and ran back to the shoreline area. I approached the tent sites, which showed no signs of life. A dog started barking from somewhere.

Rounding back on Seagull Drive, I passed alongside the kids' area. I cut through between the deflated jumping pillow and activities station, to the east of the swimming pool, entering the south side of the campground.

There was an empty bottle of Jim Beam beside the pillow. I considered stopping to throw it away, but I didn't want to interrupt my run. I figured the campground staff should see it and would realize they needed to crack down on some of the partying.

I ran back along the east side that had a series of cabins backing up to a tall stockade fence separating the campground from an auto dealership. In front of the cabins were several rows of campsites with full hookups, followed by rows of smaller cabins. The cabins were at about half capacity, judging by the cars parked in front. The west side had another series of seasonal sites, with some larger cabins along the stockade fence running parallel with Nickle Drive.

I circled back and passed by the security booth. An older worker with a blue "US Navy" baseball hat was standing there and waved. I waved back.

That route was about .75 miles. I considered just doing a few more loops within the campground and calling it quits, but then took a left at the security booth and ran out toward the trailer park. The freedom to improvise was part of the allure of running.

I exited the campground and took a right up East Shoreway Drive. There were trailers in varying states of upkeep on either side. Most of them had a tree or two on the small lots. Overall the area was unremarkable.

Occasionally a car passed by, but overall, it was quiet. The sidewalks were oddly narrow and full of deep cracks. A dog barked and I saw a pit bull mix chained to a front porch. If that chain broke, I would have been in deep shit, it seemed very angry.

I had a half dozen scary encounters during runs with dogs who were not properly restrained by their negligent owners. Although I had never been bitten, I had been pursued, which definitely escalates your heart rate.

Palmer ended at West Shoreway Drive, where I took a left and headed south. This took me out of the trailer park and as it ran along the western parking lot of the Cloverleaf apartments. They resembled a rundown project, grimy and beaten up. The lot was full of junky, rusted out cars. Weeds grew through cracks in the pavement.

Just past the apartments was the entrance to Eagle Creek, a gated community. There was a black wrought iron gate that lifted to allow vehicle access when activated by a keycard. Beside the main gate was a man-gate for pedestrians to use. There wasn't an actual security booth.

I had run past there multiple times and had always wanted to take a look at the houses within. The area was quiet, so I jogged over to the man-gate. I pushed the gate lightly and it didn't move. I turned and started jogging back to the street when a vehicle approached the gate from the inside. The gate slowly rose, and a dark gray Land Rover rolled through and took a right onto West Shoreway.

The gate had reached its apex as the vehicle turned and I doubted the driver could see the gate as it slowly lowered. Running over, I ducked beneath the opening. It closed behind me a few seconds later. I felt like I was Indiana Jones, narrowly escaping a cavern in the jungle as it collapsed behind him.

I don't know what I was thinking. I wasn't sure if I could exit through a man-gate or would need a keycard. If I was trapped, I would have to wait for another vehicle to exit and slip out.

I ran along Eagle Creek Drive heading west and came across Crosstree Lane, taking a right and heading north. The houses were amazing. Maybe 5,000 square feet, sided with lake stone, pillared, and well built. There was a canal running through each block, a watery alley, with boat garages and docks at the back of each house. Boaters could travel down the canal into a channel connecting to Lake Erie. I could only imagine how much these houses were worth.

Maybe that was the Holy Grail of luxury in northeast Ohio, living in a cul-de-sac in a gated community that featured boat garages. I was sure these were summer residences, as it wouldn't be appealing to live on a frozen canal in January. But that was what summer homes in Florida or North Carolina were for.

I ran up the street until it dead-ended in a cul-de-sac. I didn't want to push my luck and remain in the neighborhood too long, so I decided to exit instead of exploring the other streets. At the far west end, there was another gate that exited near some condos and an indoor water park owned by Gravity Junction.

I was fairly certain that most people here would identify me to be a stranger, as I assumed the neighbors all knew each other. It would be an awkward conversation if someone called security or the police. All I needed was to have Marcy bail me out of jail and lose my government security clearance for trespassing.

I ran the circle of the cul-de-sac and headed back. About halfway up the street, I heard a motorcycle fire up. I glanced to my left and saw a middle-aged guy roll slowly out of his garage, revving his bike loudly as he slowly drifted down the driveway.

The guy was in his late fifties with that Harley-Davidson biker look, but perhaps a degree more polished. His hair was totally gray, wearing wayfarer sunglasses, jeans, and a black t-shirt with a black leather vest. He had somewhat of a gut protruding over what I assumed was a Harley belt buckle.

I knew nothing about motorcycles, but that bike seemed expensive. I glanced again quickly and thought I recognized him. Or maybe his bike. I wasn't sure.

As I passed him, I tried to take a closer look without blatantly staring at him. I wished I had worn my sunglasses so it wouldn't be obvious.

He didn't look like he belonged in this neighborhood. It was not that he was unkempt looking, but he appeared more legit Harley, not the lawyer or doctor who decides to be a rebel and buys a Harley during the course of some midlife crisis. He looked like a blue-collar guy who had built a business, made some money, and clawed his way into the upper class.

Then I remembered where I saw him. He owned an RV in the northwest corner of the campground, the one Chuck and the creepy Euro guy frequented. Along with a few other creepy guys. Guys who were not seasonal campers. Not that I recognized everyone who camped at Sandusky Shores.

So, he had a mansion and a camper. Not quite Elmer J. Fudd with his "mansion and a yacht", but impressive. Within a mile of each other. *Okay.*

Was the camper some sort of rental property? It didn't make sense to have your house and RV located so close to each other. I wasn't entirely sure that he owned the RV. I wished I had checked his mailbox for a name as I ran past his house, but it was too late.

I ran back to Heron and turned left to return to the east gate. The motorcycle growled loudly as he approached me. He passed me slowly, without looking in my direction. I glanced at his vanity plate: *GLORYB*. "Glory be"? Was he a holy roller? He didn't fit the image of an avid churchgoer, but some of them defied stereotypes.

As he approached the gate he stopped in front of the console and swiped a card. The gate began to rise. However, the guy just sat there.

I passed alongside him, and he looked over at me and smiled. He gestured his hand in a sweeping motion as if to say, "after you". I smiled as best I could, hesitated a moment, and ran past him and beyond the gate. He revved his engine a few times and followed, rolling slowly down the street. I turned right and ran about 100 yards, turning into the parking lot of a bowling alley.

Glory Bowl. That was the name of the alley. Such a blatant off-color reference, and yet there it was, on a big neon sign in front. It had to be a play on “glory hole.” I tried to envision youth bowling leagues with the place emblazoned on their shirts. I nearly laughed out loud when I imagined what the graphic on the shirts would be.

I figured I would do a loop in the parking lot. I glanced behind and saw the motorcycle guy had pulled in right behind me. I felt my tension rise as I reached the sidewalk in front of the alley and slowed a little. Was he tailing me because I was running through his gated neighborhood?

His vanity plate suddenly made sense. *GLORYB. Glory Bowl.* The bowling alley was his. It was my bad luck to run into the parking lot that was the Harley guy’s destination. If I had just run up to Columbus Road, I would have been free of him.

He rolled up rather close to me as I approached the building but turned right and traveled behind it. Circling the parking lot, I ran back to the street.

The motorcycle engine revved again loudly and then there was silence. I continued running back toward the camper, reminding myself to check the run stats later to see how high my heart rate had climbed during that particular segment of the run.

As I ran back in the direction of the campground, I could not get the motorcycle guy out of my mind. He had a lot of things going on in this small geographic area. I glanced over as I ran past the Cloverleaf Apartments. Did he have a stake in this too? I thought it would be worth looking into online property records on the county recorder website to see what names were on these properties.

## Chuck 3

8:35 a.m.

**M**y damned walkie-talkie shrieked, startlin' me and sendin' a pain up my left shoulder. That pain seemed to happen a few times every day. *Christ.*

The pain went away and Data's voice crackled through the speaker. "Chuck, we have a problem over here at the jumping pillow. Can you get over here?"

"Yeah," I said, placing the walkie-talkie back on the dashboard. The battery was nearly dead, I would need to charge it. I forgot to bring it back to the office last night.

My head was poundin'. Completely poundin'. I was feeling queasy.

I dropped by the office when it opened and tried to eat a piece of bacon and toast from the breakfast buffet, only to hurl it up in the garbage can outside of the pool. An old couple walkin' by didn't seem to appreciate that. There was always a set of fuckin' eyes where you didn't need em'.

I was in the far northeast corner and headed west, roundin' the northeast shower house and goin' south on Hawk. I was afraid somebody had vandalized the jumping pillow. Some dirtbag from the tent area had too much to drink a few summers ago and slashed it up with a pocketknife. Replacin' that thing was expensive.

Headin' west on Seagull Drive, I was careful to drive in the grass to the right of the speedbump. I hit one earlier and nearly threw up, it set my head to poundin' even worse.

I didn't remember comin' home the night before. Well, not the night before, it was earlier that mornin'. I woke up all sprawled out in a lawn chair in front of my camper. My back was killin' me from sleepin' awkward. There was a pile of puke over by the grill I had to clean up, retchin' as I did. Sharon would have gave me some shit if I just left it.

Startin' work early was always a bitch, but this was killin' me. The sun was out and bright as hell. Hangovers needed cloudy days, with rain or snow keepin' you indoors. Not cloudless and sunny. If I hadn't had my sunglasses to protect me, I would likely have died.

After I half-ass cleaned up my puke, I limped over to my golf cart and found more puke on the hood and wheel well on the driver's side. At least I had the sense not to puke inside. There was also a big scratch alongside the fender. I looked closely and there was some brownish gravel in the scratch, so it was most likely the side of a fire pit. Much better to hit that than a car or RV.

I drove over to the east shower house, went in the bathroom, gathered a stack of paper towels, ran some water on them, and managed to clean the golf cart up without pukin' again. Luckily there were no campers around. I entered the building again and washed my face with cold water. That made me feel a little better.

I was still feelin' drunk and dizzy as I pulled up to the playground area. It wasn't supposed to be open until 9 am, but both swinging gates were open. It was my job to lock them when it closed at 10 p.m., but I forgot to.

A few golf carts and work carts were parked on the fringes by the chain-link fence and a small crowd of people gathered by the edge of the jumping pillow. One was Data. The others were campers.

I tried to play off how rough I was feelin' as I walked up. I thought about a cigarette, checked the inside of the golf cart, and didn't find any. Maybe that was for the best, sometimes they made me nauseous after a rough night.

Data waved as I walked up. The black guy in the Airstream at 65 was there, too. A sudden drunken memory hit me hard and I think I flinched. Somethin' about gettin' caught diggin' into someone's camper fridge last night. I couldn't quite grab the full memory. *Jesus Christ.*

The other two bystanders were the elderly couple who had seen me throwin' up in the garbage can earlier. I put on somethin' I thought was a smile but doubted it looked real.

"Hey folks," I managed to croak.

"Hey Chuck," Data said nervously.

“Somethin’ wrong with the pillow?”

“Uh, yeah, there is somebody passed out here. Why wasn’t the playground gate locked?”

“Who?” I asked, ignorin’ his question. I would blame it on Patrick if Travis pressed me.

“Um, Chris from 51,” Data said softly, almost whisperin’. I walked closer to the edge and saw a figure lyin’ there on the deflated pillow. I recognized the greasy black hair. He was missin’ his shirt, just a pale figure lyin’ on his side.

“I found him earlier when I was cutting through here on a walk,” Mike said, takin’ a step closer. He was wearing an Atlanta Braves baseball hat, a red Under Armour t-shirt, black gym shorts, and gray runnin’ shoes with white socks.

“Is he alive?” I asked in a whisper, feelin’ that pain in my left arm again. I was havin’ trouble catchin’ my breath.

“Yeah, I checked his vitals. I put him in the rescue position. Someone better call an ambulance,” Mike said. His voice was a little too loud for my liking, I could feel it in my head.

The elderly couple were millin’ about over by the swing set, so maybe they weren’t able to hear that. Them being old and all.

“Rescue position?” I asked, not knowin’ what the fuck that meant.

“You turn him on his side, so if he vomits, he won’t choke on it and die. It looks like he did a fair bit of vomiting earlier, but he is breathing, so there’s that,” Mike said, foldin’ his arms. “They don’t teach you any first aid skills working at a campground? What if you have to pull some drowning kid from the pool or the lake?”

“Fuck no, I ain’t no paramedic. Let’s see if we can get him up,” I said, walkin’ gingerly toward the figure. He appeared to be sleepin’ soundly. Then I saw a few small piles of light brown vomit next to him. Some of it was on his gym shorts and the side of his face. The sight of the vomit stopped me in my tracks. Then the smell of it hit me. I backed up a few feet, got caught up in the pillow fabric, and fell back flat on my ass.

I stood up, not takin' the hand Data was tryin' to offer. I shuffled quickly over to the side to a garbage can along the fence and barely made it there as I threw up into it. About two feet over on the other side of the fence, a middle-aged black guy with flowery swim trunks and a white tank top was walkin' a small little dog with a red bow in its hair, frownin' at me. The dog started yippin'.

"Another one of those and you'll have a vomit hat trick," the old man who had seen me pukin' earlier said. I didn't look at him. I wiped my mouth with the inside of my elbow and walked slowly back.

"Did you radio Travis?" I asked.

"No, he isn't due in until lunch," Data said.

"Yeah, but somethin' like this usually...never mind, no police or ambulance involved, he don't need to be here. I can mention it later," I said. "Let's try to move him."

But I didn't move forward. I couldn't hang with the puke; it would send me to the garbage can again. Data looked at Mike and he nodded.

"Hey folks, if there is nothin' else you need we got this," I said, directin' it at the elderly couple. The black guy with the Yorkie, or whatever the fuck kind of dog it was, lingered by the fence. He shook his head and kept walkin', pullin' the dog along.

The elderly couple didn't move at first, but then turned and started walkin' toward the office. Good thing those two were probably tech ignorant and likely wouldn't be leavin' a campground review on Yelp.

Travis was always goin' on about reviews left on Yelp. Compliments were never brought up, but the complaints were thrown in my face. The music was too loud at night, dogs barking, kids running wild, broken alcohol bottles, *blah blah blah*. A complaint about employees pukin' wouldn't go over good. About as good as a post about a junkie passed out at the playground.

Mike and Data walked over to Chris. Mike situated himself by his head, Data by his feet. Mike slowly rolled him onto his back. They counted to three and picked him up, with Mike grabbin' under his armpits, careful to avoid touchin' puke. They slowly walked him off the pillow and over beneath a tree, where they leaned him back against it.

## Chris 2

8:40 a.m.

**T**here I was, being escorted out of the tower. Not guided or lead, physically escorted by two security guards, semi frog-marched, with each grasping an elbow. A third had a cardboard box with my personal items.

This walk of shame was not a complete surprise. The shift had begun like any other. I arrived for work at Cleveland Hopkins Airport right on time, like I almost always did. Never early, generally on time, occasionally late.

This was seldom appreciated by the person I was relieving, but sometimes I just flaked out. I had been written up a few times, but hey, I was a federal employee, what could they do to me?

My gig as an air traffic controller was a good one. I had the aptitude for it, as I first discovered as a senior in high school when I took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test, a standardized military test to see what sort of job I was qualified for in the Air Force. I figured I would get a decent job, maybe as an aircraft mechanic or a computer programmer or something.

My ASVAB score came back really high. Not jet pilot high, but air traffic control or foreign linguist high. Learning a foreign language sounded like a drag, so I went with air traffic controller.

