

## Chapter 2:

Nathan Williams stepped out of the car and took a sip of his coffee as he surveyed the scene laid out before him. The day was already dark and dreary, and it was barely 9am. Grey clouds blanketed the sky, and a light but steady rain fell, laying on top of his clothes before settling, gradually soaking them through. An officer stood a few feet away, sealing the crime scene. "Detective." The one word greeting spoke volumes, and Nathan nodded in response as he made his way over to his partner.

Frank was bending down examining the body, his belly stretching out over his belt and slacks, his face turning red from the strain. In contrast, Nathan slipped agily under the yellow crime scene tape, and Frank snorted his jealousy. Nathan dismissed the sound. "Frank. Whadda we got?" He stood next to his aging partner peering beneath the tarp used to keep the rain from washing away any more of the evidence than it possibly already had.

"Female, caucasian; late 20s to early 30s. Suffered blunt force trauma to the back of the head, possible cause of death. Strangulation another possible cause."

"Do we have a name? Who found the body?" Nathan asked, bending down to get a better look at the victim.

Frank grunted as he rose, then looked at his notepad. "Aimee Spencer. Manager found her this morning when she pulled in; thought it strange Aimee's car was here because she works the evening shift. When she saw no sign of Aimee inside, she came back out to check the car."

"Anything disturbed?"

Frank shook his head. "Nothing by anyone or anything except the rain."

Nathan took Frank's place next to the body. Setting his coffee next to him on the pavement, he slipped on a pair of examiner's gloves and lifted the tarp once more. Aimee's soft features were distorted, and although pale, there was still bruising around her mouth and temple. The bruising around her throat was deep purple, and you could clearly see what appeared to be two thumbprints. Nathan gently lifted her arm. It was stiff in his hand, rigor already set in. His eyes looked her over- clothes were disheveled but intact; her heels, which appeared to have been expensive, were caked with mud; her nails were still polished, none broken; and there was no bruising on her knuckles.

"Where is the manager now?" Nathan asked as he stood. He disposed of the gloves and retrieved his coffee, which was now mixed with rainwater. Frank made a slight face as he watched Nathan take a swig. Nathan shrugged. "It's coffee." Frank shook his head slightly as they made their way across the parking lot.

"Manager's name is Susan Walters. That's her over there." Frank nodded towards the building where an attractive middle-aged woman huddled beneath the awning. She was gripping a cup with both hands, hair plastered to her face and neck. Mascara was streaked down her cheeks, and

she stared off blankly in the distance.

"Ms. Walters?" Nathan approached her quietly, not wanting to startle her. She looked up at him, her expression still blank, as if she wasn't really seeing him, or at least who he was. She said nothing as Nathan pulled out his badge, displaying it in front of her. "I'm Detective Williams, and this is my partner Detective Stevens."

Susan remained silent and the detectives exchanged knowing glances. Nathan continued, "I know this may be the last thing you want to do right now, but we need to ask you a few questions. Susan lowered her head, eyes to the ground, and nodded. "How well did you know Miss Spencer?"

"Well enough," she managed to get out before her face distorted, and the tears once again began to fall. She continued to cry, speaking through her tears. "She and I came to work here at the same time, about three years ago. Even though she worked for me, we both kind of bonded, being the new people." She paused to take a breath, and a sip of whatever liquid warmth she held in her cup. "She wasn't quite like a daughter to me, but we talked about things, held one another's secrets."

"And what kinds of secrets would those be?" Frank spoke up.

Something in Frank's tone seemed to rub Susan the wrong way, and she quickly shot him a disdainful look. "Not those kinds of secrets, detective." She resumed staring off into the trees, seeming to see them this time. "She was a good girl, not into drugs, barely drank even." Susan smiled, remembering. "Her secrets were pretty tame, things about her childhood, guys she dated, things like that. Not secrets at all really, just things you wouldn't talk about with to everyday strangers." She shrugged at this, still in her own mind.

When she offered no further information, Nathan continued the questioning. "Guys that she dated. Was she currently seeing anyone?"

Susan shook her head. "No. She hadn't had a date in a while. A few months, maybe? She was going back to school, so that took up a lot of her time, besides work."

"What school was she attending?"

"Cambridge College. She was working towards her Master's of Education in Counseling Psychology." Susan smiled again. "She was so proud. And I was proud of her. She worked hard to make that happen."

Both Nathan and Frank raised their eyebrows. "That is impressive," Nathan commented appreciatively. His ex had attempted to attend Cambridge- dropped out after a semester. Although it was a continuing education college for working adults, their studies were rigorous, and Missy hadn't had the patience to succeed. "Did she work here full time?"

"Yes," Susan answered. "Her hours varied, depending on her school schedule, but we always

made it work."

"What were her hours yesterday?" Frank spoke up again.

"She worked from 3 to 9pm yesterday."

"That's only six hours; I thought you said she worked full time?"

"She did work 40 hours a week. Some shifts were shorter, some longer. As I said, we worked around her school schedule."

Nathan saw Frank open his mouth to say something more, but he quickly interjected. He could see the irritation begin to build on Susan's face, hear it in her tone. He didn't know how he did it, but Frank always seemed to get under people's skin. "Would you happen to have a copy of Aimee's work and school schedule?"

"Yes. We kept everything on record."

"Thank you. We will need to have a look at that as soon as possible. We would like to speak with anyone Aimee came in contact with for the last week. What exactly was her job title?" Nathan made notes as he went along.

"Her title? She was a "Career Counselor" and a "Student Educational Psychologist". What does that entail? She worked mainly as a mentor, tutor, and counselor for young adults entering the college world. Most of her clients were having trouble adjusting to "normal" college life, and she would help them get through it."

"Could you explain that further, please?"

"Aimee met with students or soon-to-be students- some were "military brats", moved around from school to school, unable to keep up with curriculum. Others were just out of boarding school. Some were recovering addicts, looking to turn their lives around. Aimee was a friend, a mentor. That was her concentration in school- School Adjustment, Mental Health, and Addiction Counseling."

Nathan's respect for the deceased was growing, as was his resolve to find her murderer. Aimee was clearly a hard-working young woman with a good head on her shoulders. He didn't have to know her or get others' testimonies of her to know that she had been well-liked and respected. But not by everyone.

"One more question, and then we will be on our way." Susan nodded, and Nathan continued. "As much good as Aimee seemed to be doing for these young adults, someone took a disliking to her. Can you think of anyone, anyone at all, that would want to hurt her, or see her be hurt?"

Susan wiped at more tears that threatened to fall. She shook her head. "No. No one. Everyone loved Aimee. She was bright, bubbly, always had a smile and a kind word for everyone." She

covered her eyes briefly with her hand as she composed herself. "Who would do this?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know, ma'am. But we will find out." Frank said resolutely. Obviously, Susan's testimony had struck a chord with him, also.

Susan nodded, and she sighed. "Thank you."

"Thank you, Ms. Walters. Please call us if you can think of anything else, no matter what time of day or night, and no matter how insignificant you think it may be." Nathan dug out his card and handed it to Susan, grasping her fingers briefly as he placed it in her hand.

Susan nodded once more. "I will."

Nathan and Frank both turned away and marched towards their cars. They stopped an officer on the way, asking him to get Aimee's schedule, and also a list of her clients.

"I don't know who this bastard thinks he is," Nathan growled as he opened his car door, ready to go to the station, "but I'll be damned if he gets away with this."