

DETECTIVE TALES

December Issue
Published October 27th



VOL. TWENTY-EIGHT NOVEMBER, 1944 NUMBER FOUR

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Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2250 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter June 3, 1936, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1944, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.80. Foreign postage 75c additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

COME HOME TO THE CORPSE!

Starkly Realistic Crime-Mystery Novel

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS



Somebody came from behind
and took him with a black-



If you'd married Edith, no one could blame you for sneaking out, like Wes, for a peaceful beer, even though it meant hell-a-mile when you sneaked back again. . . . But the kind of hell Wes returned to was something far more grim and deadly than the usual tongue-lashing of the vitriolic virago who shared—and did her best to wreck—his life. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

The Men at the Door

WES hadn't known Edith had a cousin named Al until after Wes and Edith had been married eighteen months. Then one January afternoon the plant physician sent Wes home with a bad chest cold, and when Edith let him into their apartment, why there was this dark, short-browed man with eyebrows like square chunks of licorice candy. Edith pointed, her palm upward as

though pointing was something she'd practiced in front of a mirror, and said: "Wes, this is Cousin Al," just like that, out of a not-so-clear sky.

Al lifted himself out of a lounge chair. His expensive dark suit with chalk stripes was patterned to lend him height and plane off some of his breadth. His right hand, bright with three carats of diamond, engulfed Wes' fingers in a crusher grip while eyes like ripe olives gave Wes a going-over.

"So *this* is Wes." Al was loud and patronizing. "How're you, fellah. Ha-huh-huh." Al's chuckle was not a happy sound, not contagious.

By the time Wes had washed and put on clothes that weren't covered with the dust of the pattern-making shop, Cousin Al was on his way out. In overcoat and black homberg hat he waved casually to Wes from the doorway.

"See you again, fellah."

And that was the last time Wes saw Cousin Al until the night of the murder. But he heard enough about him from Edith. All of their fights ended in the same round, with Edith reminding Wes that if Cousin Al were married, *his* wife wouldn't have to wear her trousseau forever either; she'd have mink coats and Dache hats. . . .

THE night of the murder, the quarrel was different in that it started with Al and his money instead of ending that way. Wes came home late from the plant to find Edith keyed up to a screaming pitch because the bathtub faucets were dripping. She'd been after the janitor all day, and if she had to sit there all night listening to that steady drip-drip, she'd go out of her mind.

Wes was dead on his feet. With all the war orders pouring into the foundry, the pattern shop was a mad-house. He didn't try to explain how tired he was to Edith because she'd long ago ceased to be interested. He went into the bathroom to look at the faucets, then came around into the adjoining bedroom. At the back of the clothes closet was a little door which divulged the secrets of the bathtub plumbing. Opening the door he saw a shoe box wedged between water and drain pipes. He scowled, stooped, pulled out the box, shook it. Then he slashed the string that bound it with his keen-edged knife and removed the lid.

The knife, the lid, the string fell from his fingers to the floor. Wes held the box in his hands, stared into it. He was bewildered, shocked, scared, like dreaming he'd gone downtown and forgot to put on his trousers. The box contained money—wads of money in neat packs of eye-popping hundred dollar bills.

Out in the living room, the satin-faced heels

of Edith's mules came clattering down on the floor. The sofa springs squeaked, and there was the startled swish of her taffeta housecoat. Wes came from the closet as she came into the bedroom. Her dark hair was tumbled from lounging all afternoon. Her eyes were so wide the white showed all around the blue irises. At first there was panic in her eyes and then the hard brightness of defiance.

"Snooping in my closet, are you?"

He didn't answer. He shoved the box toward her. "What—what's this?"

She laughed. "You wouldn't know, would you? You've heard about the stuff but you've never seen any!"

"Where—where—" He moistened his lips. Ugly thoughts whirled around in his brain like castings tumbled in a rotary cleaner at the plant, making meaningless clatter, raising a blinding dust.

"Cousin Al's," she said. "I'm keeping it for him for a while. He wants it to start a new business."

"Oh. He's got something against banks?"

Her eyes fled from his for a furtive second. Then she talked fast. "You wouldn't understand. Al's up there where he hears things long before they break in the papers. A new regulation. It's something about attaching private savings and giving war bonds in exchange."

Wes brought a wilted smile to his lips. "Confiscation of private wealth. I'm up there where I hear things, too. They spiked that rumor as coming from Berlin—not Washington. *Cousin Al*—"

He paused. The reflection had come unintended, as though prompted by something that had been going on in his subconscious. It brought a short brittle laugh from Edith's full red lips. She leaned toward him, one hand on her hip, the other clasping the low neck of her housecoat. Her face was waxen with only a faint apricot tint up high on her cheeks. She'd had something to drink, though Wes didn't know where she'd got it. The drink was part of her defiance, but the scornful narrowing of her eyes was something he'd been putting up with for a long time.

He said, "Go ahead, laugh. Out loud, I mean. Up to now I've been seven kinds of a jackass!" He dropped the box at her feet.

He left the bedroom, got hat and topcoat out of the living room closet. When he turned, Edith was in the living room with him, between him and the door. She looked a little scared.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, taunting in spite of her fear.

He started for the door. "You'd like to know."

She caught his arm, he brushed her off, reached for the doorknob. He was quite calm.

The only thing that hurt was his pride. He turned toward her once more.

"If you hadn't killed the love I had for you a long time ago, Edith, I'd strangle you with my bare hands. You notice, don't you, I'm not asking when *Cousin Al* was here last or how many times he's been here since that first time? I'm just not interested."

She laughed an unstable laugh that wavered between derision and hysteria. "Go on, Wes. Go out and get stinko on two beers! Wes—" She leaned out the door after he had entered the hall to shout at his back, "Wes, pick up a girl who understands, why don't you?"

This last struck her particularly funny and her brassy laughter echoed in Wes' ears long after he had left the apartment.

IT was a place on Illinois Street. Wes hadn't bothered to look at the name. It had a bar and tables, a noisy crowd, a piano perched on a little platform at the back with a gray-haired harpy of a woman to play it. Edith had been right about Wes and a couple of beers. He'd had one and a straight whiskey, trying to get hilariously drunk, but instead of that he was just feeling slightly numb. He wasn't used to liquor and it hit him like a lead pipe. It made him wonder if Edith had been right too about him not being able to pick up a girl.

There was one girl sitting alone at a little table tucked back in a corner between the wall and the piano platform. Wes never did know what made him think she'd be easy unless it was the black lace stockings she wore. He'd show Edith—or show himself, because Edith didn't matter any more.

He slid away from the bar, through the crowd to stop at the girl's table. It wasn't until he had his hand on the back of the chair opposite hers that he decided he was all wrong about her. She was looking toward the piano and it was her profile he saw—clean-cut, delicate features, the black veil from her small black hat just reaching the tip of her short straight nose. She had the poise that bar-flies never had, and probably money; hay hadn't bought the fur coat that was softly crushed against the back of her chair. He'd probably get his face slapped.

