

The Fourth Mara



Mara-Elizabeth Vest

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<https://litres.ru/74436424>

SelfPub; 2026

Аннотация

Mara and her companion escaped the city to protect her daughter, Lily. But when Lily draws a strange matrix and a mysterious woman with Mara's face appears, the past returns. A shadowy Fourth clone has stolen Mara's identity, and the ruthless Original Mara is still alive, coming to take her life and daughter back.

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Book 2

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Three Months Later

Three months had passed since I found Lily.

Three months since I had stood in a doorway and heard her call me Mama.

Three months since I had decided that whatever I had been before, whatever they had made me into, whatever pieces of other people lived inside my head, I was going to be myself.

It sounded easier when I said it out loud.

It wasn't.

Lily was asleep upstairs.

I stood in the kitchen with a cup of coffee that had gone cold twenty minutes ago, staring through the window at the street.

Nothing happened.

That was what frightened me.

For five years, something had always been happening.

A knock at the door.

A photograph.

A voice I didn't recognize.

A woman with my face.

A memory that didn't belong to me.

Now there was nothing.

Just rain.

The kind that turned the streetlights into pale yellow circles

and made the city look softer than it really was.

I should have been grateful.

Instead, I kept waiting.

He came into the kitchen behind me.

I heard his footsteps before I saw him.

"You've been standing there for ten minutes."

"Have I?"

"Yes."

I looked at the clock.

He was right.

I smiled faintly.

"You've started counting?"

"I've had practice."

He leaned against the counter.

He looked different now.

Not younger.

Not happier.

Just less haunted.

I wondered if I looked the same.

Probably not.

There were some things a face couldn't hide.

"You should sleep," he said.

"So should you."

"I wasn't the one staring out the window."

"I wasn't staring."

"You were."

I turned toward him.

"Do you always have to be right?"

"No."

A pause.

"Just usually."

I almost smiled.

Almost.

Then I saw movement across the street.

A woman.

She was standing beneath a black umbrella.

I stopped breathing.

He noticed immediately.

"What?"

I didn't answer.

The woman didn't move.

She was too far away for me to see her face clearly.

But I knew.

I knew before she turned.

My body recognized her first.

The umbrella tilted slightly.

Her face appeared beneath it.

My face.

My stomach dropped.

She stood there for several seconds.

Looking directly at our house.

Then she turned and walked away.

I was already moving.

"Where are you going?"

"Stay here."

"Mara."

I grabbed my coat.

He caught my wrist.

"Don't."

I looked at him.

"You saw her."

His grip loosened.

"Yes."

"Then you know why I'm going."

"No."

His voice was quiet.

"You don't know what you're walking into."

I pulled my hand free.

"Neither do you."

I opened the door.

Cold air rushed inside.

He followed me.

Of course he did.

We crossed the street.

The woman was gone.

There was only the rain.

And a small piece of red ribbon lying near the curb.

I bent down and picked it up.

It was wet.

Fresh.

I knew that ribbon.

I had seen it before.

Not on the street.

Not in a photograph.

In Lily's room.

She wore one exactly like it when she slept.

I looked at him.

"Where did this come from?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you know?"

He looked at the empty street.

"I don't know."

I laughed quietly.

"That's becoming a habit."

He looked at me.

"I mean it."

I held the ribbon tighter.

"Someone was standing here."

"Yes."

"She had my face."

"I know."

"And she left this."

His eyes moved to the ribbon.

For the first time that morning, I saw the old fear return.

Not much.

Just enough.

"Let's go inside."

"No."

"Mara."

"Who is she?"

He looked at me for a long moment.

"I don't know."

I stepped closer.

"Then why are you afraid?"

He didn't answer.

That was answer enough.

We went back inside.

Lily was still asleep.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs and listened to her breathing through the ceiling.

For a moment, everything felt normal again.

Then I heard something upstairs.

A soft scratching sound.

I looked at him.

"Did you hear that?"

He nodded.

We went upstairs together.

Lily's bedroom door was open.

She was sitting on the floor.

Drawing.

She looked up at me.

"Mama."

I smiled.

"What are you drawing?"

She turned the paper toward me.

