Survivor in Death

Nora Roberts writing as J.D. Robb

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So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no dying then
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy
Family is unhappy in its own way
LEO NIKOLAEVICH TOLSTOI

PROLOGUE

A LATE-NIGHT URGE FOR AN ORANGE FIZZY SAVED NIXIE'S life. When she woke, she could see by the luminous dial of the jelly-roll wrist unit she was never without that it was after two in the morning.

She wasn't allowed to snack between meals, except for items on her mother's approved list. And two in the morning was way between.

But she was *dying* for an Orange Fizzy.

She rolled over and whispered to her best friend in the entire galaxy, Linnie Dyson. They were having a school-night sleepover because Linnie's mom and dad were celebrating their anniversary in some fancy hotel.

So they could have sex. Mom and Mrs. Dyson said it was so they could have a fancy dinner and go dancing and crap-o, but it was for sex. *Jee-zus,* she and Linnie were nine, not two. They knew what was what-o.

Besides, like they gave a woo. The whole deal meant Mom—the Rule Monster—bent the rules about school nights. Even if they'd had to turn the lights out at nine-thirty—were they *two?*—she and Linnie had the most magolicious time.

And school was still hours away, and she was thirsty. So she poked Linnie and whispered again.

"Wake up!"

"Nuh. Not morning. Still dark."

"It is morning. It's *two* in the morning." That's why it was so frosty. "I want an Orange Fizzy. Let's go down and get one. We can split it."

Linnie only made grunting, mumbling noises, rolled away, and tugged the covers nearly over her head.

"Well, *I'm* going," Nixie said in the same hissy whisper.

It wasn't as much fun on her own, but she'd never get back to sleep now, thinking of the Fizzy. She had to go all the way down to the kitchen because her mother wouldn't allow her to have an AutoChef in her room. Might as well be in prison, Nixie thought, as she scooted out of bed. Might as well be in prison in 1950 or something instead of her own house in 2059.

Mom had even put child codes on all the household AutoChefs so the only thing Nixie or her brother, Coyle, could program was health sludge.

Might as well eat mud.

Her father said, "Rules is rules." He liked to say that a lot. But sometimes he'd wink at her or Coyle when their mother was out and order up some ice cream or potato crispies.

Nixie sort of thought her mom knew and pretended she didn't.

She tiptoed out of her room, a pretty little girl, just going gangly, with a wavy mass of platinum blonde hair. Her eyes, a pale, pale blue, were already adjusted to the dark.

Still, her parents always kept a low light on in the bathroom at the end of the hall, in case anybody had to get up and pee or whatever.

She held her breath as she walked by her brother's room. If he woke, he might tell. He could be a complete butt-pain. Then again, sometimes he could be pretty chilly. For a moment, she hesitated, considered sneaking in, waking him, and talking him into keeping her company for the adventure.

Nah. It was sort of juicy to be creeping around the house by herself. She held her breath again as she eased by her parents' room, hoping she could stay—for once—under her mother's radar.

Nothing and no one stirred as she crept down the stairs.

But even when she got downstairs, she was mouse quiet. She still had to get by Inga, their housekeeper, who had rooms right off the kitchen. Right off the target. Inga was mostly okay, but she'd never let her get away with an Orange Fizzy in the middle of the night.

Rules is rules.

So she didn't turn on any lights, and snuck through the rooms, into the big kitchen like a thief. It only added to the thrill. No Orange Fizzy would ever taste as frigid as this one, she thought.

She eased open the refrigerator. It occurred to her, suddenly, that maybe her mother counted stuff like this. Maybe she kept a kind of tally of soft drinks and snack food.

But she was past the point of no return. If she had to pay a price for the prize, she'd worry about paying it later.

With the goal in hand, she shuffled to the far end of the kitchen where she could keep an eye on the door to Inga's rooms and duck behind the island counter if she had to.

In the shadows, she broke the seal on the tube, took the first forbidden sip.

It pleased her so much, she slipped onto the bench in what her mother called the breakfast area, and prepared to enjoy every drop.

