

At twelve midnight on the eleventh of the month as the tower bells chime and the moon reflects ten thousand moons in the ten thousand windows of the city, chasing shadows across nine dark storefronts along the square, some certain moonbeam banks an eight-point ricochet and snaps a seven-second beeline to the six-story building on Fifth Street, where it shoots through a four-by-three-foot ground-level window of two-layer glass, straight to the basement floor where one wide circle of blood is spreading out around the body of one man.

One the Gun.

He has one minute to live.

The bells are still chiming as he opens his eyes.

But now he is standing.

This is strange.

Strange enough that the walls to his left and right grab his ears and give a twist, trying to throw him back down onto the floor.

One the Gun shuts his eyes and tries to steady himself. Listens to another strike of the bell. Opens his eyes. The room stops spinning.

She's standing in front of him. This is strange, too, as she certainly wasn't here a moment ago. Such a look on her face. Eyes the color and size of oceans.

Two the True Blue.

He doesn't understand the light in the room. It's bright as day even as the midnight bells ring.

He doesn't understand the room. This is not the basement.

The troubled look on his assistant's face: She looks the way he feels. He sputters out the only thing he can think to say, "Miss Blue?"

"You looked so odd just now," she says. "Are you alright?"

"Of course!" he says, to shrug it off like a man—but actually, yes, truly, really, he's alright. He's not dead. Wasn't he just dead? About to be dead?

Two the True Blue has this radio show she listens to every Friday night and talks about constantly called *Who Is the Villain?*, a trite piece of schlock where the detective—one of those fakey radio detectives with nothing but brawn and clever quips—solves a different overblown case each week. The narrator's always saying ridiculous stuff like "the dame had the kind of eyes

that made you want to melt like honey on a hot biscuit.” And the victim’s always coming to in a hospital bed asking, “Where am I? Where am I?” One the Gun tries to know where he is so that he doesn’t have to ask this. He’s not in the basement. He’s in a room full of light.

Blank white walls and a couple windows. The open blinds shred the sunshine and leave it in stripes on the floor. A couch and chair, a beat-up old filing cabinet in the corner. Bookcase and desk. He’s in his office.

One the Gun shakes his head. “I just got a little dizzy all of a sudden. I’m fine.”

He needs to sit down.

“I think I’ll just sit down.”

One the Gun sits down.

He takes the couch where clients generally sit when they come to him to solve their very ordinary and unradialike cases like is my wife cheating on me?, or is my clerk siphoning twenty bucks a week from the company till? Sometimes he gets more interesting assignments, yes, sometimes even a murder. One the Gun is on a murder case right now—no, not his own murder, that’s a different case altogether. In fact it’s not a case at all, in fact it didn’t happen at all, he’s pretty sure it didn’t happen at all.

“Sir?” Two the True Blue’s giving him the big blue eyes again.

He kicks out a laugh to show her he’s fine and not at all hallucinating his own death in the middle of the night—day—in the middle of the day. “Don’t mind me. It’s just been . . .” He thinks about it. “A long morning.”

She smiles. “Shall I continue?”

He doesn’t know with what. He says, “Of course.”

She takes a seat opposite him in the chair, looks down at the notepad he didn’t notice before in her hand. “Well, the coroner’s office confirms that the victim was killed with poison. It’s a hard one to pronounce, but here goes.”

She’s telling him things he already knows, things she reported on yesterday, but he doesn’t care. He settles back against the couch, happy to be here and not . . . wherever he . . . probably wasn’t before.

“Police say that specific poison was also found in the storeroom in the form of rat poison. I have a box of it for you on the desk. The storeroom was unlocked at the time, but this poison is also not uncommon and could have been brought in by someone from the outside.”

She shifts and crosses her legs under her pale peach cotton skirt. Two the True Blue has a heart-shaped face and the kind of beautiful innocence that would make any altar boy give up his ticket to heaven just to steal her lollipop. It's not just her innocence that's beautiful either. She's all-over beautiful. Just look at her there, smiling that smile that melts you like honey on a hot biscuit.

"The poison usually takes about twenty minutes to activate in the body. Once it went to work on the victim, it would have been quick," she says. "A few shocking moments of agony followed by violent convulsions, followed by unconsciousness, and finally death."

