CHAPTER ONE: GRADUATION DAY

The oath takes forty- three seconds.

I know because I counted. Not from anxiety - from habit. Timing is data. Data is control. I stood in the third row and moved my lips with the others and felt the words go into me the way words only go in when you have been waiting your whole life to say them.

I do solemnly swear.

The auditorium smelled like pressed wool and cut grass through the open doors. Annapolis in May. Somewhere behind me, a parent was crying. I could hear it without turning around.

I did not turn around.

That I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States.

The gold stripe on my shoulder board caught the light when I shifted my weight. I had checked it three times in the mirror that morning. Not vanity. Verification. The stripe was real. The rank was real. The name on the order sheet was real.

Ensign Samantha Williams, United States Navy.

Williams.

Not Hêvî. Not the name on the paper in the locket. Not the name my grandmother said into my hair in a village outside Erbil while the whole family pressed in close and Rashid's voice broke trying to translate.

Williams. Here. Official. Mine.

Both names are mine. I have been working on believing that for eighteen months.

So help me God.

Forty- three seconds.

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Thunder was in the seventh row.

I found him before the ceremony started, the way I always find him - not by looking directly, but by reading the room until one point in it feels different from the others. He was in civilian clothes. Dark jacket. No tie. He sat very still in a row of parents who were leaning forward, checking programs, taking photos.

He was not leaning forward.

He was scanning.

Door left. Door right. The balcony. The exits. The two men in suits near the stage who were almost certainly just administrative staff and whom Thunder had nonetheless already assigned a category.

I looked at him for three seconds.

He found me in exactly two.

His face did not change. He did not wave. He did not mouth my name. He did the thing he always does when he is proud of something and has no intention of saying so.

He nodded. Once.

I looked back at the stage.

I filed that nod somewhere it would not get lost.

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The orders were waiting in my inbox before the reception ended.

I read them in the parking lot, standing beside a car that still had the USNA visitor tag on the dashboard. Thunder stood two feet away eating a sandwich he had produced from somewhere without explanation. BJ leaned against the hood with his arms crossed and his eyes on the entrance.

The orders were clean. Specific. A billet in an intelligence analysis cell. Suitland, Maryland. Report date in thirty days.

I read them twice.

Then I read the name at the top.

Ensign Samantha Williams.

Not a question. Not a blank to fill in. My name, in government type, attached to a set of instructions about my life.

Thunder finished the sandwich. He looked at the orders without reaching for them.

“Intel,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Analysis.”

“Yes.”

He was quiet for a moment. Not the comfortable quiet. The kind where he is running a route in his head and checking every intersection.

“Good billet,” he said finally.

“That’s all?”

He looked at me. “What do you want me to say?”

I folded the orders. “I don’t know.”

“You want me to tell you it’s going to be clean.” He wasn’t asking.

“No.” I put the orders in my bag. “I want you to tell me what to watch for.”

Thunder’s eyes moved to the parking lot entrance, then back to me. The same sweep he had run on the auditorium. The same category assignment.

“You already know,” he said.

He was right. I did know.

Process over people. Paper as weapon. The lane that is handled elsewhere. The smile that lands wrong.

I had been learning the language for two years. Now I was going to work inside the institution that spoke it.

BJ pushed off the hood. “Car’s getting warm,” he said.

Thunder picked up his jacket. He stopped beside me for a moment - not a hug, not a speech. He put one hand briefly on my shoulder, the way you check a knot before trusting your weight to it. Then he walked to the car.

I stood in the parking lot for another thirty seconds.

Ensign Williams.

Hêvî.

Both names. One set of orders. Thirty days.

I started walking.