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the newest novel by Nora Roberts

***The Witness***

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Elizabeth Fitch's short-lived teenage rebellion began with L'Oreal Pure Black, a pair of scissors and a fake ID. It ended in blood.

For nearly the whole of her sixteen years, eight months and twenty-one days she'd dutifully followed her mother's directives. Dr. Susan L. Fitch issued *directives*, not orders. Elizabeth had adhered to the schedules her mother created, ate the meals designed by her mother's nutritionist and prepared by her mother's cook, wore the clothes selected by her mother's personal shopper.

Dr. Susan L. Fitch dressed conservatively, as suited—in her opinion—her position as Chief of Surgery at Chicago's Silva Memorial Hospital. She expected, and directed, her daughter to do the same.

Elizabeth studied diligently, accepting and excelling in the academic programs her mother outlined. In the fall, she'd return to Harvard in pursuit of her medical degree. So she could become a doctor, like her mother; a surgeon, like her mother.

Elizabeth—never Liz or Lizzie or Beth—spoke fluent Spanish, French, Italian, passable Russian and rudimentary Japanese. She played both piano and violin. She'd traveled to Europe, to Africa. She could name all the bones, nerves and muscles in the human body and play Chopin's Piano Concerto—both One and Two—by rote.

She'd never been on a date or kissed a boy. She'd never roamed the mall with a pack of girls, attended a slumber party or giggled with friends over pizza or hot fudge sundaes.

She was, at sixteen years, eight months and twenty-one days, a product of her mother's meticulous and detailed agenda.

That was about to change.

She watched her mother pack. Susan, her rich brown hair already coiled in her signature French twist, neatly hung another suit in the organized garment bag, then checked off the printout with each day of the week's medical conference broken into subgroups. The printout included a spreadsheet listing every event, appointment, meeting and meal scheduled with the selected outfit, shoes, bag and accessories.

Designer suits and Italian shoes, of course, Elizabeth thought. One must wear good cut, good cloth. But

not one rich or bright color among the blacks, grays, taupes. She wondered how her mother could be so beautiful and deliberately wear the dull.

After two accelerated semesters of college, Elizabeth thought she'd begun—maybe—to develop her own fashion sense. She had, in fact, bought jeans *and* a hoodie *and* some chunky heeled boots in Cambridge.

She'd paid in cash, so the purchase wouldn't show up on her credit card bill in case her mother or their accountant checked and questioned the items, which were currently hidden in her room.

She'd felt like a different person wearing them, so different that she'd walked straight into a McDonald's and ordered her first Big Mac with large fries and a chocolate shake.

The pleasure had been so huge she'd had to go into the bathroom, close herself in a stall and cry a little.

The seeds of the rebellion had been planted that day, she supposed, or maybe they'd always been there, dormant, and the fat and salt had awakened them.

But she could feel them, actually feel them sprouting in her belly now.

“Your plans changed, Mother. It doesn't follow that mine have to change with them.”

Susan took a moment to precisely place a shoe bag in the pullman, tucking it just so with her beautiful and clever surgeon's hands, the nails perfectly manicured. A French manicure, as always—no color there either.

“Elizabeth.” Her voice was as polished and calm as her wardrobe. “It took considerable effort to reschedule and have you admitted to the summer program this term. You'll complete the requirements for your admission into Harvard Medical School a full semester ahead of schedule.”

Even the thought made Elizabeth's stomach hurt. “I was promised a three-week break, including this next week in New York.”

“And sometimes promises must be broken. If I hadn't had this coming week off, I couldn't fill in for Dr. Dusecki at the conference.”

“You could have said no.”

“That would have been selfish and shortsighted.” Susan brushed at the jacket she'd hung, stepped back to check her list. “You're certainly mature enough to understand the demands of work overtake pleasure and leisure.”

“If I’m mature enough to understand that, why aren’t I mature enough to make my own decisions? I want this break. I need it.”

Susan barely spared her daughter a glance. “A girl of your age, physical condition and mental acumen hardly *needs* a break from her studies and activities. In addition, Mrs. Laine has already left for her two-week cruise, and I could hardly ask her to postpone her vacation. There’s no one to fix your meals or tend to the house.”

“I can fix my own meals and tend to the house.”

“Elizabeth.” The tone managed to merge clipped with long-suffering. “It’s settled.”

“And I have no say in it? What about developing my independence, being responsible?”