My first four years in the Air Force I was drug free. I had cleaned up prior to going to basic and managed to stay off them.

While I was stationed at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, I met an Airman in the barracks who was getting his private pilot's license. It sounded interesting, so I enrolled and began working toward getting mine. The classroom stuff was easy and the hours behind the yoke were amazing. I couldn't imagine a better place to learn piloting than the Hawaiian Islands. From that point on, I was able to continue logging hours at the various places I was stationed, although buying my own aircraft was way beyond my financial capabilities.

It was during my fourth year that I stumbled. I was stationed at a Royal Air Force base in England, outside of Suffolk. I had a weekend pass and went to the mainland with a few buddies. We bought rail passes and explored.

After making a few stops, we ended up in Amsterdam, and that was when my drug habit came roaring back. It started with a little weed and got worse. Whatever I found that I could smoke, I smoked. By the end of the weekend, I was totally baked and incoherent and it took an effort for my buddies to pry me out of our hotel and get me back on the train. I didn't remember the journey home.

I never fully recovered from that relapse. My last two years I played cat and mouse with the drug testing program, never getting busted. But my work performance degraded. After I was caught sleeping in the tower one night, I was told that if I reenlisted, it wouldn't be as an air traffic controller.

I had been struggling with depression since I could remember, and that was the root cause of my drug problems. Numbing myself had been necessary just to get through the day in high school. I was able to stay clean in the Air Force because I was involved in a dynamic and positive profession, but after a while, it became the new normal, and *the normal became boring*.

About three months from being discharged, I received an inquiry from the FAA about applying to civilian jobs. Apparently, my track record still appeared okay from the outside. The sleeping incident was handled in-house and didn't make it to my permanent record. I spoke with my supervisor and he agreed to give me a recommendation. He wanted me gone. I was a liability, and he wanted me to be someone else's problem.

I interviewed with the FAA in Tampa Bay and was offered a job a few weeks later. I was given a few airport choices and decided on Cleveland Hopkins Airport to be closer to my family in Michigan.

This job prospect returned me to sobriety. I quit smoking as soon as I was offered the job, knowing a drug test was imminent. I made it through the remainder of my enlistment, received an honorable discharge, and packed my shit for Cleveland.

The opportunity was a good one. It was at a high pay level, so I was making a lot more than I had as a staff sergeant in the Air Force. I bought a cheap Nissan at a used car lot in Panama City, loaded it up, and left the Air Force base and my military career for good. I drove up north to Ohio and found an apartment in Brook Park, the city where the airport was located.

After additional training, I began my career as a civilian air traffic controller. I performed well and earned the respect of my peers. I had gone clean trying to get the job and remained clean. That wasn't too hard, because I didn't have any bad influences.

I had a few friends at work and all of them were straight. We'd get together for a few drinks or to catch a sporting event, but nobody was into drugs.

That changed when I made the mistake of taking a week off and visiting my parents in Jackson, Michigan, my hometown. It was only about a three-hour drive from Cleveland. While hanging out at a local bar in Jackson, I ran into an old high school buddy.

The next thing I knew I was sitting in his truck smoking it up. That was pretty much what I did the rest of the week. When it was time to leave on Sunday, I called into work and stayed an extra day to get more high time in.

When I returned to work there was an incident on my shift. It wasn't even my fault. A coworker working an adjacent position made an error and two planes passed too close to each other under his direction. The FAA policy was for all close calls to be followed by drug tests. So, although I didn't make a mistake, I was called in before the end of my shift and forced to give a urine sample on the spot. It came back hot.

A week later, I did a drug retest. Two days after that, I was escorted off the airport premises. I was officially suspended with pay pending a hearing, but the union could offer little help. I wasn't some government paper-pusher; I was tasked with guiding dozens of airplanes filled with hundreds of people safely to the ground each shift. I lost the hearing and a few appeals, and a month later I was terminated.

I picked up odd jobs, managing to keep my apartment for a year, but getting my car reposed. I met Candy at the bar around the corner from the apartment, a blue-collar dive bar with a pool table, a jukebox, and cheap drinks.

We hit it off and I moved in with her at her dumpy apartment for a few months before a stoner friend of mine told me about a job opportunity his cousin had hooked him up with in Sandusky.

Gravity Junction was building a huge sports complex a few miles down from the park, which would feature several outdoor fields that could be used for soccer, baseball, and lacrosse. They urgently needed laborers from the spring through the fall.

I was working as a cook and dishwasher at Candy's bar and making minimum wage. The construction gig paid double that. My friend obtained a junky RV and set it up at the Sandusky Shores campground.

My stoner friend ran into some bad luck. He got pulled over outside of Toledo carrying a huge stash of weed and pills. He had enough contraband to get charged as a dealer and was locked up until his trial in the fall.

So, I inherited the trailer we were going to share. Candy had a conflict with her boss at the bar, quit her job, and moved in with me. That was lucky, because I still didn't have a set of wheels, so I could use her car to get me to work. And since she was a bartender, if she worked the night shift, there would never be a conflict. It turned out she didn't have any interest in getting another job, so there wouldn't be any conflict whatsoever. *My luck was just amazing.*

The work at the sports complex was all manual. I wasn't opposed to working hard, but some of those twelve-hour days were brutal. The most demoralizing reality of my situation was that I could see Griffing Sandusky Airport from my job site, so every day I had a reminder of what I used to be. The opportunities I squandered were very clear, as I watched the small planes come and go all day while I shoveled dirt or walked around with a trash bag cleaning up the worksite throughout the day.

In a different world, I would be working there as an air traffic controller, or piloting some rich guy's G6 to Put-In-Bay Island for a weekend trip. Instead, I was a hundred yards up the street with a shovel, digging a trench to lay the drainage pipes for the new sports park.

I reflected on working in a trench being dug alongside the road. The backhoes did most of the work, trenching the earth out and placing it to the side in piles. The laborers like me were needed to then go in and do more detailed digging.

I pictured myself shoveling a large scoop of dirt to the side, taking a dirty rag out of my pocket, and wiping my brow. I sat down with my back along the side of the hole and closed my eyes briefly. Someone was yelling something at me, maybe a coworker telling me to get back to work, but I was so tired.

Something nudged me. My eyes were still closed, but I felt something hard against my back. I managed to open my eyes just a little. Leaning over me, I saw the black guy from across the street in the shiny camper.

I wasn't in the trench; I had been dreaming that. I was leaning against the tree in the playground area at the campground. My feet were straight out in front of me. My left sandal was missing. The guy from the aluminum camper was saying something to me but I couldn't quite understand what it was.

## Chuck 4

8:45 a.m.

Chris stirred a little and opened his eyes into tiny slits. He tried to lift his hands to his face, but they just came up about six inches and dropped.

“Hey Data, get me a bottled water and then take my cart over to 51 and see if his girlfriend is around,” I ordered.

He was confused for a minute because I don’t let nobody drive my golf cart. Just then I didn’t care, I didn’t want to deal with the girlfriend.

“Ok, Chuck. When you are done, we need to talk about something,” he said nervously.

“Fine, let’s get this cleaned up first. I’m going to get a few guys to hose that off. We should be able to get it up and runnin’ before it gets busy out here.” I radioed and got things movin’.

A work cart pulled up with Patrick and Vaughn. Vaughn was a thirty-something-year-old black man, big, maybe six foot four, and pushing 300 pounds. Shaved head, short graying beard, wearing the campground uniform of a yellow polo, yellow hat, black cargo shorts. Big white sneakers. He was pretty quiet and did what he was told without sayin’ much. They walked over to me.

“Is it bad?” Patrick asked behind his dark sunglasses, noddin’ toward the pillow.

“I’ve seen worse,” I said.

Vaughn walked to the side of the clubhouse and came back with a rolled-up hose. He started unrollin’ it as he walked toward the pillow.

Chris moved his hands to his face and covered it. A few minutes later Data pulled up in my golf cart with Candy in the passenger seat.

“I think we’re good Mike, thanks,” I said. He ignored me and crouched down by Chris.

"You okay, buddy?" Mike asked softly. Chris nodded so slightly it was barely seen. He stiffened up a little when he saw Candy and hopped to his feet. He stumbled and caught his balance with one hand beneath him. I was impressed he could pull that off, given that he was mostly dead a few minutes ago.

"Easy, kid," Mike said, grabbing him by the elbow. Chris looked like a truck hit him. His face was covered with sweat, his chest hairs caked with flecks of puke. He was missing his left sandal.

"Hey, anyone seen his sandal?" I asked. Vaughn was now lightly spraying the jumping pillow while Patrick watched him.

Candy marched angrily toward Chris, carrying a bottled water. Redheads had a reputation for being hot-tempered, and she fit that, her face scrunched up in anger, freckled cheeks all rosy. Her hair was pulled back tight in a ponytail, closer to a brownish color with traces of red, she wasn't one of those gingers with bright orange hair. She wore a pink tank top, white polka dot pajama bottoms, and flip-flops.

She walked past Chris and over to Vaughn. Droppin' the bottle, she pulled the hose nozzle out of his hands. It stopped sprayin' when he released the trigger. Vaughn just crossed his arms; it didn't seem to bother him.

She turned the hose on Chris and sprayed him in the face from about three feet away. Chris made a sort of yelpin' noise, shivered, and then ducked and brought his hands up to cover his face. She sprayed him in the torso, then the crotch, then the legs. Chris tried to cover each place she aimed at. Finally, she dropped the hose and picked up the water bottle.

"Drink this!" she hissed, uncappin' it and pushin' it into his hands. He took a short pull, belched, and dry heaved. He paused for a minute and then took another small swig.

"Can you drive him back to the camper?" she asked Data, who was comin' back from the other side of the pillow with Chris's missing brown sandal.

"Sure," Data said, handin' Chris his sandal. In a daze, he just stood there with it. I didn't want him to get in the golf cart drippin' wet, but I needed to get this circus over with. I would dry it off later.

“What time were you supposed to be to work?” she asked flatly. He didn’t respond at first. She snapped her fingers in front of his nose. “Hello? Earth to Chris! Need me to get the hose again?”

“No, Christ. Nine o’clock,” he said.

“You have ten minutes. You ain’t losing this job. You need to get cleaned up and I’ll drive you in.” Chris didn’t respond but started limp’in’ over to the golf cart, still carryin’ his sandal.

I was a little surprised at how bossy she was, she hadn’t said two words to no one since she’d moved in. She struck me as lazy. Once Chris left for work it would probably be nap time for her and then on to the couch for the game shows and soap operas.

“Put your fucking shoe on,” she hissed as she started walkin’. Chris climbed in the golf cart gingerly. Chris leaned down to slip his sandal on as Data climbed behind the wheel. He gave it some gas and then braked at the edge of the playground. Chris lurched forward and hit his head on the dash. Data apologized as they looped around and exited the gate. Candy didn’t even look up as they passed by.

## Mike 3

9:10 a.m.

**T**hat's what I got for venturing out for an early morning walk. Next time I was going to go off-site to a park or something. Chris was lucky he wasn't dead.

I felt the scratching of the papers against my back as I walked, and hoped they weren't noticeable or slipping down deeper into my shorts. I walked to my camper, entering and locking the door behind me.

Reaching behind my back, I pulled out the wad of papers. There were five wrinkled pages.

When I came across the unconscious Chris, the papers were scattered around him. One was underneath him and was only revealed when I flipped him on his side. The top corners of several pages had puke or bourbon on them, they were a light brown color. I mentally noted the need to shower and change clothes after handling them.

I laid the papers out on the table. I also noted to wash the table when I was through.

It was some sort of records summary. I had given the papers a quick look as I picked them up by the jumping pillow and found they weren't Chris's personal papers. The name at the top was Brady Sullivan, along with his social security number and home address.

I only had a quick moment after I discovered them scattered around Chris to decide a course of action. If I was sure they were Chris's I would have gathered them and returned them when he regained consciousness. But they weren't his.

I had tried to decide if he could have legitimately been holding someone else's papers. I figured they could have been a friend's, but that wouldn't explain why Chris would have them in his possession while he was wandering around the campground in a late-night stupor.

Brady Sullivan. Site 31. The guy who was a victim of Chuck's alcohol theft earlier that morning.

His home address was in Medina, Ohio. I dug in a drawer and found my US road atlas. It was one of those big ones, about fifteen by eleven inches, beaten up and dog-eared from decades of use. I was one of the few people under the age of seventy who still owned an atlas. I flipped it to Ohio. Medina was a small town about thirty miles south of Cleveland.

I reviewed the rest of the pages. There were summaries of his employment history, income tax records, and property records. Sullivan worked for PAF, a federal agency that I recognized. It was the agency that paid me as a soldier and retiree.

He had a master's degree and a few government certifications. As I worked my way through his employment history, I found a common employer, the US Army, from twenty years ago. That was interesting. He served three years. Matching that against his year by year income on the tax summary, I found he was making peanuts during those years, so he was likely enlisted. Most people at that salary were below the poverty level, but when the military food and lodging benefits were factored in, it wasn't quite as bad.

Another page had his credit history. Sullivan had a high credit score. There were a few maxed credit cards, but nothing was paid late. A fifteen-year mortgage with about eleven years to go on a \$300,000 house. A \$27,000 camper that was financed for ten years. Unfortunately, it didn't list the RV model.

The summary continued with Marcy Sullivan, maiden name Kovich. She worked at a place that sounded like a medical billing firm. She made substantially less than Brady.

Overall, the Sullivans were clean, nothing that would set off any red flags. As a senior enlisted noncommissioned officer, I had reviewed more than a few financial records summaries of problem soldiers.

There was only one page on Marcy, the rest was missing. The other pages must have blown away between Chris's collapse on the jumping pillow and my finding him several hours later. I wondered if he had been partying with Chuck, who was also destroyed last night and was feeling mighty rough that morning, as demonstrated by his garbage can puking incident.

Did I miss some big party last night? Someone forgot to invite me. Then again, Chuck's partying led him to steal drinks from the camper at 31, so how much fun could it have been?

I generally tried to hold off drinking until after lunch, but I found myself making a screwdriver. Vodka and its scentless-ness was the universal go-to for morning drinking. And orange juice was most certainly a breakfast drink.

## Data 2

9:35 a.m.

I felt my gut churning. When I got back to Grandma's trailer earlier that morning and went through the backpack, I discovered that some of my summary sheets were missing. I still had most of Marcy's, but Brady's were gone.

If I would have slowed down and reviewed the papers before I left the campground, I would have realized some were missing. But with Patrick and Chris out acting like lunatics, I was flustered.

I went back once I noticed they were missing and asked Patrick, but he swore he didn't have the papers. He had no reason to lie, they were of no use to him. I needed to review the security video.

Patrick was difficult to figure out. He was one of the few guys who was nice to me once in a while, but last night he was obnoxiously intoxicated.

Chris may have had them, but I knew he was at work. I biked over to his camper, just in case he decided to call off, but the door was closed. Knocking could trigger his volatile girlfriend, and I wanted no part of that.

I didn't know if Chris was coherent enough to gather my papers, but he was trying to help me pick them up when I dropped them. Both times. I dropped them twice. *Idiot.*

Randy would kill me if I told him. I was the technology guy, the careful guy, and the sober guy. *I was the details guy.* This would ruin that trust. This may ruin this job and then I wouldn't have access to any technology at all.

The entire data extraction only took an hour. It took me another half hour to type up the summaries. The other few hours I spent at Trailer Alpha were on the dark net. I liked to check out the places I used to go and see if some of the people I used to know were still out there.

I knew all of their usernames. A few were still at it, although others were like me and sneaking around using different aliases.

