

Chapter 1: The Locket

The alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m. It is my eighteenth birthday. I slap it silent before the second beep.

Downstairs, Thunder is already moving. Coffee. The low murmur of the radio. The sound of a cabinet closing with care, like he is trying not to wake the whole neighborhood.

I pull on my running shorts and a faded Navy PT shirt that used to hang loose on me. It fits now. Barely.

When I hit the kitchen, he is standing at the counter, mug in hand, looking out the window like he is checking a perimeter no one else can see.

“Morning, old man.”

He turns. Even retired, he moves like he is still on a clock. Fast. Clean. No wasted motion.

“Old man,” he says. “I can still run you into the ground.”

“Prove it.”

He smiles, but his eyes stay sharp.

We do five miles through the park while the sky is still gray. He sets the pace. I follow, then I push, because I always push. Thunder trained me to treat comfort like a trap.

He is quiet for most of it. I can read him better than any friend at school. Thunder has tells.

Today his shoulders sit a little higher than normal. His jaw is tight. His breathing is controlled, but his focus is not on the run.

It is on me.

At mile four, I pull even with him.

“You going easy on me because it’s my birthday?”

He exhales through his nose. “No.”

I grin. “Good.”

At the end, I finish half a step ahead. Not enough to brag about, enough to make him notice.

He stops and puts his hands on his hips. Sweat runs down his temple. He does not look tired. He looks like he is filing away data.

“Thirty seconds,” I say, trying to keep my voice casual.

“You’re getting faster,” he says. “Annapolis is still going to chew you up.”

“I know.”

The acceptance letter is three weeks old. It sits on my desk like a loaded weapon. July 1. Induction Day. Plebe Summer. The start of a life I have wanted since I was little.

Thunder has made sure I do not romanticize it. He does not do romance. He does readiness.

We start walking back toward the car. The park is empty except for one guy walking a dog and a couple of older women in bright jackets doing laps at a pace that makes me feel lazy.

Thunder watches them. Then he watches me again.

“One more thing,” he says.

Here it comes. Thunder never wastes a morning. He stacks lessons like bricks.

We reach the edge of the field where the trees thicken. He pulls a compass from his pocket and presses it into my hand.

“You’re at grid three-four-seven-eight-two-nine,” he says. “You need to reach three-five-one-eight-three-four. Fastest route. Go.”

I stare at him. “On my birthday.”

He holds my eyes. “On your birthday.”

He is not smiling now.

I look down. I take a breath. I do the math. Distance. Bearing. Terrain. The creek. The small rise that turns your calves into fire if you hit it wrong.

“Northeast,” I say. “Three clicks. Forest will slow us. Creek crossing is the choke point. Forty minutes.”

“Thirty-five.”

“You want me to cut the creek.”

“I want you to think.”

I hate how much I love this. I hate how much I want to impress him.

“Fine,” I say. “Move.”

We do it in thirty-three.

The creek costs me time. I adjust. I keep moving. When I hit the grid point, I stop and turn back to him, breathing hard, heart hammering.

He nods once. Approval. It lands like a medal.

“Good adaptation,” he says. “You saw the problem and fixed it.”

“It still sucked.”

“It’s supposed to.”

We drive home in silence. Not awkward. Just our normal.

Thunder’s truck smells like coffee and leather and the faint bite of gun oil, even though he swears he does not keep anything in the cab.

At the house, I shower fast. The water does not wash off the run. It does not wash off the feeling in my chest that this day is heavier than a birthday should be.

At two, my friends show up and turn our quiet house into a small hurricane.

Maya brings balloons and a cake she definitely did not bake. Jessica brings chips and some loud playlist. Kevin brings nothing and acts like his presence is a gift.

Thunder plays the background role. The cool dad who somehow knows when the drinks are low without looking at the table. The man who can stand in a room full of teenagers and still make it feel like the house is secure.

I catch him watching me a few times. Not in a creepy way. In a way that makes my stomach twist.

Like he is memorizing.

By eight, everyone is gone. The house smells like perfume and frosting. Paper plates sit in a stack like evidence. My phone is full of stupid birthday photos I will never post.

Thunder and I clean up together. I scrape cake into the trash while he wipes the counter with slow, deliberate strokes.

He throws the last bag into the outside bin and comes back in.

“Sit,” he says.