"You look lonely," he said. "My name's Wes."

She turned her head toward him. A half-smile on moist red lips widened, brightened. Her eyes scarcely touched his face at all, and it seemed that the veil lent them a strange misty quality that was out of this world.

"I'm never lonely when there's music," she said.

If that was a brush-off, her voice and her smile took the sting out of it. Her smile was in her voice, an inseparable part of it.

She made an indefinite but graceful gesture with her hand. "My name's Sal," she said.

"Would you care to join me?"

"Thanks." He drew a breath, bowed stiffly.

"How do you do, Sal?"

"Wes—" She tried his name, sounding as though she liked it. He liked it, too, the way she said it.

He sat down. There wasn't much chance to talk to the girl because they were so close to the piano. Between numbers, he offered her a cigarette, asked to buy her a drink. She said no thanks to both. They listened to the music, Wes uncomfortably tilting his chair, fumbling at his pockets, watching the girl and the strange ecstatic expression that came across her face as she listened.

Once she said, "She plays very well, doesn't she? I can always tell when the pianist is a woman by her touch."

Wes said he didn't know much about music. He liked to listen to it, all right. "On the radio sometimes. It's relaxing after a hard day's work."

That set him thinking just how few of his evenings with Edith had been relaxing. Her acid tongue, her equally disagreeable sulky silences had spoiled so many hours that could have been pleasant. Well, that was a page torn out of the book. He'd go back to the apartment long enough to get some of his things. Then tomorrow he'd see a lawyer about a divorce. He'd see Noll Brown. Noll was a crack attorney and he and Wes had gone to high school together. Being a personal friend would make the washing of soiled linen easier. . . .

WES looked across the table at the girl.

She wasn't paying any attention to him, just half smiling and listening to the music. She'd done something for him, Sal had. Sal was decent. She'd unconsciously restored some of the self-confidence that Edith had been gradually whittling away for three years. Though they had not discussed his work, just being with Sal had made him feel there was more to pattern-making than saw dust and the smell of glue.

Wes excused himself for a moment, stepped to the piano, slid fifty cents across the top of the upright to the gray-haired woman. The woman nodded her thanks. Her shifting pale blue eyes studied him while rouged lips against husk-dry skin slashed into an unlovely smile.

"Play something for you, boy?"

Wes nodded. "Play 'My Gal Sal'." Then he went back to the table, sat down quickly, feeling red-eared and conspicuous. All through the number he didn't look at Sal. He sat silent and sweating, hands dangling and worrying him because they dangled.

"That was nice of you, Wes," came her velvet soft voice.

"Well—" He coughed. "I wanted to do something—" He couldn't explain. He leaned forward quickly, arms resting on the table. He tried searching Sal's elusive, misty eyes that lay behind the coquettish black veil. "Say, would you like to go some place where there's a band?"

Her smile faded. "Oh, I couldn't. I have to go home, really. It must be quite late."

"Ten after eleven. Can I see you home, then?"

"No, thanks." She was trying to get into her coat. In her haste, the shoulders of the coat fell down behind her to the seat of her chair. Wes got around the table and helped her with her coat. The coat, he thought, was mink like Edith was always talking about.

"You'll see me to a taxi, won't you?" she asked.

"Sure."

"It'll worry my brother when he comes back here for me, but he shouldn't have left me so long." Her warm fingers found Wes' hand, clasped it as she got to her feet. Then her hand slid up his arm and through it.

"Then you were a little bit lonely when I came along?"

"A little bit. You were nice, Wes."

She said that again, "You were nice, Wes," just before the taxi whisked her away from him. He stood there on the curb, watching after the cab until it was out of sight. Then he took a deep breath of chill air, turned up the collar of his thin coat, and started back to the apartment.

Thirty minutes later, as he was about to fit his latch key into the lock, the door of the apartment was suddenly opened. Wes stood there with the key in his hand. His eyes traveled up leather puttees, across blue serge, a bristling cartridge belt, brass buttons, up to a craggy red face with blue ice chips for eyes. Fear stabbed him swiftly. He stepped back, but not beyond the reach of the cop.

"Your name Wesley Robbins?"

He nodded, dumb-struck. His eyes searched the red face, then reached beyond. There were others in his apartment—other cops milling around. Dully the thought struck him that all this had something to do with the shoebox full of money. But after they'd hauled him into the living room the thought of Al's dough was knocked from his head by the sight of Edith lying behind the open door—Edith and the blood and the knife that belonged to Wes.

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Frying Pan

"WE'LL try it once more, Robbins," the plainclothes cop named Haskins said quietly to Wes.

This time it was different. This time the body was gone and there was no attempt to shock or frighten him into telling what they called "the truth." They let him sit in the lounge chair while Haskins sat on the ottoman in front of him. A midnight hush had descended upon the apartment, and there was no one in the living room except Wes, Haskins, and a uniformed man who stood in the doorway and scraped at his nails with a knife. The detective began patiently.

"You still can't remember the last name of this man your wife called 'Cousin Al'—the man you and your wife quarreled about to-night?"

Wes shook his head tiredly. "I don't think she ever mentioned it."

"All right." Haskins was patient. "There's nothing you want to add or retract concerning this shoebox full of money?"

"Nothing. Whoever killed Edith must have taken it with him."

"If," Haskins said, "if there ever was a shoebox full of money around here. You see, Robbins, we strike cases like this every day in the year. Cases just like yours. A triangle, some jealousy, some booze, and a gun or knife. The same pattern over and over, so we get awfully damned skeptical when you drag in a shoebox full of money that nobody can find. It's a very interesting idea, but it's also a little bit screwy."

Haskins was silent a moment. His wrists were crossed on one knee and a cigarette burned between the first and second fingers of his right hand. He'd been burning up cigarettes like that for thirty minutes, just lighting them and letting the feather of smoke play up in front of his lean face like incense before a joss.

"All right. Now, after the quarrel, Robbins. What time did you leave here?"

Wes shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe nine or nine-thirty. All I know is that I was in this joint on Illinois Street at about ten o'clock. I think I went there straight from the house."

"But you don't remember the name of the joint?"

"No. I'll point it out to you if you give me the chance."

"You'll get the chance. And you were there in company of somebody named Sal from ten o'clock until a few minutes after eleven. You're sure of that?"

Wes was sure. "There was an illuminated clock in the tap room and I noticed."

Cigarette ash snowed soundlessly on the worn carpet. Haskins said, "That's the point. You don't know Al's last name. You don't know Sal's last name nor her address. You don't know the name of the joint where you had a beer and a Scotch. But, damn it, you

know the time you were there. Everything else is hazy like a nightmare—even the color of this Sal girl's hair and eyes. But you know the time you were in that joint. That's the only thing that fits, and it fits too damned tight."

Wes asked, "What time was—was my wife killed? You haven't told me."

