

Chapter 1: Why the Cold Wins — The Mistake That Sends People to the ER or the Impound Lot

Somewhere in this country tonight, a man is sitting behind the wheel of a parked car with the engine running, telling himself it's just for twenty more minutes. He's not stupid. He's tired, he's cold, and the heater vents are the only warm thing within reach. He doesn't know his exhaust pipe is half-buried in snow, or that the rubber seal around his trunk gave out two winters ago. He falls asleep at minute twelve.

That scene isn't rare. It's one of the two ways this goes wrong, and I've come dangerously close to both of them myself.

I spent four winters living out of a converted minivan before I figured out the system this book is built on. The first winter, I did what everyone does: I ran the engine when I got too cold to think straight, and I burned through gas money I needed for the next day's work. The second winter, I got smarter about fuel and started experimenting with a propane camp stove inside the van with the windows cracked "just enough." I woke up at 4 a.m. with a headache like someone had driven a nail through my skull and my hands wouldn't stop shaking. I didn't know yet that this was carbon monoxide talking to me. I just knew something was very wrong, and I got the door open in time. I've thought about that night more than almost any other night in that van.

Two ways to lose, one way to win

This chapter is about naming the trap before you build anything, so the rest of this book actually works.

The two failure patterns: burning fuel you don't have, or burning something you should never burn indoors

There are exactly two ways people try to solve vehicle cold, and both of them are built on the same false idea: that warmth has to come from burning something.

Pattern one is burning fuel you don't have. This is the engine-idling habit — running the car to run the heater. It feels free because you already own the car and the gas is already in the tank. But gas is money, and if you're reading this book tonight, you already know how little of that you have left. Every hour of idling is an hour you're spending toward tomorrow's gas station, and most people who idle all night wake up with a quarter tank and no plan for how to fill it again.

Pattern two is burning something you should never burn indoors. This is the propane heater, the charcoal grill dragged inside for "just a little heat," the camp stove lit with the windows barely cracked. People reach for this because it feels like a controlled trade — small flame, small space, contained risk. It isn't. Vandwellers on cold-climate forums who run propane "Buddy"-style heaters as a no-engine warming method say the same thing every time: crack a window, never run it unattended overnight, don't trust the built-in low-oxygen shutoff sensor as your only safeguard. That's not a footnote from cautious people. That's a warning from people who use these heaters regularly and know exactly how they fail.

Both patterns end in one of two places: the emergency room, or the impound lot, because a vehicle burning fuel indefinitely eventually draws attention, breaks down, or runs somebody out of the money that was supposed to get them through the week.

Warmth that depends on burning fuel is warmth you'll eventually run out of, one way or another — in gas money, in air, or in luck.

Why running the engine is not a heat plan — the math on gas, wear, and carbon monoxide poisoning in a closed cabin

Let's do the math nobody does at 2 a.m. when they're freezing.

An idling engine burns roughly a quarter to half a gallon of gas per hour, depending on the vehicle. Run it for six hours a night, five nights a week, and you're spending gas money on heat that a few dollars of cardboard and a sealed jar of hot water can replace for free, as you'll see starting in Chapter 3. That's money that should be going toward food, toward a tank of gas to get to a job interview, toward literally anything except idling in a parking lot.

Beyond the money, there's wear: idling runs your engine without the airflow that normally cools it, and it burns oil in a way that shortens the life of the one asset standing between you and actual homelessness. Your vehicle isn't just your shelter. For most people in this situation, it's also transportation to work, to appointments, to the next opportunity. Treating it like a disposable furnace puts that asset at risk.

But the number that should actually scare you is this one: more than 400 Americans die every year from unintentional, non-fire carbon monoxide poisoning, over 100,000 end up in the emergency room, and more than 14,000 are hospitalized^{1, 2}. That's not from house fires or industrial accidents. Much of it is exactly the scenario I described at the start of this chapter — engines running, exhaust systems that aren't perfect, people asleep and unable to notice the warning signs.