I drop onto the couch and stretch my legs out. My body feels used up, the good kind of used up. The kind I want before Annapolis.

Thunder sits at the other end of the couch, far enough to keep space, close enough to feel like family.

He reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a silver chain.

An oval locket hangs from it. Old. Heavy. Covered in delicate script I cannot read.

My chest tightens so fast it feels like pain.

He holds it out, but he does not let go.

“Sorry it’s not wrapped,” he says. “I spent all my money on beer and whiskey at the 7-Eleven.”

I snort, because that is what we do when something is too serious. We pretend it is not serious until we cannot.

His grin flickers. Then it dies.

“Before I give you this,” he says, “there’s a story you need.”

Of course there is.

Thunder does not lecture. He tells stories. Always has.

When I got detention in sixth grade, I got a story about a guy who made a small stupid choice and paid for it for ten years.

When I made honor roll, I got a story about a teammate who stayed humble because he knew life could drop you in the dirt at any time.

When Jake Morrison asked me to homecoming, Thunder waited until five minutes before the doorbell and told me a story about a girl who thought she was in control until she was not.

I have never heard him tell a story like he does not want to tell it.

Tonight, he looks like he is walking into a room he avoided for eighteen years.

“Sam,” he says.

He only uses my full name when he needs me focused.

“You know you’re adopted.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“You never asked about it.”

“You’re my dad,” I say. “That’s enough.”

His eyes soften. “I appreciate that.”

Then he looks straight at me, and the air shifts.

“But there are twelve months missing from your life,” he says. “Twelve months that finish the story of who you are.”

My throat goes dry.

He sets the chain in his palm like it weighs more than metal.

“Two thousand seven,” he says. “Iraq. Near Tikrit.”

The words hit like cold water. Iraq is not a place to me. It is a word from movies and the news and the occasional shadow in Thunder’s eyes when fireworks go off too close.

“Third deployment,” he continues. His voice flattens, controlled. The voice he uses when he is stepping through a drill. “My platoon was hunting a bomb maker. We had an interpreter. Local guy. He worked with us for two years.”

He pauses. His fingers tighten on the locket.

“His name was Karim.”

I stop breathing.

“Our lieutenant decided to check on Karim’s family first,” he says. “Make sure they were safe before we started clearing houses.”

He looks past me, like the living room wall is gone and he is seeing dust and heat instead.

“His wife opened the door,” he says. “Her name was Dalal.”

Mother.

The word lands in my chest like a rock.

“She did not speak much English,” Thunder says. “But she welcomed us in. Small house. Two windows. A table with breakfast. Three boys eating. Dalal held a baby.”

He swallows.

“You,” he says.

I blink, hard. My eyes sting.

“She handed you to her oldest son,” he continues. “Iyad. He was around eight.”

Thunder’s jaw tightens. His hands clench, then relax, then clench again.

“Dalal poured tea,” he says. “A kettle on the stove. The room smelled like bread and smoke and something sweet. I remember thinking it felt normal. Too normal.”

He exhales slowly.

“Someone knocked,” he says. “Hard. Karim went to the door. When he opened it, a man pushed in. Heavy jacket. Shouting. I heard the phrase. I heard it and I knew.”

He closes his eyes. His face tightens like he is bracing for impact that already happened.

“Karim grabbed him,” he says. “Threw him down. Dalal moved first. Faster than any of us. She dove on him and covered him with her body.”

My stomach flips.

“The blast went off,” Thunder says. “There was fire. Noise. Dust. Then nothing made sense.”

He opens his eyes again. They are wet, but he does not let the tears fall.

“I woke up on a helicopter,” he says. “Shrapnel in my side. Blood in my mouth. The sound in my ears was like a bell that would not stop.”

He stares at me.

“And you were screaming,” he says. “Someone had you in their arms. You were alive.”

I cannot feel my hands. They have gone numb.

“What happened to them,” I whisper.

Thunder breathes in, then out. Slow. Like he is forcing his body to stay calm.

“Karim and Dalal died right there,” he says. “Instant.”

My vision blurs. I blink again, but the blur stays.

“The three boys,” he says, “they were killed when the roof came down.”

I make a sound. It is not a word. It is air leaving my body like a wound.

“But Iyad,” Thunder says, and his voice breaks on the name, “Iyad threw himself over you. His body took the debris.”