She was just settling in when she heard a noise and dived down to lie on the bench. From beneath it, she saw a movement and thought: *Busted!*

But the shadow slipped along the far counter, to the door of Inga's room, and inside.

A man. Nixie had to slap a hand on her mouth to stifle a giggle. Inga had a boogie buddy! And she was so old—had to be at least forty. It looked like Mr. and Mrs. Dyson weren't the only ones having sex tonight.

Unable to resist, she left the Orange Fizzy on the bench and slid out. She just had to look, just had to see. So she crept over to the open door, eased inside Inga's little parlor, and toward the open bedroom door. She squatted down on all fours, poked her head in the opening.

Wait until she told Linnie! Linnie would be so jealous.

With her hand over her mouth again, her eyes bright with laughter, Nixie scooted, angled her head.

And saw the man slit Inga's throat.

She saw the blood, a wild gush of it. Heard a horrible, gurgling grunt. Eyes glazed now, she reared back, her breath hissing and hitching into her palm. Unable to move, she sat, her back pressed to the wall and her heart booming inside her chest.

He came out, walked right by her, and out the open door.

Tears spilled out of her eyes, down her spread fingers. Every part of her shook as she crawled over, using a chair as a shield, and reached up to the table for Inga's pocket 'link.

She hissed for emergency.

"He's killed her, he's killed her. You have to come." She whispered the words, ignoring the questions the voice recited. "Right now. Come right now." And gave the address.

She left the 'link on the floor, continued to crawl until she'd reached the narrow steps that led from Inga's parlor to the second level.

She wanted her mommy.

She didn't run, didn't dare. She didn't stand. Her legs felt funny, empty, like the bones in them had melted. She started to belly crawl across the hall, sobs stuck in her throat. And to her horror, she saw the shadow—two shadows now. One went into her room, the other into Coyle's.

She was whimpering when she dragged her body through her parents' bedroom doorway. She heard a sound, a kind of thump, and pressed her face into the carpet while her stomach heaved.

She saw the shadows pass the doorway, saw them. Heard them. Though they moved as if that's what they were. Only shadows.

Shuddering, she continued to crawl, past her mother's bedroom chair, past the little table with its colorful lamp. And her hand slid through something warm, something wet.

Pulling herself up, she stared at the bed. At her mother, at her father. At the blood that coated them.

I MURDER WAS ALWAYS AN INSULT, AND HAD been since the first human hand had smashed a stone into the first human skull. But the murder, bloody and brutal, of an entire family in their own home, in their own beds, was a different form of evil.

Eve Dallas, NYPSD Homicide, pondered it as she stood studying Inga Snood, forty-two-year-old female. Domestic, divorced. Dead.

Blood spatter and the scene itself told her how it must have been. Snood's killer had walked in the door, crossed to the bed, yanked Snood's head up—probably by the mid-length blonde hair, raked the edge of the blade neatly—left to right—across her throat, severing the jugular.

Relatively tidy, certainly quick. Probably quiet. It was unlikely the victim had the time to comprehend what was happening. No defensive wounds, no other trauma, no signs of struggle. Just blood and the dead.

Eve had beaten both her partner and Crime Scene to the house. The nine-one-one had gone to Emergency, relayed to a black-and-white on neighborhood patrol. The uniforms had called in the homicides, and she'd gotten the tag just before three in the morning.

She still had the rest of the dead, the rest of the scenes, to study. She stepped back out, glanced at the uniform on post in the kitchen.

"Keep this scene secure."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant."

She moved through the kitchen out into a bisected space—living on one side, dining on the other. Upper-middle income, single-family residence. Nice, Upper West Side neighborhood. Decent security, which hadn't done the Swishers or their domestic a damn bit of good.

Good furniture—tasteful, she supposed. Everything neat and clean and in what appeared to be its place. No burglary, not with plenty of easily transported electronics.