Haskins snorted. "That's it. We haven't told you, but automatically you pop up with a shaky alibi exactly covering the time of your wife's death. The coroner's physician says between ten and eleven, approximately. That watch on your wife's wrist struck the door stop when she fell. The crystal was smashed and the hands stopped between two cracks on the glass, fixing the time between ten-thirty and ten-forty."

Wes' pulse quickened. His hand went out, closed tight on Haskin's hard, bony knee. "Then what are we waiting for? Give me a chance, can't you? I can prove where I was at that time. Listen, even if I don't know where to get hold of Sal, there's a gray-haired woman who plays the piano in that joint. She'll remember me, because I gave a fifty cent tip to her and asked her to play a piece I'll bet she hasn't played in years."

Haskins looked at his watch, stared at it, scowling as though telling time was a trick

that required a working knowledge of astronomy. Then he stood up, looked at the cop in the door.

"Okay, Mike. We'll run Robbins down to the station now, and on the way we can stop and check on this alibi." He turned to Wes. "I don't suppose you know either the first or hind name of this female piano-pounder?"

Wes shook his head. "Of course not. I never saw her before in my life."

Haskins said wearily. "Of course not. A perfect stranger. She's probably your mother."

Wes' fingernails bit into his palms and his teeth into his lower lip. He struggled against an impulse to hang one on Haskins' lean jaw. Haskins chuckled dryly, handed Wes his hat and topcoat. They left the apartment in a line-up like flying wild geese, with Haskins in front, Wes to the left and back, and the uniformed cop named Mike in the tail position. Haskins explained that there wouldn't be any handcuffs because there were medals for shooting pinned to Mike's underwear or some place.

OUT in the street a chill rain was coming straight down, drops the size of bullets smacking the pavement and the roof of the waiting police car. A couple of drunks were tacking along the sidewalk in front of the

apartment, arms linked for mutual support, walking like Siamese twins. Haskins hated the rain, and his head was ducked low as he plunged for the police car. Mike was shoving Wes from behind when the thing happened that flipped Wes from the frying pan and into the fire.

The scuffle of feet was scarcely audible above the splatter of rain. There was a soft *chunk* sound behind Wes and an explosive grunt from Mike. Mike pitched to the sidewalk dead weight. Wes and Haskins twisted around, saw the two drunks, drunk no longer, stepping around Mike's sprawled form, closing in with gun and sap. Haskin's snatched at his shoulder gun, but before he'd got it in a talking position, somebody came from behind the cop car and took Haskins from behind with a black-jack.

It was sudden and silent, timed to the split second. There was for Wes an exalted moment of freedom damped almost at once by chill realization of what this really meant to him. He was free, yes, to be hunted by police now doubly sure that he was a killer and a member of a gang. He stood there an instant, hands dangling helplessly, then drew a shallow breath ducked his head, dashed into an opening between two of his shadowy liberators. The opening closed on his coat tails. Two hands clamped on his right arm while his weight carried him forward to spin on his right heel, shoulder twisted painfully. Another man caught his left arm, kept him from spilling on the pavement.

"Now take it easy, fellah. A helluva way to show your gratitude!"

Wes hadn't heard the voice in over a year, but he recognized it instantly. Cousin Al! Wes yanked himself forward and back, trying to break away from the pair as they dragged him toward the mouth of the alley that skirted the side of the apartment building. The cold muzzle of an automatic in the hands of the third man rammed his spine.

"Be good, fellah!"

He wasn't good. He got a foot in front of Al, tripped him. Al fell, dragged Wes down on top of him. One of the others clipped Wes behind the ear, a blow that stunned without plunging him all the way under. They picked him up bodily, carried him into the alley where a car waited. He was shoved into the back seat between Al and one of the others, while the third man climbed in under the wheel.

"That's gratitude," Al grumbled. "Down-right disillusioning to a Boy Scout." He put a big hand on Wes' shoulder, shook him. "Wake up, fellah. We're doing you a good turn."

"Yeah—" came like a sob from Wes' throat. They were doing him a swell turn. They'd done

everything but strap him into the chair.

The car rushed through the night, the tires sucking on wet asphalt, the cold rain spitting through a window open at the top. Close to Wes's ear, Al's voice came in a rumbling monotone like water in a culvert.

"You're on the spot, Wes. Behind the eight ball, and I mean really. I'm getting you out. I'm getting you the best mouthpiece there is. You'll see. He'll be waiting for us where we're going. When I tell 'em to come, they come. You'll beat the rap. All you got to do is shoot square with me."

They headed out East Michigan, bumbling over railroad tracks, then turned sharply to the left in front of a squarish three story brick building. A white sign flared up in the rain-streaked headlight beams: "A. T. Morris. Poultry and Produce House. Wholesale and Retail." The sign was superfluous. The smell of burned feathers and filthy chicken batteries ought to have been enough.

Wes said, "This your place? You're A. T. Morris?"

"Yes," Al said. "One of my places."

Wes got to laughing. Even when he felt the gouge of a gun in his ribs, he still laughed. He couldn't help it. He was comparing the smell of fish glue that sometimes clung to him after he left the pattern shop with the nauseating stench that came from Al Morris' place of business. Beside this filthy reek you could sell *eau de* fish glue for ten bucks an ounce.

Wes was hustled out of the car between Al and the man with the gun. They skirted a pile of poultry batteries piled high on the sidewalk, climbed worn stone steps, pushed through double doors into a hall. The draft the doors made closing eddied dust and feathers up from the floor. There was dim illumination from guarded light bulbs high in the ceiling. Al led the way up a wide staircase that creaked and squawled under his heavy tread.

Up on the second floor somebody was pacing nervously back and forth—short pecking steps on hard heels.

"When I tell 'em to come, they come," Al said and chuckled. "Hi, Noll."

The pacing stopped. As they came to the head of the stair, Wes saw a slight, short figure of a man standing in front of a door marked "Office." In front of him dangled a brief case like a Scotsman's sporran. Noll Brown, reputed to be the city's crack attorney, hadn't changed much since Wes had known him in highschool. Instead of horn-rimmed glasses he now wore *pince nez* that wobbled from bunched-up flesh between his eyes. His lower lip still drooped like an iris petal, showing his lower gums, and he still had a shrewd squint. He squinted now at Wes, but gave no indication of recognition.

He said to Al, "This should be good, Morris."

Tonight I was going to get caught up on some sleep."

"It'll be good for a couple of grand," Al returned. "I'll talk to you in a minute." He stooped in front of the door, unlocked it, motioned Wes to enter his office.

CHAPTER THREE

The Harpy

AL MORRIS propped up his square chin in the fork of a hand, his elbow resting on his desk. His thumb gouged up one blubbery cheek until his eye was only a glittering slot.

"Wes, you're in a spot."

"We're not going over all that again," Wes said irritably. He rested one knee on the seat of the chair Joe had proffered. "And we'll cut out the patronizing. You speak your piece, say what you want of me, then I'll say no and get the hell out of here." He uttered a tired man's croaking laugh, and added. "The smell in here gets me down."