My heart pounds so hard I can hear it.

“You had cuts,” Thunder says. “Bruises. Nothing else.”

I stare at him.

I see him in the kitchen every morning. I see him on the porch when he thinks I am asleep. I see him after a bad day at school when he asks one question and somehow knows the whole story.

I have never seen him look like this.

He is not telling a story to teach me.

He is telling a story to confess.

“I was in Germany for three weeks,” he says. “Then Walter Reed. When I could think again, I asked what happened to you.”

He looks down at his hands.

“They tried to find Karim’s relatives,” he says. “Command sent people. They asked around. They checked camps. They checked lists. Nothing. The village took mortar fire two days later. People fled. Records burned. Names disappeared.”

He looks up again.

“And I was lying in a hospital bed with a piece of metal in my side and a baby who had no one,” he says.

My voice is thin. “So you brought me home.”

He nods once.

“I pulled every favor I had,” he says. “I called in debts. I broke rules. I fought people in uniforms and people in suits. I did not care.”

His mouth tightens.

“Your parents saved my life,” he says. “Your brother saved yours. I owed you more than a report.”

He holds up the locket.

“This was all they recovered from the house,” he says. “It was under rubble. Bent but intact. I kept it.”

I stare at the script. It looks like art. It looks like a language I should have known.

“I never found your name,” Thunder says. “Your real one. The one your mother whispered into your hair. The one your father wrote down somewhere.”

My throat tightens.

“So I named you Samantha,” he says. “After my grandmother. She raised me after my mom died when I was six. My dad died two years later. She taught me what family is.”

His eyes hold mine.

“I wanted you to have a name tied to someone who loved me into a man,” he says. “Because I did not know how else to do it.”

The room feels too small. The couch feels like it is sinking.

I glance at the clock. Ten p.m.

This morning I was eighteen and sure of who I was.

Now I am eighteen and the ground under my feet is not the same.

I am Iraqi.

My birth parents died saving Thunder.

My brothers died protecting me.

I have a name I have never heard.

Thunder holds out the chain again.

This time he lets go.

I take it. It is cold and heavy in my palm.

Questions slam into my head so fast I cannot catch them.

What did my mother look like when she laughed.

Did my father have my eyes.

Did my brothers fight over who got to hold me.

Does anyone remember them.

Does anyone remember me.

Nothing comes out of my mouth.

I stand up without meaning to.

Thunder shifts like he is going to follow me, then he stops. He lets me have the space. That is what he does when I am on the edge of something.

I walk down the hall to my room.

My Naval Academy letter sits on my desk. My running shoes sit by the door. The compass from last year sits on the shelf.

Evidence of Samantha Williams.

I sit on the edge of the bed and stare at the locket.

The script catches the lamp light. I trace it with my thumb.

It is beautiful. It feels like it belongs to someone else.

I try to open it. The hinge gives a little, then stops. Like it has a secret I do not know how to reach.

I press it to my palm.

Then my chest caves.

I pull a pillow over my face and I cry until my throat hurts and my body shakes and I cannot breathe right.

I do not cry like this. Thunder taught me better than this.

But Thunder did not teach me how to be someone's daughter twice.
After a long time, the sobbing fades into quiet, ugly breaths.
I sit up. My face is wet. My eyes burn.
I put the chain around my neck.
The locket settles against my sternum like a weight and a promise.
I stare at my reflection in the dark window.
I look the same.
But I am not the same.
I whisper into the room, to no one and to everyone.
"Karim."
"Dalal."
"Iyad."
The names feel strange in my mouth.
Then I hear Thunder's footsteps in the hall. He stops outside my door.
He does not knock.
He does not come in.
He just stands there.
I can feel him, like a guard at a door he has protected for eighteen years.
After a minute, he speaks softly through the wood.
"Sam."
I wipe my face fast, like he cannot already hear what happened.
"Yeah."
"I'm here," he says.
"I know."
Silence.
Then, quieter, like it costs him to say it.
"I'm sorry."
My hand closes around the locket.
"I know," I say again, but I do not know what I mean.

His footsteps move away.

I lie back on the bed with the locket against my chest and stare at the ceiling until my eyes finally close.

I do not sleep.

Not really.

I drift in and out of a place where my life has two beginnings, and neither one feels like mine yet.