I was careful not to post anything or go anywhere where I may be recognized. I wanted to gloat about being back but that would be self-destructive. If I got caught again that would lead to hard time.

I was a little annoyed with Travis. If he had standards of hiring and the campground wasn't such a haven for thugs and misfits, then none of this would happen. But if the campground was managed on the level and the employees were all Boy Scouts then Travis wouldn't have hired me, and Randy would have no use for me.

## Travis 2

9:45 a.m.

**J**esus Christ, it was always something. Trying to get this campground a five-star rating with all of these lackeys Randy brought in was bad enough. These seasonal randoms like Chris Randolph were just as bad.

I pulled into the campground in my Jeep and stopped at the security gate. No one was there. Of course not. I thought Patrick would be there.

I parked and walked across to the office. Rounding the corner, I saw Vera at the front desk, staring down at her cell phone. Nothing like paying people to fuck around on their phones all day.

“What’s new, Vera?” I asked loudly. She flinched and stood up, sliding the phone into her purse.

“Hey Travis,” she said. She was the typical type of office help I was able to get with the low wages I paid. Nineteen years old, slightly overweight, nose ring, red streaks through her dyed blond hair that was down to her shoulders. Tattoos almost every place that skin showed, from her knuckles to her forearms to the back of her neck. Always chewing gum. Probably high or planning how she could sneak off and get high. Probably would happen in a cabin with Chuck.

“I have a truck coming in at any time with a load of chains and fence posts. They are to be dropped off along the back northeast area,” I said, knowing she couldn’t identify northeast to save her life. She nodded.

“Please have Chuck and Data escort it back there and have the chains unloaded to the flatbed trailer and stack the poles beside it. It may require a fork truck. Chuck should be able to make that happen.”

I found several hundred feet of used nautical chains at an auction, salvaged from a marina in Vermillion. I also bought a bunch of six-foot metal posts, so the idea was to sink the posts and run the chains along the entire shoreline as a decorative fence. It would also serve to keep stupid people from trying to swim in the swampy shore area.

“Did you hear about the wasted guy passing out on the jumping pillow?” she asked, chomping savagely on the piece of gum in her mouth. I nodded.

“Let’s not talk about that when customers are wandering around, it isn’t exactly the kind of publicity we’re looking for,” I said, shaking my head.

Chuck was out front, sitting in his golf cart. As I walked toward him, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Hey Travis!”

I turned and saw Brady Sullivan walking up. He was wearing a green Medina Lacrosse t-shirt and black gym shorts.

“Hey, Mr. Sullivan.”

“What’s new?”

“We’re waiting on a delivery. I bought some large chains to make a fence along the east shore.”

“Cool. That will look good. When will that be done?”

“Hopefully some time this season.”

I sighed and looked over at Chuck. He was slouched down in the seat and looked like he was about to fall asleep in his golf cart.

“Or next.”

“Can’t wait to see it. I need to settle up my electricity bill and then get back to work, talk to you later,” he said and went into the office.

I heard the squeal of semi brakes and knew it was probably the delivery truck coming up Nickle Drive.

## Sam 1

7:30 p.m.

**M**y shift ended at the bowling alley later than I expected and I wasn't going to get overtime for going over eight hours. Big picture, my career with Randy wasn't a career where I punched a time clock and claimed overtime. I couldn't complain about the bowling alley pay because the side jobs Randy tossed my way more than made up for it.

I was hoping to have a few minutes to relax and get my mind right for the job after work, but I needed to get moving if I was going to get it done tonight. Going out the back door, I unlocked my black Chevy Suburban with the fob. Pulling out onto Columbus Road, I headed to the causeway that connected the mainland to the amusement park.

The causeway was manmade, built for traffic to cross from the shore of Sandusky to Gravity Junction. As you drove along, the open water of Lake Erie was to the left and a smaller cove was to the right. The cove was created by the construction of the causeway, with a small canal letting boats in and out beneath the road.

The traffic wasn't as bad as I figured. Earlier it rained for a few minutes and that might have scared off some of the people. The causeway was a five-lane road with traffic managed by using orange cones to assign the direction of the lane. Three lanes were going in and two going out. When it opened, four lanes were going in, and after it closed, four lanes went out.

The west side of the park became visible, with the big roller coasters seeming to rise out of the water. As the causeway veered to the right, the east side was visible. More steel rides. The Cloud Ride, a cable car ride going north and south, was dead center.

I stayed in the left lane and showed my park pass as I pulled up to the booth. Otherwise, it would cost a ridiculous twenty dollars to park. Randy bought me a season pass that included parking because I did a lot of business in and around the park. I couldn't remember the last time I used my pass to go on a roller coaster ride. That wasn't my preferred type of entertainment.

The main parking lot was directly ahead and appeared to be about half full. After pulling past the booth, I drove down a street going east-west that bordered the lot.

I took a left and then turned right onto a street heading north. The main parking lot was to my right and a runoff parking lot to the left. As I pulled even with the first roller coaster, I took a left into an area that had restaurants, a dog kennel, and the marina entrance. I parked in front of the marina, opened the back of the SUV, and took out a large black duffel bag.

I walked along to the dock, which had several rows of boat slips. Most of the boats were expensive, although there were a few junky ones that found their way there, probably rehab projects.

The marina wasn't cheap. The hobby of boating, in general, wasn't cheap, but that place was next level expensive.

I could afford a modest boat, but they took a lot of time and effort. Those types of toys ended up owning you. The cost of the boat was high enough, but then you added in fuel, insurance, supplies, transportation, repairs, storage fees, and all kinds of other unexpected costs.

I turned right when I reached the third dock offshoot, looking down at the wooden planks so I wouldn't trip. About halfway down, Randy's boat came into sight.

It was a gorgeous fifty-foot Azimut Flybridge, a half-million-dollar boat. The yacht had a full kitchen, two staterooms, two full bathrooms with showers, and a family room with a pullout sleeper. Decked out with state-of-the-art electronics, it included an advanced nav system, a weather station, cameras, fish finders, a digital antenna, and a sound system. It was powered by twin 669 horsepower inboard engines. *Morning Glory, Sandusky, Ohio* was stenciled in fancy lettering along the back.

*Morning Glory.* These boats all had stupid names. You probably couldn't buy a boat without promising to name it something stupid. That and the need to fly a stupid flag. Maybe you had to pledge to wear a stupid captain's hat, too.

A twelve-foot Saturn Dinghy Tender with a thirty-horsepower motor was tied to the back of the yacht. It was the inflatable type, but it was a premium dinghy and durable.

I was nervous about operating it at first. If I damaged something Randy would kill me. But I was pretty good at operating vehicles in general. I learned to crew an amphibious attack boat in the Corps and that was much more technical, plus it had a weapons system.

I unlocked the door to the bridge and went inside. It was perfectly clean inside, nothing was out of place. That was how Randy liked it and demanded it. At least with everything except the bowling alley. For some reason, he was never concerned with tidiness when it came to that place.

When we were out entertaining on the boat, some clients treated it badly. Drunk, sloppy people spilling things, smoking where they weren't supposed to, dropping ashes on the carpet.

People always treated other people's property like crap. Bowling alley customers were the worst. The things people did to the bathroom were disgusting. You wouldn't go into your own bathroom and throw paper towels in the toilet, punch the mirror, wipe a booger on the mirror, or scratch graffiti on the wall. Yet people did that all the fucking time at Glory Bowl.

Overall, clients weren't that bad on the boat. Most didn't intentionally wreck things and most of the damage was from carelessness. If it was a crew member that damaged something, I addressed that carelessness. If it happened twice, I addressed it with some wall-to-wall counseling. If it happened out on the lake, that crew member could end up swimming back to shore.

If it was damage from the client, I politely asked them to cover it. There was usually very little pushback, given the nature of what was happening out on the boat. Johns out on the water who refused to pay would get a gallery of pictures from a high definition camera in the main cabin that was very persuasive.

I opened a drawer by the console, pulled out a laminated checklist of pre-launch tasks, and got to work.

A man approached, walking up the dock. He was carrying a big red duffel bag. He walked over and stood in front of my dock, then walked to the back and looked at the back of the boat.

He was a big man, probably six foot three, maybe 250 pounds. I guessed he was in his late twenties or early thirties. He had a military look to him, black hair cut close, a guy who spent a fair amount of time in the gym. Tattoos were visible on his neck, forearms, and hands.

His face looked battle worn. His nose was flat, like maybe he used to box. His jaw was square and clean-shaven.

I was not happy to see him wearing his park uniform. I left instructions not to wear that. He wasn't starting off on the right foot with me.

We made eye contact and I waved him on board. I glanced at the white rectangular name tag over his pocket. "Alexander" in large black letters. Romania in smaller red letters. He opened the door and came in.

"Sam?" he asked, pronouncing my name as *Som* in a thick accent, holding out his hand for me to shake. I ignored it. He stood there awkwardly for a few seconds and then dropped his hand. Standing next to him, I figured he was a few inches taller.

"Didn't Viktor tell you to change clothes before coming here?" He stood there unmoving.

"No, he did not."

"Fucking Viktor. You are walking around with a name tag and then getting on this boat before we do a job. You don't see the problem with that?" I asked, shaking my head. He stood there silently with a blank expression on his face.

"I will know next time."

"Did you bring a change of clothes or do you want to do the job wearing a Gravity Junction uniform with a name tag?"

"I have clothes," he said quietly.

"Go change and we'll get started, unless you want to keep chewing the fat onshore," I said, looking back at the check sheet.

"Chewing fat?" he asked, looking puzzled.

“Go back there and change. Hopefully, you didn’t pack a shirt with your name on it,” I said impatiently, pointing to the stairs leading to the lower berth.

Alexander walked past me and down the stairs. When he came back up, he was wearing a jogging outfit. All black, including black running shoes. I was wearing a black tank top, running pants, and gray tennis shoes. This was a lot of black.

“Do you know how to crew a boat?” I asked. He stared at me blankly.

“Crew?” he asked.

“How to work on a boat?” I said. I turned the key and the engine roared to life, gurgling steadily in the water.

“No,” he said. I nodded.

“Just do what I say. Untie those two ropes from the posts and toss the ropes into the boat,” I said. He went out and started untying ropes.

Once I saw we were untied I backed out slowly. The engine hummed louder as we separated from the dock. After we were out several yards, I spun it around and went forward at a slow pace. I was careful to watch the wake through the marina area. People tended to complain about the slightest wave, even though we had the marina to ourselves.

I continued along until I was beyond the marina and opened it up a little. The engine hummed louder and a wake began to form. When I gave it some gas Alexander stumbled a little, and that made me smile. After I was out in the open, I turned it up even more, moving along at about thirty knots.

The sun was setting to the right. It would be dark in about a half-hour. I motioned for Alexander to come up to the bridge.

“Sit down, I’m going to brief you on what we’re going to do, Al,” I said. He sat down.

“It is Alexander,” he said.

“Do you expect me to blurt out four syllables every time I need your attention? My name is Samuel. *Sam-u-el*. Three syllables. But people just call me Sam. Neither one of us is royalty. Simplify your life, son,” I said in an irritated voice. Al didn’t react.

"We are paying a visit to a guy named Tom Polk. He has a beach house over at Torch Point. You ever been there?" I asked. He shook his head.

"We'll anchor about a half-mile west, about fifty yards from the shore. We will launch the dinghy and take that the rest of the way. Pulling in with this big monster would surely draw too much attention."

"Tom is a John who booked a date at a cabin a few Saturdays ago over at the campground. He overlooked the fact that he had to pay. For the second time. He enjoys the hookers but not the bill. Randy knows him and let it slide once, but not twice."

It was odd that Randy would let him have a second date at all since he didn't pay the first time. That was not the way he did business.

"I don't know why a rich guy wouldn't opt for the boat rather than those grimy cabins, maybe he liked to slum. Some do," I said.

"Slum?" Al asked.

"Never mind. We tried to get ahold of him, but this guy has been dodging us. We are going to visit him and persuade him to pay up." Al nodded.

"Polk is going to pay tonight. How we work that out with him is up to me. You don't do nothin' unless I tell you to. Got it?" I asked. Al continued to nod.

We moved along in silence for a while. Al stared out across the lake, taking in the scenery.

"How far is the target?" he asked.

"It should take us about forty-five minutes."

"Why take the boat? Why not drive?"

"A couple of reasons. One, Tom lives in a gated community. If we drive there we have to go in and out past security. On a boat, I can pull up and tie off on the community dock. Two, it is hard to identify a dinghy unless you are right next to it. The odds of someone identifying a small boat in the dark are low," I said. He nodded.

"Just so you know, I'm the only one carrying a piece. Your job is to look scary and to help me out if things go sideways," I said.

"I can handle weapons," he said.

"You former military?" I asked. He nodded.

"*Operații Speciale* in the Romanian Army," he said.

"I don't know what the fuck that is," I said, although it sounded something like "special" and so probably special forces.

"Were you military?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm a Marine," I said. He nodded again.

The sun had almost set as we approached the Torch Point Bay. There were a lot of lights I could see and a few campfires. It wasn't quite as dark as I'd hoped, but it was dark enough. There wasn't any boat traffic, the rain earlier had kept most boaters off the lake.

We pulled closer to shore, which was an undeveloped stretch of woods. I cut the engine and dropped anchor.

I went below and found my gym bag. I took out my Glock 23 and put it in my pocket. I would rather wear a holster, but I didn't want to be obvious and didn't expect to have to pull it. Tom Polk wasn't going to resist. Even if he did, I wouldn't need a gun to handle him, especially with Al as a backup.

I had met Polk at the bowling alley when he went there to chat with Randy about arranging a date. He was in his late fifties and overweight, with thick graying hair. He reminded me of Judge Smails from the movie *Caddy Shack*, played by Ted Knight. Polk was deeply tanned from hours on the golf course all summer. I forgot exactly what he did for a living, beyond the fact that he owned several businesses in Toledo.

This type of guy never did well with the rough stuff. I was not supposed to get too physical with him, per Randy. Nothing to the face. But I was authorized to send him a message.

There was no excuse for him not to settle his bills. This guy tipped his caddy more in a week than what he owed Randy. This was disrespect.

I was sure that there were a lot of times Polk got away without paying for shit. Rich pricks always got away with shit because they kept lawyers on speed dial. They paid late or not at all, and when they got cornered, they delayed and obstructed. A lot of times they ended up paying in the end, but they made the people they owed run an expensive gauntlet.

I scanned the bridge to see if I was forgetting anything and located a medium-sized waterproof black tote in the corner. Damn, I almost forgot that. I carried it out and loaded it onto the dinghy. I took one last look around the yacht. We untied and headed east.

About fifty yards away from the docks, I idled the motor. I leaned forward and opened the tote. Inside was something that looked like a stereo component with a small green digital display. I flicked it on, and the display blinked a few times and showed “ready”. I pushed the red button and the little triangle Wi-Fi light signal blinked and then a red circle with a line through it appeared on top of it. Wi-Fi would be jammed within a few hundred yards. Tom’s cameras were dead in the water.

Data found out that Tom’s security system was not hardwired, but was connected through a wireless router. We tested the jammer at the campground the week before and it worked perfectly. I put it in the front seat of the SUV during the test and kept moving it farther and farther away from the router, to almost one hundred yards before a very weak signal started streaming.

Since it would knock out most of the neighborhood, Data was worried about what the neighbors would do when it was cut off. Since Wi-Fi failed all the time and we wouldn’t be there long, we decided to risk it. If the cable company was called we would be long gone by the time they sent someone out to look into it.

