

THE
HOUSE
WITHOUT
WINDOWS

A central graphic featuring a shattered keyhole shape. The keyhole is white and appears to be made of a material that has been broken apart, with numerous sharp, angular fragments of the original material floating around it. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly black or very dark grey. Overlaid on this background are numerous thin, red, scratch-like lines that crisscross the entire area, giving the impression of a heavily scratched or damaged surface. The overall effect is one of horror and mystery.

MARA-ELIZABETH VEST

Mara-Elizabeth Vest

The House Without Windows

«АВТОР»

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Vest M.

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The final book of the psychological thriller trilogy. Mara has the silver key, but the truth is hidden behind a locked door in the darkest place of her past—the house without windows. To save Lily and find her real name, Mara must face the memories she was supposed to forget, the Fourth clone, and the lethal return of the Original.

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Mara-Elizabeth Vest

The House Without Windows

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Book 3

Book 3

The metallic tang of old blood was gone, replaced by the sterile, freezing bite of winter rain. But in my mind, the stains never really faded.

We had left the cottage behind. It was no longer a fortress; it was a compromised coordinates box. Lily was asleep in the backseat of the stolen sedan, wrapped in the same woolen blanket, her breathing a soft, steady rhythm that kept me anchored to reality. The Companion drove in silence, his eyes darting between the rearview mirror and the dark, wet highway stretching ahead. The neon glow of the city grid was already painting the horizon in sickly shades of pink and blue.

We were running back toward the fire.

I sat in the passenger seat, my fingers tracing the cold engraving on the silver key. M.V. 4. The metal was light, almost weightless, but it felt like a lead anchor in my palm. The number four looked too clean, too precise. It wasn't scratched on by a desperate hand. It had been laser-etched in a laboratory.

"She knew where we were," I whispered, breaking the hours of silence.

The Companion didn't look at me. His knuckles were white against the steering wheel. "The Fourth has access to the primary network. If she's active in the city, she has the satellite sweeps. I told you, Mara. The moment she woke up, our peace died."

"But she didn't send soldiers," I countered, looking down at the key. "She came herself. She spoke to Lily. She gave her this. Why would a newer model try to help me?"

"You think this is help?" The Companion laughed bitterly, a dry, hollow sound. "She didn't give you a key, Mara. She gave you a leash. She's pulling you back to the slaughterhouse because she can't open that door alone."

I turned the key over. Beneath the numbers, there was a tiny, microscopic sequence of coordinates. Six digits. A localized grid map. I didn't need a computer to recognize them. My duplicated brain, with all its stolen habits, mapped out the layout of the old industrial sector instantly.

"It's the old pharmaceutical plant," I said, the realization hitting my chest like a physical blow. "Near the river. The one that burned down five years ago."

The Companion suddenly slammed on the brakes, pulling the car onto the muddy shoulder of the road. The tires screeched against the wet asphalt. He turned to me, his face pale, his eyes wide with a look of raw, unadulterated panic.

"What did you just say?" he demanded.

"The coordinates. They point to the river plant. Why? What's there?"

He grabbed my wrist, his grip shaking. "The fire five years ago wasn't an accident, Mara. That wasn't a pharmaceutical plant. That was the first nest. That was the house where the first Mara MV-1 signed the contracts. If that key fits a lock down there, we aren't just looking for memories."

He looked back at Lily, then back at me, his voice dropping to a terrified whisper.

"We are looking for the cradle."

The city didn't welcome us back; it swallowed us whole.

The rain grew heavier as we crossed the bridge into the central district. Towering digital billboards lined the streets, casting giant, flashing shadows over the crowded sidewalks. I pulled my hood low, leaning away from the glass, but as we stopped at a crowded intersection, my heart stopped beating completely.

A massive, three-story holographic advertisement flickered to life right above our car.

It was a promotional campaign for Vest-Tech Logistics—a multi-billion dollar corporate empire. And standing in the center of the flashing blue light, wearing a pristine, tailored white

corporate suit, was a woman. She was smiling a perfect, cold, practiced smile. She was speaking about future investments, her voice smooth, articulate, and completely devoid of human warmth.

She had my face.

"Look," I choked out, pointing up through the windshield.

The Companion looked up, his jaw tightening until the muscle clicked. "Mara-Elizabeth Vest. Chief Executive Officer. Announced three weeks ago. The public thinks she was recovering from a long illness abroad."

"She's wearing my name," I whispered, tears of pure fury stinging my eyes. "She's living my life. She's walking through my world while I'm hiding in the dirt like a rat."

"She's not living your life, Third," the Companion said coldly, stepping on the gas as the light turned green. "She's living the life the Original designed. The organization didn't just build a clone to hunt you. They built a clone to replace the asset. She owns the banks, the property, the security codes. To the police, you are an imposter. To the corporation, you are a defective product that needs to be recycled."

I stared at the giant hologram as it faded in the rearview mirror. The Fourth version wasn't hiding in dark alleys. She was sitting in a penthouse, protected by armed security and corporate law.

