



A girl's frantic plea for help puts Private Detective Nicholas Alexander on the trail of an odd and amazing crime case that calls for every bit of his cleverness!

CHAPTER I
Murder List

THE sign on the glass upper half of the office door informed the girl standing before it that here was the professional headquarters of Nicholas Alexander, whose business was private investigations.

Her small gloved hand hesitated as she raised it to grasp the door-knob, then she opened the door. The waiting room was severely plain, and empty. She stared at the door to the inner office, and after a moment or two rapped on it.

A voice called a command to enter, and she stepped inside. Here was comparative luxury. The furniture was massive and in excellent taste, and well chosen oil paintings were on the walls. Behind the big desk sat Nick Alexander, as little like a successful

private detective as it was possible to imagine. He looked more like a college sophomore.

His pink-cheeked face was round and smooth, his brown hair was carefully parted, but his necktie was a whirlwind of color and confused design.

Nick Alexander looked up and his eyes brightened. He liked the five feet five of shapely figure he saw, the eyes that should have been clear blue, but which seemed full of fear now. He was used to that. Most people who came to see him feared something or someone.

"You have a problem?" he asked. "Please sit down. And be assured that whatever you tell me will be held in the strictest confidence whether or not I take the case."

"Mr. Alexander," the girl said, "I'm here on terribly serious business. You may be

able to help me. I don't know. I feel that the police wouldn't even listen. It's so—vague, and yet I'm certain that murder has been committed."

Nick pursed his lips. "Murder is out of my line, Miss—Miss—"

"But perhaps this isn't." She disregarded his open hint for her name. "I've got to be sure before I go to the police. Shall I go on?"

"By all means." Nick nodded.

"Yesterday," she said, "my father was buried. He had been killed by a falling branch from one of the big trees on our country place. But he lived almost two hours after the accident and I have an idea he wanted to tell me something, but he was afraid to. There were others in the room, of course. He gave me his wristwatch, said he wanted me to have it. After he was dead, I noticed that the back of the watch wasn't tight. Inside the case I found a piece of tissue paper."

NICK fiddled with a letter opener. A girl with ideas of murder, he thought, adding two and two to get nine.

She eyed him keenly. "It sounds like a fairy story, but on that bit of paper were four names and addresses. I was, according to the instructions also on it, to visit each one and say that my father was dead and that each one of the men had been right."

Nick shrugged. "Then why not visit these men? You don't need a private detective for that."

"I did see the first man on the list. His name was Martin Jackson. Twenty minutes after I left him, he was killed by a hit-and-run driver. Then I saw the second man—Jerome Cassard. Half an hour later, he was found crushed to death beneath a subway train. I—I'm afraid to visit the other two men."

Nick leaned forward. "When you talked to those who were later killed, what was their reaction to the message which you

delivered?"

The girl fumbled nervously with the catch on her purse.

"Mr. Jackson only said 'Thank you.' Mr. Cassard said, 'I've known that for a long time.'"

Nick reached for the telephone. "I'll get the details for you. Frankly, I believe these two men were killed accidentally and quite by coincidence their deaths happened soon after you left them. Please wait just one moment."

Nick called Police Headquarters, talked to a ranking officer, and when he hung up, he smiled broadly.

"The police," he said, "are positive that death in both those instances was pure accident. You need not fear to visit the other two men on your list and I assure you, my fee for such a simple task would be much too high in proportion to its worth."

The girl arose. Her eyes were moist. "I—didn't think anyone would believe me. But I—well, I hoped you might help. Oh, I know my story is fantastic, Mr. Alexander, but ever since Dad died, I've had a feeling that I was watched. That someone—or something—was right at my elbow. Like a shadow."

"You haven't seen anyone following you?" Nick asked. "There really hasn't been a shadow?"

She attempted a smile that failed miserably. "No. I was referring more to the way I felt. The shadow—it's the shadow of fear. I'm afraid."

She went out and closed the door, and he heard her heels clicking across the outer office.

Nick sat down again and then shrugged. That girl's mind was an eddy of emotions, caused by the violent death of her father. Nick felt sure he understood the girl, and that if he had tried to help her he probably would have discovered she was the victim of too active an imagination.

He had almost forgotten her when, five minutes later, his phone rang. He lifted the receiver off its cradle.

"Mr. Alexander?" a man's voice asked, and at Nick's acknowledgment, "This is Arthur Polk, and I need your services badly. There are two men waiting now for me in my living room, so I can't talk long. To be frank, it's a blackmail scheme. Come to my suite in the Hotel Elite. If I'm compelled to accompany these men, I shall contrive to hide a note giving all the details. It will be tied to a string, hanging out the window of my study . . . I hear them moving about. Please don't let me down."