He can tell she's enjoying this. Delivering the fiendish details of this murder case. Maybe that's why she's going on about things she already told him yesterday. It probably makes her feel like the sidekick in that radio show she laps up every Friday night like honey on a hot biscuit. One the Gun wonders if he ate breakfast this morning. He remembers nothing of the morning. Did he have some sort of stroke? Temporary insanity? Did he go out last night and get tight and pass out, and was the whole death thing nothing but a booze dream?

He stands and starts pacing. His shoes hitting the worn wood floor say this isn't a dream. So does this very real office, dinky as a broom closet in a fleabag motel, with only space enough for one desk, which he and Miss Blue have to share. It's barely enough room for adequate pacing, but he can't sit still.

Two the True Blue glances from her notes, eyebrows up, but Gun's eyebrows and smile indicate that he would simply like to pace a bit while listening to her very interesting reporting and could she please continue.

"I've made appointments for you to talk to the witnesses and suspects," she says. Little punch of relish in her voice when she says suspects. "The doorman of the place, the bartender, that priest. I haven't reached out to the widow yet because I thought you might want to play a little more casual with her."

"Good choice," he says.

Two the True Blue always makes good choices. She's the best assistant a third-rate gumshoe could have. She comes into the office every day at eight when he's still at home sleeping, types up any notes he's recited into the dictation machine the night before—notes that generally come with instructions for her and research to do, which she does—and by the time he arrives at the office, usually around noon, she has all the information he needs, all his notes prepared, and his appointments made for the day. She's indispensable. Not to mention pretty as a stuffed pigeon on a fancy hat. Sophisticated like.

She stands and crosses to his desk in the corner. "I've jotted your appointments on the calendar. Want to have a look?"

He joins her, standing over the desk looking down. Her finger with a clean, filed nail points at a notation on the page. One o'clock time slot. Meet with doorman at café.

"I hope this works," she says. "He's on duty at the Dive Inn starting at three, and I wanted to give you a chance to really talk. He's an important witness. He was the one who discovered the body."

It's déjà vu. That's all this is. He didn't really experience this whole conversation yesterday, he's just feeling like he did. Maybe this déjà vu feeling is an aftereffect of the weird nightmare he had last night: the office . . . the power going out . . . him in the basement with the flashlight . . . the gunshot . . .

"Of course," he says, "that sounds perfect." The words coming out of his mouth feel like words he already said.

"Good. And then you'll want to go over to the church," she says. "The victim will be there in an open casket if you want to view him. And I've made an appointment for you to speak with the priest at two thirty. He was one of the last remaining patrons that night at the Dive Inn. Later this evening you'll go over to the Dive where you can speak to the bartender who was also on the scene at the time."

She's standing so close her shoulder brushes his. She smells like jasmine.

"Miss Blue?"

"Sir?" she asks.

"You ever get the feeling you're having déjà vu?"

"Mmm, every twice in a while," she says. "Oh, and don't forget to break for dinner. You know how you get on task. Now this poison." She turns to the bookcase beside the desk. With one hand on a shelf, she rises on tiptoe, lifting off one foot and using the ball of the other to raise herself even further and reach for the thick volume of The Compleat Illustrated Pharmacopeia on the high shelf. Sliding the book out and grabbing hold of it, she drops back onto both feet, teeters. Not truly like she's going to fall, but One the Gun, right behind her, catches her in a way that makes her tip back into his arms.

For just a moment she's in his arms.

Then the office door opens and a man walks in. He's annoyingly dashing with his gray tailored coat, homburg, and neatly trimmed whiskers.

Three the Goatee.

“Sweetie!” Two the True Blue steps out of One the Gun’s grip, passing him the book. It’s heavy in his hand. “We can continue talking about the poison later,” she tells him, then turns back to her beau. “Lunch?”

Three the Goatee is shooting a suspicious single eyebrow, as carefully groomed as his whiskers, at One the Gun.

Watching the two of them is like watching a movie Gun has already seen.

“Oh, now.” Miss Blue waves the incident away with the back of her hand. “I slipped pulling down a book. He caught me from falling.” And then again: “Lunch?”

A hug, a peck on the mouth, Three the Goatee’s shoulders relax, and he smiles. “Lunch!”

As Two the True Blue turns to snag a light jacket and pocketbook from the hook on the wall by the door, Three the Goatee angles his eyes back to One the Gun. He snaps a courteous, if chilly, nod of recognition. “Gun.”

A short, formal nod back. “Professor.”

Then Two the True Blue beams warmth on them both. “Sir, I’ll be back in the office within the hour. Give a call with whatever you need.” And the couple is off, leaving One the Gun alone at the start of a very strange day.