

I smelled him before I saw him. The stale scent of layered sweat and piss still hung in the air.

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. He rocked compulsively back and forth, his lips moving but talking to no one. His filthy overcoat was slick with rain and his heavy black boots were drawn up to his butt.

“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.

“Evening,” I said.

“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.

I stood and fished the cigarettes from my jacket, offering one to Randall. He shook his head so I stepped to the outside door and propped it open with my foot. I lit, inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out through the crack enjoying the sound of the rain drops against the pavement.

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

“Yeah I heard it. Hard not to.”

“So you know whose kid it was?”

Randall nodded.

“Some are saying carjacking.”

“Nobody stole that boy’s car.”

“Why do you suppose the boy was downtown that time of night?”

“How would I know?”

“Exactly what I’m saying. 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. His wife’s breaking down 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.

“Do we have to do it out here in the open? Nobody can know I been down here.

“Course not, 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 and pushing his way up to his feet. I blew the last of the smoke from my lungs and gently dabbed out my half burnt cigarette before gently wrapping it in a tissue and sliding it into my breast pocket. 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 kill that boy. But he saw me after. I know he saw me. Got a good look. That's why I can't have... I don't want any trouble for myself."

"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 when I saw the boy."

"What was he up to?"

"Just standing there. Waiting for... just waiting."

"For?"

"The man I guess. He came outta nowhere. Tall fella. Hit the boy with a crowbar. Cracked his head a few times then kept beating on him when he went down. 'Fuck you, fuck you' he said every time he swang."

"Then what?"

"That's when he saw me."

"So you were pretty close to the boy when this happened?"

"Yeah. I mean, close enough."

"What he do?"

"Started coming for me. I backed up right quick, trying to get away and those girls saved my life. They were half drunk, stumbling down the sidewalk screaming and laughing. Must of come from Broadway. When he saw them he ran off towards downtown and I hurried back to camp."

"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 a phone and shot a text to Dawson.

"Let's see if you can ID the guy first then we'll worry about the next part."

I leaned back in my chair, unwrapping the cigarette from the tissue and stuck it back in my mouth without lighting it. Randall tapped his foot quietly on the floor and kept cutting his eyes at me and the door.

"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 point him out then I leave?"

"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.”