Finding the battery-powered spotlight in my bag, I flipped it on, carefully pointing it at the water surface. Sweeping it across the docks, I was careful not to light up any of the houses. A fifteen million candlelight beam would draw attention. I found an empty guest slip and carefully steered the dinghy in.

Me and Al climbed out of the boat and crossed the docks. The docks were about half full, with random boats here and there. We walked toward Polk’s house at a steady pace, trying not to move too fast and draw attention. Just seeing us in that neighborhood would draw attention. Two big gorillas dressed in black would stick out like sore thumbs.

We walked up Standard Street and I started counting houses. Tom's was the third house on the right. I double-checked the house number on my phone and it was right. There was a short driveway up to a pricey two-story beach house with a lot of brick and stone.

There was a black BMW M3 in front of the garage, which was closed. There were lights on in the front window and the upstairs room to the left. I walked up to the porch and knocked, with Al standing behind me on the sidewalk leading up to the porch.

There was no answer. I knocked again. I heard movement behind the door and then it opened. An attractive blond woman appeared, in her late thirties, wearing a tank top, gym shorts, and short white socks. Tom's trophy wife. He probably threw the first wife away years ago when she was about the age of this woman, so her days as the current Mrs. Polk were probably numbered.

"Hello there. Is Tom around?"

I knew Tom was around. Data patched into the camera feed, which was stored on a cloud, and confirmed his car was there before we left. If he saw him leave, he would have shot me a text and we would have aborted.

"Yes. Whom may I tell him is visiting?" she asked nervously, looking us both over.

"Sam," I replied.

"And he is?" she asked, nodding to Al.

"Sam's friend," I said, smiling. She stood there for a minute. Tom came up behind her. He was wearing a blue Toledo Rockets baseball cap, blue swim trunks, a white polo shirt, and flip-flops.

"Hey Sam!" he said with excitement, as if we were old drinking buddies. He stepped past his wife and shook my hand. He nodded at Al, who nodded back.

"Do you have a minute to chat, Tom?" I asked politely. Tom stared down at his feet for a moment. His wife walked further into the house but did not move out of sight.

"I was doing a little work for the company before the damn Wi-Fi cut out," he said, not looking up.

"It will just take a minute. Maybe we could go out back by your pool house?" I asked, still smiling. Tom stood there, shrugged, and then nodded.

“Go ahead and go around by the garage, I will meet you back there,” he sighed, stepping back and closing the door.

I glanced over at Al, who was stone-faced. I should have cut through the house with him to the back door, this gave Tom a chance to pull something. But it was what it was, so I walked around the garage to the backyard, with Al close behind me.

His backyard was perfect. There was no doubt he had a landscaper; the trees, flowers, and bushes were straight out of a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. We walked along a lighted stone path past an in-ground pool to a covered bar area. There were several stools at the bar and Al took one.

“Need a drink?” I asked. Al shook his head. I took down the bottle of Woodford Reserve, found a rocks glass, and filled it about a third of the way.

I searched carefully behind the bar for weapons and didn’t see any. Looking through the cupboards, I found nothing there, either. I came back around and sat down one stool over from Al. A few minutes later Tom came out.

“Helped yourself to the bar, I see,” he said, irritated.

“You ought to know about helping yourself,” I said flatly. He glared at me for a minute before looking down.

Tom walked around behind the bar. When he turned his back, I didn’t see the bulge of a gun at his waistline. I was glad I was able to sweep the bar area for weapons before he came out, it allowed me to relax a little. But not too much.

He took down a bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin. Opening the cupboard, he took out a fancy crystal glass. He pulled out a bottle of tonic water from the fridge and made a very strong drink. A glass of gin on the rocks with a splash of tonic. He gulped down half of it. His face was already red from drinking earlier, I assumed.

“Do I need to explain to you why we’re here?”

I took a sip of my drink. I didn’t want to get buzzed, I just wanted the taste of bourbon in my mouth. The burning feeling as it washed past my throat and into my stomach kept me alert.

“No,” he replied, standing against the bar with his belly halfway lapping above it.

“Good. You got the money on you?”

"I don't owe Randy any money," he said, taking a drink that emptied his glass. He stared at me with a frown. "I didn't get what I paid for."

"You reserved two dates in a cabin and you stayed two nights," I said.

"We didn't do what I paid to do," he replied, looking around nervously. "Did you do something to my Wi-Fi? None of my cameras are operating."

He nodded to the camera above the bar. I ignored the question.

"The girls said they did what they were supposed to do. These girls are Slavic peasant girls, if you want some around the world kink you need to go out to Vegas or go Asian or something. You knew what you were getting the first time and yet you came back for more. Pay up."

Tom made himself another drink. He glanced up at his house to make sure the missus wasn't snooping.

"Or what?"

"Or a lot of things. I can bring Mrs. Polk into the conversation. Or I can give the signal to Al here and he can start off by breaking a few of your ribs. How do you think your golf swing is gonna fare with broken ribs?" I asked, finishing my drink. Polk snuck a nervous glance at Al.

"How much?" he said after a pause.

"Fifteen hundred," I said. He let out a laugh.

"No way, I agreed to five hundred dollars a night," he said in disbelief.

"How much do you think our time is worth, Mr. Polk? For us to take a fuckin' field trip to Polk Manor out here and waste our time going back and forth about a debt you know that you owe," I said, getting angry. "Keep wasting my time and it goes up to two thousand. Randy gave me permission to negotiate."

"Negotiate? You are robbing me!" he said angrily.

"If I was robbing you, you'd know it. Everyone in that house would know it," I said, nodding to the house. This hushed Polk, who was about to come back with another comment and stopped short.

"I don't have that kind of money in the house," Tom finally said.

"You have a stash here. You have a safe in the house. You have twenty minutes to get fifteen hundred dollars in my hands or we start considering Plan B." Polk started to say something, but I interrupted.

"You are on the clock, sir, tick-fucking-tock," I said angrily. Tom nodded, set his glass down, and walked back up to the house.

"Was it good to let him go alone?" Al asked, leaning against the bar.

"Maybe not. But if he comes out here and raises hell he will risk his wife hearing the whole thing. She probably knows about his shenanigans, but having details of it rubbed in her face would be bad for him."

"Shenanigans?"

"Polk's banging other women, paying prostitutes, whatever other shit he is involved in."

Fifteen minutes later he came out with a small blue backpack. I stood up as he came over. He walked over and pushed it harshly into my hands.

"Is it all here?" I asked as I handed the backpack to Al.

"You don't trust me?" he asked angrily, folding his arms. Al pulled out bills and was counting them out on the bar. The disabled camera also served the purpose of concealing Mr. Polk's cash payoff from his nosy wife, who would have definitely been in the house watching the feed. After a few minutes, he nodded.

"*Al o mie cincii sutelea*, one thousand five hundred," he said gruffly. Polk sneered at him.

"So Al has a voice." Al put the money back in the backpack and zipped it up.

I walked up to Tom and punched him very hard in his swollen stomach. His gut was harder than I expected. My knuckles grazed the bottom of his rib cage, but I didn't think I broke anything. The wind shot out of him, and he fell down to his hands and knees. He grabbed his stomach, rolled over on his side, and started gasping.

“Forget we were here and forget about doing any more business with Randy. No one has time to waste collecting from fucking deadbeats.”

I considered kicking him in the stomach but decided not to. Nodding at Al, we started walking back to the dock. I thought I heard Tom throwing up as we made it to the street.

## Chris 3

10:00 p.m.

**T**here was a cool breeze, which made for a great night to sit by the fire. Candy still wasn't talking to me, so I was sitting out alone. I was drinking warm Pepsi out of a plastic cup. No fucking way was she going to catch me drinking or smoking anything tonight.

It had been one of the longest days of my life. I must have puked five times. The crew found that shit hilarious, but my foreman Vince didn't. I didn't think I would have any more chances if he caught me slacking off, I needed to get my shit together or else find another summer gig.

I didn't want to find another summer gig. The work wasn't that bad, the crew wasn't that bad, and I didn't mind living at the campground. Although, shit, how many people had seen me passed out on the jumping pillow that morning? It was early when it happened, so maybe only a handful.

I looked down into my cup and wished there was something strong to flavor it with. My hangover was gone, and a stiff drink sounded good.

I heard the horn blasting as the train approached, lighting up the east side of the campground. Continuing to stare down into my cup of Pepsi, I thought I could see small ripples in it as the train rumbled loudly past.

I tossed another log on the fire. I was dead tired. Surprisingly, sleeping outdoors on a deflated rubber jumping pillow all night was not very restful. But there was the situation with Candy's anger and I didn't want to go inside the camper yet. Waiting until she was asleep seemed to be a better strategy than going in and catching shit from her.

She ordered Chinese takeout for dinner but forgot to ask me if I wanted something. I bought a stale bologna and cheese sandwich and chips from the campground snack bar. The bitch paid for her food with my credit card, but I let it go.

That could have been my formal mantra in life. *I let it go.* I let everything go. I was a 36-year-old child living in a broken-down RV, working for peanuts, and living with a woman who contributed nothing. Hardly the American fucking dream.

A wave of depression jolted me. My stomach burned, that ulcer I thought had disappeared hadn't gone anywhere.

I needed to escape and start again fresh somewhere. The reality was that no matter where I escaped to, I would still be there, with my dysfunction and bad habits.

The door opened on my camper. Candy came out, carrying a blanket and a sweatshirt. She tossed them on the picnic table.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"It's going to get chilly out here tonight. Make sure you set your phone alarm, in case the sun doesn't wake you up," she said flatly. She walked back into the camper, slammed the door, and I heard it lock. At least she was talking to me.

I needed to take a piss. I walked over to the shower house and entered through the north door. Standing in front of the mirror was the black guy from across the street who found me passed out that morning. He nodded at me when I walked in. I resisted the urge to do an about-face and sprint out the door in embarrassment.

"You're looking better," he said as he pulled a few paper towels from the dispenser and began drying his hands. I nodded and walked over to the urinal. The man lingered.

"I'm Mike. I own the Airstream camper over at 65. I would shake your hand but..." he said, motioning to me and my current state of taking a whiz.

"Hey Mike," I said as I zipped up. "I'm Chris. Thanks for your help this morning."

Mike nodded. I walked over and washed my hands.

"No problem. You scared me a little this morning. Glad you're okay."

Mike turned and left. I followed behind him and out to the street.

"Yeah, it was a rough night. My girlfriend...isn't very understanding," I said softly.

"Yeah, that kind of shit will definitely land you in the doghouse. But she'll get over it."

"I'm in for a long night. She sorta locked me out," I said, putting my hands in my pockets.

"Sucks. I will be out by my fire for a while, I typically go late. You are more than welcome to hang out. If you want to crash, I could set a bunk up for you in my RV," he said. I nodded at him.

"I appreciate that, but if she came out and I was gone..." I said, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

"You can come over and have a drink with me. Whatever you want, it doesn't have to be alcohol if that..." he trailed off.

"No, no, I'm...I'm good. I don't have a problem. I just got carried away last night. Drank way more than I should. But that is not an everyday thing," I said, wondering if I sounded convincing. The guy who pulled me out of a puke-drenched stupor in a kiddy area was probably skeptical. He nodded.

"Been there," was all he said.

"I may try to rest for a little while. If I get antsy, I will drop by."

## Brady 4

11:30 p.m.

**M**y legs were sore, but it was a good sore. I didn't have any knee or ankle pain, it was the sort of muscle soreness expected from running when I hadn't run in a while.

I had considered staying sober that evening but then thought better of it. Since I ran four miles that morning, I rationalized that I deserved it. Treat myself.

"Treat yourself" was such a ridiculous mantra, like I was a trained dog that had just done a trick and was waiting for a biscuit as a reward. Either I had a drink or I didn't, what I deserved was irrelevant.

I pulled out the bottle of margarita mix and made a drink. I had spent most of my adult life avoiding the sugary "girl drinks", but margaritas were becoming a nightly thing during my exile at the campground. In the military, I had selected the drinks that fit an alpha male image and then acquired the taste for them. Whiskey, bourbon, Jägermeister, Guinness, etc. Over the course of years and countless gallons consumed, these abrasive drinks began to be tolerable, and then actually started tasting good.

Margaritas weren't completely lame because of the tequila, but a daiquiri, piña colada, or similarly fruity cocktail would be hard to justify. But I wouldn't need to justify it unless I got caught drinking one by someone who would judge me. Red Solo cups revealed no contents and thus told no tales, at least from a distance.

The margarita I was drinking was damn near toxic with tequila. I bought a fifth of Patrón earlier that evening while grocery shopping and had put a decent dent in it.

After a few drinks, the wheels in my head started slowing. *Thank God.* I negotiated with Marcy earlier to get the kids out at the campground for the weekend. It had been a few weeks since I had seen them, and it was weighing heavily on me. I managed to get a phone call or Facetime with them several times throughout the week, but that was no substitute for their presence.

The campground was lively. The people over at the gazebo were out drinking, with their packs of kids running and pedaling up and down the street. Small groups of people walked by with drinks. Occasionally, other work carts and golf carts rolled past.

I hadn't seen the Glory Bowl biker yet. I wondered if he had recognized me as a Sandusky Shores camper with an RV on the same street as his. He probably didn't.

I was excited about having the kids visit the campground for a few days. It would mean everything. Living in the camper away from them was rough.

There was a weird dichotomy that I supposed every father experienced. Loving your family and at the same time wanting to be away from them. The daily grind of raising kids made me crave peace and solitude, to get away from the bickering, the neediness, the constant questions posed, and the relentless need to be engaged. But as soon as they were out of my presence for a short time, I felt a deep void in my life and couldn't wait to be with them again.

There were times when I believed that my campground living situation was optimal for me. That I was meant for minimalism, that this RV and its contents were all I needed. If I never had kids, I could contentedly live that lifestyle indefinitely.

But I could also see the danger in it. Out here, I was not accountable, and with that came the danger of excessive drinking. People who weekend camped were often putting away a lot of alcohol because that was what you did while camping, along with building fires and roasting s'mores. That culture was meant to be sampled in small doses during the course of a temporary stay, not continuously throughout an entire season.

It was a perspective born of battle scars from years of being a husband and father. The pre-family version of myself would have found the current situation sad and bizarre.

I took another swig of my drink and put another log on the fire. Checking my watch, it was a little after 2300 hours. A motorcycle rumbled in the distance and was getting louder as it rolled along Starling.

There were still kids out, I saw them in the headlight of the motorcycle as it crept along. As it approached, I saw that another motorcycle was a few feet behind the first.

It was the Eastern European guy in front, followed by the guy with the GLORYB plate from the gated community. About twenty feet behind them was a black Suburban. I watched as the Eastern European parked his bike in his lot at 15 and the other vehicles pulled up to the camper at site 21.

## Mike 4

11:15 p.m.

It was clear that Chris had fully recovered from his previous night's drinking debacle. The alcohol he had consumed plus whatever other substances he was on last night. Chris put away four bourbons neat in about thirty minutes and was happily glassy-eyed. I had consumed one and was starting on number two.

As uneasy as his drinking was making me, it would be easier to return his papers if he got hammered. If he passed out, I could tuck them into his pocket.

But I didn't want him to pass out on my lot. He was a liability. And I didn't want to get on the radar of that crazy girlfriend of his.

In the brief amount of time we hung out I got to learn a little more about him. I was surprised to hear that he was an Air Force vet in a demanding profession. He could also fly planes. What the hell was he doing living in a trashy RV and digging ditches?