Here's the part almost nobody knows until it's too late: you don't need a broken car to get poisoned. A clogged or iced tailpipe, or an aging exhaust system with a small leak, can let carbon monoxide seep into a parked cabin even while the engine is running completely normally^{1, 3}. Snow around your tailpipe isn't just an inconvenience. It's a mechanism for turning your own engine into the thing that kills you in your sleep, with no smell, no smoke, and no warning before it happens. We'll go deeper into exactly how carbon monoxide kills silently, and what's safe versus what's never worth the risk, in Chapter 10.

So the engine isn't a heat plan. It's a stopgap that costs you money, wears down your only shelter, and carries a real, documented risk of killing you without so much as a cough to warn you first.

The scale of the problem: how many Americans are sleeping in vehicles tonight, and why the number is rising, not falling

If you feel like you're the only one dealing with this, you're not, and that matters more than it might seem, because it means the system in this book has been tested by a lot more people than just me.

Researchers estimate that 20-30% of unsheltered homeless individuals in the US live in vehicles, which works out to roughly 45,000 to 67,500 people nationally, though no single dataset tracks this cleanly because a lot of vehicle dwellers never show up in official counts at all^{4, 5}. In some cities, vehicle living isn't the exception, it's close to the rule: about 35% of San Francisco's unsheltered population lives in vehicles, 50% in Seattle, and nearly 60% in Los Angeles^{6, 7}. In LA specifically, the number of people living in RVs, vans, and cars rose 55% between 2016 and 2020, from about 12,200 to roughly 18,900 people⁸.

And this isn't only happening to people who've lost everything. A full-time worker in the US now needs to earn nearly \$29 an hour to afford a one-bedroom rental nationally⁹. That gap between what work pays and what rent costs is exactly why coverage of people who are employed full-time and still living in cars keeps showing up in the news — the working poor, not just the chronically unhoused, are increasingly ending up here.

Reality check: In Los Angeles's official homeless count, people living in vehicles broke down as 49% in RVs/campers, 28% in vans, and 23% in cars⁸. If you're reading this in a car tonight, you're in the smaller share, not the only one.

The number is rising, not falling, because the underlying math — wages against rent — hasn't been fixed, and because a wave of new state and local laws is making it harder, not easier, to simply exist in a parked vehicle. We'll cover exactly what's legal, what's risky, and how to reduce your exposure to towing and citations in a later chapter. Tonight, the only thing that matters is that you're not an outlier. You're part of a pattern large enough that a whole body of practical, tested knowledge exists for surviving it, and that's what the rest of this book hands you.

What this book replaces: the store-bought heater assumption, and the myth that warmth costs money

Almost everyone's first instinct is the same: I need to buy a heater. A propane heater, a 12-volt heater, a battery pack big enough to run one all night. And if you had \$600 lying around for a solar power station and panel bundle, or even \$50 for a small propane setup, that instinct wouldn't be wrong¹⁰. But you're reading this book because you don't have that money tonight. Maybe you don't have it this month.

So here's the myth this book exists to kill: **that warmth is something you buy.**

Warmth, physically, is something you already have. Your body produces it constantly, all night, for free, just by being alive. The only question is whether you're losing that heat faster than your body makes it, or holding onto it. Everything in this book — the cardboard layering in Chapter 3, the candle-and-clay method in Chapter 5, the hot-rock and hot-water-bottle protocols in Chapters 6 and 7, the sleeping nest in Chapter 8 — is built around one idea: **stop losing the heat you already have, instead of trying to manufacture more of it by burning fuel you don't have.**

- ✓ Stop treating the engine as your heat source starting tonight
- ✓ Check your tailpipe for snow or ice buildup before you do anything else
- ✓ Accept that the real fix isn't a purchase, it's a system you build with what's already around you
- ✓ Read Chapter 2 before you build anything — it gives you the framework everything else in this book hangs on

I want to be straight with you about something. The night I got sick from that propane stove, I didn't fix my situation by buying a better heater. I fixed it by learning a framework that didn't depend on flame or fuel at all, and it's the same framework I'm about to hand you. But there's a harder question sitting underneath all of this, one that most people never stop to ask before they start improvising: if body heat is already enough, why does almost everyone still wake up cold anyway? That's not a mystery of willpower. It's a mistake in exactly one step of a four-part system, and finding out which step is where Chapter 2 begins.