Al said, "You ought to know what I want. I want my money. I went to your place *after* you'd knifed your wife. The money was gone. There was close to a hundred grand in that box. I got to have it. If I don't get it, don't think you won't get that hundred thousand volt kick in the pants."

"I haven't got your money," Wes said. He shivered. There was much heat in the office and the soaked collar of Wes' coat was clinging to the back of his neck like a hand of ice.

"Now, be reasonable, fellah," Al argued. "You're a long time dead, and after they ram the switch home up there at Michigan City, they tell me you die just as fast if you killed for a hundred grand or ten cents. All you got to do is tell me where you stashed the money. I send one of my boys for it. When I've got my hands on the dough, I call in Noll Brown. He takes your case. You've automatically got an alibi six blocks long. Big people, I mean, will swear they saw you drinking coke the time of the murder."

Wes shook his head. "I got an alibi. I had one until you and your mugs horned in, anyway." He took his knee off the chair and rested his clenched fists on the desk top. "You want to know how I think it was? You went to my apartment tonight after I'd left, to pick up your money. You found out Edith held out some of the money, quarreled with her about it. In the fight you picked up my knife and killed her. You wore gloves, so only my prints were on the knife. You ran out of there, with your dough, then had your men pull me out from under the cops to make me look even guiltier. When you get the frame nailed all neatly around me it'll probably include some

of that 'missing' money which you probably snatched from— from some war-plant payroll."

Al's oompah-horn lips curled scornfully. "That's reasoning like a worm, fellah. You want to know why Edith wouldn't have held out any money on me and why we wouldn't have quarreled? It was like this with Edith and me." He leaned back in his chair so his coat fell away from his broad vest and the gold chain and walrus ivory that glittered there. He fished down into a pocket, pulled out two folded pieces of pale green paper. He fanned them apart so Wes could see there were two of them—two railroad tickets.

"That's how it was with Edith and me," he said. "Two for sunny California."

IT wasn't the ghost of a dead love nor the goading wound of his pride that made Wes do what he did. It was simply that he hated the guts of this grinning, cock-sure Al Morris. Wes' long looping right had a steam whistle on it that told of its coming, but Al just had too much weight to pull back out of the way. Wes' knuckles glanced across the thick lips, opened them against teeth. Al's chair went slamming back from his desk, and when he got onto his feet, Wes was around the desk, ready for him. Al reached in under his coat for his gun. Wes let him have another in the middle. Al fumbled the gun, drawing it clear of the harness—and taking it from him as like taking candy from a baby.

Wes transferred the gun to his right hand. He felt a grin tightening his lips. He said a crazy thing, "Score one for fish glue and saw-dust."

"Now, wait a minute, fellah." Al had his hands half raised, his fingers were wide spread. His voice wasn't the deep assured bellow of a moment before.

Wes backed away toward the door. He said, "Thanks for the gun. The way you fixed things up for me, maybe I'll need it."

He went out into the hall. Al's gunman assistant straightened away from the stair rail, jaw dropping, eyes on the gun in Wes' hand. Noll Brown was in the hall. He stopped that *peck-peck* hard-heeled pacing, squinted at Wes through wobbling glasses. He raised his briefcase to belly-level as though the thing was bullet proof. Wes took a step toward him.

"Noll. Noll Brown. Remember me, Noll? In Latin you were top man and I was the dope. It's still like that. I'm still the dope."

Noll's squinted eyes widened slowly. There was a glimmer of recognition in their dark depths. "Wes—" He snapped his thin, crooked fingers. "Ah, Wes *Robbins!*" He put out his hand and then remembered the gun. His hand dropped. A dour apology for a smile twisted that lower lip of his. "We've come a long way from that Latin class."

Wes seized Noll's arm with his left hand. His voice was quiet, earnest. "You used to say you wanted to be a lawyer so you could defend the guy who was too poor and too dumb to do that for himself."

Noll said again, "We've come a long way from that Latin class."

Wes shook his head. "You've got to hear me. I've got to talk to you before I turn myself over to the cops."

Cold reserve stiffened Noll Brown's face. He had come a long way from that Latin class and the schoolboy ambitions to defend the small fry.

He said, "Do I get it right? You think you can force me to take a case at the point of a gun?"

"All I'm going to force you to do is listen. Their framing me for a murder rap. I've got an alibi. I can prove I didn't do it."

Al Morris opened the door of his office, stood there wiping blood from his mouth on the back of his hand. Wes swiveled the gun, covering Morris and his henchman. The latter slid a glance at Al. Al shook his head.

"Let him go," Al said. He nodded at Wes. "Be seeing you, fellah. In the papers. 'Wes Robbins, wife-slayer, paid the supreme penalty for his crime today in the electric chair at State Prison, Michigan City.' And as for you, you chiseling shyster," he flung at Noll Brown, "if you defend this punk I'll cut your heart out."

Noll Brown said concisely, "That would be suicide." Then he turned and walked ahead of Wes down the steps.

When they reached the street, Noll turned to Wes. His lips twisted wryly. "My car's up the street. Can you tell your tale while I give you a lift some place?"

Noll didn't ask Wes where he wanted to be taken. Wes didn't have any place to go, so he didn't care. Noll drove slowly, listened without interrupting while Wes talked. Wes told him about finding the money and about the quarrel with Edith. He told him that vague chapter about going to some joint on Illinois Street and listening to some unnamed gray-haired woman pound the piano. He told about Sal who didn't have a last name and no address, about the home-coming to homicide and the attack on the cops by Al's men.

After that, he went into the realm of speculation, spoke of his theory involving Al Morris and the missing money. The money was hot, he figured, and Al was hiding it from the cops. Possibly Edith had spent some of the money, let it slip into circulation before it had cooled off, thus blazing a trail back to Al Morris. Maybe Al had killed her on that account.

Noll Brown stopped the car at the curb in front of an apartment building with a canvas canopy reaching out across the sidewalk.

He said, "My place, Wes. Come on in and have a drink." He started to slide out of the car, but Wes caught his arm.

"Wait a minute. You believe me, don't you?"

Light from the apartment entry way reflected opaque glare from Noll Brown's glasses. "I believe you. Your chances before a jury are slim as a hangnail. We'll see what we can do, for the sake of the Latin class and an ambitious kid who wanted to be a lawyer so he could defend the dopes that got in trouble."

IN the sixth floor apartment, Noll Brown made highballs, tasted his, put the tall glass down on a cocktail table, paced away to return to it every now and then like a bee to a honeysuckle bloom. He didn't sit down. He rasped Wes' nerves with his constant motion. Between cigarette puffs and sips, he talked.

"Wrong about Al Morris' shoebox full of money," he said. "It's not hot." He buzzed back to the glass for a sip. "That is, he didn't hold up a payroll. More subtle robbery than that. He can spend it any day. He just doesn't want to be caught with it on his person at this particular phase of his career. And he couldn't put it in a bank because Bureau of Internal Revenue inspectors are watching him."

