

CHAPTER 1

Homebound

In the year 2005

“Ouch!” Johnny yelled as Sarah maliciously clamped two fingers down, pinching against her brother’s forearm. “What’s wrong with you?” Johnny hoped his cry would echo throughout the car’s interior, inviting parental support.

“Just checking to see whether you’re awake, Brother. We’ve been motoring along the compound for a while now, and we’ll soon be home.”

Johnny thought Sarah’s meager attempt at an apology lacked remorse. “I wasn’t sleeping, Sis. I had my eyes closed, thinking how great university will be—away from you!”

While counting down the days to the start of a new life away from home, Johnny recalled his plays with his high school basketball team. He hoped he could accomplish as much and knew he had to improve his game. Up for the challenge and standing a few bumps over six feet, he could outperform many in his league.

Only a few minutes from home, Johnny’s cries did not cause the car to waver in the slightest. Father was always prepared for sudden changes in driving conditions, be it the neurotic drivers he was forced to share the road with to abrupt changes in the weather or talk of legendary family tales. Even on this day of family conflict, Father kept control of the vehicle.

This trip home was not so different from any other, John thought as he maneuvered the car into a sharp bend. Upon approaching the last stretch of road, he began to accelerate. Gearing up, he synchronized the shift with the rpm displayed. With the compound gates in sight, he signaled his intention to exit. He downshifted meticulously, and the engine roared. Now in first gear, he prepared the vehicle for the steep climb of embedded stone that lay ahead. With the road behind them, the wheels made contact. They were home.

Jolted, Mother awoke—or was it Johnny’s scream of pain that caused her to open her eyes? “All right, you two. I don’t know who started it, but let me take a guess.” She turned to face the rear cabin.

“You’re correct, Mother,” Johnny called out, interrupting. “It’s your lovable daughter. She’s misbehaving—again!” *This time she went too far,* Johnny thought. “Did they not write a song titled ‘Your Lovable Daughter’? And yes, Mother, Sarah started it. I can answer the *what* part. You will need to ask your lovable daughter the *why* part.”

“Eloquently put,” Mother said with a hand clap of amusement.

“Would it please the audience if I were to follow through with an encore?” Johnny asked, bowing his head in appreciation.

“The show’s over, Johnny,” Mother announced. “We’re home already. At least I didn’t ask your father to stop the car.”

“Stop the car?” Sarah cried out. “We all know Father doesn’t like to make stops—and when he does, there’s always a lecture to follow. Would someone please tell me why it was necessary to live this far out? Why couldn’t we live in the city like normal people?”

Aghast at her words, Johnny remained silent as he waited for a rebuttal from Mother or Father.

“Far from what?” Father uttered. Sneaking a peak into the rearview mirror, he attempted to capture their attention.

John shut off the engine, and the family remained in silence—but only for a moment. “Tell you guys what. When you’re both old enough, the place you decide to live will be yours. But mark my words: you will always call this place home, no matter how far you choose to venture. Then maybe, just maybe, that choice will be with the normal people, if you can believe that.”

From the rearview mirror, they fixed their eyes on Father. It was lecture time, thought Johnny and Sarah, and Father had stopped the car.

It was John who stepped out first. Stretching his arms and legs wide, he let out a roar. Keeping in shape was important to him, but he knew stretching and bending would not be enough. *The drive home seemed to take longer*, he thought, *but*

the clock doesn't lie. The time blame would go to the weekend travelers and those neurotic drivers. The weekenders, as he liked to call them, were those trying to escape their city, that place they liked to call home.

After waving to his wife, Manuela, John made his way to the front passenger door, but she opened it before he could. "You're wide awake," John said to his wife.

"And the kids made sure of that," she replied angrily. Quickly Johnny and Sarah turned, staring face-to-face as if asking who was to blame.

"Awake, Mother?" Sarah asked, giggling.

"You guys coming in?" Father asked as he poked his head into the rear cabin.

"I'll be in soon," Johnny said, still hoping for that overdue parental support. "I'll need a minute to stretch out these stiff legs. The drive back seemed to take forever."

"Too long of a drive for you? How so, Son? You're much too young to be complaining about stiff legs. Why don't you get out before dark and take a run? Stretch those stiff legs of yours. The track is out there waiting for you. I'll join you if you like," Father said proudly.

"I don't think you would be able to keep up with me," Johnny said, trusting he hadn't offended his father.

“Who said it would be a competition, Son? I’m up to the challenge, if that’s what you want. Think about this for a moment, would you? How many fathers do you know who are my age and can fit into their sons’ clothes?”

Johnny said, “Okay, I’ll admit you’re in better shape than most men your age. But, if you recall, you have a shorter inseam than I do.”

“What does that have to do with it? You’re not much taller than I am,” Father said defensively.

“Really, Father? I’m in a different league altogether. Tonight I have a lot of work to catch up on, so can I take a rain check on that? Then we’ll see what league you belong in,” Johnny said. He realized it’d been a while since he’d taken a serious run on the track.

“Coming in, Sarah?” Mother asked.

“I’ll be in shortly.”

“Let’s go in, then,” Manuela said to her husband, closing the door behind them. “Did Sarah say anything while I was sleeping?” Mother whispered in Father’s ear.

“No, not at all, other than the little scuffle they just had. Otherwise, she never said a word,” John replied.

“I’m worried about her, John,” Manuela said, reaching for his hand.

“We both are. Maybe what she needs is more time, and then she’ll be her old self again,” John said, attempting a positive outlook.

“I hope so.” Turning away, she said, “I need to get dinner started.”

“It’s getting late. I’ll give you a hand with that,” John said, leading her into the kitchen.

“John, tell the kids to come in soon, and make sure they don’t leave the door open. With the rain and warmer temperatures, the mosquitoes believe summer never left. There’s so many of them, and one just bit me,” Manuela said, slapping the back of her neck. “Did I get him?”

“I believe you did,” John said, rubbing her back. “Have you forgotten? Only female mosquitoes bite.”

“You’re correct. That’s ‘got her,’ but that was a different kind of female animal altogether,” Manuela said, smiling.

“You’re the animal. That was an insect you just slapped,” John said, grinning.

“You’re bad,” Manuela said, squeezing his hand. “So, let’s all do our part by making sure they don’t follow us inside.”

“I’ll make sure they close the door. But the forecast said it’s going to rain. The good news is they also said the temperature

will be dropping tonight, moving out the humidity. That should rid us of the mosquitoes, and the timing couldn't be better. I'll be up early, stacking firewood before that snow arrives.”