

## PROLOGUE

The rain gathered slowly, settling into a steady drizzle that coated the marble in a thin, reflective sheen. Water traced the curves of the staircase and gathered along the edges before slipping free, dripping in quiet, uneven intervals. The house stood open and exposed to it, untouched and pristine, as if nothing had ever gone wrong here.

Freya stood with Steve and Jack at the rear of the house, her eyes fixed on the staircase leading down toward the pool. The white stone held the light in a way that should have felt clean.

It didn't.

The weight in the air pressed against her chest without explanation. The clouds had swallowed the moon, leaving only a low, suffocating darkness overhead. Rain tapped steadily against the pool, the sound repeating without pause, soft enough to ignore, constant enough that it couldn't be.

Light spilled from inside through the tall French doors, warm and golden.

Wrong.

"Steve..." Her voice dragged, slow and uneven, like it had to force its way out. "You sure there's nobody home?"

Jack answered immediately, sharp and irritated. "I already checked. No one's here."

Freya didn't look at him. She kept staring at the lights.

"They wouldn't just leave everything on," she said, though the thought didn't feel fully formed even as she spoke it.

Steve turned, his expression tightening. "Just shut up."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a small square of foil, tossing it toward her without looking.

It slipped through her fingers and landed in the shallow water at her feet.

Her body reacted before her thoughts caught up.

She dropped immediately, hands pressing against the wet stone as she searched for it, her breathing already quickening. The fading edge of her high left something hollow behind, something that pulled at her from the inside.

She found the foil and opened it with shaking hands. The straw inside was blackened and warped from use, its shape and texture already known to her hands in a way that bypassed thought and went straight to need.

She worked without thinking, bringing the flame beneath the foil and holding it there as the heat built and the smoke began to curl upward toward her.

She inhaled deeply, holding it longer than she should have.

The world softened.

Edges blurred. Sound dulled. The tightness in her chest loosened just enough to breathe through.

Steve's voice continued somewhere behind her, rising and falling with a frustration she no longer had to carry.

"These people don't give a damn about anyone but themselves," he said. "They take everything and leave the rest of us with nothing."

Jack murmured something in agreement.

Freya let it pass through her.

A hand grabbed her arm.

"Move."

She let herself be pulled upright, her balance lagging behind the motion. The ground shifted slightly beneath her before settling again.

Jack moved ahead. Steve wrapped his hand and drove his fist through the glass.

The sound cracked through the space.

Freya flinched late.

Steve reached in, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

She followed.

They had barely entered when the voice came from the stairwell.

“Who are you? What are you doing in my house?”

The words reached her.

They didn't stay.

Movement followed. Fast. Heavy.

A crash.

A scream.

Something struck the ground hard enough that the vibration carried through her feet.

“Grab her! Tie her down!”

Steve’s voice cut through everything else.

Freya’s vision shifted. The edges of the room smeared and struggled to hold their shape.

Something was pressed into her hands.

Weight.

Solid.

Her arms moved.

She didn’t choose it.

The motion came first. The understanding didn’t.

She swung.

No direction. No control. The movement disconnected from everything around her. Her body felt distant, like it belonged to something else.

Voices overlapped, losing meaning as they collided.

“No—leave her—”

A sharp impact.

A sound that should have anchored her.

It didn't.

The world slipped.

Her body dropped, the ground rising up to meet her as everything narrowed and then disappeared.

Darkness took her.

Pain brought her back.

Sharp. Immediate.

“Freya. Wake up.”

Her head pounded as she forced her eyes open. Steve's face hovered too close, his expression hard, impatient.

Then the smell reached her.

Metallic. Thick.

Wrong.

She pushed herself up slightly. Her hands dragged across the floor.

Wet.

She looked down.

Red.

Too much.

Her breathing changed without her meaning for it to.

She lifted her head.

A man lay across the floor, his chest barely moving, each breath uneven and wet. A woman sat tied to a chair, her head angled forward in a way that didn't make sense.

There was blood everywhere.

It spread across the marble. Across the walls. Across her.

Her stomach twisted.

She turned and retched, her body folding in on itself as the motion took over. Nothing came up, but it didn't stop the force of it, didn't stop the strain or the tears that blurred everything in front of her.

A sound tore from her throat.

"Look what I found."

Freya turned.

Jack dragged a girl into the room.

Small.

Too small.

Her hands were bound in front of her. Her knees scraped across the floor as she was forced forward, leaving streaks behind her. Her face was wet, but she didn't scream.

She stared.

Steve stepped toward her.

"We can't leave witnesses," he said, his voice low. "But we don't have to rush it."

Something broke through the fog.

Not thought.

Not understanding.

Just force.

No.

Freya moved.

She hit him hard enough to stumble him, her hands striking without strength but without stopping.

“You said no one would be here,” she said, the words tearing out of her. “We weren’t supposed to hurt anyone.”

He shoved her.

She hit the floor. Pain flared across her shoulder.

He moved toward her again—

And stopped.

Freya followed his line of sight.

The man on the floor was moving.

His arm shook as it lifted, blood soaking through his clothes. A gun rested in his hand.

His eyes locked onto Steve.

The shot split the room.

Steve dropped instantly.

Jack ran.

Freya didn't move.

She stared at Steve's body, at the way it didn't respond, at the blood spreading beneath him.

Then she turned.

The man was still breathing.

Barely.

Each breath sounded like it hurt.

Tears ran down his face.

Freya felt it then.

Not a thought.

Not a realization.

Something inside her giving way.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice breaking apart as it left her. “I’m so sorry.”

The words didn’t reach him the way she meant them to.

They weren’t for him.

They weren’t for forgiveness.

They came from somewhere deeper, pulled up from everything she had done, everything in front of her, everything she couldn’t undo.

She didn’t look away.

The man looked past her.

At the girl.

Then he raised the gun.

Freya stayed where she was.

The shot echoed.

There was no pain.

Light.

Then nothing.

The room didn't change.

Rain continued to strike the broken glass. Wind pressed through the open space. Somewhere in the house, a faint alarm repeated.

The girl moved.

Slowly, dragging herself across the floor, her hands still bound. Blood smeared beneath her as she reached her parents. She pressed into them, her body shaking as her sobs filled the room.

No one came.

Nothing answered.

Something moved through the room.

Not fast.

Not slow.

It passed between what remained, crossing the space with quiet intention. It did not disturb anything. It did not hesitate.

It reached Freya and stopped.

For a moment, it remained there.

Then it bent.

Two fingers pressed lightly against her neck.

No urgency. No doubt.

It held there only long enough.

Then it straightened.

It turned, continuing through the room the same way it had entered, moving past the broken glass, past the light, past the sound of the girl's sobbing.

It did not acknowledge any of it.

It reached the edge of the space.

And faded.

Leaving nothing behind.

Nothing changed.