"Where'd he get it?" Wes wanted to know.

"From saps. People who get a kick out of beating the government ration restrictions. Retailers patronize him, too."

"You mean blackmarket?"

Pacing away from Wes, Noll nodded his head. He turned, flipped cigarette ash, came back to his drink. "Name anything you think you can't get from a steak to a radio and Al Morris can get it for you. If you want to pay those kind of prices. That poultry business fronts for the meat racket. He's got other places. He takes in big money and it's all spendable. The only trouble is, he's being watched closely. One slip and he's in for a long time."

"You don't think he killed Edith?"

Light glinted on Noll's glasses. "I didn't say that. Maybe he did. Maybe she changed her mind about going to California with him. Maybe they fought about that and he killed her. Anybody could have killed her. If she was attractive or if she wasn't, there are still a lot of morons going around who break in on lonely women and kill them. And then there was the money. Maybe the janitor knew about the money."

He paced away again, went to the window, stared at his reflection in the darkened glass. "This woman who played the piano in the tavern—she wouldn't make the best witness in the world. I know her. She's a former concert pianist. Liquor. She's a dipsomaniac."

He twisted around, pointed a finger at Wes. "That's why you can't give yourself up to the police. We can't risk an indictment and trial because the prosecutor will discredit our star witness. We've got to break this thing before it goes that far. The woman pianist—her name's Mehring—won't look good on the stand. I won't defend you if the Mehring woman is the best we can do."

Wes drank a little of his highball in an effort to put down an inner chill. "What about Sal?"

Noll shook his head. "From your vague description of the girl, the fact that she did not mention her name, would not let you take her home or learn her address, I gather that she was money gone slumming. If so, we'd never find her. As soon as this breaks into print, she'll go into hiding. She wouldn't go into court to defend a stranger whom she'd allowed too—well, pick her up. You can't blame her. The newspapers would crucify her."

Wes' lips tightened into a mirthless smile. "Not even if a man's life was at stake?"

"Not even that. Practicing law can be pretty disillusioning." Noll looked at his watch. "Three o'clock. I'll see if I can find out where the Mehring woman lives." He space-stared thoughtfully, eyes squinted, then bobbed his head like a robin sighting a worm. "I'll try Max Hart who runs the local amusement agency. He has the addresses of all the talent in town."

Ten minutes later, Noll Brown had the information he wanted. He disappeared into the bedroom to return after a short while carefully triggered out in derby hat, overcoat and pigskin gloves. He swept up briefcase and car keys on his way to the door. His lips twisted into a dour smile as he motioned Wes to follow him.

"If you've got a rabbit foot, rub it. You'll need all the luck you can get."

MADAME Gertrude Mehring—so read her card above the mailbox—lived in one of those old apartment buildings with bay-windowed front on Talbot Avenue. Hers was one of the two flats on the lower floor. Heavy green shades were pulled in the bay window but cracks in the filler showed illumination beyond.

Inside the foyer, Noll Brown took off his derby, put a gloved thumb on the bell, kept it there until Madame Mehring's frowzy gray head appeared in the door. Her pale blue eyes hurried over Noll and Wes.

Noll said, "Madame Mehring, I believe."

Her lips turned down at the corners, lending drooping black wrinkles like a Mandarin's mustache to the dry, powder-white mask of her face. She said, "The solicitor. The competent attorney. In plainer words, the shyster.

What's the idea of getting a poor sick woman out of bed this time of the morning? Come in, come in. And I might add there's no keeping you out."

She widened the opening in the door, showed her angular figure draped in an orchid colored satin wrapper.

"You're sick?" Noll said as he entered ahead of Wes.

"A bad cough." She demonstrated her cough and it didn't sound too bad. She waved elegantly at a small oak table that centered the bay of the front window. The table held a potted fern, a water tumbler, and a bottle of sherry. "For my cough," she explained. "I'd never touch the filthy stuff otherwise. It warms the pipes, loosens the phlegm—" Her eyes moved to Wes. "Who's this?"

Noll was elaborately apologetic. He introduced Wes.

"You've seen him before?" he added. "Tonight at the pub where you play?"

A crafty glint came into the faded eyes. "I see so many lovely people. I never remember names and always forget faces."

A sickening sinking feeling came into the pit of Wes' stomach. He took a quick step toward the woman who fell back in front of him. He put out strong hands and gripped her bony shoulders. Her knees buckled and she dropped into a platform rocker that complained loudly of even her slight weight. Wes leaned over her, his face within the sherry miasma that breathed from her red gash of a mouth.

"Take a good look," he said, voice husky. "I was at the table beside your stage, practically under your nose. I was with a girl."

"With a girl? How quaint!" She tittered, remembered to cough.

"You couldn't have missed the girl," Wes said. "She was—well, she was different than the rest of the crowd, beautiful, stylish, poised. Whenever you stopped playing, she clapped. She thought you were wonderful."

"I am. Carnegie Hall wants me, but I make more money at the Bide-A-Wee Inn."

Wes reached for her shoulders again, shook her gently. "You've got to remember! A man's life depends on it. I gave you a four bit tip to play 'My Gal Sal.' Nobody's requested that number in an age."

The harpy's face was a total blank. "You I don't remember from nothing. My public is so vast and all the shining faces look alike beyond the footlights—"

A small sound of glass on glass. Madame Mehring looked toward the bay window, uttered a small shriek, bounced out of the chair to throw Wes backwards. In the bay window, Noll Brown turned slowly from the little oak table. He had poured a brimming glass of sherry, had lifted it to his lips. Madame

Mehring seized his left arm, slapped at his right hand, spilling some of the wine.

"How dare you hog a poor woman's medicine!" She relieved him of the glass and put it carefully down on the table. She was seized with a fit of violent and artificial coughing.

Noll shrugged. "Last time it was *creme de menthe* for your indigestion. Sherry is cheaper." Noll reached around to his hip pocket and pulled out a leather wallet. From it he took three twenty dollar bills and fanned them under Madame Mehring's nose.

"Didn't you see my friend tonight? Wasn't he in that tap room between the hours of ten and eleven? Didn't he pay you to play a request tune?"

Madame Mehring shook her head. "He may have, but I do not remember. Begone with your bribe! It's too small anyway."

Noll added four tens to the three twenties. "A hundred dollars. You could afford to have indigestion again."

Madame Mehring sniffed. "A paltry amount. The great Mehring should play *I Remember You* for so paltry a fee! You would offer a dime for Beethoven."

Noll sighed, returned his money to his wallet. "Come on, Wes." He started for the door.

Wes stared from Madame Mehring to Noll. "But she knows. You can see it on her face."

Noll said sharply, "Do you want a lawyer, or are you planning to defend yourself? I said come on. We've got other witnesses."

Madame Mehring followed them to the door. "So sorry, gentlemen," she purred. "For a thousand dollars I think I could get a memory course. Remarkable what these memory courses achieve. Good night."

