

Seeing a murder was the final nail in an already broken man. He rocked compulsively back and forth, his lips moving but talking to no one.

He had wrangled his overstuffed dufflebag and rollcart into the breezeway and was now hunched down on the floor. He kept his back to the outside window with the mirror image of the gold and blue Nashville Metropolitan Police Department emblem looming large over his head. His filthy overcoat was slick with rain and his heavy black boots were drawn up to his butt. The stale scent of layered sweat and piss still hung in the air.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

“Didn’t get a name. I told him to wait his ass in the breezeway,” Dawson said. “He was 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.

“You didn’t ask?” I said.

“Sure I did. He said he ‘don’t want nothin but to see the captain.’”

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

“They like the attention.”

I cut my eyes to the clock on the wall

“You buzz the captain?”

“Fuck 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 sighed taking the jacket off my shoulder and sliding it back on.

“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 tapping on the keys.

I stepped towards the breezeway and the man stopped rocking, eyeing me warily. I pushed the door open and joined him in inside, breathing through my mouth.

“You the captain?”

“I’m detective Taylor Watson...”

The man shook his head and commenced to rocking again.

“No, no, no. Nobody but the captain.”

“We can call the captain, but I just need a bit of information. Let’s start with your name.”

The rocking slowed and he raised his yellow bloodshot eyes to me.

“Randall.”

I approached a little closer and squatted down in front of him.

“Can you tell me what you saw?”

“No, no. 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.”

“You think that’s why I’m here? For some oatmeal? I get two hots and a bed at the mission without havin’ to talk to you pi—” he paused, embarrassed.

Randall fished inside the dirty breast pocket and pulled out a single cigarette. He pinched it between his finger and thumb and held it an inch from his mouth. His tongue shot out and touched the end of the cigarette a couple times.

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

“Yeah I heard it. Hard not to.”

“So you know it was a cop?”

Randall kept his eyes locked on the cigarette still quivering between his fingers.

“Some are saying it was a robbery gone wrong.”

“Nobody was robbing that boy.”

“Why do you suppose somebody’d kill a cop down there?”

“He wasn’t dressed like no cop. Now stop with the questions. I won’t say nothing else but to the captain.”

“Look here. Our tip line is maxed out and we still got nothing useful. Why would I call the captain in to talk to you?”

“I seen it.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t, I’d just like to hear your story before I drag the captain down here. He’s with Bristoll’s wife now and he’ll have to leave her to come talk to you. See what I’m saying?”

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.

“Come on now. Just talk to me a bit then we can get the captain.”

“Do we have to do it out here in the open? He knows me.

“Who knows you?”

“I mean, the guy, he seen me. Knows what I look like.”

“Right.” I stood. “We can head back to my office. We’ll skip the interrogation room and the cameras. 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. He gently placed the cigarette back in his pocket and struggled his way up to his feet. I pushed open the entry door and motioned for him to go ahead.

“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 and I draped my jacket over the back of my chair and eased down. I started the recorder on my phone and slid it out between us.

“So tell me what you saw.”

“I saw that man that kilt that cop. But he knows what I look like. He saw me. I can’t have him coming after me and mine.”

“There’s no way you’ll get into trouble for seeing a murder. Where’d you see it?”

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

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Right, so I’d just left the church service. I helped them clean up after and was heading back to my camp at Negley. That’s where my girl is.”

“And?”

“I seen him.”

“Officer Bristol?”

“No.”

“The killer?”

Randall nodded.

“What was he up to?”

“Just standing there. Waiting for... just waiting.”

“For?”

“The cop — Bristol, I guess.

“And?”

“When Bristol showed up he musta surprised the guy cause he grabbed a brick off the ground and cracked that cop on his head. Cop folded over like that,” Randall snapped. “Then the guy slammed that brick down two, three more times. ‘Fuck you, fuck you’ he said every time.”

“Then what?”

“I got the fuck out of there.”

“While he was swinging the brick?”

“Yeah.”

“So when’d he see you?”

“Before.”

“Before Officer Bristol arrived?”

“Mmhm.”

“What did the man do after?”

“Don’t know. Last I looked back he wasn’t there.”

I leaned forward.

“Why didn’t you go straight to the police?”

Randall let out a bitter laugh.

“Cops’ll just blame it on me and it’d give y’all the last excuse ya need to break up our camp and kick us all out.” He shook his head. “That’s not gonna be on me.”

“But you could ID the guy? If we showed you some pictures?”

“Hmhm. Absolutely. But I ain’t going to no trial. You’ll have to do that part on your own.”

I picked up my phone and shot a text to Dawson before taking a seat.

“Let’s see if you can ID the guy first then we’ll worry about the next part.”

Randall tapped his foot quietly on the floor and kept shoving his dirty fingers into his breast pocket, fingering the loose cigarette in there.

“What’s taking so long?” Randall asked.

“Dawson’s pulling some mugs for you to look through. Won’t be a few minutes.”

“Nobody’s gonna see me right? I’ll finger him then I’m gone.”

“Let’s figure out who it is then we’ll go from there.”

Randall opened his mouth to answer, but the door swung open and Captain Rainer loomed in the doorway. He had on joggers, a Nashville Predators tshirt and a trucker cap. The bags under his eyes hung lower and redder than normal.

“Dawson says you’ve got something for me.”

“Yes sir,” I said, then Rainer turned towards my witness.

Randall’s eyes went wide and he let out a guttural moan before tipping sideways out of his chair and scrambling to his feet.

“No sir, I’m sorry. I ain’t seen nothin’.” Randall gasped. “Sorry to waste your time officers.”

Rainer stepped back out of the doorway and watched as Randall ran past him, the man’s dirty overcoat fluttering behind him.

“What the hell got into him?” I asked.

“Who knows with these vagrants?” he answered, eyes still down the hallway.

“They’re awfully unreliable.”