“Independence comes in degrees, as does responsibility and freedom of choice. You still require guidance and direction. Now, I’ve e-mailed you an updated schedule for the coming week and your packet with all the information on the program is on your desk. Be sure to thank Dr. Frisco personally for making room for you in the summer term.”

As she spoke Susan closed the garment bag, then her small pullman. She stepped to her bureau to check her hair, her lipstick.

“You don’t listen to anything I say.”

In the mirror, Susan’s gaze shifted to her daughter. The first time, Elizabeth thought, her mother had bothered to actually look at her since she’d come into the bedroom. “Of course I do. I heard everything you said, very clearly.”

“Listening’s different than hearing.”

“That may be true, Elizabeth, but we’ve already had this discussion.”

“It’s not a discussion, it’s a decree.”

Susan’s mouth tightened briefly, the only sign of annoyance. When she turned, her eyes were a cool, calm blue. “I’m sorry you feel that way. As your mother, I must do what I believe is best for you.”

“What’s best for me, in your opinion, is for me to do, be, say, think, act, want, become exactly what you decided for me before you inseminated yourself with precisely selected sperm.”

She heard the rise of her own voice but couldn’t control it, felt the hot sting of tears in her eyes but couldn’t stop them. “I’m tired of being your experiment. I’m tired of having every minute of every day organized, orchestrated and choreographed to meet your expectations. I want to make my own choices, buy

my own clothes, read books *I* want to read. I want to live my own life instead of yours.”

Susan’s eyebrows lifted in an expression of mild interest. “Well. Your attitude isn’t surprising given your age, but you’ve picked a very inconvenient time to be defiant and argumentative.”

“Sorry. It wasn’t on the schedule.”

“Sarcasm’s also typical, but it’s unbecoming.” Susan opened her briefcase, checked the contents. “We’ll talk about all this when I get back. I’ll make an appointment with Dr. Bristoe.”

“I don’t need therapy! I need a mother who *listens*, who gives a shit about how I feel.”

“That kind of language only shows a lack of maturity and intellect.”

Enraged, Elizabeth threw up her hands, spun in circles. If she couldn’t be calm and rational like her mother, she’d be *wild*. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

“And repetition hardly enhances. You have the rest of the weekend to consider your behavior. Your meals are in the refrigerator or freezer, labeled. Your pack list is on your desk. Report to Ms. Vee at the university at eight on Monday morning. Your participation in this program will ensure your place in HMS next fall. Now, take my garment bag downstairs, please. My car will be here any minute.”

Oh, those seeds were sprouting, cracking that fallow ground and pushing painfully through. For the first time in her life, Elizabeth looked straight into her mother’s eyes and said, “No.”

She spun around, stomped away, and slammed the door of her bedroom. She threw herself down on the bed, stared at the ceiling with tear-blurred eyes. And waited.

Any second, any second, she told herself. Her mother would come in, demand an apology, demand obedience. And she wouldn’t give either.

They’d have a fight, an actual fight, with threats of punishment and consequences. Maybe they’d yell at each other. Maybe if they yelled, her mother would finally hear her.

And maybe, if they yelled, she could say all the things that had crept up inside her this past year. Things she thought now had been inside her forever.

She didn’t want to be a doctor. She didn’t want to spend every waking hour on a schedule or have to hide a stupid pair of jeans because they didn’t fit her mother’s dress code.

She wanted to have friends, not approved socialization appointments. She wanted to listen to the music girls her age listened to. She wanted to know what they whispered about and laughed about and talked about while she was shut out.

She didn't want to be a genius or a prodigy.

She wanted to be normal. She just wanted to be like everyone else.

She swiped at the tears, curled up, stared at the door.

Any second, she thought again. Any second now. Her mother had to be angry. She had to come in and assert authority. Had to.

"Please," Elizabeth murmured as seconds ticked into minutes. "Don't make me give in again. Please, please, don't make me give up."

Love me enough. Just this once.

But as the minutes dragged on, Elizabeth pushed herself off the bed. Patience, she knew, was her mother's greatest weapon. That, and the unyielding sense of being right crushed all foes. And certainly her daughter was no match for it.

Defeated, she walked out of her room, toward her mother's.

The garment bag, the briefcase, the small, wheeled pullman were gone. Even as she walked downstairs, she knew her mother had gone, too.