"She looked right at the camera," I muttered, my hands shaking inside my coat pockets. "She knows I'm looking at her."

"Good," the Companion muttered, pulling the car into a dark, underground parking garage beneath a derelict warehouse. "Because if she knows you're looking, she's going to make her first mistake."

The underground garage smelled of oil and stagnant water. It was the lowest level, reserved for broken machinery and forgotten storage crates. A single fluorescent bulb flickered overhead, buzzing like an angry insect.

We left Lily in the car with the doors locked and the engine running softly to keep her warm. The Companion stepped out first, his hand resting beneath his jacket, right on the grip of his weapon. I followed him, the silver key heavy in my palm.

"We need supplies," he said, scanning the shadows. "Food, a secure radio link, fresh license plates. Stay near the concrete pillar."

He walked toward the service elevator. I watched him go, but before he could reach the metal doors, a strange, familiar scent hit my nose. Expensive silk. Fresh leather. And a faint note of high-end perfume.

The buzzing light overhead died completely.

"Companion?" I called out into the pitch blackness.

No answer. The silence was absolute.

Then, a soft click of heels echoed against the concrete floor. Tap. Tap. Tap. The sound wasn't coming from the elevator. It was coming from behind me. From the darkest corner of the garage.

I spun around, pulling the small knife from my pocket. "Who's there?"

A lighter clicked. A small, orange flame illuminated a face just inches from mine.

It was like looking into a cold, flawless mirror.

The Fourth stood there, holding a cigarette between her gloved fingers. She didn't have her corporate white suit on now; she was wearing a long black leather coat, her dark hair cut into a sharp, perfect bob. Her eyes—my eyes—were wide, dark, and utterly vacant of fear.

"You shouldn't have brought the child back to the city, Third," the Fourth said, her voice dropping into that chillingly perfect octave I had heard on the phone.

"What do you want from us?" I hissed, raising the knife. "Why did you give Lily that photograph? Why the key?"

The Fourth blew a ring of gray smoke into my face. She didn't even look at the knife. "Because your time is running out. The memory transfer process... it has a shelf life. Look at your hands, Third. Are they shaking? Do you hear the ringing in your ears?"

My breath hitched. She knew.

"The Third model was stable for five years because you stayed dormant," she whispered, leaning closer until I could feel her cold breath on my cheek. "But now the code is waking up. If you don't use that silver key to access the central terminal in the House Without Windows, your brain will collapse into a permanent blackout within a week. I'm not trying to save your life. I'm trying to save the data inside your head before it rots."

"You're lying," I whispered, but my knees felt weak.

"Am I?" The Fourth smiled, a terrifyingly sharp expression. "Ask your Companion. Ask him why he really keeps you alive. He doesn't love you, sweetie. He's just waiting for you to remember where the original Mara hid the money."

A loud bang echoed from the elevator hallway—the Companion was running back.

The Fourth stepped back into the shadows, the lighter flame dying out. "Find the door, Third. Before I have to come and take the child myself."

When the Companion threw open the stairwell door with his weapon drawn, the corner was completely empty. There was only the smell of expensive perfume and a single, burning cigarette butt on the wet concrete.

The safehouse was a small, windowless concrete room hidden behind a false wall in the warehouse basement. A single mattress lay in the corner, where Lily was now sleeping, exhausted from the long journey.

I sat on a wooden crate, my head buried in my hands. The ringing in my skull was back, a low, rhythmic thumping that felt like a countdown clock. The Fourth's words were looping in my brain.

An outdated model. A permanent blackout.

The Companion stood by the small electric heater, his back to me. He had taken off his jacket, revealing the thick, white surgical scars that ran across his shoulder blades and down his spine. They looked like old burn marks, shaped in strange, geometric lines.

"She said my brain is going to collapse," I said, my voice cracking in the quiet room. "She said you're just using me to find the money."

The Companion didn't move for a long time. Then, he let out a long, ragged breath and turned around. His face looked completely defeated.

"She's right about the blackout," he said quietly.

I looked up, my chest tightening. "What?"

"The memory transfer isn't permanent, Mara. It never was. The organization designed the clones to last exactly five years before the neural pathways degrade. They want the models to self-destruct so no evidence remains. You've been active for five years and three months. You're already on borrowed time."

"And the money?" I stepped closer to him, my eyes blazing. "The original Mara's fortune? Is that why you kept me?"

"No!" He grabbed my shoulders, his eyes wild with a sudden, desperate emotion. "I don't care about the money, Mara! Look at my back! Look at these scars!"

He pointed to the geometric marks on his skin.

"Five years ago, in Room 814, I wasn't just your handler. I was the head of security for the primary lab. When the First Mara decided to shut down the project, she didn't just run—she locked the main archive inside her own digital imprint and tried to destroy everything. The organization caught me. They strapped me to a table and burned the encrypted access codes into my own skin, using me as a physical hard drive."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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