

Chapter 2: Nightmare on Elm Street: My Recovery in Champaign

The House and Recovery

I found the house on a birthday weekend. It was rent-to-own, which meant I could build equity while I rebuilt myself. The house needed work. I needed work. We were perfect for each other.

Champaign was supposed to be different. Smaller town. Fresh start. Space to breathe after everything that happened in Chicago.

I was going to heal here.

For the first three years, I stayed in that house. I worked from home when I could. I wasn't running toward anything — I was running away from everything that had happened. The bar fight. The police arrest. The evictions. The lawsuits. The nursing facility. The homelessness.

I needed to just exist for a while.

The neighbors harassed me. All three of them. I called the cops multiple times. Nothing was ever done. So I installed cameras. The harassment never stopped. The drug trade in the neighborhood quickly reduced when they realized they were being watched. Evidence works. Visibility works. No lawyers needed. Just cameras.

I started making music. Music was therapy that didn't require talking to anyone. I could take all the anger, all the hurt, all the betrayal, and turn it into something. Not something good necessarily — just something.

I biked. Long rides through Champaign. The endorphins helped. The repetition helped. The solitude helped. Out there on the bike, I wasn't fighting anyone. I wasn't in court. I wasn't bleeding. I was just moving forward, one pedal at a time.

Three years in that house. Three years of healing. Three years of learning to exist again without constant crisis.

The Work Begins

After three years of recovery, I was ready to work again. Not because I had to. Because I wanted to.

I got a job at a computer store. It was honest work. I knew computers. I knew how to help people. I liked helping people.

I worked there for a year and a half.

Then I got promoted to Pavlov. Pavlov was a sister company — bigger, more complex, more opportunity. They wanted me as a WordPress developer. I was good at it. Really good at it.

I spent three years at Pavlov doing amazing work. I built things. I solved problems. I was creative. I was valued — or at least I thought I was.

During those four and a half years working (1.5 at the computer store, 3 at Pavlov), I was rebuilding more than just my career. I was rebuilding my sense that work could be stable. That I could contribute something meaningful. That the world wasn't just designed to punish me.

I started streaming during this time. Building an audience. Finding my voice again through content. Sharing what I knew. Connecting with people online when I couldn't connect with them in person.

The bike rides continued. The music continued. But now there was also work. Purpose. Growth.

The One Friend

In all seven years in Champaign — the three years of recovery, the year and a half at the computer store, the three years at Pavlov — I made one friend.

One.

I made that friend at Pavlov. In all those years of recovery, all those years of trying to rebuild, all those years of music and biking and streaming and working, it took until I was at Pavlov to find someone who actually stuck around.

One person who understood. One person who didn't disappear when things got hard. One person who knew what I was going through and stayed anyway.

The Layoff

Then Pavlov laid me off.

Not because I wasn't good at my job. Layoffs. Budget cuts. Corporate restructuring. The reasons companies give when they don't want to explain why they're throwing you away.

I was good at my job. I know I was. I did amazing work. I solved problems. I built things that worked.

It didn't matter.

After spending three years healing, after spending four and a half years rebuilding, after finally starting to believe that I could have a normal professional life — I got laid off.

The Realization

Seven years in Champaign. Three of healing in the house. Four and a half of work. Scattered months of trying to figure out who I was without crisis.

I had come to Champaign to get away from Chicago. From the bar fight, from the police, from the landlords, from the lawsuits, from people who wanted to hurt me or control me or use me.

I thought a smaller town would be different.

The neighbors still harassed me. I solved it with cameras instead of lawsuits.

The job I thought was stable ended with a layoff.

But I learned something important in those seven years: I could survive without crisis. I could just exist. I could make music and ride bikes and work from home and have one real friend and be okay.

Not happy. Not healed. Not whole.

But okay.

And sometimes, okay is enough to build from.

That one friend I made at Pavlov — they got it. They understood that healing isn't linear. That sometimes you need three years just to exist. That sometimes you need to make one real friend instead of a hundred fake ones.

Moving On

After seven years, I left Champaign to regroup.

The house, the friend, the music, the bikes — they had given me what I needed. Now I needed something else. Something new. Something that would take me to the next part of the story.

I didn't know what was coming. I just knew it was time to move.