Out in the dark and rain-glistened street, Noll Brown wheeled sharply to face Wes. "If you had kept your big mouth out of this, we could have improved her memory for a hundred dollars. She didn't know but what it was a question of dented fenders. But no, you have to make a life and death proposition out of it!"

"Sure, me and my big mouth!" Wes' footsteps dragged disconsolately as they approached the car. Maybe the Mehring woman was his one chance. He'd played his cards wrong, lost his wad. He said, "She wants a thousand bucks! Where would I raise that kind of money?"

At the car door, Noll turned on him. "I'll handle that. I'll stake you." His voice whiplashed. "Trouble is, we've lost time. If the cops lay hands on you, Wes, I won't help you. I won't go into court and have the D.A. make an ass of me."

Wes' jaw thrust a little farther forward. "We'd better call it quits now, Noll, before you get in too deep to get out."

Noll's laugh crackled like a short circuit. "When it's time to quit, I'll know it. Get in the car, you big sap!"

CHAPTER FOUR

On the Lam

FORTY-FIVE minutes later, they were again in front of the apartment where Madame Mehring lived. Noll Brown had the thousand dollars in cash which he had picked up from his office safe.

"I have to have a lot of cash where I can get my hands on it in a hurry," he had explained to Wes. "You're not the only client I've had who gets himself into jams after banking hours."

Wes had laughed bitterly. "I'm the only client you ever had who had exactly one hundred and twenty-six dollars in the bank plus a hundred dollars in war bonds and not another damned thing in the world!"

They hurried up the approach walk, Noll's hard heels pecking on ahead, entered the apartment building foyer where Noll thumbed the bell. There was no immediate answer. The little attorney tried the bell again, shook his head doubtfully, then put a gloved hand on the doorknob. The knob turned, the door opened. Noll hopped into the woman's living room, stopped half way.

"Damn! We shouldn't have left without taking that wine of hers," he said.

Over Noll's head and shoulders, Wes saw Madame Mehring lolling half on and half off the leather covered couch. On the floor beside her was the empty sherry bottle and the thick water tumbler over-turned. Noll sprang to the couch, seized Madame Mehring's shoulders. He lifted her, shook her. Her slight frame wobbled loose-jointedly. There was a faint purplish cast to her parted lips.

"Wait a second, Noll!" Wes elbowed the lawyer out of the way, bent over the limp form of the woman. Cold fear moved up along his spine and prickled at his scalp as he touched the woman's wrist.

"She's dead!" he whispered. "Noll, she's dead!"

"Dead drunk," Noll said.

"She's dead, I tell you!"

The attorney took her wrist. The tick of a clock came faintly from an adjoining room. Noll's eyes met Wes', held them. His small head jerked. He dropped the woman's hand, drew a breath that hissed across his teeth.

"Hell!"

IN the street in front of the apartment building a car slowed down, brakes squeaking. Noll's dark glances scurried about the room. He said, "Black out the lights. Quick!" Then

he pecked to the front of the room to the dark green shades drawn down over the bay window.

Wes sprang to the light switch, thumbed it down. In total darkness he heard the green shade crackle. A faint thread of gray light showed momentarily, then Noll Brown was on the move toward the door.

"Cops," he said. "Checking your alibi. Get out a back room window. I'll stall them in the foyer. Go to a third rate hotel, don't give your right name, phone me."

Noll got the door open. Wes heard him press the button of the night latch, then close the door softly. Almost at once, Noll pressed the bell-push in the foyer and the sharp brazen voice of the bell made Wes' heart jump into his mouth. The outer door of the apartment building opened and heels rang on the tile of the vestibule. Then there were voices—Noll Brown's voice and that of Detective Haskins.

"She doesn't seem to be at home," Noll said. "I've been ringing for half a minute."

The hammering of police fists was the sound that cured Wes of his buck fever. He started swiftly along the living room, ran into the platform rocker that uttered a plaintive squeak. The chair kept rocking in ghostly fashion even after Wes had stumbled into the next room—the room with the ticking clock. Dim night glow entered the window, showed him the end of a bed. He rounded the bed, trembling hands outstretched to the window. He got the window unlatched just as burly police shoulders started ramming the panel of the front door. He gave the window catch a basty wipe with his handkerchief, wondering

as he did so how many finger prints he had left in the living room. He couldn't remember touching a thing except Madame Mehring herself, but then he had forgot a lot of important things in the past several hours. He got over the sill, all but fell on his face getting to a narrow walk between buildings six feet below. And then he was on the run, on the lam as those persons who were hunted by the law liked to put it.

Up alleys and back streets, he covered a mile the hard way to come finally into the lobby of the Hotel Dalton, definitely third rate, where rooms were rented by the week, the day, or the hour, and no questions asked. He registered under the name of William Rexford, paid in advance, and was shown to his room that looked out on dark roofs and water tanks. He sat down on the edge of the bed, waited an age of minutes until it was five A.M. by his dollar watch. Then he went to the phone, gave Noll Brown's number. Noll sounded sore about being awakened at this hour.

"Sorry to get you up at this time of the day," Wes said, "but I know you want to see me as soon as possible. This is William Rexford. I'm at the Dalton."

"Fine!" Noll replied. "You'll hear from me later. I'm anxious to close the deal. And don't forget, I've got an option. *Don't see anybody else.*"

HE didn't see anybody else. The morning dawned wet and predominantly gray. Wes waited through it without sleep and food far into the afternoon. Dusk came as the morning

with drizzling rain and a leaden sky, and the phone in his room jangled. Wes sprang up from the bed, staggered a little like a drunken man, lurched toward the phone. The mirror of the dresser caught a reflection of him in passing, showed him the shadow of a beard against ashen cheeks and the haggard circle beneath his eyes. He picked up the receiver. It was already talking to him in Noll's voice.

"...change our plans somewhat and hold our meeting at some other place. Certain persons whose opinion differs somewhat from ours are trying to see you at your present location and may possibly dissuade you from going through with it. You understand, Rexford?"

"Yes," Wes breathed. "I get you, sure." He hung up. Noll meant that the police were checking the hotels, putting out the dragnet for him. He picked up hat and topcoat, put them on with hat brim turned low and collar up. He left the room, took to the stairway, clattered down flight after flight to come into the lobby. He tossed his key on the desk, went through the coffee shop, and out the side door. He was three paces beyond the door when he saw the police car at the curb. A man in plainclothes was getting out about four doors down the street.

Wes twisted back, stepped to the yellow painted section of curbing in front of the hotel. A taxi stood there, its radio playing, the driver with a newspaper spread out on the wheel trying to read by the light that came to him from the hotel entrance. Wes seized the handle of the cab door, twisted it, got in, slid to the far side of the cushions. The driver crushed his paper, glanced over his shoulder as he plugged at the starter.

"Where to, sir?"

Wes blurted the first address that came into his mind—that of his own apartment.

"You want the radio off, Mister?" The driver reached one hand toward the dial.

"Yes," Wes said, then shouted: "No! Wait!"