She went upstairs, came to the parents' room first. Keelie and Grant Swisher, ages thirty-eight and forty, respectively. As with their housekeeper, there was no sign of struggle. Just two people who'd been asleep in their own bed and were now dead.

She gave the room a quick glance, saw a pricey man's wrist unit on a dresser, a pair of woman's gold earrings on another.

No, not burglary.

She stepped back out just as her partner, Detective Delia Peabody, came up the steps. Limping—just a little.

Had she put Peabody back on active too soon? Eve wondered. Her partner had taken a serious beating only three weeks before after being ambushed steps outside her own apartment building. And Eve still had the image of the stalwart Peabody bruised, broken, unconscious in a hospital bed.

Best to put the image, and the guilt, aside. Best to remember how she herself hated being on medical, and that work was sometimes better than forced rest.

"Five dead? Home invasion?" Huffing a bit, Peabody gestured down the steps. "The uniform on the door gave me a quick run."

"It looks like, but we don't call it yet. Domestic's downstairs, rooms off the kitchen. Got it in bed, throat slit. Owners in there. Same pattern. Two kids, girl and boy, in the other rooms on this level."

"Kids? Jesus."

"First on scene indicated this was the boy." Eve moved to the next door, called for the lights.

"Records ID twelve-year-old Coyle Swisher." There were framed sports posters on his walls. Baseball taking the lead. Some of his blood had spewed onto the torso of the Yankees current hot left fielder.

Though there was the debris of an adolescent on the floor, on the desk and dresser, she saw no sign Coyle had had any more warning than his parents.

Peabody pressed her lips together, cleared her throat. "Quick, efficient," she said in flat tones.

"No forced entry. No alarms tripped. Either the Swishers neglected to set them—and I wouldn't bet on that—or somebody had their codes or a good jammer. Girl should be down here."

"Okay." Peabody squared her shoulders. "It's harder when it's kids."

"It's supposed to be." Eve stepped to the next room, called for lights, and studied the fluffy pink and white bed, the little girl with her blonde hair matted with blood. "Nine-year-old Nixie Swisher, according to the records."

"Practically a baby."

"Yeah." Eve scanned the room, and her head cocked. "What do you see, Peabody?"

"Some poor kid who'll never get the chance to grow up."

"Two pair of shoes over there."

"Kids, especially upper income, swim in shoes."

"Two of those backpack deals kids haul their stuff in. You seal up yet?"

"No, I was just—"

"I have." Eve walked into the crime scene, reached down with a sealed hand, and picked up the shoes. "Different sizes. Go get the first on scene."

With the shoes still in her hand, Eve turned back to the bed, to the

child, as Peabody hurried out. Then she set them aside, took an Identi-pad out of her field kit.

Yes, it was harder when it was a child. It was hard to take such a small hand in yours. Such a small, lifeless hand, to look down at the young who'd been robbed of so many years, and all the joys, all the pains that went in them.

She pressed the fingers to the pad, waited for the readout.

"Officer Grimes, Lieutenant," Peabody said from the doorway. "First on scene."

"Who called this in, Grimes?" Eve asked without turning around.

"Sir, unidentified female."

"And where is this unidentified female?"

"I . . . Lieutenant, I assumed it was one of the vics."

She glanced back now, and Grimes saw the tall, lean woman in mannish trousers, a battered leather jacket. The cool brown eyes, flat cop's eyes, in a sharply featured face. Her hair was brown, like her eyes, short, choppy rather than sleek.

She had a rep, and when that icy gaze pinned him, he knew she'd earned it.

"So our nine-one-one calls in murder, then hops into bed so she can get her throat slashed?"

"Ah . . ." He was a beat cop, with two years under his belt. He wasn't ranking Homicide. "The kid here might've called it, Lieutenant, then tried to hide in bed."

"How long you had a badge, Grimes?"

"Two years—in January, Lieutenant."

"I know civilians who've got a better sense of crime scene than you. Fifth victim, identified as Linnie Dyson, age nine, who is not a fucking resident of this fucking address. Who is not one Nixie Swisher. Peabody, start a search of the residence. We're looking for another nine-year-old girl, living or dead. Grimes, you idiot, call in an Amber Alert. She may have been the reason for this. Possible abduction. Move!"