"She left me. She just left."

Alone, she looked around the pretty, tidy living room. Everything perfect—the fabrics, the colors, the art, the arrangement. The antiques passed down through generations of Fitches—all quiet elegance.

Empty.

Nothing had changed, she realized. And nothing would.

"So I will."

She didn't allow herself to think, to question or second-guess. Instead, she marched back up, snagged scissors from her study area.

In her bathroom she studied her face in the mirror—coloring she'd gotten through paternity—auburn hair, thick like her mother's but without the soft, pretty wave. Her mother's high, sharp cheekbones, her biological father's—whoever he was—deep-set green eyes. Pale skin, wide mouth.

Physically attractive, she thought, because that was DNA and her mother would tolerate no less. But not beautiful, not striking like Susan, no. And that, she supposed, had been a disappointment even her mother couldn't fix.

"Freak." Elizabeth pressed a hand to the mirror, hating what she saw in the glass. "You're a freak."

But as of now, you're not a coward."

Taking a big breath, she yanked up a hunk of her shoulder length hair and chopped it off.

With every snap of the scissors she felt empowered. *Her* hair, *her* choice. She let the shorn hanks fall to the floor. As she snipped and hacked, an image formed in her mind. Eyes narrowed, head angled, she slowed the clipping. It was just geometry, really, she decided—and physics. Action and reaction.

The weight—physical and metaphorical, she thought—just fell away. And the girl in the glass looked lighter. Her eyes seemed bigger, her face not so thin, not so drawn.

She looked . . . new, Elizabeth decided.

Carefully, she set the scissors down, and realizing her breath was heaving in and out, made a conscious effort to slow it.

So short. Testing, she lifted a hand to her exposed neck, ears, then brushed them over the bangs she'd cut. Too even, she decided. She hunted up manicure scissors, tried her hand at styling.

Not bad. Not really good, she admitted, but different. That was the whole point. She looked and felt different.

But not finished.

Leaving the hair where it lay, she went into her bedroom, changed into her secret cache of clothes. She needed product—that's what the girls called it. Hair product. And makeup. And more clothes.

She needed the mall.

Riding on the thrill, she went into her mother's home office, took the spare car keys. And her heart hammered with excitement as she hurried to the garage. She got behind the wheel, shut her eyes a moment.

"Here we go," she said quietly, then hit the garage door opener and backed out.

\* \* \*

She got her ears pierced. It seemed a bold if mildly painful move, and suited the hair dye she'd taken from the shelf after a long, careful study and debate. She bought hair wax, as she'd seen one of the girls at college use it and thought she could duplicate the look. More or less.

She bought two hundred dollars' worth of makeup because she wasn't sure what was right.

Then she had to sit down because her knees shook. But she wasn't done, Elizabeth reminded herself as

she watched the packs of teenagers, groups of women, teams of families wander by. She just needed to regroup.

She needed clothes, but she didn't have a plan, a list, an agenda. Impulse buying was exhilarating, and exhausting. The temper that had driven her this far left her with a dull headache and her earlobes throbbed a little.

The logical, sensible thing to do was go home, lie down for a while. Then plan, make that list of items to be purchased.

But that was the old Elizabeth. This one was just going to catch her breath.

The problem facing her now was she wasn't precisely sure which store or stores she should go to. There were so many of them, and all the windows full of *things*. So she'd wander, watch for girls her age. She'd go where they went.

She gathered her bags, pushed to her feet—and bumped into someone.

“Excuse me,” she began, then recognized the girl. “Oh. Julie.”

“Yeah.” The blonde with the sleek, perfect hair and melted-chocolate eyes gave Elizabeth a puzzled look. “Do I know you?”

“Probably not. We went to school together. I was student teacher in your Spanish class. Elizabeth Fitch.”

“Elizabeth, sure. The brain trust.” Julie narrowed her sulky eyes. “You look different.”

“Oh. I . . .” Embarrassed now, Elizabeth lifted a hand to her hair. “I cut my hair.”

“Cool. I thought you moved away or something.”

“I went to college. I'm home for the summer.”

“Oh yeah, you graduated early. Weird.”

“I suppose it is. Will you go to college this fall?”

“I'm supposed to go to Brown.”

“That's a wonderful school.”

“Okay. Well . . .”

“Are you shopping?”