The phone clicked. Nick seized his hat. When a man like Arthur Polk, one of the coolest, most level-headed financiers in town asked for help like that he honestly needed it, and badly.

Nick hailed a taxi and drove to the Hotel Elite. He stopped at the desk, asked for Polk's suite number, then an elevator whisked him to the twenty-second floor. He had raised a hand to knock on Polk's door when he saw that it was ajar.

Nick pushed it wider, and stood there listening.

The apartment was pitch dark. He stepped into the hall and glanced into the living room. A chair lay on its side and a lamp had been knocked from a table.

That meant Polk was gone, that he had put up some sort of an argument and lost. But the note hidden outside the study window would give the necessary leads. Nick hurried to find the study. It was at the rear, and there was no mistaking it. Books lined the walls, there was a massive desk, parchment-shaded lamps and heavy, dark window drapes. The floor was highly polished.

Nick hurried to the window which had been described to him over the phone. He raised it and looked for a note, attached to string.

It wasn't there.

He leaned out of the window, twenty-two floors above the sidewalk. Then he saw the note, caught on a small figure on an ornamental molding around this top floor. The folded paper, attached to a string, was fluttering three feet below the window.

TO REACH the string Nick had to lean far out, and he didn't like heights. His fingers barely missed the string and he leaned further. Suddenly he felt the rug under his feet start to slide, then that rug really traveled.

Nick kept his wits. Instead of clawing for support, he let himself go suddenly limp and fell across the window sill, more of him hanging out than inside the room. If he had been leaning out just another inch, he would have been pitched to his death.

Gradually he wormed his way back inside. He started to straighten up and both feet shot out from under him. He fell heavily to the floor, completely winded and trembling.

His fingers moved gently across the highly polished floor. It had a thick covering of wax. He got up carefully, turned on one of the table lamps and studied the situation. The rug which had slid from under him so neatly was a worn old throw rug, highly dangerous on a slick floor. And the rug was hardly in keeping with the rest of the furnishings.

Nick's nostrils dilated a bit. This looked almost like an attempt on his life. A clever scheme where the presence of a murderer wasn't needed.

Then he gasped. That girl! Two men she had visited were dead. Accidentally, according to the police. But his death would have been put down as an accident too.

Nick sped for the telephone and called the desk in the lobby. "

"Mr. Polk sent for me," he explained. "His apartment door is open, but no one is here. Did he leave any word for me to wait?"

"Mr. Polk left the city four days ago and isn't expected home for another week," the desk clerk declared. "The clerk who gave you his suite number didn't know that. But Mr. Polk's door should not have been open. I'll send up a man to examine it."

Nick cradled the phone and again approached the window, but cautiously, wary of that smooth floor. An idea came to him and he searched the room, found a curtain rod in the closet. Using this like a fish pole, he finally disengaged the loop of string and lifted the note through the window.

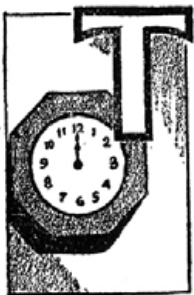
It was a blank piece of paper!

Nick didn't wait for the bellhop. He checked through the phone book for the addresses of the two men who had died after a visit from that girl. Nick was cursing himself for a fool. He should have believed her!

Right now he didn't even know her name, where she came from or the names of the other two men on her fatal list. He had to find out. Lives depended upon it. For more and more it became apparent that a visit from that girl was followed by a visit from Death!

CHAPTER II

Personal Interest



HE elevator stopped four times on its way down, and when he reached the lobby Nick Alexander fretted. He bolted out of the revolving door and almost struck a short, slim man who stood just outside. The man gave him a baleful glance, but Nick had no time to apologize. He raced for a cab that was dropping a passenger at the curb.

In ten minutes he was ringing the doorbell of Martin Jackson's home. A red-

eyed maid let him in.

"Mr. Jackson is dead," she explained. "It happened just—"

"I know," Nick said. "I'm from headquarters. May I talk to Mrs. Jackson?"

"He wasn't married," the girl said. "There is nobody here now."

"Look," Nick said, "this is important. Did Mr. Jackson know a man named Jerome Cassard?"

"Oh yes, sir. They were good friends. Mr. Cassard came here often."