Four women stood beneath a black sky.

All four had the same face.

Mine.

I stared at the drawing.

"Lily..."

She looked at me.

"Who are they?"

She pointed at the first woman.

"You."

The second.

"You too."

The third.

"You."

I pointed to the fourth.

"And her?"

Lily became quiet.

Then she looked toward the window.

"Her too."

I felt something cold move through me.

"What makes her different?"

Lily looked back at the drawing.

"She's the one who remembers."

"Remembers what?"

Lily shrugged.

"Everything."

I looked at him.

He had gone pale.

I turned back to Lily.

"Did someone tell you to draw this?"

She shook her head.

"Who showed you these women?"

"No one."

"Then how do you know them?"

Lily looked at me as if the answer was obvious.

"Because she comes to see me."

My heart stopped.

"Who?"

Lily smiled.

"The woman who looks like you."

Lily's Drawing

I didn't sleep that night.

Neither did he.

Lily slept peacefully in the room next door, completely unaware that she had just taken everything I thought I knew and torn it apart.

I sat at the kitchen table with the drawing in front of me.

Four women.

Four identical faces.

The first three were drawn in black pencil.

The fourth was drawn in red.

I kept staring at her.

There was something wrong with the picture.

Something I couldn't explain.

"You're going to make yourself sick."

His voice came from behind me.

I didn't look up.

"She said someone visits her."

"I heard."

"How long have you known?"

"I don't."

I looked at him.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Answer a question with another question."

He pulled out the chair opposite me.

"I don't know who she is."

"But you know something."

He was silent.

I pushed the drawing toward him.

"Who are the four women?"

"I don't know."

"Then tell me what you do know."

He looked down.

"The woman you saw today isn't the woman from the hotel."

I frowned.

"How do you know?"

"Because she's dead."

"Evelyn was dead."

"Yes."

"Until she wasn't."

He didn't answer.

I leaned back.

"So we're doing this again."

"No."

"It feels exactly like last time."

"It's not."

"How is it different?"

He looked at me.

"Last time, you didn't know who you were."

"And now?"

"Now you know."

I almost laughed.

"Do I?"

He didn't respond.

I looked down at the drawing again.

"Four women."

He nodded.

"Why four?"

"I don't know."

I hated that answer.

I stood and walked to the window.

The street was empty.

No woman.

No umbrella.

Nothing.

"She was watching the house."

"I know."

"How?"

"I saw her."

I turned around.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I wanted you to have one normal morning."

I stared at him.

"That was your idea of normal?"

"No."

His voice softened.

"It was my idea of letting you breathe."

I looked away.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then he said my name.

"Mara."

I turned.

"There's something you need to know."

My stomach tightened.

"What?"

"I found something yesterday."

"Where?"

"In your old apartment."

I stared at him.

"You went there?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because someone had been inside."

He reached into his coat and placed an envelope on the table.

My initials were written on the front.

M.V.

I didn't touch it.

"What is it?"

"A photograph."

"Of what?"

"You."

I looked at him.

"Another one?"

"Yes."

I opened the envelope.

There was a photograph inside.

I was standing in front of a building I didn't recognize.

The picture looked old.

Five years old.

Maybe more.

I turned it over.

There was writing on the back.

My handwriting.

I recognized it immediately.

One sentence.

I looked at him.

"What does this mean?"

He read it.

His face changed.

"What?"

He didn't answer.

I pushed the photograph toward him.

He finally spoke.

"It says, 'If she finds me, don't let her come home.'"

I felt the blood leave my face.

"Who is she?"

"I don't know."

I stood.

"You're lying."

"I'm not."

"You always say that."

"I know."

I looked at the photograph again.

There was something in the background.

A window.

Someone was standing behind it.

A woman.

I brought the picture closer to the light. The shape in the window wasn't just a shadow. It was a face. My face. But she was staring directly at the camera with an expression of pure, calculated malice.

"She didn't find you five years ago, Mara," the Companion whispered, his hand gently dropping onto my shoulder. "She was the one who built you."

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I did not tell him where I was going.

I waited until Lily was asleep.

Then I took the photograph, my coat, and left.

The city was quiet at night.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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