Then again, I figured he was in his current situation because of substance abuse. It was a damn shame. You could tell the kid was bright, but had issues with self-inflicted wounds. I could also read the deep depression in him that he revealed with his words and mannerisms. There were enough markers for me to consider him a suicide risk. I knew a lot of combat vets who suffered from PTSD, and I had attended an unsettling amount of funerals over the years.

Chuck rolled up on his golf cart playing some country song I never heard of. I guess I had lost touch with new hillbilly music.

Chuck slowed down, then looped around and parked in the empty lot next to mine. He stepped out cautiously, as if he was concerned about falling, and walked over to us. He carried a big stainless steel thermos in his hand.

"Good evening, gents," he said, his voice raspy, a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

I nodded. Chris waved.

I pointed toward a folded chair leaning against the front of the camper. Chuck set down his thermos, unfolded the chair, and brought it near the fire. He grabbed the thermos and walked over to the chair. In attempting to sit down he fell back clumsily and dropped himself hard into the chair, nearly toppling over, barely saving himself with his non-thermos hand.

“Whoa, coming in hot!” he laughed, picking up his thermos and taking a drink. “I thought you’d be in the rack early tonight, Chris.”

Chuck took a drink from his thermos. Chris forced a smile. Chuck put the thermos between his legs and leaned back.

“Well, I’ve been sort of evicted for the night,” he said, drinking from his cup. While I admired his honesty, I wouldn’t have been so forthcoming. Publicizing domestic discord was seldom productive.

“Damn, doesn’t that camper belong to you?” he asked. I was sure he knew that it did.

“Yeah. I fucked up, so I guess I can spend a night in the doghouse,” Chris said, shrugging, staring into the fire.

“You need a place to stay?” Chuck asked.

“I don’t know.” Chris stared up at the sky. “It doesn’t look like rain. I may just sleep under the stars.”

Chuck studied him for a few seconds and took another drink. He joined Chris in staring up at the sky. They both appeared to be deep in thought.

“I tell you what, let me take a look. I may have a cabin I can let you use for the night,” Chuck said.

“Don’t go through any trouble, Chuck,” Chris said. Chuck smiled.

“Well, I’m making the rounds, boys. I’ll see you later,” he said, struggling out of his chair. He flicked a cigarette butt at the fire and missed. He walked past it to the golf cart.

I got up and stomped it out. Chuck looked at me and nodded. I turned around and walked back to my chair. As he sped off, I saw him lifting his phone to his ear.

## Chuck 5

11:30 p.m.

**H**ey Randy," I said as I put the phone up to my ear.  
"Yeah," Randy said coolly.  
"What is your twenty?" I asked. There was a pause.  
"Taj," he said.  
"You have a minute?" I asked.  
"Roger," he said, slightly garbled.

I hung up and drove toward the Taj, taking another deep drink of vodka and tonic. I saw a campfire at their site as I rounded the corner. Sam's SUV was there. That wasn't what I wanted to see. I parked to the side of his SUV and walked over to the fire.

Randy, Sam, and Viktor were by the fire, drinks in hand. They stopped talkin' as I walked up.

"Evening, gents," I said as I walked up.

"What do you need, Chuck?" Randy asked. He was a bit short with me, which make me nervous. I could never read him, and I hated that.

"Maybe we should chat in the camper?" I asked. Randy glared at me. Sam looked annoyed. But he always looked annoyed.

"Okay," he said, gettin' up. We walked in together. He closed and locked the door.

"This place has been swept," Randy said, sitting down. I sat across from him. He pulled the wand out from a drawer and began sweepin' it over me.

"Chris Randolph is in the doghouse. His old lady locked him out for the night. He needs somewhere to stay. Any girls around?" Randy took this in, thinkin' about it.

"I think so. Let's check with Viktor."

"Okay. I just need to get a cabin number and convince him to go party there. He is hittin' it hard again tonight, it won't take much effort."

## Brady 5

11:45 p.m.

I watched from my patio table as Chuck walked out of the RV and took off in his golf cart. That guy stayed busy late into the night. Was he still on the clock? He waved at me as he went by, the cherry from the cigarette in his mouth glowing.

I needed to be online no later than 0730 tomorrow. Although I lost count of my drinks, I hadn't overdone it. I could have one more and then pull the plug.

There was a tightness in my legs from running. I stood up and stretched. Refreshing my drink, I went back outside. A short walk sounded good. I locked up the RV and started north.

There were a few figures around the campfire at 21 where Chuck just was, maybe three adults. I was on the opposite side of the street and continued past. I rounded the corner and turned right on Sparrow.

There was a campfire ahead at the Airstream site. As I approached, I saw that there were two men there. I recognized one as Chris.

"Hey Brady!" I heard a voice yell, thick with alcohol. I stopped and turned toward the fire. Chris waved me over.

"Hey Chris," I said, walking over.

"Hey!" he said again. The other man was getting to his feet. "Hey Brady, this is..."

"Mike," he said, stepping forward to shake my hand. We shook hands and he stepped back, remaining standing in front of his chair.

Mike was a familiar face, mostly because there were very few black men camping. A lot of mixed kids, but mostly with their white moms and grandparents.

"Nice to meet you," I said, standing there awkwardly. "Just out for a walk, it is a nice night."

"Absolutely," Mike said. "Want to pull up a chair?"

I was torn because I was getting tired. But I hadn't socialized with anyone other than Chuck in a few days. Isolation was comfortable for me, but perhaps not *absolute isolation*. I nodded and Mike pointed toward an empty chair by the fire.

"So what's going on in the neighborhood tonight?" I asked, waving off a cloud of campfire smoke that happened to blow right into my face. I adjusted my chair over about a foot to avoid it.

"Nuthin," Chris said. "I'm camping tonight."

"Camping? Aren't we all camping tonight?" I asked, smiling.

"I'm doing some real camping, under the stars," Chris laughed, gulping something out of a plastic cup. "What time do you work tomorrow?"

"I start around 7:00 or 7:30. How come, you need a ride somewhere?" I asked.

"Nah, I don't want to oversleep. If you remember can you walk out and check on me?" he asked.

"Where are you going to be?" I asked.

"In front of my camper," he said, laughing. I laughed too, without knowing why that was funny.

"Okay, forgive me if this is a stupid question, but why not sleep inside?"

Chris laughed. Mike put another log on the fire.

"I'm in the doghouse. Candy locked me out," he said.

"Out of your own camper?"

"Out of my own camper," he said, incredulously.

"Damn," was all I could think to say. I took a drink.

"I offered to let him stay here, but he wouldn't have it," Mike said, shrugging.

I considered offering him the fold-out bed in my RV, but decided against it. I didn't want him there and felt guilty about declining to extend an invitation. Chris was pretty drunk, and I didn't want to deal with him in the morning when I was trying to set up for work.

"If you won't want to stay inside one of our campers you can borrow my tent," I offered.

"Dude, I'm fine. The bugs ain't bad. It ain't supposed to rain. I'm good," he said, polishing off his drink. He stared down into it to make sure it was empty. He looked up expectantly at Mike.

"Need a refill?" he asked flatly. Chris nodded as Mike took his cup.

"So how long does your sentence to the doghouse usually last," I said, smiling at him. He smiled back.

"Should be okay tomorrow. After work she should be fully thawed out," he said as Mike came out and returned his cup.

Headlights approached from the north. I didn't hear a car engine, so I knew it was a golf cart. Chuck pulled past the camper and into the empty site. He got out, taking a drag from his cigarette.

"Hey Brady, I didn't know you wandered over here," he said. I nodded at him.

"Good news, Chris! I can sneak you into an empty cabin," Chuck said, smiling. Chris stared at him blankly.

"Dude, I'm okay..." he trailed off, taking a drink. Chuck walked up and stood next to him for a moment.

"At least ride over there with me and take a look," Chuck said, staring into the fire.

"I know what they look like," Chris replied. Chuck motioned for him to come over and started walking back to the golf cart.

"Come chat with me for a minute, Chris," Chuck said from the side of his golf cart.

Chris didn't move for a moment, then walked over. Chuck spoke softly to him, a contrast from his usual loud voice. Chris appeared to be thinking about it, then nodded. He went around and got into the passenger side. Both waved as they rode off.

I glanced down into my cup, then finished the last swig of it. There was an awkward moment of silence between Mike and me.

"So it looks like Chuck made him an offer he couldn't refuse," I joked. Mike chuckled, taking a drink. "So how long are you staying at Sandusky Shores?"

"I don't know yet, I'm paying by the week."

"Traveling the country?"

"Parts of it. For the past few years I've been going back and forth, north and south during the different seasons. I need to get out of my rut and head out west. Need a drink?" he asked, standing up. I definitely didn't need another.

"Sure, what are you drinking?"

"Jim Beam."

"Straight?"

"Yup. I have ice," he said. I nodded.

Drinking more would probably be a mistake. But sometimes when I got started drinking, I struggled to find the kill switch.

A moment later he returned with a red plastic cup and handed it to me. I nodded and took a swig. The cubes slid up and hit my lips. The burning sensation of the bourbon going down almost caused me to choke, but I managed not to.

"So you stay out here all summer?" Mike asked.

"It is looking that way," I said, instantly regretting the odd answer. I should have just said "yes". Mike didn't respond.

"We are seasonal, here on and off throughout the summer. My kids will be up this weekend," I said. I realized that my answers were painting a picture for him if he was even slightly astute.

"You friends with a lot of other campers out here?" he asked, sipping his bourbon.

"Not really. I know some of the staff like Chuck, and my neighbor Chris, but otherwise we keep to ourselves," I replied, staring into the fire, which was dying down, the orange embers glowing brightly. Mike got up and threw on another log.

"So what do you suppose convinced Chris to go stay in a cabin instead of at one of our places?" Mike asked. I shrugged. "Are you and Chris tight?"

"No. We've talked a few times. He seems okay," I replied.

"I found him passed out this morning on the jumping pillow," Mike said, taking a drink. I didn't reply. After a moment, I nodded. "Threw up all over, lucky he didn't die."

"You found him?" I asked.

"Yeah. My impression was that he was on something more potent than alcohol," Mike said.

He got out of his chair and walked to the edge of the campsite, looking around as if he was trying to determine if someone was listening. I looked at my watch, it was after midnight. Mike came back and sat down.

"It's possible," I replied, not knowing how else to respond.

"So I figure Chuck is setting him up in that cabin to bring him drugs," Mike said.

"Why would he do that?" I asked.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. I wish I knew which cabin they were going to," he said.

"Was Chuck around this morning when you found Chris?" I asked.

"He was one of the employees who came over to handle it."

"Mind if I ask you a personal question?" I asked, and then instantly regretted it. The alcohol had me running my mouth. He shrugged.

"Are you law enforcement?"

"Nah," he said.

"Former military?" I asked.

"Yeah, retired Army," he said. I nodded.

"I did three years back in my youth," I said, taking a drink.

"I know," Mike said.

"Really? I didn't think I still gave off that vibe. I've been out for a long time," I said, laughing.

Mike smiled and didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, he got out of his chair and went inside the camper. He came back with a flashlight and a handful of papers.

"I could have guessed, I have seen you jogging around here like you've been doing it for a while. But that wouldn't have confirmed anything, civilians run all the time. This is what led me to believe you were in the Army from 1989 through 1992," he said, handing the flashlight and papers over.

My breathing hitched for a moment. How did he know what years I was in?

I took the sheets and shined the flashlight on them. As I leafed through them, I felt a small sense of dread.

"Where did you get this at?" I asked, trying to sound calm.

Anger was starting to build inside. Was this some sort of identity theft scam? Did he steal data from my laptop through a Wi-Fi hack?

“Relax, the black man didn’t steal your identity. I barely know how to turn on a computer. These papers were lying around Chris when he was passed out. I collected them, and when I saw they didn’t have Chris’s name on them, I pocketed them

I sat staring at the papers for a long moment. Then I turned off the flashlight, reaching over to hand it back to him. Why would Chris have these papers with my information? Was he hacking me?

I sat there for a moment trying to reason through this despite the high tequila and bourbon content in my blood. The angry side of me wanted to ambush Chris the next time I saw him and get some answers. This was a complication that I didn’t need on top of everything else going on in my life.

“I’m gonna hang on to these,” I said. Mike nodded slowly.

“By all means. That is your information.” Mike said, standing up and going into the camper. He came out with the originals. I took them and added them to the stack.

“Mind if I ask how you are going to handle this?” he asked, staring into the fire.

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out,” I replied, finishing my drink.



# **Chapter 3**

**Thursday, June 18<sup>th</sup>**



## Data 3

12:50 a.m.

I pedaled toward the campground, trying to decide how I would approach the problem. I had some valuable information to deliver, but I also potentially needed to do some damage control. What that entailed I had no idea; it could range from pretending that the data loss didn't happen to fully admitting that it happened and throwing myself at Randy's mercy.

I reviewed the video earlier. Unfortunately, parts of the incident happened out of the range of the camera that covered the security booth. I had to make it a priority to see Chris. Patrick swore he didn't take them, so Chris was the only other person who could have taken those papers that night.

I pulled up along the security gate and Patrick stepped out. He crossed his arms and started laughing. I remembered that I was wearing my helmet.

"Hey, Evil Knievel is here! Safety first on that badass machine, Data!" he said. Wasted again. I ignored him, looped around the booth, and cycled up Starling.

I pedaled up to the Taj, carefully maneuvering over the speed bump in front of the gazebo. Sam's SUV was parked in front, along with Randy's motorcycle. A feeling of dread set in knowing I would be dealing with Sam. That guy had been hostile toward me since day one for no apparent reason. I supposed he felt threatened, as he was most certainly Randy's right-hand man, and I was getting a lot of important assignments.

The three were seated around the campfire and were staring at me as I pulled up. I parked my bike near the camper, taking off my helmet and hanging it on the handlebars by the straps. I heard the train approaching from the west as I walked over to the fire.

"Data!" Randy said. He was leaning back in his chair with a cup in his hand. Viktor just stared at me. Sam smirked as he stoked the fire with a stick.

"Sir," I said, nodding at Randy. Randy stood up and stretched.

“Let’s go on inside and chat,” he said, walking up the stairs. The other two stood up and walked in behind him. I was the last one in.

Once in, I closed and locked the door behind me. The noise from the train passing was barely audible from within the trailer.

Randy sat in his usual chair at the table, with his back to the north side of the trailer. Sam was at the fridge, getting a beer. He turned around and nodded at Randy. Randy shook his head and gestured to the cupboard. Sam took out the bottle of Woodford Reserve and poured it into a plastic cup.

“Get yourself what you want, Viktor,” Randy said, as Sam walked over and handed him his drink. Viktor took his cup to the cupboard and withdrew a bottle of vodka, filled his cup, and sat at the table. “Anything for you, Henry?”

“No thank you, sir. Do we need to sweep the trailer?” I asked.

“Chuck got it earlier. Sam, can you check Data here?” Randy asked. Sam nodded and walked over to me. I assumed the position with my hands on the counter. He wanded me then searched me roughly like he always did.

“You look a little red in the face, why don’t you grab a water?” Randy said.

I walked over and took a bottled water out of the fridge. I sat down and took a long drink.

“So what do you have on Mr. Sullivan?” Randy asked.

“Well, Brady O. Sullivan is employed by the federal government, working at the Payroll Accounting and Finance agency, commonly referenced as PAF. He is a GS-13, which is a mid-level ranking,” I said.

“How much does that pay a year?” Randy asked.

“He is at step six, so about \$105k,” I replied.

“How many years has he been there?” he asked.

“Eleven years.”

“So what does he do there?”

“He is a program analyst. From what I can gather, he works on finance projects. Like on pay systems, I think. He has a Top-Secret security clearance. That kind of clearance in that agency means it is very likely that he has access to military personnel and pay records,” I said.

