

THE NIGHT
HE CAME
BACK



MARIA ELIZABETH VEST

Mara-Elizabeth Vest

The Night He Came Back

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Аннотация

A tense psychological thriller following Mara, who wakes up with amnesia next to a dead man. Five years later, her past caught up with her as she discovers she is the "Third" version of herself. To save her daughter Lily, she must unlock a hidden archive before a dangerous organization hunts her down.

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He came back on a Tuesday. I remember that because Tuesdays were always quiet. No parties. No excuses to dress up. No reason to stay awake past midnight. Just the city outside my window, the sound of tires on wet asphalt, and me sitting on the floor of my apartment with a glass of wine I hadn't touched in an hour.

Then someone knocked. Three times. Slow. Like they already knew I was home. I didn't move. The knocking came again. Three times. I knew who it was before I opened the door. Some people leave a mark on your life. He left one on my nervous system. I opened it anyway.

He looked almost exactly the same. That was the worst part. Same dark coat. Same tired eyes. Same little scar near his eyebrow that I used to touch when he was asleep. Five years. Five years and my body recognized him before my mind could catch up. He looked at me for a long moment. Then he said, "Hi."

I almost laughed. That was all he had? Five years of silence. Five years of letting me believe he was dead. And—Hi. I didn't invite him in.

"You shouldn't be here."

"I know."

"Then why are you?"

He looked past me, into the apartment. "You still have the

blue curtains.”

I stared at him. “You came back from the dead to talk about my curtains?”

His mouth moved slightly. Not quite a smile. “You always hated those curtains.”

“I hated a lot of things about you.”

“I know.”

The rain started again. I should have closed the door. Instead, I stepped aside. He walked in. And just like that, five years disappeared. Not because I forgave him. I didn’t. But because some people don’t really leave you. They just become quieter inside your head.

He stood in my living room, looking at the photographs on the wall. There weren’t many. I had taken most of them down. There was one left. A black-and-white picture of us on a train. He was asleep. I was looking at him. Young. Stupid. In love. He noticed it.

“You kept it.”

“No.” I looked at the photograph. “I forgot it was there.”

He nodded. Neither of us believed me.

Then he reached into his coat. My hand immediately went to the knife on the table. He noticed.

“Still carrying that?”

“Still giving me reasons to.”

He pulled out an envelope. No name. No address. Just my initials. M.V. He put it on the table.

“You need to leave the city.”

I looked at him. “That’s why you came?”

“Yes.”

I laughed this time. A small, ugly sound. “You disappear for five years and come back to give me travel advice?”

“It’s not advice.”

“What is it?”

“A warning.”

I picked up the envelope. Inside was a photograph. A woman standing outside a hotel. Blonde hair. Black coat. My face. My body went cold. I looked at him.

“Who is she?”

“You.”

“No.”

“She died three days ago.”

I looked back at the photograph. The woman was standing under a streetlight. She was looking directly at the camera. And she was wearing my necklace. The one I had lost the night he disappeared. I touched my throat without thinking.

“Where did you get this?”

“I told you. You need to leave.”

“Who is she?”

He didn’t answer. I stepped closer. “Who is she?”

He finally looked at me. And I saw something in his face I’d never seen before. Fear. Real fear. Not the kind he used to fake when he wanted me to stay. The kind that made his hands shake.

“She knows where you are.”

“Who?”

He swallowed. “My wife.”

I stared at him. I thought I had misheard.

“Your wife?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have a wife.”

“I do now.”

For a moment neither of us spoke. Then I started laughing. I couldn’t stop. He watched me.

“You’re insane.”

“Probably.”

“You expect me to believe you?”

“No.”

“Then what do you want?”

He looked at the photograph again. “I want you alive.”

That sentence should have frightened me. Instead, it made me angry. Because five years ago, I had wanted exactly the same thing from him. And he hadn’t stayed. He had left me in a hotel room with blood on my dress and a dead man on the bathroom floor. He had told me not to move. Not to call anyone. Not to trust anyone. Then he disappeared.

I spent five years wondering whether he had betrayed me. Now I finally had my answer. He hadn’t. He had been protecting me. I wish I could say that made everything better. It didn’t. It made everything worse. Because betrayal is easier to hate than

love.

I put the photograph down. "Tell me what happened that night."

He looked away. "No."

"Then leave." He didn't move. "Leave." Still nothing.

I walked to the door and opened it. He finally spoke.

"You killed him."

I froze. "What?"

"You killed the man in that hotel room."

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I was unconscious."

"I know."

"Then why are you saying I killed him?"

He looked at me. "Because you don't remember what happened before you blacked out."

