

# CHAPTER 1

## A Cold Start

I woke to the sound of screeching tires and the side-to-side veering of the Dodge Econoline van I was riding in. Disoriented, I grabbed the seat in front of me and gathered my bearings. My brother, Iszel, also snapped his eyes open. He sat next to me in the back of the tan ten-seater. Our older brother, Jacque, sat in the row in front of us, his 12-year-old arms spread across the back of his seat as if to create a physical barrier between us and the driver. He'd never let his guard down enough to sleep. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the white man who was trying to coax the shimmying van up a snowy hill.

I peered out the window at the churning mid-afternoon sky and saw that we were at the bottom of a long driveway, apparently in the middle of nowhere. The wind howled in different high and low tones past the van. My hammering heart began to slow as I switched my attention back to the driver, Henry Hill, the stiff and aloof man who had picked us up from Main Campus in Philly. We were informed that morning that he was the houseparent of a group home in Avondale, Pennsylvania, where my brothers and I had been placed. The house had five other guys living there and had openings for three more boys. None of us had ever heard of Avondale before and had no idea what to expect. It looked like the end of the world, populated by trees and little else. Just how long had I fallen asleep? It was my coping mechanism in stressful situations like this one, and I wondered how far from North Philly we had gone.

Henry took a long drag of his Newport in frustration. He let the smoke out in a noiseless whistle as he reached behind the steering wheel, cocked the gear stick, and put the van in reverse. Trying not to lose too much of his uphill progress, he pumped the van's brakes to avoid it gaining backward momentum. He shifted back to 'Drive' and gave it some gas. The van nudged forward a little bit but began fishtailing again in the accumulating snow on the driveway. He dropped the butt of his cigarette into a paper cup in the cupholder, the hot ash sizzling as it extinguished in the remnants of cold coffee. He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled another cigarette out of the pack, lit it, and took a long drag. I watched, disgusted, hating the smell and the whole situation. Henry

considered his snowy nemesis, his unreadable eyes thickly bespectacled. He finally reached behind the steering wheel, jammed the gear stick to 'P,' turned the key, and peered through the rear-view mirror at us. Smoke escaped his lips as he spoke. "Boys, we're gonna hafta walk the rest of the way." His rough, country accent set me on edge.

Jacque gave us a nearly imperceptible nod to grab our stuff, which amounted to a couple of grocery bags of second-hand clothes each. Wearing a thin spring jacket with a t-shirt underneath, blue jeans, and a pair of Pro-Keds low-top black canvas shoes, he took a beat before shoving the door open and allowing the blast of icy air to invade the cabin of the vehicle. As he climbed out, the cold hit me like a ton of bricks. Instead of jumping out, I recoiled back into the van, using the bags as a shield.

"Elliott, Ikey, let's go!" Jacque called sternly. Resigned, we complied and climbed out into the wintry weather. I immediately began to shiver.

It was early January 1985. The thick layer of snow carpeting the ground suggested it had been snowing for days, and it wasn't showing any signs of letting up. I was nine years old. Iszel was eight. This would be the fifth alternative living situation for my brothers and me in the last year – if we survived the trek to the foreboding house overlooking the small development we had just driven through.

Henry didn't wait; instead, he plodded up the hill toward the house with his hands shoved deep in his pockets and the freshly lit Newport hanging from his mouth. His baseball cap was pulled low over his eyes, and his jacket collar was flipped up to protect his neck. He scrunched his shoulders as high as they could go, the tops of them nearly touching his exposed earlobes. His face was down, and he allowed the brim of the hat to take on the blustery, snowy gusts. Jacque gave him plenty of space before shuffling behind him, trying his best to shield us from the wintry onslaught while also keeping himself between Henry, Iszel, and me. Instead of following the long, arching driveway, Henry opted for the more direct path across the cornfield that ran alongside the driveway. His heavy boots crunched the remnants of last year's crop. Our sneakered footfalls were less effective. We trudged along, trying to lift our feet high enough to avoid the short, frozen stalks. I tripped and fell forward, spilling into the snow. Iszel, following closely behind, almost falling on top of me. The snow was numbingly cold on my bare hands, and I started crying.

Jacque grabbed my arm, pulling me. "Get up!" he ordered. He grabbed one of my bags and dusted the snow off my hands and knees. "You're fine. Stop crying."

We emerged from the cornfield onto the beginning of the large lawn in front of the house. Woods backed the dwelling like a thick, protective curtain. I also noted a weathered and dilapidated barn in the distance across the gravelly drive. Its white paint was peeling, its missing planks of wood exposing the inside to the elements. We still had a decent walk to go, but the grass was easier to negotiate than the cornfield. Henry was a good distance ahead of us, and Jacque picked up his pace. We followed suit, trying not to slip. Icy gusts blew the snow in billowy circles around us, battering our faces and settling in our hair.

With each step, my uneasiness grew. The house had a deep, red-brick exterior, dark windows, and white shutters. Its three stories towered ominously over the ten-house development below. It loomed tall and wide, like a thick-necked bully ready to take lunch money from a smaller, weaker classmate. Although there was a light dusting on its rooftop, the wintry mix pelting us seemed to avoid the overwhelming house, which swallowed the six acres of fields and woods around it.

It was eerily quiet as we finally made it to the front porch. Too quiet for a house where five other boys were supposed to live. There was a coldness to it, and I had a feeling it would not be much warmer inside. We climbed the porch steps, kicking snow off our shoes as best we could before entering to discover what the house had in store for us.