Nick jammed his hands into his coat pocket and started thinking. If Jackson knew Cassard, the chances were good that he had also known the other two men on that girl's list. But Jackson had been an important man, and probably knew hundreds of men. Purely on a hunch, Nick asked another question.

"The police are beginning to think Mr. Jackson may have been murdered. Now listen. Did he keep a telephone list of friends? Or a diary? An address book?"

"He kept a diary," the maid said. "Once when I broke a dish—an heirloom—he said he'd have to write that in his diary."

"Where would it be kept?" Nick asked. "Hurry!"

He was shown into a study where he wasted no time. He ransacked the desk first, found no trace of a diary, then went to a bookcase. One shelf was filled with red-leather-bound diaries. He picked out the current one, flipped the pages and read Jackson's day-by-day account of his life, progressing backward.

On a page dated four months before he found Jerome Cassard's name. It was included with two others and concerned a fishing trip, and also mentioned a debt of gratitude owed someone named John Blair.

Nick was interested only in the other two names. Dick Wilson and Robert Steele. He looked into the phone book again. There were five Richard Wilson's, but only one lived at an address comparable to that of the

two men already dead. The one Nick selected lived only four or five blocks away. Robert Steele's name wasn't listed.

Nick thanked the uneasy maid, left the house, and headed toward the residence of Dick Wilson. There he learned that Wilson was not at home and hadn't been for hours.

"Has a pretty girl, with blue eyes and brown hair been here to see him?" asked the detective.

"No, sir," the servant replied. "There have been no visitors today at all."

"Then did Mr. Wilson know two men named Martin Jackson and Jerome Cassard?"

"The names are not familiar to me, sir," the servant answered.

Nick groaned. He had selected the wrong Dick Wilson and had wasted time. He departed, hurrying for the nearest phone booth. Finding one, he called Police Headquarters and asked if anything had happened to either Dick Wilson or Robert Steele.

"What are you—psychic?" Nick's Headquarters friend asked. "Less than five minutes ago we got a report that a man named Robert Steele had fallen off a ferry boat. Looks like suicide. He left his coat on the deck, which is how the identification was made. He lived in Jersey."

"Thanks," Nick groaned. "I'll explain later."

There was only one thing to do. He hired a cab and made the rounds of the other four Dick Wilsons listed in the phone book. Three of them thought Nick a crook or a lunatic. The fourth and last one lived above a row of cheap stores.

Nick climbed the steps and knocked on the door.

A woman answered. Dick Wilson was her husband, she said, but he wasn't even in the country.

"He enlisted in the Red Cross and was shipped out to the Pacific several weeks

ago," she explained. "I don't know where he is. None of his letters have come through yet."

"Did he know three men named Martin Jackson, Jerome Cassard and Robert Steele?" Nick asked hurriedly.

"Oh, yes," she promptly replied. "My husband used to guide them on fishing trips. Just before he went abroad, all three of them were with him fishing in the Catskills."

"And was a pretty girl trying to locate him a short time ago?"

"Why, yes. She seemed agitated at first, then relieved to learn he was out of the country."

Nick took another flyer.

"What about a man named John Blair?"

"My husband knew Mr. Blair," she said. "That last fishing expedition was made near his home. It's at Middale, upstate somewhere."

FORTY minutes later, behind the wheel of his own car, Nick Alexander was driving toward that small Long Island town sixty miles from the city. His mind was busy with the few facts he had, weighing them. First of all, that unknown girl's father presumably had been murdered. He, as well as the other four men, three of whom were now dead, must have known something which endangered a man who didn't stop at murder.

Clever, carefully planned killings though. Each had looked exactly like an accident. Nick shivered, thinking of his own close shave. The murderer must have believed that he was on the list provided by the girl's father, since she had invited him. So he had been a candidate for death.

The murderer would soon realize, though, that the attempt on Nick's life had been a mistake. Now, believing his four victims dead, he might clean up the whole affair by eliminating the girl also. That meant Nick had to reach her somehow and

warn her. Though how, he did not know.

The dashboard clock indicated ten minutes of midnight when Alexander pulled up about half a mile from John Blair's home. The big house glittered with light, but he intended to look over the situation before he made his presence known.

In the long, large living room he saw the girl again. She was smoking a cigarette rapidly, showing her nerves were still on edge. There were two men in the room. One was a husky gray-haired man, the other tall and slender, and as nervous as the girl.

The detective went around to the front of the house and rang the bell. The girl answered, and her eyes went wide in surprise when she saw him.