The hallway suddenly felt too narrow. Too quiet. I closed the door.

"What don't I remember?"

He came closer. "Before I found you in that room, you called me."

"I never called you."

"You did."

"What did I say?"

He was silent. I could see the answer in his face before he gave it to me.

“You said, ‘If I forget everything, don’t let me become her.’”

My stomach dropped. “Her who?”

He didn't answer. The apartment went quiet. Then I heard it. A car stopping outside. He turned toward the window. I didn't. I already knew. Someone was here.

He reached for my hand. This time I let him.

“There’s one thing I never told you,” he whispered.

“What?”

“I didn’t disappear because I stopped loving you.”

I looked at him. “Then why?”

He squeezed my hand. “Because you asked me to.”

I stared at him. “No, I didn’t.”

He looked almost sorry. “You did.”

Another car door slammed outside. Then another. He pulled me toward the back door. I followed him into the kitchen. My heart was beating so hard it hurt.

“Where are we going?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“Who is outside?”

He looked at me. “Your wife.”

I stopped. “My wife?”

He nodded. And suddenly I understood. The photograph. The necklace. The woman who looked like me. The missing five years. The things I couldn’t remember.

I looked at him. “You said my wife.”

He didn't correct himself. He just stared at me. Then he whispered, "Because five years ago, you weren't the woman I fell in love with."

I couldn't breathe. He opened the back door. Cold air rushed into the apartment.

"Come with me."

I didn't move. "Who am I?"

He looked at me for a long time. Then he said the one thing I wish he hadn't.

"I don't know anymore."

A light came on in the apartment across the street. Someone was watching us. I grabbed his coat.

"Then we're going to find out."

He looked down at my hand. For the first time that night, he smiled. Not because he was happy. Because he was afraid. And somehow, that scared me more than anything else.

We ran. Neither of us looked back. But just before I turned the corner, I saw the woman from the photograph standing in my window. Wearing my necklace. Watching us leave. And she smiled. Like she'd been waiting five years for me to come home.

We didn't stop running until the city swallowed us. Three blocks. Maybe four. I stopped counting when my lungs started burning. He kept moving. I grabbed his arm. "Stop." He didn't. "Stop." This time he did. We stood beneath the awning of a closed pharmacy, both of us breathing hard. Rain ran down the

glass behind us. For a few seconds, neither of us spoke. Then I looked back toward my apartment. Nothing. No lights. No people. Just the dark shape of my building at the end of the street.

“Who was she?” He looked at me. “You saw her.” “That’s not an answer.” “It’s the only one I have.” “You said she was my wife.” “I know what I said.” “You also said I wasn’t the woman you fell in love with.” His jaw tightened. “I know.” “Then explain it.” He looked away. I stepped closer. “No more secrets.” He gave a quiet laugh. “You really think we’re past secrets?” “I think I’ve spent five years being lied to.” “That’s different.” “How?” “Because this time I’m trying to keep you alive.”

I stared at him. “You keep saying that.” “Because it’s true.” “Then tell me the truth.” He was silent. Rain tapped against the awning above us. Finally, he reached into his coat again. This time I didn’t reach for the knife. He pulled out a small black phone. Old. Cheap. The kind of phone nobody used anymore. He handed it to me. “Open it.” I looked at him. “There’s no password.” I pressed the screen. One file. One video. No name. No date. Just a thumbnail. I pressed play.

At first, there was only darkness. Then a woman’s voice. My voice. I froze. The recording was quiet. Almost a whisper. “If you’re watching this, he came back.” I looked at him. He didn’t move. The woman on the screen continued. “Don’t trust him.” My stomach tightened. The recording went on. “He’ll tell you he saved you.” A pause. “He didn’t.” I looked at him again. His face had gone completely still. The woman on the screen breathed in.

“He'll tell you that you don't remember.” Another pause. “You do.” My fingers tightened around the phone. “No,” I whispered. The recording continued. “You remember everything.” The screen went black.

I stared at my reflection. For a moment, I didn't recognize the woman looking back at me. Then the phone vibrated. A new message appeared. Three words. SHE KNOWS YOU. I looked up. He was already watching me. “Who sent that?” “I don't know.” “Don't lie.” “I'm not.” I turned the phone toward him. His expression changed. Just slightly. Enough. “You've seen that number before.” He didn't answer. “You know who it is.” Still nothing. I stepped backward. “You know her.” “I know of her.” “Who is she?” He looked toward the street. Then back at me. “Someone who shouldn't exist.” I almost laughed. “That's your explanation?” “No.” He lowered his voice. “That's the problem.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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