

# SOUL STEALER



NYTHAN

SHANE BOULWARE

# Prologue

*Fortune favors the bold, but no one tells you she hates the ambitious. It's the sort of lesson life lets you learn the hard way.*

*I heard Thomas Jefferson once say that honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom. I don't lay claim to wisdom, but I can manage the honesty. So, if I'm being honest, then you need to know that this isn't the story of champions. Nor is it a story of soulmates and true love.*

*This is a story about failure.*

*As much as I want it to be about sunshine and roses, you can't escape those lessons life wants you to learn the hard way. But if there's a silver lining anywhere in all this, it's that big things have small beginnings. One spark of hope can light a raging fire that burns all the lies away. The truth has a funny way of setting people free like that, if only they have the courage to listen.*

*To be honest...I'm not sure you should've come, but I'm glad you're here.*

## Chapter 1

### All Good Things...

Nythan Dwienz scrunched his eyebrows as he inspected his cadet uniform lying on the bed. He stood a lean five feet, six inches, weighing in at 140 pounds. His buzzcut made him look like the younger brother in *American History X*. Nythan stepped back, gazing at the creased dress shirt. He then looked down at four instruction books laying evenly spaced on the bed, all flipped open to pages of photos, diagrams, and highlighted paragraphs. Nythan picked up the one turned to a picture of a uniform and held it beside his own.

Nythan smiled. "Perfect match."

He jumped as a sharp crack resonated down the hall, and he stared through the open door.

*Juuuuust ignore it, he thought.*

His friend Pamela had left her house in his care for a few days while she visited her family in New England. When Pamela had showed him around the place, she told him that the county considered her 1910 residence

historic. The high ceilings, wood paneling, and faded marble floors gave the place a stately feel. But the random sounds of the old house shifting on its pier and beam foundation made him paranoid about the walls coming down around him.

Nythan set the textbook down and neatly squared it against the rest. Returning his attention to his uniform, he used a pair of small scissors to trim frayed strands of thread from his shoes. A high-pitched creak echoed from the hallway, and he again turned toward the door. That noise didn't sound like the groaning of walls or the strain of the ceiling. A slow panic twisted Nythan's stomach into knots.

He shook himself and sighed. *I wish this house would just...stop.* He strode over to the open door, gave it a forceful push closed, and pressed the lock button. *Better safe than sorry.*

Nythan finished going over his uniform, scanning up and down until he was sure that not even the tiniest blemish remained. He then scanned one of his highlighted books to confirm the measurements of his medals. As a cadet in the U.S. Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps at the University of Central Florida, he spent a great deal of time preparing for all the knowledge tests and uniform inspections.

Nythan swelled with pride as he hung up the uniform on the closet door, snapping to rigid attention in front of it. "FLIGHT, TENCH-HUT! DRESS RIGHT, HESS!"

He relaxed, appraising the flat pockets and razor-sharp creases. "There's no way we're going to fail this time."

Nythan cast a worried look at the door, sighing before he grabbed the doorknob. He peeked through the crack as the door opened.

*Stop being stupid,* Nythan chastised.

He stole a glance down either side of the long, narrow, beige hallway for reassurance. One end led to the master bedroom. The other led to a dead-end wall with an open doorway leading to the dining room on the left and a single-step stair descending into the living room on the right.

Nythan stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him. He hustled inside the bathroom next to his room and closed that door too, only relaxing when he heard the *snap* of the lock button as he pushed it in with his thumb.

# Chapter 2

## The First

Nythan came out of the shower, shaking droplets of water from his body like a wet puppy. His stomach growled as he dried off and got into a pair of shorts.

*Oops*, he thought. *Forgot dinner*. He walked down the hall and turned toward the living room on his way to the kitchen when another high-pitched creak sounded behind him. Eyes widening, he whirled and looked across the hallway, where he saw a wiry man in the dining room fumble with and drop a platter of Pamela's finery.

"Don't move! Don't move!" The intruder yelled, ripping a knife from a worn leather sheath clipped to his sweatpants. He rushed Nythan.

Nythan's whole body seized for a split second, then he lurched backward.

Forgetting the step-down behind him, he tumbled into the living room. He scrambled to one knee as the trespasser swung the knife over his head and whipped it down at Nythan's shoulder. Nythan raised both hands to block the weapon, but the descending dagger fell short of its target, missed his shoulder, and sliced long and deep into his lower right forearm. He groaned in pain, while grasping the man's bony knuckles on the knife hilt with his left hand to keep the weapon from cutting deeper.

"I said...don't move!" his attacker said, trying to saw the blade into Nythan's arm.

The edge freed itself from his forearm as he threw himself backward. The burglar and his knife came crashing down on top of him. This time, Nythan grabbed for the intruder's wrists, stopping the spiked tip a few inches from his chest. Sweat ran down the burglar's face, a drop falling on Nythan's forehead.

Nythan squirmed to keep the dagger away, but it didn't dissuade the blade's course. His face contorted, teeth gritted, as the blade came ever closer. A millimeter of the knife's point pierced Nythan's left chest muscle, then burrowed further. It felt like a thousand tiny fire ants gnawing on that one spot.

Nythan's face twisted into pure rage in a last-ditch effort to thwart his attacker. *To quit is to die!*

The intruder grunted and pressed down harder. Both he and Nythan locked eyes as the knife slid in deeper. Nythan gasped and cried out. He felt his lungs tighten and his chest constrict.

Suddenly, his assailant shuddered, eyes rolling into the back of his head. A silver gas exited his nostrils, traveling into Nythan's hyperventilating mouth. The man's grip on the knife released, his body slumping on Nythan. An explosion of energy filled Nythan to the brim, and he yanked the blade out of his chest. He thrust the corpse off him, kicking as much distance as he could between himself and the body. Blood seeped from Nythan's chest and spurting from his forearm.

He started to retch, but then only burped. Traces of the ethereal mist floated out before dissipating. Nythan's attention fell back on his assailant's unmoving body as a prickly sensation washed through him.

*What the hell just happened?* he thought.