“Anything else of interest in his employment records?” Randy asked.

“He has worked in a factory and served a few years in the military,” I said.

“Which branch?” Sam asked.

“Army. Three years,” I replied. Sam showed no reaction. I was sure that if Sullivan was a Marine that Sam would have been so much more impressed.

“What did he do in the Army?” Sam asked. “Any lethal skill sets?”

“He was intelligence. A few schools, but he wasn’t Special Forces or anything like that. Jumped out of planes, for what that’s worth,” I said.

“Any judicial records?” Randy asked.

“No. A few traffic citations, but nothing major. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have the high clearance. It has to be renewed every five years and he has remained clean,” I replied.

“So we have a Boy Scout in the neighborhood. How do his finances look?” Sam asked. Randy glared at him, as though he was growing weary of Sam asking the questions.

“Not bad. He has a mortgage on a 250k house, a 20k home equity loan, a 25k camper loan, two vehicle leases, and about 10k in credit card debt. Pretty average looking stuff, there. His wife works. I think they need that second income,” I said.

“How much does she make?” Randy asked.

“About 60k,” I said.

“Other relevant facts?” asked Randy.

“Two kids, a boy and a girl, ages 10 and 8. Seem to be normal. I have seen them at the campground at the beginning of the season. They go to public schools,” I said.

“Any idea why he is here by himself?” Sam asked.

“No. There aren’t any probate records besides their wedding in 2004 and a small estate filing for his wife Marcy’s grandfather, she was the executrix. No pending divorce actions,” I said.

“Do you have all the records there?” Randy asked, nodding toward my backpack. I nodded, patting it lightly. “Okay, leave those with me. I want to give them a look, and then you can shred them.”

“I also have a summary,” I mentioned as I withdrew the stack of papers and handed them to him.

“Does anyone know you are looking into Sullivan?” Randy asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said nervously.

“You don’t think so? What the fuck does that mean?” Sam asked.

“No. Nobody knows that I researched him. I did it cleanly,” I said. I could feel my face reddening.

“Okay. What do you guys think?” Randy asked, looking at Sam and Viktor.

“What value is this guy to us?” Sam asked, taking a drink. Randy turned to me.

“What value are military records?” Randy asked me.

“They could be very valuable if you find the right buyer. Names, birthdates, social security numbers. A lot of fraud possibilities, especially if you knew deployment statuses. Bigger picture, that data could also be sold to outside entities,” I said.

“Foreign governments?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. If a buyer could be arranged, a big data extract could be lucrative. An asset within PAF who could provide continuously updated data sets could be the gift that keeps on giving. As long as he didn’t get caught, of course,” I said.

“If he has access to certain financial transactions, that may be an even bigger cache of data. If a number of soldiers are drawing hazardous duty pay in a certain unit, you can infer that they are deployed. The purchase locations of some of those transactions may reveal the theater. A lot of activity can tip you off that something is either happening or is about to happen,” I said, shrugging.

"If you got that raw data, could you crunch it and figure out what was happening?" Randy asked.

"Sure," I answered, although I wasn't certain. It sounded intriguing.

The room was quiet. Sam looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it. *Good.*

"Okay. Let's take the next step. We need to set up a cabin rental for him, sooner rather than later. He could reconcile with his wife at any time, so his bachelor's life at this campground could quickly come to an end," Randy said.

"Is he a drinker?" Sam asked.

"I believe so. I know Chuck had a drink or two with him. I will have to pick his brain later," Randy said. He finished his drink and looked over at Sam, nodding. Sam got up and prepared him another one.

"Isn't this sort of a long shot? We are just assuming that we can get him to play ball?" Sam asked.

"It is a long shot. Most of the lucrative things I have done were long shots. Bringing in working girls and thugs from Romania was a long shot. Entertaining Johns at a campground and on a boat was a long shot. Wiping down bar tops and serving drinks at the bowling alley; not a long shot. And not lucrative. Leave the forward-thinking to me," Randy said, staring at Sam. Sam stared back for a moment, then looked down at his beer.

"Did I mention I saw him jogging through my neighborhood this morning?" Randy asked. Everyone shook their heads.

"He snuck in the gate?" Sam asked. Randy nodded.

"I tell you what, I will get this rolling. Catching him in my neighborhood trespassing gives me an icebreaker, something for us to chat about," Randy said.

"What can I do to help? I haven't reviewed the Wi-Fi data that may be out there."

"Yeah, do that. What are the odds that he is using the campground Wi-Fi?" Randy asked.

“If he is working from the camper, pretty good. How else is he going to connect? Using a hotspot through his phone all day would be expensive. If he is tech-savvy at all he is also using our Wi-Fi with his phone,” I said.

“Pull that data and let’s talk again tomorrow. I also need you to pull some video.” Randy glanced at his watch. “Should be some footage on Cabin D first thing. Can you pull something for me by 8 a.m. tomorrow?” he asked.

I nodded. He nodded back.

“Nice work, Henry,” Randy said, taking a drink.

“Viktor, I need your best talent available tomorrow night. I will have Chuck set up Cabin D. Clear her schedule and have her set to arrive at the bowling alley around dinner time. Drive her over, park around back, and be ready to send her in when Sam messages you,” Randy said to Viktor, who nodded.

“If things work out, I will have more video for you to pull Friday morning,” he said to me.

“Okay, we are done,” Randy said, looking at Viktor and me. I took my backpack and put it on. We filed out of the door.

“Close it behind you,” Randy said.

## Chuck 6

3:30 a.m.

**M**y phone alarm went off at 3:30 a.m., vibratin' in my shorts pocket. I scrambled to get it before it woke up Sharon. Shutting it off, I laid still until I was sure she was still asleep. Quietly, I got up and slipped out of the room, slidin' the bedroom door shut behind me.

I used the flashlight on my phone to find the bathroom, steppin' over a pile of clothes and other shit left on the floor. Shuttin' the door, I turned the light on.

The bathroom was in bad shape. I needed to spend some time on it. The mirror was broken, there were cracks on the sink and chips in the flooring. All the time I spent makin' the campground better and my own camper was in rough shape.

There was a layer of grit on everything. You would think that Sharon could get off her ass and clean once in a while.

I took a piss and then looked in the mirror. I looked like hell, big bags under my eyes. My face was drooping. My hairline had slowly crept back to the middle of my head over the past few years. So much gray on my head and in my beard. My body was a train wreck, gray and black hair all over mounds of chub. My gut made my arms look too small.

The coughin' began. I tried to muffle it, but it was almost impossible. It felt like there was a pound of phlegm in my throat and lungs. I coughed and spit up a few times into the sink. Two packs a day made mornings a nonstop coughin' fit. I needed to quit.

I found a hair tie, pulled my hair back, and splashed some water on my face. My buzz was still there from partyin', but I didn't feel too bad. Once I dropped Chris off at the cabin, I quit drinkin'.

I walked back out to the main camper area, where I had a shirt, a hat, my wallet, cigarettes, a lighter, and keys laid out. I got dressed, found my flip-flops, and opened the door. The door squeaked loudly, somebody needed to put some WD-40 on the hinges. I opened it slowly, stepped out, and pushed it carefully shut. I locked it and walked over to the golf cart.

I lit up a cigarette as I kept coughing. A few drags and I started to feel a little better.

The idea to put Chris up in the cabin was a good one and it made me look like I was on top of things to Randy. But it also made the clean up my responsibility. If I could get the girl back to Cloverleaf and him back to his camper as quickly as possible, I could still get a few more hours before I had to be back at work at seven. Seven-ish.

I drove over to Cabin D. I walked up the stairs and onto the porch. The small window to the right of the door had its curtains closed. I listened for any sounds from inside. It was impossible to tell with the train going by, so I stood there another minute until it was gone.

There was no noise comin' from the cabin. I took a drag from my cigarette and threw the butt into the yard. I raised the key and carefully put it into the lock, turnin' it softly to the right. Once it clicked, I slowly pushed the door open.

I took out my cell phone and put on the flashlight. Walkin' in slowly, I closed the door behind me.

The door opened to the open area that was both the dinin' room and livin' room. A bottle of vodka and plastic cups was on the table. One of the cups was used as an ashtray, half full of cigarette butts. Next to that was the pipe I left with him. I looked at it closely to make sure it wasn't lit, tapped the residue out in the cup, and pocketed the pipe.

I turned the flashlight beam to the couch and jumped when I saw Anka sitting there. She was dressed in a tight sweatsuit. She was a knockout, even after turnin' a trick late into the night. Long dark hair and green eyes. She pointed to the door on the southern side of the cabin, which was the master bedroom.

I walked over to the door and stopped to listen, but heard nothin'. I pushed it open.

I shined the light up and found the bed. Chris was sprawled out on top of it, face down and buck naked. Killing the flashlight app, I switched to the camera app and took a few pics. I looked up at the ceilin', where the smoke detector was mounted. The video camera was hid pretty good up there. I smiled at it and waved.

I switched on the bedroom lights. He didn't move at all. Chris's clothes were in a pile by the bed. I picked them up and put them on the bed. Walking over, I grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him.

He didn't move at first. I shook him again harder. He groaned, then rolled on his side, exposin' himself to me.

"Dude, get dressed," I said. He sat up and put his feet on the floor. He put his head in his hands.

"Come on, Chris, let's get you back," I said. Chris coughed a few times. He looked around the room in confusion.

"Dressed. Get dressed," I said more harshly, but still keepin' my voice down.

"How?" Chris grunted, lookin' around.

"Listen, I'm taking the girl back," I said, openin' the door. "You need to be out of here when I get back. Can you get back to your camper?"

Chris sat there, hunched over. I walked over and snapped my fingers in front of his face.

"Dude. Can you make it back to your camper?" I said. He looked up, glassy-eyed, and nodded. "You are at Cabin D. You go up Pigeon, around the playground, and back to your camper. No nappy on the jumping pillow this time. Just lay out in your lawn chair. Can you do that?"

Chris nodded again. He reached for his clothes.

"I need a verbal, Chris," I said.

"Yeah. I can do it," he finally said.

"Pull the door closed when you leave. I will lock up when I drop her off," I said.

"Her?" Chris asked.

“Your date, bro,” I said, laughin’. I walked out and closed the bedroom door behind me. I waved for the girl to follow me and we walked out of the cabin.

## Brady 6

7:00 a.m.

I slept terribly and was wide awake when the clock struck 0700 hours. I had checked Chris's lot a few times throughout the night, in case he returned. The last time was around 0500 hours when I found him sleeping in a lawn chair, wearing a hoody, and partially covered with a blanket. He snored softly as I slipped the papers into his hoody pocket.

I needed him to tell me why he had my personal information. I knew that he worked construction and Mike mentioned he had an aviation background in the Air Force. Neither of those professions required the collection of third-party personal information, so I couldn't imagine a legitimate reason why he would have mine.

Peering through the kitchen window, a bit of blue sky was visible through a break in the tree leaves. I dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and flip-flops. I made a pot of coffee, filled two Styrofoam cups, and carefully put lids on both.

Stepping out of the camper, I put the coffee cups on the patio table and closed the door. There was a layer of dew on the grass that dampened my feet as I walked over to Chris's.

He was sleeping on his side in the lawn chair, with one arm dangling and touching the grass. I placed the coffee cups down on the top of his rusty grill.

"Hey Chris," I said, shaking him softly. He stirred, rolled back in the chair, and sat upright. There was a rectangular pattern from the fabric on his face, pink lines on paleness. He groaned and sat up.

"Hey Brady," he said quietly as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"It is about ten after seven. You mentioned last night you needed a wakeup call. Need a coffee?" I asked.

"Yeah, I remember. Thanks, man. Sure," he said, reaching out to take one of the coffees. He sipped it carefully and winced.

"I'm not much on coffee, got any energy drinks?" he asked apologetically. I shook my head.

"Sorry, man, I don't drink those," I said.

That was a generational differentiator, how we obtained our caffeine. Baby Boomers and Gen X were team coffee, Millennials and younger were into the sugary energy drinks.

As he shifted, he put a hand in his hoody pocket. I heard the muffled sound of papers rustling. He was confused for a moment, slowly taking his empty hand out of his pocket and putting it in his lap.

"Are you going to be able to get inside to get your work clothes?" I asked, sitting on the metal stairs leading up to the back door of his camper.

"That is the question of the day, my man," he said quietly, sipping his coffee and wincing again.

"Need a ride to work or anything?" I asked. Chris didn't answer for a moment. I put the coffee down next to me on the stairs.

"I don't know. She drove me yesterday," he said. "Listen, I appreciate you waking me up and the coffee. I'm going to chat with Candy, you may not want to be around for that convo."

"I'm gone. Good luck," I said, nodding at him and returning to my lot. I paused for a moment before walking back over to Chris's site. He was staring down at the folded papers.

"Hey, almost forgot this," I said, gesturing to my coffee cup on the stairs. Chris jumped when he heard my voice. He folded the papers and shoved them back into his hoody pocket. I grabbed my coffee and walked back to my site.

I wiped the dew off of a damp patio chair with a swipe of the hand, sat down, and sipped my coffee quietly. Chris knocked faintly on his camper door. I heard the door open, a murmuring, and then the door closing.

## Chris 4

7:20 a.m.

**A**s I stepped out of the shower, I was struggling to remember the last part of the night. I recalled riding with Chuck to the cabin, smoking with him, and him leaving. Someone else was around, but I wasn't sure who. Chuck mentioned dropping a person off after I woke up. I hadn't given it any thought as I walked back to my camper early in the morning. At least I didn't puke on myself this time. *It was the small victories.*

Candy most likely would have checked on me in the night and saw that I wasn't there. I would tell the truth, that Chuck was kind enough to give me a cabin since she locked me out of my RV.

The difficult part of the puzzle to put together were the papers in my hoody pocket. Brady's papers. I wasn't sure how they got there. Why would I have them? I was lucky that they didn't fall out in front of him.

A memory returned to me. It was of Data dropping some papers a few nights ago. The night I passed out on the jumping pillow. But why would Data have Brady's papers? I could find him and see if they were his. Maybe Brady was trying to invest in the campground or refinance his camper or something?

I walked out of the shower house and out on Sparrow. I heard a golf cart approaching and saw that it was Chuck. He rolled up beside me.

"Mornin'," Chuck said, putting a cigarette in his mouth and inhaling deeply. He wore a red do-rag and sunglasses, even though the sun was not yet that bright in the sky.

"Good morning, Chuck," I said.

"Long night last night?" he asked, smiling. I tried to smile back and nodded.

"Yeah. Not too restful," was all I could manage.

"Off to work?" he asked, taking a Styrofoam coffee cup from the holder and taking a drink.

"Yup. Hey, is Data working today?" I asked.

“Yeah, he will be in at eight. Why?” he asked.

“I have something for him,” I replied.

“If you want to give it to me, I can make sure he gets it,”  
Chuck said, taking another drag.

## Brady 7

7:30 a.m.

I positioned myself at the patio table to get a visual angle on Chris's camper. I couldn't quite see his front door, but I could see most of the rest of his lot. Chris went to the shower house like he always did before work.

The sudden blast of the train horn jarred me. Despite having consumed a fair amount of alcohol last night, I felt okay, with a minimal hangover. I was reasonably alert.

Sometimes I couldn't predict how the liquor would hit me. I could drink half of a bottle of vodka and only feel groggy the next day or I could drink a few beers and feel hungover. There were times I felt hungover when I hadn't drunk a drop the night prior. My theory was that it had something to do with my diet as well as occasional sinus and allergy issues. I should have a better grasp of how booze affected me at this point in my life, with decades of drinking experience under my belt.