“Broke.” Julie shrugged—and Elizabeth took a survey of her outfit—the snug jeans, riding very low on the hipbones, the skinny, midriff-bearing shirt, the oversized shoulder bag and wedge sandals. “I just



came to the mall to see my boyfriend—my *ex*-boyfriend, since I broke up with him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Screw him. He works at The Gap. We were supposed to go out tonight, and now he says he has to work till ten, then wants to hang out with his bros after. I’ve had it, so I dumped him.”

Elizabeth started to point out that he shouldn’t be penalized for honoring his obligations, but Julie kept talking—and it occurred to Elizabeth that the other girl hadn’t spoken more than a dozen words to her since they’d known each other.

“So, I’m going over to Tiffany’s, see if she wants to hang because now I’ve got no boyfriend for the summer. It sucks. I guess you hang out with college guys.” Julie gave her a considering look. “Go to frat parties, keggers, all that.”

“I . . . There are a lot of men at Harvard.”

“Harvard.” Julie rolled her eyes. “Any of them in Chicago for the summer?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“A college guy, that’s what I need. Who wants some loser who works at the mall? I need somebody who knows how to have fun, who can take me places, buy alcohol. Good luck with that unless you can get into the clubs. That’s where they hang out. Just need to score a fake ID.”

“I can do that.” The instant the words were out, Elizabeth wondered where they’d come from. But Julie gripped her arm, smiled at her as if they were friends.

“No bull?”

“No. That is, it’s not very difficult to create false identification with the right tools. A template, photo, laminate, a computer with Photoshop.”

“Brain trust. What’ll it take for you to make me a driver’s license that’ll get me into a club?”

“As I said, a template—”

“No, Jesus. What do you want for it?”

“I . . .” Bargaining, Elizabeth realized. A barter. “I need to buy some clothes, but I don’t know what I should buy. I need someone to help me?”

“A shopping buddy?”

“Yes. Someone who knows. You know.”

Eyes no longer sulky, voice no longer bored, Julie simply beamed. “That’s *my* brain trust. And if I

help you pick out some outfits, you'll make me up the ID?"

"Yes. And I'd also want to go with you to the club. So I'd need the right clothes for that, too."

"You? Clubbing? More than your hair's changed, Liz."

Liz. She was Liz. "I'd need a photo of you, and it will take a little while to construct the IDs. I could have them done tomorrow. What club would we go to?"

"Might as well go for the hottest club in town. Warehouse 12. Brad Pitt went there when he was in town."

"Do you know him?"

"I wish. Okay, let's go shopping."

It made her dizzy, not just the way Julie piloted her into a store, snatched up clothes with only the most cursory study. But the *idea* of it all. A shopping buddy. Not someone who preselected what was deemed appropriate and expected her to assent. Someone who grabbed at random and talked about looking hot, or cool, even sexy.

No one had ever suggested to Elizabeth she might look sexy.

She closed herself in the dressing room with the forest of color, the sparkle of spangles, the glint of metallic, and had to put her head between her knees.

It was all happening so fast. It was like being caught in a tsunami. The surge just swept her away.

Her fingers trembled as she undressed, as she carefully folded her clothes, then stared at all the pieces hanging in the tiny room.

What did she put on? What went with what? How did she know?

"I found the most awesome dress!" Without even a knock, Julie barged right in. Instinctively, Elizabeth crossed an arm over her breasts.

"Haven't you tried anything on yet?"

"I wasn't sure where to start."

"Start with awesome." Julie shoved the dress at her.

But really, at its length it was more of a tunic, Elizabeth thought, and in a screaming red, ruched along the sides. Its razor-thin straps sparkled with silver.

"What do you wear with it?"

"Killer shoes. No, lose the bra first. You can't wear a bra with that dress. You've got a really good

body,” Julie observed.

“I’m genetically predisposed, and maintain fitness and health through regular daily exercise.”

“Get you.”

And the naked—or nearly—human body was natural, Elizabeth reminded herself. Just skin, muscle, bone, nerve.

She laid her bra on her folded clothes, then shimmied into the dress.

“It’s very short,” she began.

“You’re going to want to ditch those Mom panties and buy a thong. *That* is definitely club worthy.”

Elizabeth took a breath, turned to the triple mirror. “Oh.”

Who was that? Who was that girl in the short red dress?

“I look . . .”

“Awesome,” Julie declared, and Elizabeth watched a smile bloom on her own face.

