

## CHAPTER 1

# THE BEGINNING OF THE END

So this is how it feels to take a man's life. Forced to kill for one's own survival.

I looked down at the puddle of blood by my feet, locking eyes with my own reflection. Fluorescent lights flickered overhead. How'd I get here? I was just a dude who worked at the grocery store.

Now here I was, standing over a man I murdered.

I guess in that moment it was attempted murder. He was still desperately gasping for air. Sucking in his last breaths. But there was no doubt about it—he was dying a violent death and experiencing every moment of it.

In the mornings when I left my apartment for work, sometimes I would hold the elevator door for Mrs. Huffle. She was a sweet woman in her seventies. Say the elevator stopped and some sick game began where only one of us could leave the box alive. Would she kill me to survive?

Would she have it in her to pull the trigger and meet her friend Dolores in time for brunch? Man, I think about shit like that all the time, too much, I suppose. The funny part is I always thought of myself as such a good guy, you know? Someone who would do anything to avoid confrontation.

What the fuck happened? This wasn't me. But none of this was what it seemed to be, quite honestly.

The blood on my hands smelled metallic. It reminded me of when my uncle would work on his truck. I must have been three years old. You know when you smell something and it takes you back in an instant—back to a memory as vivid as the page you're reading this very moment, even though you haven't thought about it since your brain shelved it decades ago? I was brought back to reality by the feeling of blood crawling down my forearms.

It dripped onto the floor from my fingertips, like a faucet when a child doesn't shut it off after brushing their teeth. It was thick like maple syrup but not sticky, more like red coffee creamer.

Planting my knee on the ground, I reached into the pocket of the dying man's button-down. I took out his pack of cigarettes and silver Zippo. I forced a few cigs from the pack with an upward jolt, snatching one with my lips so I didn't stain the butt with blood. The man was wheezing now. Inhaling in intervals, like someone heaving during a nightmare. Maybe that's what this was, just a nightmare. I mean, to be honest, none of it felt real, except for the blinding pain from the open wound on my head.

And that's when he spoke.

"Flynn, you were doing so well."

Bubbles popped from his blood-covered lips.

Flicking the lid of the Zippo, I tried to light my cigarette to no avail.

"Mmmm-hmmm," I muttered as I struck it again, this time igniting the cigarette. I noticed the words *Vanilla Sky*

engraved on the top of the lighter.  
I brought my cigarette to the man's lips.  
"There you go," I said. "Now puff."  
I could hear sirens and fire trucks in the distance.  
His lips stained the butt of the cigarette, like the lipstick  
of a single mom driving an Astro van in the 90s to  
pick up her fifth-grade son from soccer practice. Poufy  
hair and shoulder pads, you know the one.  
"This is all Lola's fault, you know," he said.  
"I know," I said.  
He laughed, until the pain in his chest forced out a  
groan, reminding us both of the whole dying thing happening.  
"Flynn, what's—what's my—my . . . last na—"  
"I don't know," I said. "I told you that already."  
"Flynn, did we have fun?" he asked.  
"You ruined my life."