"Follow my lead," Nick whispered, then spoke in an ordinary tone. "Miss Blair, I've come to say that I'm sorry for not believing you, wild as your story sounded. Soon after you left, someone tried to kill me too."

"Oh!" the girl gasped, and gave a frightened look over her shoulder. The two men were advancing. This is Mr. Alexander," she explained to them. "He's a private detective. I tried to hire him today. Mr. Alexander, this is Cyril Maitland, my father's cousin."

The tall, slim man shook Nick's hand limply.

The more ruggedly built individual turned out to be Herbert Esmond, manager of John Blair's Western properties and businesses. Esmond's handshake was firm and warm.

"Alida—Miss Blair—was telling us about her queer experiences in town today," he said. "We could scarcely believe her, and now you give verification. Mr. Alexander, do you believe that four men were murdered today because Alida visited them?"

"Three died," Nick said quietly. "The deaths of two have been entered as accidental—suicide for the third. I seem to have been the fourth intended victim, but I

managed to scrape through. Believe me, Mr. Esmond, someone did try to murder me. I want to know what it's all about."

"Come into the living room," Esmond invited. "I'm as eager as you to get to the bottom of it."

Cyril Maitland didn't seem so eager.

"Now listen, Herb," he said, "this man is a private detective. I don't trust any of that breed."

"Mr. Maitland," Nick snapped, "you may have cause to dislike some private detectives, but all I want is to find the person or persons who tried to kill me. And I'll stay until I do learn something, whether you like it or not."

"I think I could have you thrown out of here," Maitland said softly.

"Try it," Nick said tartly, "and when I come back, there'll be police with me. Miss Blair, have I your permission to remain?"

"Why—yes," Alida answered doubtfully. "I usually respect Cyril's advice, but he doesn't believe anyone was murdered and I do. Cyril, I must disagree with you, because I'm still afraid."

Cyril Maitland shrugged. "It's your house, Alida. But you'll find out that private detectives come high in fees and in the trouble they can cause you."

IN THE living room, Nick Alexander sat down in a comfortable chair as the others seated themselves, but before anything could be said another man walked casually into the room. Instinctively, Nick didn't like him. He was too suave, too much at ease. As he smoked a cigarette through a short ivory holder he seemed to hold the rest of the world in utter disdain.

"Mr. Alexander," Alida said, "this is my father's secretary, Frank Colton. He worked for Dad for about two years."

Nick nodded in Colton's direction, then plunged into the matter that had brought him here.

"From what I've heard," he said, "Miss Blair's father was accidentally killed. However, someone appears to be a specialist on accidents, so considering all that has followed Mr. Blair's death, it is safe to assume he was deliberately murdered. I want to find out why."

Esmond nodded. "I've been wondering if there could be a killer loose. When Alida told me of three men dying after she visited them, following her father's instructions, I began to doubt that Mr. Blair's death was an accidental one."

"Sheer rot." Cyril Maitland waved a hand irritably. "Besides, it's possible that my cousin sent Alida to the three men so that they would realize the jig was up about something or other. They could have committed suicide."

"I was not thinking of committing suicide," Nick Alexander said, "yet I nearly pitched out of a window after a killer carefully laid his plans to make my death seem like an accident . . . Mr. Maitland, I notice you are wearing a mourning band around your sleeve. Is it for your cousin?"

"No," Cyril Maitland said stiffly. "My wife. She died four months ago, if it's any of your affair."

"An accident?" Nick asked.

Maitland turned away without answering.

Colton, the secretary, deigned to remove the cigarette holder from between his lips and remark:

"Mr. Maitland's wife lost her life in an auto accident. It has grieved him so deeply he doesn't like to talk about it."

"On what day of the month did she die?" Nick asked musingly.

"The fourteenth," Alida replied.

Nick Alexander surveyed the group, his eyes resting on Alida Blair's face the longest.

"There is nothing to be gained by holding back anything," he finally said. "The

murderer—and there is one—knows he made one mistake. He assumed because Miss Blair visited me that I was on that list of doomed men. I wasn't. Miss Blair, did you show the list to anyone?"

"No," she said quickly, "I didn't."

"All right."

The detective crossed his legs and leaned back. He was sure that one of these men was the killer he wanted. With a stooge to help of course, because it had required two men to handle those murders—one to trail Alida and discover the identity of the next victim, the other the actual killer. The methods of murder had probably all been worked out beforehand.

"Miss Blair," Nick said, "will you let me see that list, please?"