Peabody snagged a can of Seal-It out of her own kit, hurriedly sprayed her shoes and hands.

"She could be hiding. If the kid called it in, Dallas, she could be hiding. She could be afraid to come out, or she's in shock. She could be alive."

"Start downstairs." Eve dropped on her hands and knees to look under the bed. "Find out what unit, what 'link placed the nine-one-one."

"On that."

Eve strode to the closet, searched through it, pushed into any area of the room where a child might hide. She started out, moving toward the boy's room, then checked herself.

You were a little girl, with what seemed to be a nice family. Where did you go when things got bad?

Somewhere, Eve thought, she herself never had to go. Because when things got bad for her, the family was the cause.

But she bypassed the other rooms and walked back into the master bedroom.

"Nixie," she said quietly, as her eyes scanned. "I'm Lieutenant Dallas, with the police. I'm here to help you. You call the police, Nixie?"

Abduction, she thought again. But why slaughter an entire household to snatch a little girl? Easier to boost her off the street somewhere, even to come in, tranq her, carry her out. More likely they'd found her trying to hide, and she'd be curled up somewhere, dead as the rest.

She called for lights, full, and saw the smears of blood on the carpet on the far side of the bed. A small, bloody handprint, another, and a trail of red leading to the master bath.

Didn't have to be the kid's blood. More likely the parents. More likely, but there was a hell of a lot of it. Crawled through the blood, Eve thought.

The tub was big and sexy, double sinks in a long peachy-colored counter, and a little closet-type deal for the toilet.

A smudged and bloody swath stained the pretty pastel floor tiles.

"Goddamn it," Eve mumbled, and followed the trail toward the thick, green glass walls of a shower station.

She expected to find the bloodied body of a small dead girl.

Instead she found the trembling form of a live one.

There was blood on her hands, on her nightshirt, on her face.

For a moment, one hideous moment, Eve stared at the child and saw herself. Blood on her hands, her shirt, her face, huddled in a freezing room. For that moment, she saw the knife, still dripping, in her hand, and the body—the man—she'd hacked to pieces lying on the floor.

"Jesus. Oh Jesus." She took a stumbling step back, primed to run, to scream. And the child lifted her head, locked glassy eyes on hers, and whimpered.

She came back, hard, as if someone had slapped her. Not me, she told herself as she fought to get her breathing under control. Nothing like me.

Nixie Swisher. She has a name. Nixie Swisher.

"Nixie Swisher." Eve said it out loud, and felt herself settle. The kid was alive, and there was a job to do.

One quick survey told Eve none of the blood was the child's.

Even with the punch of relief, the stiffening of spine, she wished for Peabody. Kids weren't her strong suit.

"Hey." She crouched, carefully tapped the badge she'd hooked to her waistband with a finger that was nearly steady now. "I'm Dallas. I'm a cop. You called us, Nixie."

The child's eyes were wide and glazed. Her teeth chattered.

"I need you to come with me, so I can help you." She reached out a hand, but the girl cringed back and made a sound like a trapped animal.

Know how you feel, kid. Just how.

"You don't have to be afraid. Nobody's going to hurt you." Keeping one hand up, she reached in her pocket with the other for her communicator. "Peabody, I've got her. Master bath. Get up here."

Wracking her brain, Eve tried to think of the right approach. "You

called us, Nixie. That was smart, that was brave. I know you're scared, but we're going to take care of you."

"They killed, they killed, they killed . . ."

"They?"

Her head shook, like an old woman with palsy. "They killed, they killed my mom. I saw, I saw. They killed my mom, my dad. They killed—"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I crawled through the blood." Eyes huge and glassy, she held out her smeared hands. "Blood."

"Are you hurt, Nixie? Did they see you? Did they hurt you?"

"They killed, they killed—" When Peabody turned into the room, Nixie screamed as if she'd been stabbed. And launched herself into Eve's arms.

