

Witnessing a murder had forced the man into the last place he wanted to be.

Now he stood in the breezeway, his back against the window, hands clutched in front of him.

He had removed his trenchcoat and hung it on the coat rack. His clean flannel shirt was tucked into old cargo pants. His hair was combed over neatly and it looked like he'd had a shave in the past twenty four hours.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"Didn't get a name. I told him to wait his ass in the breezeway," Dawson said. "I didn't want him funking up the whole precinct."

"Why's he here?"

"Says he saw what happened."

"What's he want?"

Dawson shrugged. He'd done his fair share of herding the homeless before working his way to a desk. He'd spent the last two days controlling the inordinate chaos in the bullpen and was using the midnight lull to catch up on paperwork.

"You didn't ask?" I said.

"Sure I did. He said he 'don't want nothin' but to see the lieutenant."

"Bit strange, eh? Seems like coming in here's the last thing he'd want to do. Especially now."

"They like the attention."

"You buzz the lieutenant?"

"Hell no. I figured the guy'd get bored and leave on his own." Dawson's eyebrows lifted a smidge. "You can buzz him if you'd like."

"I'll have a chat with him. See if I can get him to leave."

Dawson swiveled his chair back to his monitor and started stabbing at the keys again.

I pushed open the breezeway door and held out a ten dollar bill.

"Hey bud," I said. "Here's ten bucks. Why don't you head down to Mr. Whiskers. You still have time to grab a fifth before they close."

The witness stiffened at the offer, but didn't respond.

"You hear me?" I asked.

"You the lieutenant?" he answered, eyes still ahead.

"I'm Detective Taylor Watson..."

The man shook his head and moved his hands to his pockets.

"No sir. Nobody but the lieutenant."

I slipped the money back into my pocket.

"Why the lieutenant?"

He turned his eyes to mine.

"I need protection. I live out there," he cocked his head towards the door. "I tell some suit what I saw and it goes nowhere, then what? What if the guy comes after me next?"

“Ok,” I said. “I hear you. We can one hundred percent call the lieutenant, but I just need a bit of information first. Let’s start with your name.”

He hesitated, but answered.

“Randall.”

I approached a little closer, pulling out my pad and pen.

“Right. Randall. Can you tell me what you saw?”

“No sir. Uhuh. I know how this works.”

“Come on. I’ve got coffee. Water. I bet I can even wrestle up some oatmeal. Easy peasy. I’ll get my man Dawson to bring it in and we can have a conversation.”

Randall shook his head, frustrated.

“You think that’s why I’m here? You know I get two hots every day at the mission.

I paused, letting the witness calm for a moment.

“You heard the news about the attack, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. Hard not to.”

“You know it was one of our own that was killed?”

Randall nodded.

“So you get it? Our tip line is maxed out and we still got nothing. Why would I call the lieutenant in to talk to you? It’ll be both our heads if what you heard isn’t useful.”

“I didn’t hear it. I seen it.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t, I’d just like to hear your story before I drag him down here. He ain’t slept since it happened and we’re crazy around here.”

Randall grunted, whispered to himself something I couldn’t make out, then a shiver raced through his body.

The last thing this man wanted was attention from me or any other cops.

“We can head back to my office. We’ll skip the interrogation room and all that. Just have a conversation.”

“What about my stuff?”

“Dawson will keep an eye on it for you. It’ll be right where you left it when you’re done.”

He chewed on his lip for a moment before nodding. I held the entry door open for him. He dipped his head as he stepped ahead of me.

“Dawson, can you keep an eye on Randall’s belongings? We’ll be just a minute.”

Dawson’s face tightened as he brought his hand up to his nose, but he nodded ascent.

I led the way back through the hallway to my office. Randall took a seat across from my desk. I started the recorder on my phone and slid it out between us.

“So tell me what you saw.”

“I saw that man who killed that cop. I saw it happen.”

“Where’d you see it?”

“That big dirt spot under the forty. Cross from Dominoes. It’s got them big green metal legs. You know the place?”

“Yeah. And you were there?”

“Just cutting through. Heading back to Negley when I saw the cop come up on the guy—the guy that killed him.”

“Ok. Walk me through it.”

“Like I said, the cop came around and bout bumped into the guy. The guy straight way starts yelling. ‘What the fuck you doing down here? This ain’t where you belong!’, then sucker punched him. Dropped him. Then he grabbed Barnes’ baton and started beating the shit out of him. Musta hit him thirty, forty times.”

“Officer Barnes? You knew him?”

“No sir.”

“They didn’t see you?”

“Yes, I mean, yeah, after the guy stopped swinging he wiped the baton off on his pants then dropped it next to the cop. He looked back at me, pointed at me, then did this—” Randall ran his thumb around his neck, “then ran off the other way.”

“What’d you do?”

“What you think I did?” Randall’s voice got louder.

“That’s what I’m asking.”

“I ran. Went back to Negley.”

“Officer Barnes’ badge and wallet were missing. You know anything about that?”

“The killer must have taken them.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“I was scared. I didn’t want to get in trouble.”

“But you’re here now.”

Randall shrugged.

“Like I said. The guy knows me. I don’t want him coming after me next.”

“I get it Randall. I’d be scared too. You think maybe you could ID the guy if we showed you some pictures?”

“Mmhm. Absolutely.”

“Let’s go down the hall,” I said, standing from my desk. Randall stood with me. “We have a computer setup so you can start looking through some mugshots. See if you can spot the guy.”

Randall nodded and followed me out the door into the hallway. I walked a few paces, then glanced back.

Randall had stopped. He was turned and staring at the row of framed officer headshots hung along the wall.

“Randall?”

I stepped back towards him. His eyes were locked on the smiling picture of Lieutenant Wilson. He slowly turned his head to me, his eyes bulging with shock and fear.

“Detective!” Wilson’s voice cracked like a whip from the end of the hall. “Dawson says you got a witness for me.”

I turned to face my superior.

“Yessir.”

“And?”

“He wants to talk to a lieutenant.”

“Well here I am.” He looked at Randall. “What you got for me?”

Randall looked between Wilson and me three times.

“Nothing,” he finally said. “I was just trying to get out of the rain. Thought maybe you could help me out with some spare change or something.”

I pulled the ten out of my pocket and handed it to him.

“Thank you sir. God bless. I’ll be out of your hair now.”

Randall took a couple steps back then turned and ran down the hallway disappearing around the corner back into the lobby.

Lieutenant Wilson came up beside me.

“You get anything interesting out of him?”

“Not much,” I said. “Any idea why he ran off like that?”

Wilson shrugged.

“I’ve picked that guy up before. He probably recognized me.”