She nodded and walked out of the room. No one spoke until she returned in a few moments and handed the list to Nick. As he took it he lit a match and brought the flame to a cigarette. He didn't blow the match out, but held it, and after a brief glance at the paper, touched the match flame to it. He stepped on the ashes and ground them beneath his foot.

"Now," he said, "nobody but you and I, Miss Blair, knows the identity of the fourth man on that list. The killer believed I was one of the quartette, and I'm betting that he stopped trailing you after you visited Robert Steele who, incidentally, was pushed off a ferry boat. Now, gentlemen, while Miss Blair was in New York, what were you doing?"

"I played a little golf," white-haired Herb Esmond said. "Then I did a bit of fishing in the trout stream half a mile east of here."

Colton shrugged. "I was busy finishing up in my work in connection with Mr. Blair's estate. I spent the day in the upstairs study. Mr. Maitland, I know, took a train to New York even before Alida left."

"You talk too much," Cyril Maitland snapped. "All right, I did go to New York.

I've run my cousin's business out West for years. Naturally there were a lot of details to be cleaned up. I can't account for every moment of my time. I don't have to. I didn't kill anyone."

"All killers say that," Nick Alexander observed dryly. "Later, they have to convince a jury of the fact. I'm not accusing you, Maitland. Were you injured in the accident which killed your wife?"

"Of course I was," Maitland said angrily. "Do you have to bring that up, when I'm trying to forget the horrible experience? But if you must know, my wife was driving. The car went over a cliff. I was thrown clear, but knocked unconscious. They carried me to the house and that's all I know. My wife was dead."

Nick Alexander arose. "Miss Blair," he said, "I'd like to have you show me around. Through the house tonight, and the grounds and the spot where Maitland's car went over the cliff tomorrow."

CHAPTER III

Death at Their Elbows



LIDA BLAIR took the detective's arm with a doubtful glance at the other three men, and the two left the living room. However, it turned out that Nick was doing the leading, for he piloted the girl upstairs and along a hall until they reached a room that appeared to be Colton's office. There Nick Alexander closed the door and sat down behind the desk.

"You're the only person here I can trust," he said to Alida, and smiled at her. "First of all, I am convinced that this whole matter is tied up tight with the death of Mrs. Maitland. On the day of the accident, those four men

on your father's list were fishing nearby. I'm certain they saw something."

"But what on earth did they see," Alida asked, wide-eyed, "that would make someone want to murder them?"

"I don't know," Nick admitted. "Something important, though. The four men must have talked to your father about what they had seen, and for some reason he must have told them to keep quiet. The murderer discovered all this somehow. He killed your father then, but he didn't know who those four men were. However, he had learned in some way that likely you would approach them, so he bided his time until you did."

"I'm terribly sorry I brought you into this, Mr. Alexander," Alida said earnestly. "Now you're in danger too. If, as you say, there is a murderer, he'll be determined to find out the name of the fourth man on the list, and only you and I know."

Nick nodded. "That's true, and I don't mind sticking my neck out. It's you I worry about. This fourth man—and never mention his name because someone might be listening—is safe, but even we don't know where he is. When we don't produce him, the murderer will assume we can't. So he'll finish his work, whatever it is, and cover up all traces. We can't permit that."

"What will we do?"

"I don't know. But we've got to identify the killer before he can take any further action. And we must attempt to contact the fourth man. Miss Blair, when Cyril's wife died, what were her injuries? Were they internal?"

Alida shuddered. "No. Her head was crushed."

"And the cause of the accident. Do you know?"

"Dad told me there had been a big rock in the middle of the cliff road. The car hit it . . . Do you think that was a deliberate attempt to kill Cyril's wife?"

"Could have been," Nick said thoughtfully. "Where was Colton when the accident happened? And Herb Esmond?"

"Why, Colton was in the house, I think. Mr. Esmond was out West at the plant. Dad called him Long Distance, to have him come here. He and the Maitlands were always excellent friends. Sometimes I have an idea that it's really Mr. Esmond who runs the business out there and Cyril is there just because Dad felt sorry for him. And Cyril's wife was very ambitious."

Nick nodded and arose. "We'd better go downstairs. By now the killer should be brewing something calculated to wipe us off the map. Or stewing in his own juice."

When they returned to the living room all three men were quietly waiting there. Colton was studying his manicured nails, Esmond was playing solitaire, with a drink at his elbow, and Maitland was reading a newspaper. They looked up as Nick and Alida entered.

"Well," Colton said, and seemed suddenly affable, "did you find that killer, Mr. Alexander?"