Peabody stopped short, kept her voice very calm, very quiet. "I'll call Child Protection. Is she injured?"

"Not that I can see. Shocky, though."

It felt awkward holding a child, but Eve wrapped her arms around Nixie and got to her feet. "She saw it. We've got not only a survivor, but an eye witness."

"We've got a nine-year-old kid who saw—" Peabody spoke in undertones as Nixie wept on Eve's shoulder, and jerked her head toward the bedroom.

"I know. Here, take her and—" But when Eve tried to peel Nixie away, the child only wrapped herself tighter.

"I think you're going to have to."

"Hell. Call CPS, get somebody over here. Start a record, room by room. I'll be back in a minute."

She'd hoped to pass the kid to one of the uniforms, but Nixie seemed glued to her now. Resigned, and wary, she carted Nixie down to the first floor, looked for a neutral spot, and settled on what looked like a playroom.

"I want my mom. I want my mom."

"Yeah, I got that. But here's the thing: You've got to let go. I'm not going to leave you, but you gotta loosen the grip."

"Are they gone?" Nixie pushed her face into Eve's shoulder. "Are the shadows gone?"

"Yes. You have to let go, sit down here. I have to do a couple of things. I need to talk to you."

"What if they come back?"

"I won't let them. I know this is hard. The hardest." At wit's end, she sat on the floor with Nixie still clinging to her. "I need to do a job, that's how I can help. I need to . . ." Jesus. "I need to get a sample from your hand, and then you can clean up. You'd feel better if you got cleaned up, right?"

"I got their blood . . ."

"I know. Here, this is my field kit. I'm just going to take a swab for evidence. And I need to take a recording. Then you can go to the washroom over there and clean up. Record on," Eve said, quietly, then eased Nixie back. "You're Nixie Swisher, right? You live here?"

"Yeah, I want—"

"And I'm Lieutenant Dallas. I'm going to swab your hand here, so you can clean up. It won't hurt."

"They killed my mom and my dad."

"I know. I'm sorry. Did you see who they were? How many there were?"

"I have their blood on me."

Sealing the swab, Eve looked at the child. She remembered what it was to be a little girl, covered in blood not her own. "How about you wash up?"

"I can't."

"I'll help you. Maybe you want a drink or something. I can—" And when Nixie burst into tears, Eve's eyes began to ache.

"What? What?"

"Orange Fizzy."

"Okay, I'll see if—"

"No, I went down to get one. I'm not supposed to, but I went down to get one, and Linnie didn't want to wake up and come. I went down to the kitchen, and I saw."

With blood smeared on both of them now, Eve decided washing up would have to wait. "What did you see, Nixie?"

"The shadow, the man, who went into Inga's room. I thought . . . I was going to watch, just for a minute, if they were going to do it, you know."

"Do what?"

"Sex. I wasn't supposed to, but I did, and I saw!"

There were tears and snot as well as blood on the kid's face now. With nothing else handy, Eve pulled a wipe rag out of her field kit and passed it over.

"What did you see?"

"He had a big knife and he cut her, he cut her bad." She closed her own hand over her throat. "And there was blood."

"Can you tell me what happened then?"

As the tears gushed, she rubbed the wipe and her hands over her cheeks, smearing them with blood. "He left. He didn't see me, and he left and I got Inga's 'link and I called Emergency."

"That's stand-up thinking, Nixie. That was really smart."

"But I wanted Mom." Her voice cracked with tears and mucus flowing. "I wanted Dad, and I went up the back way, Inga's way, and I saw them. Two of them. They were going into my room, and Coyle's room, and I knew what they would do, but I wanted my mom, and I crawled in, and I got their blood on me, and I saw them. They were dead. They're all dead, aren't they? Everybody. I couldn't go look. I went to hide."

"You did right. You did exactly right. Look at me. Nixie." She waited until those drenched eyes met hers. "You're alive, and you did everything right. Because you did, it's going to help me find the people who did this, and make them pay."