“Awesome.”

She bought the dress, and two others. And skirts. She bought tops that rode above her waist, pants that rode below it. She bought thongs. And she rode that tsunami to shoes with silver heels that she’d have to practice walking in.

And she laughed, like any ordinary girl shopping with a friend at the mall.

She bought a digital camera, then watched Julie make up her face in the bathroom. She took Julie’s picture, and several backups, against the pale gray of the stall door.

“That’s going to work?”

“Yes, I can make it work. How old should you be? I think it’s best if we stay as close as possible to the legal age. I can use everything from your valid driver’s license and just change the year.”

“Have you done this before?”

“I’ve experimented. I’ve read and studied identity fraud, cyber crimes. It’s interesting. I’d like to . . .”

“Like to what?”

“I’d like to study computer crimes and prevention, investigation more seriously. I’d like to join the FBI.”

“No bull? Like Dana Scully.”

“I don’t know her.”

“*X-Files*, Liz. Don’t you watch TV?”

“My viewing of popular and commercial television is limited to an hour a week.”

Julie rolled her big, chocolate brown eyes. “What are you, six? Jesus Christ.”

“My mother has very definite opinions.”

“You’re in college, for God’s sake. Watch what you want. Anyway, I’ll come to your place tomorrow night. Say nine? We’ll take a cab from there. But I want you to call me when you finish the ID, okay?”

“Yes.”

“I tell you what, breaking up with Darryl was the best thing I ever did. Otherwise, I’d’ve missed all this. We’re going to party, Liz.” Laughing, Julie did a quick hip-swiveling dance right there in the ladies room. “Big time. I’ve gotta go. Nine o’clock. Don’t let me down.”

“No, I won’t.”

Flushed from the day, Elizabeth hauled all the bags to her car. She knew what girls in the mall talked about now.

Boys. Doing it. Julie and Darryl had done it. Clothes. Music. She had a mental list of artists she needed to research. Television and movie actors. Other girls. What other girls wore. Who other girls had done it with. And back to boys.

She understood the discussions and topics were a societal and generational trope. But it was one she’d been shut out of until today.

And she thought Julie liked her, at least a little. Maybe they’d start to hang out. Maybe she’d hang out with Julie’s friend Tiffany, too—who’d done it with Mike Dauber when he’d come home on spring break.

Elizabeth knew Mike Dauber, or she’d had a class with him. And he’d passed her a note once. Or he’d passed her a note to pass to someone else, but that was something. It was contact.

At home, she laid all the bags on her bed.

She’d put everything away in plain sight this time. And she’d remove everything she didn’t like—which was nearly all she owned—box it up for charity. And she’d watch *The X-Files* if she wanted to, and listen to Christina Aguilera and \*NSYNC and Destiny’s Child.

And she’d change her major.

The thought of it had her heart spearing up to her throat. She’d study what she wanted to study. And

when she had her degrees in Criminology, in Computer Science, she'd apply to the FBI.

Everything changed. Today.

Determined, she dug out the hair dye. In the bathroom she arranged everything, performed the recommended spot test. While she waited, she cleaned up the shorn hair, then purged her closet, her dresser, neatly hung or folded her new clothes.

Hungry, she went down to the kitchen, heated one of the pre-labeled meals and ate while studying an article on her laptop about falsifying ID.

After she'd done the dishes, she went back up. With a mix of trepidation and excitement she followed the directions for the hair color, set the timer. While it set, she arranged everything she needed for the identification. She opened the Britney Spears CD Julie had recommended, slid it into her laptop's CD player.

She turned up the volume so she could hear as she got in the shower to wash the color out of her hair.

It ran so black!

She rinsed and rinsed and rinsed, finally bracing her hands on the shower wall as her stomach began to churn in anticipation and not a little dread. When the water ran clear, she toweled off, wrapped a second towel around her hair.

Women had altered their hair color for centuries, Elizabeth reminded herself. Using berries, herbs, roots. It was a . . . rite of passage, she decided.

It was a personal choice.

In her robe, she faced the mirror.

"My choice," she said, and pulled the towel off her hair.

She stared at the girl with pale skin and wide green eyes, the girl with short spiky raven black hair that framed her narrow, sharp-boned face. Lifting a hand, she scratched her fingers through it, feeling the texture, watching it move.

Then she stood, and she smiled.

"Hi. I'm Liz."