

PROLOGUE

Elias Everard had already forgotten the woman's name by the time he found her corpse.

Five years.

Five ghosts.

Sixteen—no, twenty-one—victims.

He always made himself wait until the first full day passed before checking on his volunteers. Sometimes, they'd make it that long, but only if Minerva was particularly slow in her hunt that time around. The longest anyone had ever made it before being found by her was a week. That was the first time.

This woman was number sixteen. What was her name...Judy? Mid-thirties, lived alone. No family or friends who would miss her if something happened. Just another lonely human who wanted something to do with nothing to lose. The same cut-out of every person who had taken Elias' offer yet.

Always the same.

Over and over.

Nothing ever changed.

He was disappointed, but not surprised, when he entered the house to find two bullets in her chest. He'd seen the same fate too many times to be shocked. Based on her position, she'd been running toward the door. She was the seventh to make that mistake.

It was recent, too; the blood was still slick. Constance was calming down Minerva, holding her lover in a tight embrace. Elias could overhear the teenager's panicked mumblings as she realized what she did to the woman, but he knew he didn't need to worry about them.

Her memories would restart, anyway. Every kill would be as fresh as the first. The cycle would repeat.

Always the same.

Over and over.

Nothing ever changed.

From over Minerva's shoulder, the French woman met Elias' eyes. They had long since dried, no longer tearing up with every new death. She knew better than to mourn the lives of those she couldn't reach in time—it made both of their jobs easier.

Elias gave her a nod, and she closed her eyes, tightening her grip.

He scooped up the body, ignoring the pop and twist of his joints while bringing it around the back of the mansion. A small corner, tucked away to conceal it from prying eyes. No one would see it unless they came too close, but he was very cautious to avoid that. If normal people found this...he couldn't bear to think of it.

Finally, he reached the plot. *Judith Sampson*. That was her name, according to the note he'd left himself. Beside fifteen more who had suffered the same fate.

There was too much blood on his hands.

Too many bodies now in the ground.

He needed to try something new.

Something needed to change.

Along with that thought came a new one. Not just any thought: an idea. One he'd never considered before, suddenly popping in his head like a lightbulb sparking to life.

It was risky. If Elias was being honest with himself, he had no idea how it would work. But he needed to try.

He laid the grass blanket over Judith Sampson's body before standing up.

He would fix this.

No one else would die on his behalf.