"Not yet," Nick replied. "You see, I think he'll reveal himself. He'll have to, because shortly that fourth man he didn't get will be here to settle the whole thing. So, if you gentlemen would like to go to bed now or arm yourselves with a gun or a knife, go to it. I'm packing a gun myself and I can shoot fast and straight. Of course, none of you will attempt to leave here until after that man arrives."

Esmond grinned. "I hope he doesn't take too long. I've got to get back to work."

"All nonsense," Maitland observed sourly.

Colton only gave Nick a cool, steady, glance as he walked out of the room and climbed the steps to the second floor.

Maitland also left for his room finally, but Esmond came over and sat down beside Nick and Alida.

"Mr. Alexander," Esmond said, "I assure you this is as much a mystery to me as it is to you. Perhaps even more so. However, I'd like to help all I can. To be brutally frank, Cyril hated Alida's father like poison, and hated his own wife just as much. They were on the verge of a divorce and Alida's father was trying to straighten them out. You see, Alida, your father believed he owed Cyril something."

"But what on earth could he owe?" Alida exclaimed. "Cyril has sponged on Dad for years."

ESMOND inclined his head briefly. "Years ago, your father was trapped in a mine he owned and Cyril saved his life. Cyril never forgot to remind him of that fact. Just between ourselves, Cyril may be the titular head of the Western division, but I run it."

"And what do you think of Colton?" Nick inquired.

Esmond laughed. "A cold-blooded beastie with a methodical mind full of facts and figures. He probably knows more about John Blair than anyone else. What Blair didn't tell him, he'd have been sure to find out by reading private mail and listening in on phone calls. I caught him doing that some weeks ago."

Nick looked keenly at Esmond. "Now perhaps you'll tell me about yourself."

Esmond laughed. "Why not? Now that Blair is dead, I'll probably become more powerful than ever. Perhaps I'll even buy out some of his interests. I stand to profit by his death, but certainly not by the death of those other four men. Now I think I'll retire. This business is tiring to an old man like me. Take care of Alida. I wouldn't want anything to happen to her."

"Nor I," Nick answered.

"I could never sleep," Alida said when they were alone. "Mr. Alexander—Nick—I'm terribly frightened. What are we going to

do?"

"Sit tight, keep on hoping, and wait for the killer to try something. He has to—Alida. He had to kill four men who knew his secret. He got only three and he hasn't the vaguest idea who the fourth one is. So he must find out—through you or me. We'll sit right here, Alida, but believe me we've got something to worry about. . . ."

It was near dawn when Nick Alexander heard someone moving stealthily about upstairs. Whoever it was seemed to be passing from one room to another in either bare or stockinged feet. The house was old, and squeaking boards carried their message.

Gently Nick moved Alida's head from his shoulder where it had rested while she slept, and made her comfortable on the divan. Then he tiptoed into the hall, though reluctant to leave her even for a few moments, because the killer might strike. But Nick knew he had to force the issue if possible and the fact that one of the trio upstairs was stealthily moving about was interesting.

He climbed the steps silently. All lights were out except for a dim table lamp in the living room, and he was soon beyond the range of that. Nearing the top, he pressed against the wall. Cyril Maitland was the prowler, in pajamas and a robe. When Nick first caught sight of him he was heading for the far end of the hall where he entered the last room.

Maitland's own door was partly open and the room was dark. Nick slipped inside it, closed the door softly and lit a match. Maitland's two trunks were open and so were a pair of expensive traveling bags. Quickly the detective rifled the trunk drawers, tossing their contents about indiscriminately. He did the same thing to the other luggage, then pulled bureau drawers wide open.

Maitland was coming back. Nick hurried into the bathroom, stepped into the tub and

pulled the shower curtain about him. With his pocket-knife he slit the curtain a bit.

Maitland locked his door, turned on the lights—and gave a cry of alarm. Through the slit in the curtain Nick saw him rush toward one of the windows, pick up a heavy drape and press the end of it between his hands. He seemed satisfied at what he felt there.

Nick Alexander stepped out of the tub and into the bedroom. He was lighting a cigarette when the sound of the striking match brought Maitland around with a cry of terror. Nick didn't say a word. He merely walked over to the drape and, when Maitland tried to interfere, he dusted him on the jaw with a right hook.

Nick ripped the drape open. Inside, was an oblong envelope, containing an insurance policy. He read it, with one eye on Maitland. It was a policy on his wife, paying off to the tune of thirty thousand dollars in the event of an accidental death, and taken out less than a year ago. Cyril was the beneficiary.