AS the taxi rolled into the traffic lane, Wes threw himself forward in the seat, one arm reaching out toward the radio as though the music was a tangible thing. A dance band was playing *My Gal Sal*, playing it sweet and low. The music faded to background and the voice of the announcer came from the loudspeaker.

"Here she is, to brighten up the cocktail hour, your gal and my gal, Sal!"

"What was that address again, Mister?" the hack driver cut in.

Coming from the radio now was the velvet toned voice of a woman—a voice with a smile in it.

"Hello, nice people! The boys and I want to start out with a number we've done before

and which you liked well enough to ask us to do again."

"That's her!" Wes' trembling fingers pointed at the radio. "That's Sal! What station's that?"

The driver gave Wes a sidelong glance, nearly rammed a trolley bus doing it. He said, "A local. WVBD. What was that Alabama Street number you wanted to go to?"

"No." Wes shook his head. It was the first time he had realized what address he had given. If the driver had seen that address in the papers, if he had seen Wes' picture—

His hand dropped to the pocket of his coat, gripped the chill butt of the gun he had taken from Al Morris the night before. He said, "Get me to the radio studio. Where that program is coming from. Fast!"

They didn't get there fast. In spite of gas rationing, the downtown streets were clogged with traffic at this late hour. All the lights were against them and Wes lived the lingering minutes in a chilly sweat, counting them by his watch—five, seven, ten. . . .

The taxi stopped. The driver pointed "That building there. Four flights up."

Wes tossed the man a buck, got out, looked right and left. No cops in the hurrying throngs along the sidewalk. He crossed to a door with the gold letters "WVBD" on the glass, pushed it open. Stairs slanted steeply upward. He ran up the three flights, burst through double glass doors into a room paneled with sound dampening material. A girl at the reception desk gave him a practice smile that faded as she studied his unshaven face.

"Whom did you wish to see, please?"

Wes looked to the left toward a door marked "Studio A." "That girl," he gasped. "Sal. I've got to see her."

"Sorry, but that program is already in progress and no studio audience is permitted."

Wes shook his head. "I've got to see her. I've got to." He turned, started doggedly for the studio door.

"Please!" The receptionist came half out of her chair, then reached across the desk and pushed a frantic thumb against a button. A signal burred softly, and before Wes could reach the studio door, two men came out of an office on his right, caught his shoulders.

"You can't go in there. What do you want, anyway?"

Wes looked into a clean-shaven, well-fed face, close to his and threatening. "I have to see her. I can't explain. It—it's very important." He was getting control of himself now and catching up on his breath. "I'm a friend of Sal."

The other man put a hand up to conceal a smile. The first motioned to a chair. "Sit down and wait. She'll come through here in a minute."

Wes sat down with the two men standing on either side of him. His heart was pounding jig-time out of all accord with the sweet music that Sal sang. It was only a matter of seconds before the orchestra broke into the theme song, concluding the quarter hour. Wes hitched himself forward in the chair and watched the studio door. The music stopped. There was a scraping of chairs and a general bustle. The door opened and a man hurried out with a sheaf of papers in his hand. And then in another moment the door opened a second time and Wes saw *her*.

She was wearing the same coat, the same hat with its misty black veil that reached the tip of her pretty nose. She was clinging to the arm of a middle-aged, well-dressed man who in some respects resembled her. For an instant, she seemed to be looking straight at Wes, the sweet half-smile fixed on her lips. She gave no sign of recognition.

"That was sweet music, Miss Herron," one of the men beside Wes said.

"Thanks," she acknowledged, and came through the door, the fingers of her left hand delicately touching the frame. The man beside her drew her a little to one side.

"Careful, Sis. There's a chair."

Sal laughed gayly. "Don't worry so! I'm not a doll that breaks if she stubs her toe. Besides, I'm learning my way about here pretty well."

Wes just sat there, staring open-mouthed and wide-eyed as Sal passed him. When he drew a breath it came as a sob. Sal hadn't seen him. She had never seen him, though she had sat and talked with him through that fatal hour of the night before.

Sal was blind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Third Victim

WES stood in the phone booth in the corner drugstore and in his trembling hands his nickel beat a frantic tattoo on the coin box before he got it into the slot. He dialed the number of Noll Brown's apartment, failed to get an answer, returned the nickel, and called the little attorney's office.

"I've found her, Noll," he said in a hoarse whisper when Noll's sharp voice snapped across the wires.

"Who? Where the hell are you?"

"Sal. The girl I was with last night. She lives in the Fairmont Apartments on Meridian Street. She and her brother got in a cab and I heard the brother give the address."

"The Fairmont means money," Noll said. "What did I tell you?"

"Anyway, I'm going to try. I'm going to *make* her tell the truth to the police. Now"

"Wait—" There was a silent interval before Noll spoke again. "Meet me at the Fairmont in twenty minutes. Can you make it? You're hot as Dillinger ever was."

"I'll be there," he replied doggedly.

"Okay. This will take some careful handling." And Noll hung up.

Ducking every glance that came his way, Wes left the drugstore. Outside he was thankful for the rain and the chill wind that gave him an excuse for lowered head and turned up collar. Holding his hat down tight with one hand, he passed a cop on the corner, crossed the street to a Meridian bus stop. Five minutes ticked away before the bus came. When he got on, the bus was packed to the doors and he had to stand facing the rain-blurred windshield. So far, Lady Luck was riding with him.

He got off within half a block of the towering Fairmont Apartment Building. The sidewalks were deserted. People in this neighborhood did little walking, in spite of gas rationing. He entered the softly carpeted lobby, eyes alert for mailboxes. There was a desk in the foyer and a plucked and permanent blonde gave him a disapproving examination.

He found Sal's box, read her number. Wes turned back to the door, stood in the corner of the vestibule to wait for Noll.

An elevator safety gate clattered open, and Wes heard footsteps and voices in the foyer. He sent a furtive glance over his shoulder, saw Sal's brother and a woman leaving the elevator. The woman wore a cloth, fur-trimmed black coat and beneath it Wes glimpsed the white postage-stamp apron of a maid's uniform.

Sal's brother was saying, "I'm pessimistic enough about this operation to continue to push my application for a seeing-eye dog for her. But keep that under your hat. Sally's so certain she'll be able to see again—and there is every chance that she may. . . ."

They passed Wes, still talking, to get into a waiting taxi. Wes watched the cab drive away, and at the next corner it drew up to the curb to let the maid out in front of a small delicatessen. Wes looked at his dollar watch. If Noll didn't show up in a minute he'd—

The swift tap of hard heels sounded on the drive and Noll Brown appeared suddenly in the door swinging his briefcase. His gloved fingers clenched the sleeve of Wes' sodden coat. He looked right and left, eyes squinted shrewdly.

"She's here," Wes whispered. "And right now, she's alone. I'm sure of it. The maid went out with her brother a few seconds ago to pick up something for dinner, I think."

Noll bobbed his head. "Made to order. What's her number?"

