

Chapter 1

The Quiet Room

The house on Highgate Hill had forty-one windows, three of them fake, and a security system that had cost more than most people's homes. Rowan Vance knew this because she had sold it to Griffin Marsh herself, eight months earlier, standing in his marble front hall with a tablet in her hand while he asked her, twice, whether it could be hacked from China.

It could not be hacked from China. It could, however, be walked through, if you had spent eight months learning its patience — the ninety seconds between the exterior sensors arming and the interior ones waking up, the blind cone behind the east chimney where the cameras had been angled to protect a hedge instead of a door, the fact that Griffin Marsh, who did not trust his own board of directors, trusted his housekeeper enough to give her a code that never changed.

Rowan was through the service door at 1:14 in the morning. She did not run. Running was for people who thought they might be caught, and being caught was not a category she allowed herself to think about, the way a surgeon does not think about her own hands shaking.

The house smelled like lemon oil and the particular staleness of rooms that are cleaned every day and

lived in almost never. She crossed the kitchen without touching the counters, climbed the back stairs on the side where they didn't creak, and stopped outside a door that, according to the floor plans she'd pulled while installing the system, wasn't supposed to be a room at all.

It was a closet, on paper. In practice it was four feet deep and lined in cedar and it held, along with a rack of unworn suits, a safe bolted through the floor into a poured-concrete slab that had been added to the house's foundation eleven years ago, the same year Marsh Dynamics went public.

She didn't touch the dial for a long moment. She just listened — to the house settling, to a pipe ticking somewhere below her, to nothing at all coming from the direction of the master bedroom, where Griffin Marsh slept the sleep of a man who had never once in his life believed anyone could get to him.

The safe took eleven minutes. It should have taken six, but her hands were cold, and cold hands lie to you about what they're feeling through the tumblers.

Inside was what she expected. Bearer bonds she didn't touch. A stack of cash in a rubber band she didn't touch. A jewelry case, unopened, that she didn't touch. And beneath a false floor that had taken Griffin Marsh's security architect three separate design meetings to get exactly right, a single manila envelope, unmarked, sealed with a strip of red wax that had been pressed with a signet ring shaped like a lowercase letter.

She lifted it out. It weighed almost nothing. It weighed, in the way that mattered, more than everything else in the safe combined.

She left the bonds. She left the cash. She left the jewelry case sitting exactly where it had been, six degrees rotated from true so that anyone who knew to look would know someone had been there, and anyone who didn't would never notice at all.

Rowan closed the safe, spun the dial back to the number Marsh himself had chosen — his daughter's birthday, which was the kind of thing people did when they believed no one was ever going to ask — and stood for a moment in the cedar dark with the envelope against her chest, feeling her own heartbeat as if it belonged to someone else.

Somewhere below her, a clock chimed the half hour, soft and expensive.

She went out the way she'd come in, past the blind cone behind the chimney, through the ninety seconds that belonged to her and to no one else, and by 1:41 she was three streets away, sitting in a fourteen-year-old sedan with a parking permit for a hospital she'd never worked at, watching the lights of Highgate Hill lie there in the dark like something asleep and dreaming well.

She did not open the envelope. She never opened them in the car. That was a rule, one of the first ones she'd made for herself, back when she was still inventing the person she was going to have to become: you do not read another man's ruin by

streetlight, sitting in a stolen kind of stillness, feeling anything that might look, even to yourself, like triumph.

What she felt instead, driving home with both hands correctly at ten and two, was something closer to grief. It always was. That had surprised her the first time. It didn't anymore.

Griffin Marsh would wake up in six hours, dress in a suit tailored in Milan, eat egg whites standing at his kitchen island, and drive to an office where four hundred people believed he had built something out of nothing. He would not know, not yet, that the thing he had built out of somebody else was no longer his to protect.

He would not know it for three more days. Rowan had learned to wait. Waiting was its own kind of mercy, though she doubted Griffin Marsh would ever think to thank her for it.

She parked outside her apartment on the unglamorous end of Foundry Row, above a shuttered print shop that still had a faded sign in the window advertising business cards at a price no one had charged since before she was born. She climbed the outside stairs, let herself in, and set the envelope on the kitchen table beside a chipped mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST LOCKSMITH, a joke gift from Des that she'd never had the heart to throw away.

She thought, sitting there, about the first rule she had ever made for herself, back when the whole enterprise had still been more grief than plan: that

she would never let herself become the thing she was trying to dismantle. Griffin Marsh had built a fortune on somebody else's mind and called it his own genius. It would have been easy, she knew, to let herself believe that taking his secret made her the clever one now, the one who'd finally out-maneuvered him. She did not let herself believe that. Cleverness was not the same as justice, and she had watched, in the years since her father died, exactly how many clever men mistook the one for the other.

The mug on the table caught the streetlight at an angle that made WORLD'S OKAYEST LOCKSMITH look, for a moment, like something engraved on a headstone, and Rowan almost laughed, alone in her kitchen at two in the morning, at the particular absurdity of grief finding its way even into a joke gift from a man who loved her. She thought of her father's hands again, steady once, before they weren't. She thought of the version of herself that might have existed if none of this had happened — an ordinary woman with an ordinary trade, sleeping through nights instead of counting the hours until she was allowed to open an envelope.

She did not know that woman. She had stopped trying to imagine her years ago. What she knew instead, sitting at her kitchen table with the whole of Griffin Marsh's ruin folded into a manila envelope in front of her, was the particular, hard-won peace of a person who has finally stopped asking whether the life she'd built for herself was the one she would have chosen, and started simply living the one she had.