NICK put the policy into his pocket. "A tidy motive for murder," he said. "Now suppose you tell me why you were prowling around."

"I couldn't sleep," Cyril said lamely. "That policy. I didn't even know it existed until after my wife was dead. She must have taken it out without my knowledge. I swear that's the truth. John Blair knew I'd found it, though, and he thought I killed Olive. How could I have? I loved her!"

"Go on," Nick urged.

"She was a beautiful woman. Expensive perhaps, but John Blair saw that I had all the money I wanted. We quarreled sometimes, Olive and I, but I always gave in. I didn't kill her. She was driving so fast I didn't even see the big rock in the road. She always drove fast."

Nick's eyes narrowed. "What did John Blair say when he found out about that insurance policy?"

Cyril Maitland blinked, then took hold of himself.

"He didn't believe I didn't know it existed. He inferred that I—killed her. Olive and I had had a terrific row in front of John the day before she died—but I didn't kill her. I couldn't have done that!"

"Sit down at that desk," Nick ordered, "and write the phone number of your office out West. Put down the name of your secretary and Esmond's as well, along with their residence phones."

Maitland obeyed, and handed Nick the piece of paper.

"Now you might tell me the truth about why you were prowling," Nick said.

Maitland licked his lips. "I—well, I had a feeling this house has too many secrets. Sometimes I think there are more people living here than I know of. Voices, the smell of cigar smoke—and no one here smokes cigars. I wanted to look around."

"Go to bed and stay there," Nick ordered. "Or you may get hurt. Lock yourself in after I leave."

CHAPTER IV *House of Secrets*



NICK ALEXANDER heard the key turn in the lock after he stepped out of Cyril Maitland's room. He walked quickly to Colton's office, closed the door, and used the telephone for fifteen minutes. He was worrying about Alida, but it had been essential to take the risk of leaving her alone.

But when he hurried downstairs, Alida was gone. There were no signs of a struggle, so she must have been seized while sleeping.

Nick walked into the hall and yelled at the men who were upstairs, until all three of them came down. Colton seemed to be wide

awake. Esmond was yawning and rubbing his eyes. Cyril Maitland was trembling.

"Alida is gone," Nick said to them grimly. "I doubt that she is far away, and I know that none of you kidnaped her, because you were all upstairs. But our murderer has an assistant, who has worked with him before. That assistant took Alida away. I want her back."

"Naturally," Colton cried.

"I'm not talking to you, nor to Maitland," Nick snapped. "Esmond, stop that sleepy posing. I know what happened. So does someone else—the fourth man on John Blair's list. And I know where he is."

"So you want to trade, do you?" Esmond said calmly. "I'm not sure I'll agree. Oh, I'll admit I'm the man you are after. You're shrewd. I was afraid of you the moment you walked into this house."

"Alida, in return for the name of the fourth man," Nick said. "She'll never tell it, you've got to dicker. My terms are these. Alida gets a start. Afoot, it will take her hours to reach a telephone. By then you can get clear."

"Otherwise?" Esmond asked.

"Tomorrow morning the fourth man is going to the police with his story. I knew it all along that you were the killer. Because he told me. Well—is it a deal?"

Esmond sat down heavily.

"We're at an impasse, I'll acknowledge," he said, "but you will have to convince me that fourth man talked."

"He and the three you murdered saw something at the time Mrs. Maitland was killed. Is that enough?"

Esmond inclined his head, then stamped heavily on the floor. "Gabey," he shouted. "Bring her up."

Two minutes later Alida Blair walked into the room. Behind her came a small, slim man whom Nick instantly recognized. He had been standing outside the hotel in which Nick had nearly lost his life. Alida came

forward quickly and went straight into Nick Alexander's arms.

The man Esmond had called Gabey was squinting at Nick and puffing furiously on a fat cigar. The gun he held suddenly swerved to cover the detective.

"Esmond," Gabey said, "this ain't the fourth man on that list. He's a private sleuth I trailed all day. Yeah, you made a mistake sending him up to that hotel suite where I had the floor all waxed so he'd slip and fall out the window."

Esmond's hand darted beneath his coat and emerged with a gun of his own.

"Tell me more, Gabey," he urged. "I've had a feeling he was bluffing."

"Well," Gabey said excitedly, "I was waiting around to see him kiss the sidewalk, but he comes out of the hotel under his own steam. So I tailed him. He started looking all over town for a man named—"

"Cyril!" Nick shouted. "Get him!"