"My mommy's dead." Crawling into Eve's lap, she wept and wept and wept.

It was nearly five a.m. before Eve could get back to Peabody, and the work.

"How's the kid?"

"No better than you'd expect. Got the social worker and a doctor with her. Cleaning her up, doing a physical. I had to swear an oath I wouldn't leave the house before she'd unclamp herself."

"You found her, came when she called for help kind of thing."

"She made the nine-one-one on the housekeeper's pocket 'link, from down there." She caught Peabody up with Nixie's timetable.

"From what she was able to tell me so far, it jibes with how it looks to me—efficient professional job. Come in. Bypass or jam alarms and security. One takes the housekeeper. That's the first hit. She's isolated, on another floor, and they need to deal with her first, insure she doesn't wake up, catch a whiff and tag the cops. Other guy's probably upstairs, ready to move if anybody up there wakes up. Then they do the parents together."

"One for each," Peabody agreed. "No noise, no struggle. Deal with the adults first. Kids aren't a big worry."

"One takes the boy, one takes the girl. They're expecting one boy, one girl. It was dark, so the fact they killed the wrong kid doesn't necessarily mean they didn't know the family personally. They were expecting to find one small blonde girl, and they did. Job's done, and they walk out."

"No blood trail leading out of the house."

"Seal up in protective gear, strip it off when you're done. No muss, no fuss. You get time of deaths?"

"Oh two-fifteen on the housekeeper. Maybe three minutes later on Dad, Mom right after. Another minute or so for each kid. Whole deal took five, six minutes. Cold and clean."

"Not so clean. They left a witness. Kid's messed up now, but I think

we'll get more out of her. She's got a brain, and she's got spine. Doesn't scream when she sees her housekeeper get her throat cut."

She put herself into the child, imagined those few minutes when murder cut quietly through the house.

"Terrified, she's got to be terrified, but she doesn't go running away so she can get caught and hacked up. She stays quiet, and she calls nine-one-one. Gutsy."

"What happens to her now?"

"Safe house, sealed record, uniform guards, a rep from Child Protection." The cold steps, the impersonal stages. The kid's life, as she knew it, had ended at approximately two-fifteen. "We'll need to see if she's got other family, or if there's legal guardianship. Later today, we'll talk to her again, see what more we can squeeze out. I want this house sealed up like a biodome, and we'll start running the adult vics."

"Dad was a lawyer—family law—Mom was a nutritionist. Private practice, run primarily out of an office space on the lower level. Those locks are still in place, and it doesn't appear anything's been disturbed in that area."

"We look at their work, their clients, their personals. This kind of hit, it's pro, and it's thorough. Maybe one or both of them—or the housekeeper—had a sideline that linked up with organized crime. Nutritionist, could be a front for Illegals. Keep the client thin and happy the easy way."

"There's an easy way? A way that includes unlimited portions of pizza and no hideous stomach crunches?"

"A little Funk, a little Go as part of your basic food groups." Eve lifted a shoulder. "Maybe she screwed with her supplier. Maybe one of them had an affair with a wrong number that ended bad. You're going to wipe out a whole family, you've got one hell of a motivation. We'll see if the sweepers turn up something on scene. Meanwhile, I want to go through each room again myself. I didn't get much of a . . ."

She broke off when she heard the steady clip of shoes, and turned to see the social worker, sleepy-eyed but neat as a church, walk into the

room. Newman, Eve remembered. CPS drone, and from the looks of her not too happy with the early call.

"Lieutenant, the doctor has found no physical injuries. It would be best if we transported the minor subject now."

"Give me a few minutes to arrange security. My partner can go up, pack some things for her. I want to—"

She broke off again. This time it wasn't a steady clip of shoes, but running bare feet. Still wearing the bloodied nightshirt, Nixie ran in, and threw herself at Eve.

"You said you wouldn't leave."

"Hey, standing right here."

"Don't let them take me. They said they were going to take me away. Don't let them."

"You can't stay here." She pried Nixie's fingers from her legs, crouched until they were eye-to-eye. "You know you can't."

