

## Number 27

Sarah sipped her latte and flicked her thumb across the smartphone screen scanning news articles. More misery, more corruption, more injustice. She smiled for herself. With so much wrong in the world how could a person be offended when misfortune favored them with a stilted dance? So few people realized that calamity hovered always, ready to snare the virtuous and the despicable with equal fervor.

The café buzzed with the nervous energy of the over-caffeinated. Students waxed poetic about concepts beyond their understanding, professionals pretended to not care about the price of their fancy drinks, and the obligatory writer sat alone in the corner trying desperately to stave off insignificance. Everywhere was mundane melodrama, and into that everyday dichotomy walked Number 27.

He was a non-descript man; tallish, darkish, unexceptional. His clothes were business casual and belied his importance, but he walked with a confident gait and the familiarity with which he greeted the baristas made clear that this was his haunt. Sarah found his kind humorous, this new class of technocrat so obsessed with the appearance of mediocrity. Perhaps they thought their intelligence gave them a badge of irony. Maybe they were just bad dressers.

She watched him interact with the staff, joking good-naturedly and generally hanging near the counter. The other patrons were in their own worlds and fragments of conversation floated through the space punctuated by the hiss and clunk of coffee being made, but Sarah could hear everything Number 27 said while he chatted up the girl behind the register. He was almost charming.

Sarah continued to sip her coffee while watching him over her phone. A person could blend in anywhere these days merely by fixating on a screen. She watched him collect his coffee without breaking anecdote, a surprisingly funny story involving a cat and a nursing home, and lounged at her miniature table waiting for him to move on. He would linger for a time of course, but men in his position rarely remained static for long.

As soon as his story was finished the man stepped away and headed for the door. Sarah got up as he passed and followed him out. She slipped the phone in her pocket and donned her sunglasses. The day was bright and clear as a toddler's eyes taking in Disneyland for the first time. He strolled along a carefully manicured path that led to the offices where he worked, and she pursued at a relaxed distance.

They rounded a corner and came upon a shaded bench with a bubbling fountain where he took a seat to enjoy his coffee. Sarah continued walking, but stumbled as she reached the bench and threw out a hand to catch herself. The man helped her stand and she thanked him before plopping down next to him on the bench with a sigh.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

She smiled and said, "I'm fine, just clumsy is all."

He smiled back. "I don't envy you, I think if I had to wear heels I would probably spend more time on my face than my feet."

He really was a charmer. She flashed him another smile and they sat in silence for a minute. The air was still and the only sound was the soft gurgle of the fountain. The spot was quite picturesque, beautifully landscaped and set back just far enough from the path to provide the illusion of privacy. She understood why he stopped here every day on his way back to the office.

As they enjoyed the quiet a bird descended from the sky and alighted on the branch of a nearby tree. It shuffled in the queer way that birds do, hop stepping back and forth, picking at the seeds of a newly blooming flower. It jabbed the delicate buds with its beak, quick darting motions that shook the branch, oblivious of them both, until it wasn't. When it cast its gaze upon them Sarah captured its eyes for the briefest of moments, and then it was gone, taking wing with frantic urgency and disappearing over the tops of the surrounding foliage.

So cautious, Sarah thought. What was it about consciousness that emboldened humans, robbed them of their instincts and caused them to betray their animal nature?

"I haven't seen you before," the man said suddenly. "Do you work nearby?"

Perhaps this beast was wiser than most. "No no," she replied casually. "But I am here on business."

"Ah I see," he said, though clearly he could not. "What type of work do you do?"

"Private contractor, but I'm afraid the nature of my business is secret."

"Oh? Very mysterious."

She tossed him another smile. "It's nothing special. I'm just one in a long line of professionals. The work itself can be... delicate, but"—she looked around conspiratorially—"I can tell you a secret about it if you like." Number 27 perked up at this and leaned closer. Sarah listened past the fountain, past the nature around them, but there were no footsteps approaching. She leaned in as well and slipped free the knife concealed beneath her business suit as she did. She whispered in his ear, "You're my business."

As Sarah spoke she thrust the knife between his ribs puncturing his heart. He jerked and went still, dying with the quiet dignity the setting deserved. Moving quickly she wiped the blood from the blade using the back of his shirt as he slumped forward. She guided his body to a leaning position on the bench and walked away at a brisk pace, not hurried, but the resolved gait of a motivated executive.

She reached her car in minutes and drove to a nearby lot where she switched it out for another. She sent a message from her phone and waited for the reply. Less than a minute passed before she received her confirmation, it was followed by a file with a picture. Sarah pulled the picture up and saw the face of an elderly woman. Number 28.