I quickly returned to my patio chair. The clamoring of the train began to subside as it finally passed the campground, sounding its horn again as it continued west.

My laptop was positioned so I could peer over the top of it, hopefully without revealing that I was staring at Chris's lot. There was a glare on the screen, but I didn't reposition it.

Chris returned, walking into my field of view, and disappeared to the left. I heard his camper door open and close. Then I saw Chuck pull up to the side of his lot. He sat in his golf cart and didn't look over in my direction, taking a drag off of his cigarette.

I continued to peek above my laptop screen. A moment later I heard the squeak of Chris's camper door opening and Chris reappeared. He had a manila envelope and handed it to Chuck. They said a few words and Chuck drove off. Chris went back inside.

A moment later Chris and Candy emerged, walking north on Sparrow to the overflow parking lot beyond the dumpster. I heard his junker starting, struggling at first, and then roaring to life. It was a 1990s era Pontiac Grand Am, its maroon color faded to a pinkish hue over time. If the train didn't wake up the sleeping campers, that piece of junk surely would. The car noise got louder as it approached Chris's RV. It passed into my view briefly as it headed south on Sparrow, Chris staring straight ahead in the passenger's seat.

I went inside the camper and brought out my personal laptop. I had to reconnect to the campsite Wi-Fi since it would drop the connection if it was idle for a few hours.

I navigated to the Erie County property records site. Recalling that Randy's address was "273 Eagle Creek Drive", I entered it in the search box.

The stats of the house appeared. Square footage, amenities, year built, price, etc. I scrolled down to the owners and found it was in the name of Cynthia Gorey. She was the only party listed. I did a screenshot and saved it on my hard drive.

I did a commercial search for the bowling alley. When I searched "Glory Bowl", I scrolled down through the stats. The business was titled in the name of Glory Properties Limited. I took a screenshot of that info as well.

Next, I searched the Ohio State Secretary of State site and found the search area for corporations. A search for "Glory Properties" found one record. I clicked on the link and saw that the company was chartered in 1987. The authorized representative and statutory agent was an attorney with a Toledo address. Another screenshot.

## Mike 5

9:00 a.m.

The breakfast offered by the campground wasn't half bad. It resembled an Army mess hall breakfast, with scrambled eggs, pancakes, toast, and sausage links. There was coffee, milk, and orange juice to wash it down. Army cooks had a bad reputation, mostly deserved, but they did get breakfast right. The only thing missing was the grits, but those were a rarity in the Midwest.

The drinks were poured into Styrofoam cups and the food placed in a Styrofoam container. I headed back to my campsite. It was fair out, in the high 60s, but I decided to build a fire anyways. I sat in my fold-out chair and ate, carefully cutting up the pancakes and sausage with a plastic knife and fork.

The coffee was awful. I was an expert on awful coffee, I had consumed thousands of gallons of it during my Army service. Like a lot of things that I embraced in the world, I embraced the awful. I drank the awful and I drank it black.

I did a few maintenance tasks on the camper. The exterior needed a thorough washing. The mayflies were arriving, weird insects that swarmed the coastal region of the Great Lakes in early summer. They arrived in such numbers that the swarms could be seen on weather radar. They clung to every surface. They weren't harmful, they just sat there until it rained or something else forced them off of whatever surface they were on. A few found their way onto my camper.

Spraying them directly caused them to splatter, so I modified my technique to spray them at an angle. The metal exterior of my camper seemed to be less attractive to them than the white exteriors of most campers, as I did have fewer than other RVs.

Chuck made an appearance, scooting around on his golf cart. He pulled over when he saw me, just as I was reattaching the main hose to the camper water intake.

"Hey Mike," he said, puffing on a cigarette.

"Hey. You get the kid home safe last night?" I asked.

"Yeah, he partied a bit, but I got him home," he said, laughing. I wiped the water off from my hands on my threadbare blue gym shorts.

"You guys party together?" I asked, folding my arms.

"About as much as you did having drinks around the fire last night," he replied, squinting against the sun.

"I think his problems go well beyond drinking, based on what I saw at the jumping pillow yesterday morning," I said. Chuck shrugged.

"You some kind of expert?" Chuck asked.

"I don't think any of us have a graduate degree in substance abuse counseling, right? Maybe you have some personal experience with it all?" I asked, smiling. Chuck stared at me for a minute.

"Nah, I'm just a simple campground worker, boss," he said, throwing his cigarette butt on my lot. He stood there a minute, saluted, and walked over to his cart. I watched him roll off and I pondered what sort of lowlife would intentionally litter another man's campsite, especially given he worked at the damned place. I resisted characterizing his disrespect as racial. The asshole likely tossed cigarette butts on other sites throughout the campground.

I checked my watch and figured that 1000 hours was a reasonable time to take a walk around the seasonal block, on the off chance that Brady was out. He'd mentioned that he worked from his RV during the day, so if he happened to be outside then maybe he had a moment for a chat.

## Randy 2

12:00 p.m.

Riding my bike east on Columbus Road toward the campground, I was hoping lunchtime would be the right time to catch Sullivan. I pulled into the campground. One of the old military retirees was at the booth and nodded to me.

Travis kept a few of these vets on the payroll, and I honestly didn't understand why he didn't hire more of them. They all had a good work ethic. They were old and less physically capable, but they came to work on time, and they didn't have these drug and alcohol vices that the younger guys did. If they did have vices, at least they didn't bring them to work with them.

I slowly rolled up Starling, paying closer attention when I approached Sullivan's lot. His truck was there. I saw that the main door was open, but he wasn't outside. I figured he sat at his kitchen table while he worked.

Parking at the Taj, I considered making a drink but decided to wait. I had some business at the bowling alley to tend to later and didn't want to get bogged down with a buzz.

As I walked up to the porch, I saw Chuck riding north on Starling. He pulled up to the site and stopped, puffing on a cigarette.

"I'm glad to see you out here. Usually, when I send you an urgent text you respond a little quicker," Chuck said, reaching into the back seat of the golf cart.

"You think all your texts are urgent," I said.

Chuck was out of the golf cart, carrying an envelope. I reached for it as he walked up. I opened it and found five or six laser-printed pages inside. I reviewed them and realized what they were.

"Why are you walking around with this?" I asked angrily. Chuck looked nervous.

"Let's go inside and talk," he said, taking a drag off of his cigarette.

## Brady 8

12:30 p.m.

Looking out my kitchen window, I saw the Glory Bowl biker ride past and park at site 21. Randy Gorey. The guy with several properties listed under different names.

My workday had been less than productive. I was so distracted by the handoff of my papers between Chris and Chuck that I was having difficulty focusing.

I wanted to mention it to Marcy when we talked later but thought better of it. She was a chronic worrier, so she would be terrified that we were having our identities stolen, and it would likely be my fault somehow. But I hadn't applied for credit or otherwise done anything that required a background check, so I had no idea why our information was out there.

I decided to make lunch. There were a few remaining pieces of bread in the bag that didn't appear to be moldy. I searched the cupboard and found a jar of peanut butter. It was actually faux peanut butter, made from soy. Katie's nut allergy prevented us from keeping any type of real peanut products around. It looked like real peanut butter; they must have dyed the hell out of it. It also tasted similar.

I added jelly, found a bag of chips, and grabbed a Diet Coke. The weather was nice, so I took it outside. Damn mayflies were accumulating on the side of the camper, I would have to sweep them off later.

Chuck rolled past, not looking over at me. He pulled up to site 21 and parked. He talked to the motorcycle guy from the bowling alley for a moment. Chuck handed him an envelope, which appeared exactly like the one that Chris gave him. There was little doubt that it was mine.

He looked in the envelope. He looked over at me, as did Chuck. I pretended not to notice, fixing my eyes on my paper plate. When I glanced back over, they were climbing the steps to the RV.

“Hey Brady,” Mike said as he came around my RV from the direction of the shower house. He walked a few feet into the campsite and stopped. I waved him over to an empty chair.

“Sorry to interrupt your lunch,” he said. I put the pointer finger of my left hand up in the universal “give me a moment” sign while I chewed the bite of sandwich that was in my mouth. I washed it down with a drink of pop.

“No problem,” I said. Mike was wearing a blue Braves cap and dark sunglasses, a plain blue t-shirt, and blue gym shorts.

“Any new developments?” he asked. I nodded, looking around to ensure that no one was nearby.

“I found Chris sleeping in front of his camper this morning and slipped the papers into his hoody pocket,” I said, quieting my voice. I took a few chips and ate them. Mike nodded.

“Didn’t wake up?” Mike asked. I shook my head.

“Shortly after he gave them to Chuck,” I said. Mike cocked his head to the side slightly.

“What the fuck would Chuck need with your information?” Mike asked. I shrugged. I nodded toward site 21.

“It gets better. I just saw Chuck give the papers to that guy over there at site 21. Do you know the guy who owns that camper?” I asked. Mike shook his head.

“Biker guy, maybe in his mid-fifties. I was out for a run the other day and ended up running through that gated community west of here. He has an expensive house over there. Then I ran up to the bowling alley and I think he must own it or at least a piece of it. He has a custom plate that matches the business name, Glory Bowl,” I said.

“Did you say, ‘Glory Bowl’?” he asked, scrunching up his face slightly.

“I did,” I said, smirking.

“Hell of a name for a business,” he said, laughing. “And he owns a camper here. Why own a camper a few miles from your house?” I shrugged again.

“Chuck seems tight with him. And they are running my background information for some unknown reason,” I said as I took another bite of my sandwich. Mike sat there silently.

## Randy 3

12:30 p.m.

**F**ucking Data. I hired the guy because he was discreet and didn't make mistakes.

Sure, he was human and had made mistakes in the past. He got busted hacking a few years ago, so he had a rap sheet. But he wasn't like these other degenerates out drinking and doing drugs all night. He was supposed to be my go-to tech guy. How the fuck does he lose the Sullivan papers? What if Sullivan found his own damned papers?

I guessed it was contained. I had the papers. I considered having Sam deliver a message. I couldn't afford to lose Data, so nothing too serious, some shouting and maybe some slapping around. Data was a soft little computer nerd and a little taste of the rough stuff would make an impression. If he didn't get the message and tighten up I didn't know what I would do. I had no idea how I would replace him.

The next phase of my business expansion was possibly the most profitable one. Once I got the equipment upgrade I could start data mining the whole campground. Data said I could collect everything that wasn't encrypted from the campers. It could be a goldmine, once we figured out what to collect and how to use it. Data had some ideas.

The amusement park had a vast Wi-Fi system, but he figured they would have more security. But maybe that was something Data could figure out eventually. That had enormous potential. With thousands of people using that network each day, the sky was the limit.

I decided to introduce myself, since Sullivan was sitting outside at his table. As I got closer, I saw that he had company. He was sitting with a middle-aged black guy wearing a baseball hat and sunglasses. My first impression of him was that he was forgettable, despite being one of the few blacks at the campground.

I crossed over and approached his lot, waving as I arrived. The conversation stopped and they looked over at me.

"Afternoon," I said as I approached, stopping a few feet from the table. They both nodded.

"I'm Randy Gorey," I said, reaching out my hand to Sullivan. He stood up and shook it.

"Brady Sullivan," Sullivan said.

"Mike Clemmons," the black guy said as we shook hands. There was an awkward silence.

"I think we met the other day, Brady, when you took a running tour of my neighborhood. Then you ran over to my bowling alley. Now you are camped out in front of my RV. It's like you are touring my properties or something," I said with a smile. Brady returned it sheepishly.

"Yeah, my bad. The running routes around here get a little tiresome, so when I saw the gate open, I decided to take a run inside there. Gorgeous houses. Do you live there year-round?" he asked.

"More or less. I also have a condo down south so I can get away a little when winter kicks in heavily. Otherwise, I like to stay close to keep an eye on my business investments," I said. I shifted from my left to right foot.

"Have a seat, Randy," Brady said gesturing to an empty patio chair. I nodded and sat at the head of the table, with Sullivan and Mike on either side.

"Thanks for not having me arrested," Sullivan laughed. I laughed as well. Mike smiled.

"I wouldn't dream of it, it was just curiosity, it wasn't like you were casing the neighborhood. Some neighbors have sticks up their asses, so I would be careful about it in the future," I said.

"My curiosity has been satisfied, I doubt I will chance it again," he replied. I looked over at Mike.

"Are you seasonal? I don't think I've seen you around," I said.

"No, sir, just here for a brief visit and then moving along," he replied. I gestured toward his cap.

"From Atlanta?" I asked.

“Originally. I have moved around a bit. I’m retired. My RV is my home, so I travel around in it trying to avoid hot southern summers and cold northern winters,” he said. I nodded and laughed.

“Sounds like a reasonable retirement plan. How do you like Sandusky?” I asked. He smiled and nodded. The horn from the train blasted from the distance.

“Well, I could live without those fucking trains going by all day and night,” he said flatly. Sullivan and I laughed.

“I was born and raised here, so I barely notice them. I don’t sleep in the camper very often, the tracks are so close that it shakes the whole damn thing,” I said. There was silence for a minute as we waited for the disruption of the train to end. Its horn blasted a final time and then it was quiet.

“Are you and Chuck friends?” Sullivan asked. I considered my reply.

“More like a business relationship. He helps me out with some side jobs here and there,” I said.

“Do you own a stake in this campground?” Mike asked. I smiled.

“I own a stake in a lot of things around this city. I’ve been here for a while,” I replied. I waited for a follow-up to see if I could get away with the non-answer. But Mike just nodded. He likely took my answer as confirmation that I was an investor. Not that he could verify it, I didn’t have my name anywhere on any legal documents.

“Your family coming up this weekend? I think they are having some sort of theme for the kids, like superhero weekend or something,” I asked Sullivan.

“Yeah, I’m getting out of work a little early tomorrow and heading over to pick them up for a long weekend. We’ll spend most of the time at the park but will try to do some of the activities around here, too,” Sullivan replied. “Does anyone want a drink? I’m going to grab a water and then I need to get back at it.”

Both of us shook our heads. Mike stood up.

“Actually, I need to move along, I don’t want to keep you, Brady,” he said. They shook hands, we shook hands, and Mike headed north on Starling. Brady went to the outdoor fridge and took a bottled water out.

“It seems to me that you’ve been living somewhat of a hermit’s existence up here, by yourself and all. Why don’t you come by the bowling alley later? We don’t have a fancy menu or anything, but we make a good burger, the beer is cold, a baseball game will be on TV, and there is some good people watching with the bowling leagues,” I said, leaning back in my chair.

“People watching?” he asked.

“Yeah, people watching. All kinds of interesting people there. Serious bowlers, amateurs, tourists, townies; everyone bowls around here, it is a melting pot. Sort of like this campground, I guess. Some people are well-dressed, others are tacky as shit, all fun to watch,” I said, smiling.

Brady stared down at his water bottle and appeared to be thinking. He looked up.

“Yeah, I may come by for a drink. You don’t need to treat me to anything. I can’t be out too late, I have a lot going on tomorrow,” he said.

“Great! Mention my name at the bar and you’ll get better service. I should be around managing, so I’ll drop by and say hi. Maybe we can have a bite to eat or something,” I said. I instantly regretted the last thing. I was being pushy.

“Sounds good. Maybe I’ll see you later, Randy,” he said, standing up. We shook hands and I walked back to my camper.

## Sam 2

7:15 p.m.

**N**o Sullivan yet. Randy figured that if he came in at all, he would be in around 1900 hours. The alley was busy with the bowling leagues, but the bar only had a few regulars. I was lucky I didn't depend on tips to pay the bills; it was chump change.