"Don't let them take me. I don't want to go with her. She's not the police."

"I'm going to have police go with you, and stay with you."

"You have to. You *have* to."

"I can't. I have to work. I have to do what's right for your mom and dad, for your brother and your friend. For Inga."

"I won't go with her. You can't make me go with her."

"Nixie—"

"Hey." Voice pleasant, a non-threatening smile on her face, Peabody stepped in. "Nixie, I need to talk to the lieutenant for a minute—just over here. Nobody's going anywhere yet, okay. I just need to talk to her. Dallas?" Peabody walked to the far side of the room, where they were still in Nixie's line of sight.

Dallas joined her.

"What? Can I make a break for it?"

"You should take her."

"Peabody, I need to do a more thorough on-scene."

"I've done one, and you can come back and do your own."

"So I ride with her to the safe house? Then she wigs on me when I have to leave her with uniforms. What's the point?"

"I don't mean take her to a safe house. Take her home. No place safer in the city—probably on the planet—than your place."

Eve said nothing for ten full seconds. "Are you out of your mind?"

"No, and just listen first. She trusts you. She knows you're in charge, and she trusts you to keep her safe. She's the eye witness, and she's a traumatized kid. We'll get more out of her, bound to, if she feels safe, if she's settled, at least as much as she can be. A few days, like a transition, before she ends up in the system. Put yourself in her shoes, Dallas. Would you feel better being with the icy, kick-ass cop, or the bored, overworked CPS drone?"

"I can't babysit a kid. I'm not equipped."

"You're equipped to pull information out of a witness and this would give you full access. You wouldn't have to go through the annoyance of clearance from CPS every time you want to question her."

Thoughtfully now, Eve glanced back at Nixie. "Probably only be a day, two tops. Summerset knows about kids. Even if he is an asshole. How much more traumatized could she get looking at his ugly face, considering? Basically I'd be housing a witness. Big house."

"That's the spirit."

Eve frowned, studied Peabody's face. "Pretty clever for somebody who's only been back on the job for a couple of days."

"I may not be up for chasing down suspects on foot quite yet, but my mind? Sharp as ever."

"Too bad. I was hoping concussion and coma might have honed that area, but you get what you get."

"Mean."

"I could be meaner, but it's five in the morning and I haven't had enough coffee. I gotta make a call."

She stepped away, and saw Nixie tense out of the corner of her eye. Eve just shook her head, and pulled out her pocket 'link.

Five minutes later she was signalling the social worker.

"Absolutely out of the question," the woman said. "You're not qualified or approved to transport a child. I'm required to accompany—"

"What I'm doing is taking a witness into protective custody. She doesn't like you, and I need her settled in order to interview her more thoroughly."

"The minor subject—"

"The kid had her family whacked in front of her eyes. She wants me. I say she gets what she wants—and as a ranking member of the New York City Police and Security Department, I'm seeing that she's taken to a safe place, and kept safe and secure until her safety is no longer an issue or other arrangements can be made. You can buck me on this, but why would you?"

"I'm obliged to consider what's in the best interests of—"

"The minor subject," Eve concluded. "Then you know that it's in her best interests to feel safe, to avoid more stressful situations. She's scared shitless. Why add?"

The woman looked back. "My supervisor won't like it."

"Your supervisor can deal with me. I'm taking the kid. Go file a report."

"I need the location, the situation where—"

"I'll let you know. Peabody? Pack what you figure Nixie needs."

She walked back to Nixie. "You know you can't stay here anymore."

"I don't want to go with her. I don't want—"

"And you've had it hit really hard tonight that you can't always have what you want. But for right now, you can come with me."

"With you?"

While Newman stalked away, Eve drew Nixie across the room. "That's right. I can't stay with you, because I've got to work. But there'll be people there who'll look out for you. People I trust, so you can trust them, too."

"But you'll be there? You'll come back?"

"I live there."

"Okay." Nixie took Eve's hand. "I'll go with you."