

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

He was hunched down on the floor, back to the window with the mirror image of the gold and blue Nashville Metropolitan Police Department emblem looming large over his head. He rocked compulsively back and forth, his lips moving but talking to no one.

His new long sleeved button down was tucked into a torn up pair of cargo shorts. It looked like he'd had a shave in the past twenty-four hours and his long, matted hair was slicked back into a tight ponytail.

"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 stopped rocking, 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 commenced to rocking again.

"No no no. Nobody but the lieutenant."

I slipped the money back into my pocket.

"Why the lieutenant?"

The rocking stopped again and his yellow bloodshot eyes slid up to mine.

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

“Ok,” I said. “I hear you. We can one hundred percent call in 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 could’ve gotten a bed for the night too if I didn’t come in here.”

I paused, letting the witness calm for a moment.

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

“Yeah.”

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

Randall lips thinned. He 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. The whole thing.”

“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 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.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Do we have to do it out here?”

“We can use one of the interview rooms.”

“With the two way glass and the cameras? Uhuh. I don’t want no one listening I can’t see.”

“What about my office? No windows. We’ll close the door. Just you and me having a conversation.”

He chewed on his lip for a moment before nodding and pushing his way up to his feet. I held the entry door open for him.

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.”

“Let’s start with where.”

“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?’ and ‘This ain’t where you belong!’, then sucker punched him. Boom.” Randall punched a fist into his hand. “Dropped him. Then he grabbed the cop’s baton and started beating the shit out of him. Musta hit him thirty, forty times.”

“That must have been terrifying.”

“Yes sir.”

“Then what happened?”

“The guy wiped the baton off with his shirt, dropped it in the dirt, looked around to make sure no one saw, then ran off.”

“That’s it? Dropped the baton and ran off?”

Randall nodded.

“So he didn’t see you?”

Randall shook his head, no.

“I was hiding behind one of the girders.”

“But you said he was going to come after you next. How could he if he doesn’t know you saw or what you look like?”

“I, uh,” Randall blinked. “You know. I live out there. If there’s a killer running around, he could grab me next. I live on the streets. People die every day. I’m always looking over my back. And you cops don’t care about us. Don’t help us at all. Just let us live out there like animals. Until someone you care about gets hurt, then you’re all about us!”

“I know Randall. It’s awful. And unfair. We should be doing way more to help y’all.”

Randall nodded a moment before answering.

“Yeah you should.”

“What’d you do after the killer ran off?”

“I ran all the way back to Negley. Didn’t want to hang around a dead cop. Next thing I know, I’m getting blamed.”

“So you don’t know if he was actually dead yet?”

“Of course he was dead. I saw what happened.”

I nodded.

“Of course. Sorry. You know what’s really sad? Seems someone robbed him after you left.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, his wallet and badge were gone. But you said the killer didn’t take anything. That means someone came along after you and robbed a dead cop. Pretty horrific don’t you think?”

“Awful,” Randall whispered.

“So why didn’t you call the police when it happened?”

“Like I said. I didn’t want to get blamed for a dead cop.”

“I get it Randall. I’d be scared too.”

I took a deep breath.

“Well I really appreciate you coming forward now. You think maybe you could ID the guy if we showed you some pictures?”

“Yeah,” Randall nodded vigorously. “Yeah, 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 some help. Thought maybe you could spare some change or something.”

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

“Thank you sir. God bless. I’ll get out of your way 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.”

—

Randall was servicing Wilson when Barnes happened upon them.

Wilson attacked Barnes and Randall scooted and stumbled back, watching the attack. After Wilson was done, he wiped off the baton, dropped it by the body then turned to Randall. He told him he knew he was and where he lived and would do the same to him if he said anything then ran off.

Randall crawled up to check on Barnes. Thinking he was dead, he took the man's wallet and badge. When he went for the gun, Barnes coughed and spit up blood. He was still alive but obviously hurt badly.

Randall's immediate reaction was to scramble to his feet and run. He assumed someone would find the cop and help him.

The next day when he heard that Barnes was dead, the guilt washed over him. He kept trying to convince himself it was a cop, not his fault and the cop doesn't give two shits about him, but still, he let the man die and he knows who attacked him.

He had to figure out a way to tell the cops what happened without letting on that he let the cop die. He knew they wouldn't take him seriously and if he wasn't careful, would pin the murder on him.

First thing he did was chuck the wallet and badge in the river.

Then he went down to the mission. Got a new plaid shirt, shaved, and slicked his long hair back into a tight ponytail. They didn't have any pants or new shoes for him though, so he was stuck with his old new balance with holes in them and cargo pants with one of the pockets ripped out of it.

He stashed his stuff at the mission after dinner then headed out before the closed the doors. He waited until after eleven hoping there wouldn't be too much going on at the precinct and he could meet with whoever the top cop on duty was.

When he rolled up into the precinct, Dawson was immediately annoyed. Asked him what he wanted. He said to talk to the lieutenant. Dawson said the lieutenant was busy. Randall said he needed to tell someone what happened to the dead cop and Dawson told him to wait in the breezeway. He had been there almost an hour by the time Watson saw him.