A guy came up and leaned against the bar, waiting for my attention. I was busy cleaning a glass and made him wait thirty seconds before coming over.

He was obviously a tourist. Sandusky was a small town that was invaded each summer by waves of tourists from all over the region. It was easy to spot them. He was in his mid-thirties and dressed for the golf course, somewhat overweight, skin bright pink from the sun. Probably in town to golf with his buddies.

"Hey buddy, can I get a frozen margarita?" he asked, leaning on the bar. I glared up at him.

"See a blender back here, bud?" I asked. He was confused at first, then annoyed. "I have the mix, I can make you one on the rocks."

He seemed to be thinking deeply about this counteroffer, then nodded. I walked over to the bottles.

"Do you have Patron?" he asked. I shook my head.

"Jose or no bueno," I replied. He shrugged and nodded. I made him his drink. I tended to over-pour but I under-poured his a little.

"Five dollars. Run a tab or cash out?" I asked. He handed me a credit card.

"Cash it out," he said.

"Sorry, the credit card machine is down," I said. He looked annoyed. He took out his wallet, pulled out a ten, and handed it to me. I went over to the till, turning my back to him. Slipping the bill into my pocket, I pushed "no sale" on the cash register, took out five one-dollar bills, and set them on the bar in front of him.

My phone vibrated. I reached in my pocket to check it. Randy had arrived and was in his office upstairs.

I walked back over to the side of the bar and saw that the tourist left me a one-dollar tip. I was okay with that. Twenty percent for pouring a weak drink was fine.

I glanced at my watch. 1927 hours. I remembered that there were drops to be picked up. A bowling league pogue came up, I poured him a pitcher of beer, and then hustled over to the lockers area in the back corner. I pulled out my keyring and went through the series of lockers.

Three of the lockers had envelopes stuffed in them. Two small envelopes of money and a larger one with papers that Data had left earlier.

I swept back by the bar, refilled a pitcher, and poured a Woodford Reserve on the rocks. Grabbing the bourbon drink and envelopes, I walked upstairs quickly to Randy's office.

I knocked, looking up at the camera above the door. A few seconds later the door buzzed, and I went inside.

Randy was at his desk, going through some papers. Behind him was a tinted window with a view of the bowling lanes. I put the drink and envelopes on the edge of his desk.

"No sign of Sullivan yet?" he asked. Randy already knew the answer. He had cameras throughout the building and knew that Sullivan wasn't there.

"Not yet."

"When you pick up the drops, you take them right up to me, you don't leave that shit behind the bar and serve drinks. What I have in these envelopes is a lot more valuable than the cash you're skimming."

I didn't have a response. What could I say? I returned to the bar and made a few more drinks.

"Can I get a Jack and Coke?" a voice said from the left, startling me a little. I had been off in my own world for a minute, staring blankly at a TV, where the Reds were playing the Tigers. A guy in a bowling league was a Reds fan, so I would put their games on if the Indians weren't playing.

I turned around and Sullivan was sitting at the bar. He was wearing a gray dry-fit t-shirt with a gray and black American flag and jeans. His shirt was made by a company that catered to the military, I owned a few with Marine graphics.

He wasn't a very impressive looking guy. He was six foot and about 180 pounds, one of those leaner functional fitness guys. A cardio guy. When I was in the gym it was to push iron. I was sure Sullivan didn't lift heavy.

I made his drink, giving him a double pour.

"Five dollars. Want to run a tab?" I asked. He nodded, handing me a credit card. I took it over and put it on the edge of the cash register. I walked back over and stood in front of him.

"Nice t-shirt. Did you serve?" I asked, knowing full well that he had served, per Data's research.

"Yeah, Army," he said, taking a sip of his drink. When it passed his lips, he winced a little at its strength. His hair was a brownish color, showing some gray here and there, thinning a bit. He kept it short, something close to a military regulation cut.

"I am a Marine," I said, trying to say it flatly, but knowing I sounded arrogant. It was hard to do otherwise, especially when talking to servicemen from other branches. He nodded.

"How many years?" he asked. For some reason that stumped me. I had been out for a long time but still had a hard time talking about my service when someone asked questions.

I only did a little over a year. There were times when I kicked myself for talking about it at all to other veterans because a short stint like mine usually meant either a medical retirement or a less than honorable discharge.

"A few," I muttered, and walked over to the other side of the bar and grabbed a rag. I wiped up a few sweat rings on the bar.

"May I see a menu?" Sullivan asked. I reached under the counter and grabbed one. It was only two pages, laminated. I wiped it off with the rag and handed it to him. I pulled out my cell phone and sent a text to Randy.

"Okay. I think I'll have the buffalo chicken wrap," he said.

"Fried chicken or grilled?" I asked.

“How about fried, why not live dangerously?” he asked. I faked a smile.

“Fries or pub chips?” I asked.

“I’ll do the pub chips,” he said, setting the menu down on the bar. He took another sip, leaving his glass a little less than half full. I wrote down his order and put away his menu.

“Let me run this back to the kitchen,” I said, coming out from behind the bar and walking through the swinging door at the back corner of the bar area.

## Brady 9

8:15 p.m.

The bowling alley was the dump I had imagined it to be. Dingy, smelly, badly lit. The walls and drop ceiling were a yellowish color from the years of secondhand smoke staining them. Ohio had been smoke-free in public establishments for over a decade, but apparently, it wasn't in the budget to slap a fresh coat of paint on the place.

There was a dull roar of bowling noises. Balls rolling down lanes, pins crashing, and people occasionally shouting. After living mostly in solitude for so many weeks, I welcomed the disruptive sounds of the alley.

The buffalo wrap wasn't bad. The pub chips were a little stale. The drinks were excellent, however, with the big Marine making them very stiff.

That was why I generally loved dive bars. The drinks were cheap and mixed strong. Go to a trendy bar in downtown Cleveland and you'd pay twelve dollars for a watered-down whiskey drink with an ounce of liquor in it, meticulously measured with a jigger. You would go broke before you got drunk.

A fondness for dive bars was developed while I was in the military. We were poor privates trying to make our poverty-level paychecks last as long as possible, so we settled for gritty little blue-collar bars with no cover charge and cheap drinks.

I spotted a jukebox in the corner and decided to check the music options. It was one of those digital ones that you could either play by feeding it cash or through a phone app. It must have been placed there on consignment from a vendor, it looked modern and out of place in the otherwise retro bowling alley environment. I fed it a few dollars.

After searching for bands that I liked, I selected several grunge and alt-rock songs. That genre wasn't a crowd-pleaser at a joint like this, with the older bowling leaguers likely more oriented toward classic rock and pop from the 1960s and 1970s.

I returned to my seat and took another drink. Over the course of about forty-five minutes, I consumed four strong drinks, which was way too many for that short of a duration. I would have one more and leave.

“Hey there, Brady!” a loud voice boomed from behind me. I swiveled around on the barstool. Randy walked over and shook my hand as I stood up. He was wearing a black Glory Bowl bowling shirt, jeans, and big black motorcycle boots. He was carrying a dark brown drink in a small glass.

“Hey Randy,” I said, sitting back down. He sat down on the stool to the left of me.

“How has Sam been treatin’ you?” he asked, gesturing toward him. Sam was pouring a pitcher for a bowling leaguer.

“Good. He has been on top of it,” I said, holding up my drink and smiling.

“And the food?” he asked, taking a sip of his drink.

“Good,” I said, deciding not to embellish. It was adequate at best. But I wasn’t here to critique the food. I wasn’t sure why I was here. It seemed like a reasonable idea earlier, but once I’d arrived, I didn’t know why I was here.

“Great! Just so you know, your money is no good here. Consider this covered,” he said.

“You don’t need to do that,” I responded. He shrugged.

“This is my joint. I know what the food and drinks actually cost. Believe me, you won’t drive the bottom line into the red by accepting a chicken wrap and a few drinks,” he said laughing. I smiled. I took another swig and the drink was gone.

“Are you up for another?” he asked.

I wasn’t. I was ready to leave. But what was I going to do when I left? Build another stupid fire? Get drunk by myself beside the stupid fire? Think about my wife and kids, who I hadn’t seen in weeks?

“Sure,” I said.

“Sam, how about a round?” Randy said, setting his empty glass on the bar. Sam took our glasses and began refilling them.

## Randy 4

9:30 p.m.

**W**hen to serve him that special drink was a hard decision. I figured it would be hard to keep him at the bowling alley late, but it turned out feeding him a steady supply of stiff drinks was a good way to keep him around.

Sullivan came across as straight and narrow, but he was former military, and most of those guys were drinkers. Sullivan drank whiskey. Not rum, tequila, gin, or brandy. That said something about him.

He didn't drink craft whiskey, he drank off the shelf Jack Daniels. It was advertised as Tennessee sipping whiskey but it wasn't sipping whiskey, it was "get me drunk" whiskey. The guy liked his drink.

Data had dropped off his Wi-Fi activity report earlier and there was a lot of interesting shit going on in Brady's life. His work laptop was encrypted and gave us nothing. But the stuff on his phone and personal laptop were wide open. Despite his carelessness with losing the write-up sheets, Data was an amazing resource.

Most of Sullivan's texting was either short bits of communication between him and his wife or long, wordy, angry arguments between them. That marriage was done, but he didn't know it yet. I had been there. He needed to know when to walk away.

A divorce was going to be costly, because his wife was damn near a fanatic. She was so overprotective of the kids that it bordered on insanity. The little girl had severe allergies and based on discussions about EpiPens, it was food allergies. I had to Google what EpiPens did. If the kid ate something she shouldn't, her throat would close up and she would need a shot of adrenaline from the EpiPen. Scary shit if you were a parent.

The wife always sounded stressed out and frazzled. The texts went back six months and they were all hysteria and drama. I was sure Sullivan had an ulcer from that type of stress. I understood why he was living by himself at a rundown campground and drinking away his problems every night.

The bad news for Sullivan was that it was about to get worse. I felt for a man who was down on his luck. But he was nobody to me. As an asset, though, he had the potential to be a whole lot to me.

I also saw that Sullivan was researching me, looking at my property records. Earlier that day, as a matter of fact. I was sure that failing to find my name on anything intrigued him.

I still had more of the information to review. Once Sullivan left, I planned on going back upstairs and doing a deeper dive into his world.

I swiveled around and regarded Sullivan. He was showing the effects from the whiskey. His eyes drooped a little and his speech was slightly slurred. Sam was serving them up strong. If I could keep him there another hour then things would go according to plan.

"So you are heading home to get the kids tomorrow?" I asked, leaning toward him. He nodded, taking another drink.

"Yeah, can't wait. I'm gonna work for a few hours in the morning and go get them," he said. I raised my glass and leaned it forward, clinking it against his. We both drank.

"I need to get back to the campground after I finish this. Really, Randy, you shouldn't pay for this," he said. I laughed.

"I told you your money is no good here, Sullivan," I said and took a drink. I nodded at Sam. "How about one last drink?"

Sullivan shook his head. He stood up.

"I need to take a piss and get out of here. I have a lot to do tomorrow," he said. He walked a little unsteadily toward the bathroom. Sam leaned against the bar across from me.

"Make him one more. Make him a special," I said. Sam nodded and went back to where the bottles were.

Another drink was waiting for him when he came back. Sullivan exhaled heavily and shook his head.

"Randy, I really didn't want another one," he said. I shrugged.

“Sam is a Marine. Sometimes they don’t listen so good,” I said. Sullivan laughed politely. Sam smirked, pointing to his left ear and shrugging like “this thing doesn’t work so good.” Sullivan smiled, shook his head, and took a drink.

From the side of the bar, a young woman walked up. I recognized her as Anka.

She was the hottest of the Romanian prostitutes, with long dark hair, perfect skin, and a nice body. She wore a tight little blue sundress that showed off all her curves. Her earrings were very big gold hoops. The purse she carried was also huge, it was practically a suitcase, with some designer pattern.

Standing on the other side of Sullivan at the bar, she leaned against it and squinted to read the bottle labels. It was a non-subtle way of showing some cleavage and sticking her ass out.

Sullivan noticed her and did a double-take. I didn’t blame him, it was difficult not to. He was a married man. Well, sort of. Legally, but there was no physical relationship happening between him and his wife at that point.

She ordered a drink from Sam and sat down, crossing her legs and adjusting her dress, pulling it down mid-thigh. Sam put down a margarita on the rocks in front of her.

I didn’t like to have the Romanians come into the bowling alley. This was not the place for people in their twenties generally. Why would a hot young woman come hang out at a bowling alley dive bar by herself? She wouldn’t. Unless she was a prostitute.

She leaned over and said something to Sullivan. The music was too loud for me to pick it up. He smiled politely and said something back.

I tapped Sullivan on the shoulder. When he turned around, I could tell his drink additive was starting to hit him hard. It had been five minutes since Sam mixed it up.

You could never tell how fast or hard a spiked drink would hit a person, a lot of different factors were at play. Some passed out immediately. Others functioned for a time and then became zombies before passing out. It was going to be about T-minus one minute before Sullivan pulled a Weekend at Bernie’s act.

I was hoping to get a few more minutes of Sullivan chatting with the hooker on film, but she arrived too late. Sullivan passing out at my bar was not part of the plan. I leaned closer to him.

“Are you ready to go? I’ll have Sam take you home, you drank your share, buddy,” I said, patting him on the back. Sullivan just sat there, staring straight ahead. He robotically took another drink, finishing it.

“Hey Sam. Why don’t you pull the vehicle up? I will handle the bar,” I said, walking around behind the bar. Sam nodded, grabbed a towel, wiped his hands, and walked around to the other side of the bar.

“You ready?” he asked. Sullivan’s eyes were starting to close. Sam hustled over and stood beside him, leaning over and pulling Sullivan’s right arm up on his shoulder. The Romanian girl sat quietly, sipping her drink through a pink straw.

“Let’s take a walk out to my car. Are you okay to walk?” Sam asked. Sullivan didn’t respond. His eyes closed. “Stay with me.”

Sam lifted him out of the chair and onto his feet, keeping ahold of his arm. The two started for the side door. I surveyed the bar area and luckily no one else was nearby.

The Romanian girl finished her drink with a slurp and stood up, following them. She scurried around in front of them to open the back door and the three of them walked out. I picked up the empty glasses and put them in the sink, wiping down the bar top.

This concludes your three chapter sample of Sandusky Burning! The table is set and the takedown of Brady Sullivan is in full motion! To get the full story, please follow these links:

**Paperback**

**eBook**

# Acknowledgments

I was inspired to write Sandusky Burning while camping alone in my RV in that area several years ago. Our air conditioner needed to be repaired, so I drove the sixty miles from the suburbs of Cleveland and worked from the camper while awaiting the repairmen.

I had rarely spent a moment alone there, and I looked at my surroundings from a different perspective. The transient, wide open nature of campgrounds provided a fertile environment for shady activities. I envisioned an underworld that preyed on resort town tourism, and let my imagination run wild from there.

I want to thank all of my friends who took the time to read my book in advance. The two beta readers I couldn't enlist were my parents, Bonnie and Larry, who passed away prior to publishing Sandusky Burning. I lost my mother in 2015 and my father died only a few months before my book was released. I had imagined surprising him with a copy for Christmas. I owe them both for instilling in me the love of reading and writing.



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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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Bryan W. Conway was born and raised in Flint, Michigan. He has been an author, soldier, factory worker, lawyer, project manager, and personal fitness trainer. His hobbies include writing, reading, fitness, scuba diving, and chess. He currently resides in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio.

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