"Eight-one-nine," Wes replied.

"Fine. I'll go right up. I'll sound her out. Give me ten minutes with her, then call the police. This is your last chance, Wes. Maybe if you were to give yourself up to the cops right in front of her eyes, that would bring her across. If my line doesn't." The dangling lower lip quirked wryly. "I've a pretty fair line."

Noll gave Wes a heartening slap on the shoulder and hopped into the foyer and across to the elevator that waited there.

"Nine, please," Noll said.

Nine? Wes took a startled step toward the elevator. Noll had got the number backwards, twisted it around in his excitement.

"Hey!" Wes ran the length of the foyer as the elevator safety gate slammed and the car started upward. His thumb struck the call button and plugged at it.

"You will have to wait until the car returns," said the cool voice of the blonde at the desk.

Wes turned, stared at the woman as though she was a mummy in a museum. All of the inexplicable things went tumbling through his mind like castings in a cleaner. And then it was as though somebody switched off the power of the cleaner and the meaningless clatter stilled and the blinding dust settled. He pointed shaking fingers at the telephone on the desk.

"Get the police."

"The—the *what?*" The blonde stared blankly.

"The police. Look—" He yanked back his collar and brushed off his hat. "I'm Wes Robbins. I'm in the papers. I'm wanted for murder."

THEN he wheeled, legged for the stairway, taking the steps three at a time in the beginning. On the fourth flight he began to realize that hours without food or rest had taken a lot out of his legs. He would have gained time by waiting for the elevator. He knew that now—now that stair risers seemed three feet in height and his shoes weighed him down like flatirons. But he kept going, desperation-driven. Two lives depended on his getting there in time—his own and that of the blind girl.

Because Noll Brown didn't know that Sal was blind. Wes hadn't told him for the simple reason that he feared Noll would put no faith in a blind witness. Noll's twisting of Sal's apartment numbers was the give-away. It had been deliberate. Noll's distinctly audible request for the elevator operator to take him to the ninth floor was deliberate. It gave him an alibi of sorts. He could ride to the ninth floor, get out, descend one floor via the stairway with scarcely a risk of being seen. Then he could get into Sal's apartment, do the

filthy job quickly, and again climb to the ninth floor from which he would descend by the elevator to claim he had not located Sal's apartment.

Wes could see it all now through the settling dust of confusion. Noll was preparing to defend Al Morris on black-market charges. Noll knew of the money Al had accumulated and hidden, had shadowed him to Wes and Edith's apartment, had killed for that readily spendable hundred grand—had killed with the knife that Wes had left behind that fateful night.

Only Noll besides the police had heard of Wes's possible alibi. Somehow, some way, Noll had contrived to kill Madame Mehring to smash that alibi, all the time keeping Wes from the cops, protecting Wes because Wes was the only key to the second witness of his innocence. Why did it have to be Wes who took the rap? Because once the police could discount the well-worn jealous husband motive, they'd start believing Wes' story about Al and the money. They'd start suspecting Al and his associates—among them, Noll Brown. And if they found the money in Noll's possession—

He took the last stumbling step, drove his unwilling body forward through the door into the eighth floor hall. His breath was coming in rapid shallow sobs as he threw himself against the door of eight-one-nine. He fumbled the knob. Locked. He straightened with an effort, plunged his hand into his pocket to bring out Al Morris' gun. The muzzle rattled an instant against the lock, and then he jerked the trigger three times. Before the roar had ceased, he had the door open, saw across a wide living room the open casements, the billowing curtains. There, against the black backdrop of the night, he saw two struggling figures—Noll and Sal. Sal's hips were on the low sill. She was clinging desperately to Noll and he was trying to break away to shove her backwards out the window.

Noll jerked backward, and the girl hung on. He slammed her across the face. Her hold broke and she tumbled to the floor. Noll twisted around, light glinting on his glasses, glinting on bared lower teeth. He had a gun in his hand, tried stopping Wes with a bullet that went whining harmlessly by. Wes kept coming, plunging forward on dead legs, his own gun gripped, but with the safety on. He couldn't kill, because his own life, his whole future depended upon the police getting the truth from Noll Brown's own lips.

He kept coming, and Noll triggered his gun again. Wes swerved. There was no great pain, only the impact and a numbness in his left arm. He moved in close, right arm swinging. Noll's third shot was fired while Noll was moving backward to strike a small table with his legs. Flame from the muzzle seered

Wes' cheek. And then Wes got in that blow—that blow that had everything he had left behind it, plus maybe a little prayer. The gun butt caught Noll under the chin, actually seemed to lift him to his toes. Noll pitched backward over the table, struck the floor with a bag-of-bones clatter to lie there still as death. And the force of the blow carried Wes forward, took him off balance on the follow-through. He clumped down to his knees, panting, conscious now of the warm stickiness inside the shoulder of his coat.

He turned on his knees toward Sal who crouched there on the floor beneath the wide open window. Her wide, unseeing eyes searched fearfully, her face twisted into a mask of nameless dread.

"Sal," Wes said faintly. "It's okay now, Sal. Everything's all right. Only I'm so damned sorry I got you into this."

"Wes! Oh, you *are* Wes, aren't you?" Tremulously came her little half smile.

Then the world swam and blackened before Wes' eyes as he pitched forward onto the carpet. He didn't see Detective Haskins entering the front door of the apartment. . . .

HASKINS, however, was one of the first persons he saw when he came to in the hospital after the removal of Noll's bullet. Haskins looked as tired as Wes felt, and that he explained, was from working on a tough little nut to crack, name of Noll Brown. The police had already started poking around in Noll's direction in their search for the killer. They'd associated the "Cousin Al" of Wes's testimony with Al Morris, who had been

picked up by the FBI, and that had led to Al's attorney. A little breaking and entering on the part of the police department had revealed the stolen money in Noll's safe.

Before that, though, they had followed the trail that Wes had blazed, discovering the body of Madame Mehring. There had been poison in the lady's sherry—some few and deadly crystals of photographer's cyanide. Then later, when Noll Brown became an object of police interest, a cop had found a neat little darkroom in Noll's apartment, and the cyanide had been conspicuously absent. After that, it was only a matter of time in the sweat room, Noll's endurance pitted against that of Haskins.

"You haven't anything to worry about, Robbins," Haskins said. "You've got your alibi. She's waiting to see you. Well, not exactly see you—"

Haskins bit his thin lips because Sal was already on her way in on her brother's arm.

"But maybe next time or the time after I'll see you, Wes," she said. "My brother's found a wonderful new specialist who thinks maybe he can help my eyes."

Wes said, "You'll be disappointed, seeing me. I'm not anything you'd want to paint and hang on the wall."

They laughed, her brother joining in, and her small soft fingers moved timidly across Wes' face, substituting for the sight that was to come. There wasn't anything Wes could do about it, flat on his back as he was.

He didn't know how it would turn out. All he really knew was that he'd always be in love with Sal, no matter how it turned out.

THE END