Esmond laughed. "Cyril hasn't the courage to attack a two-legged mouse. Yes, Gabey, what was that name?"

"Wilson, Richard Wilson. Anyway, he rang the bell of four men named Wilson. I was looking for a chance to nail him, but he was too fast for me."

"Your unintelligent mind was working at half its usual remarkably poor speed," Esmond said, without rancor. "You thought Nick Alexander was the fourth man. . . . Alexander, our little deal is off. You lied to me. I don't believe you even found the fourth man, that Richard Wilson. But I'll give you odds that I'll find him."

Nick shook his head. "You're not that smart, Esmond."

"All right," Esmond said. "Tell me where he is or I'll put a bullet through Alida Gabey, watch Colton and Cyril!"

NICK was looking beyond Esmond, at Cyril Maitland, who had one hand in the deep pocket of his robe.

"Esmond," Nick said, "you've got to kill all of us. You murdered once, and it took four more kills to keep your secret. You were not out West when Cyril's wife died. You were in New York. Blair phoned your office and your secretary, in turn, phoned you in your New York hotel. The hotel held the message, which you didn't get until long after you had come out here to express your sympathy. You knew Mrs. Maitland was dead, because you killed her."

Esmond shrugged. "If I did, does it matter now?"

"But why?" Nick demanded. "At least, you can tell that."

Esmond laughed. "She was too smart. Cyril was easy to fool, but not Olive. She didn't even fall for my line when I tried to get in her good graces. I knew she was going to tell Blair that I'd—well, taken a bit more responsibility than I should. Especially with some of the firm's money."

"So you come here secretly to do something about it," Nick said. "You put that rock in the road, knowing she was a fast driver and would never see it in time. Those four men who were fishing saw you slip to where the car had landed and kill Mrs. Maitland. But they thought you were Cyril. The dusk deceived them. You and Cyril are about the same height."

"They told John Blair, but Blair owed Cyril his life. He refused to believe Cyril had killed his wife until Cyril turned up with a fat insurance policy that I'll bet you had something to do with, Esmond. That was the motive. You heard Blair accuse Cyril heard him say that four men had identified him, and would come forward if he, Blair, called on them."

"But you were afraid that they might have seen you too, and would identify you, instead of Cyril. You couldn't take chances. They had to go. You had your expert on accidental deaths murder John Blair. You knew that Blair must have made some sort of

arrangement to notify these four men, then deduced that it was through Alida. The rest was easy until you made the mistake of identifying me as one of those men.”

“We all make mistakes.” Esmond shrugged. “Gabey, tie these people up—tightly. I think there will be another unfortunate accident. A fire, perhaps.”

“I know how to tie ‘em so there’ll be no trace,” Gabey declared with sadistic satisfaction. “The stuff will burn off ‘em. We’ll put ‘em in their rooms.”

“An excellent idea.” Esmond smiled. “Start with Colton, Gabey.”

“You killed Olive,” Nick went on as though he had not heard the death instructions. “The auto accident didn’t kill her, so you smashed in her head while Cyril lay unconscious near the car. You did that, Esmond.”

Cyril jumped to his feet. “You murdered Olive!” he screamed. “You killed her! She was my wife. I loved her!”

Esmond sensed the peril in Cyril’s tone. Gabey suddenly made a dive toward Cyril. There was a single shot. Gabey screeched, clawed at his throat while blood ran along his wide-spread fingers. Then he dropped. Cyril’s right hand, still deep in the lounging

robe pocket, had the robe raised a trifle and smoke curled from the pocket.

As Gabey dropped, Nick lunged forward. Esmond tried to turn in time to withstand the attack. He did bring his gun down, but it was too late. Nick’s arms went about his legs and Esmond toppled.

Colton sprang into the fray then, kicking the gun out of Esmond’s hand. Nick smashed home two solid punches, but Colton’s methods were much more effective. He aimed a powerful kick at Esmond’s head. It connected and the fight was over.

Puffing badly, Nick got up.

“Thanks, Cyril,” he said. “You had more spunk than you realized. You were our sole hope when I noticed you were holding something pretty tightly in the pocket of your lounging robe. I prayed it was a gun.”

“I should have killed him,” Cyril said mechanically. “He murdered my wife.”

“Get him a drink,” Nick told Colton. “And thanks to you also. Alida, Colton and Cyril can take care of Esmond. We’re going into town now. You’ve had enough.”

Alida linked her arm with Nick’s.

“I’ll go anywhere you say, Nick,” she said. “I’m not afraid any more. That shadow has disappeared.”