

Breene answered, but his voice was muffled. Sarah sat on her heels, wondering what on earth they meant by substituting Kitty for the dog. Kitty? That was the name of the red-headed girl who had come to live with Joseph Sleep. How very odd, she thought. Her curiosity, held in check by danger, now asserted itself when she believed herself safe. Cautiously, she raised her head and peered over the back of the couch.

The door into the other room stood ajar. The two men bent over a small wheeled table examining something illuminated by a shaded overhead light. Sarah realized it was "Face" Gordon's dog they had stretched out on the table, apparently unconscious. A curious tangle of rubber pipes dropped from the animal into the shadows below the table. She saw Dr. Palling lift the dog's right paw and drop it. The limb fell lifelessly.

"Perfect," Palling said. "Simply perfect."

Breene grumbled. "I wish I was sure as you seem to be."

At that moment Sarah felt the screen going. In her eagerness to see, she had pressed against it. Frantically, she tried to stop its fall, but succeeded only in sending it crashing to the floor. The two men in the next room whirled. She saw their mouths fall open and was conscious that, whereas Palling was angry, Breene's face betrayed absolute terror. She shoved the couch aside and plunged towards the door. Even as she ran, she remembered with a feeling of hopeless panic that it was locked.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A WARM NIGHT, but Joseph Sleep was cold inside his white shirt and black dinner-coat. He was always cold inside, even on the hottest day, for his blood count was below normal and the years had not been kind to him. He was no full-blooded, well-fed jolly man, but a thin, acidulous person suffering from a ruined digestion, ruined ambition, ruined hopes and the ever-sharpening certainty that soon, very soon, he must go the way of all men. Of late, Mafia Breene had taken to looking at him appraisingly when they met, or so it seemed to Sleep's imagination. Breene and Palling together, he thought, they were always looking at him in that odd way. They hoped he would go. He knew that because things would be easier for both of them with him out of the way. It wasn't only the money they owed him. Not that it was very much, really. Only five hundred each, but with the interest, which was unpaid, it mounted up. He knew it weighed upon them because they had other bills.

No, it wasn't only the money. At least, not in Palling's case. There were things he knew about another life Palling had lived before he came to Poldrate Street. The fellow didn't earn much, five or six thousand perhaps. But, such as it was, he worked for it, and it kept him going with that wife of his, Violet. He looked across the room. She was sitting against the high, old-fashioned windows with the dingy curtains. The

long lines of her, a trifle too long perhaps, but the effect of those slender limbs outlined under the flimsy mauve evening dress was provocative.

He remembered a time when the provocation would have set him hunting her, or any women who moved with such limbs inside a rustle of silk. It must be sheer silk stockings which made the sexy whisper under her dress, stockings which were drawn high over the rounded knees. He strained his ears to hear it, but although it was quite audible, he no longer experienced anything. It was years too late. He was too old. She knew it, he realized with bitterness. Perhaps that was why she didn't take any trouble to disguise from him her boredom with her husband, her sulky desire to betray him, if she could do it secretly.

Joseph Sleep shifted his position slightly, turning over in his mind the thought that he could ruin Palling if he wanted to, cut off that paltry six thousand by whispering a few words to the California Medical Association. The woman, too. He knew her secret. Perhaps one day, before it was too late, he would tell what he knew about both of them.

A movement across the room caught his eye. Violet shifted slightly, crossing and uncrossing her legs. He suddenly remembered this was supposed to be a party. Not the kind which people gave nowadays, all gin and noise. He had wanted it to be the dignified kind he remembered a long, long time ago, where men were gentlemen and the women always ladies. He thought now, with a slightly cynical twist of his thin lips, that it may have been because they were afraid to be anything else. But it had been pleasant.

Sleep glanced down at the unlighted cigar between his thin, bloodless fingers. Its brown leaf wrapper was scarcely darker than the tanned skin. So much of his time was spent in the garden, under the hot sun. Heat was a fetish with him, the desire to warm that glacial something which pervaded his body, even on the hottest days. He never quite succeeded. There was only one bit of warmth in him, a tiny spot of comfort which glowed always in his mind. It had come into being a year ago when he had opened the letter from the east, telling him about Kitty McKay and her money and the guardianship which would be his when her grandmother died. The old lady had died so soon afterwards that it seemed she had only waited to get the letter off to him before she did it. The letter had told him all about Kitty, then scarcely nineteen, and the money which was to be hers when she came to the age of twenty-two. It was only about a hundred thousand in property and government bonds. But it seemed a great deal to Joseph Sleep, who had managed to save little more than a third of that after a life-time of scheming and contriving. It represented wealth to him, a fortune in the almost mythical six figures.

Mrs. McKay must have been rather a simple woman, he thought, to entrust a young girl and so much money to the management of a man she hardly knew. It was fifty years since Joseph Sleep and Nina McKay, then Nina Carson, had gone together in the little Vermont town where they had grown from childhood. But the good

name he had inherited from his forebears had lingered on in the land where all but Joseph had laid their bones for ever. He thought complacently of the reputation for probity and uprightness they had created, and which could survive half a century of absence and follow him to this distant land of California where he had lived so long. It proved, he was sure, there was nothing dishonourable about him still, just as there had been nothing underhand about the coltish Joseph Sleep of fifty years ago. It was because of his reputation that Nina McKay had written him after all these years with the request that he assume responsibility for Kitty and her money. It was not until he read the letter to its very end that the little spot of warmth came into Joseph Sleep's mind. In almost its last line, Nina had said Kitty knew nothing about the money which would one day come to her.

Then had followed a postscript. Joseph despised postscripts as a rule. They indicated, he thought, a scatterbrain inability to get at the meat of a letter without afterthought. But he read and re-read this one and gloated over it. Nina had said Kitty knew nothing about her fortune. She had been brought up as a simple country girl, well-trained, of course, as befitted a gentlewoman, but ignorant of money and its responsibilities. Nina believed it better that she come to woman's estate without false ideas of her own importance. In Joseph's hands she placed the task of letting her know over a period of time, and, as he saw fit, that she was a wealthy woman. She begged him to guard against the approaches of men who might be interested in the money rather than in the girl herself. Almost timidly, it seemed, she suggested Joseph conceal the knowledge of her wealth until Kitty had become engaged to a worthy man.

There had been a great deal of the postscript. In fact it was longer than the letter itself, as if the poor woman had been so agitated in writing the letter as to have forgotten most of what she intended to say and only recovered her wits when she had signed her name. There was a long passage about their childhood, and about the little stone church with its basement Sundayschool where they had studied the Bible together. Apparently it did not occur to Nina that anyone, brought up as they had been, could wander very far from the path indicated by those early teachings. She was sure Joseph hadn't. He nodded when he read that part. He was quite sure she was right and that he could still go back to that little Sundayschool and take his place on the worn maple benches with the same simple peace of mind. Joseph did not know that a high speed motor-road now ran over the site of the long-vanished church. The change bore some resemblance to what had happened to his simplicity. Church site and simplicity were still there. What went on over them was quite a different matter. But Nina, faced with the conviction of approaching death, had reached out to her girlhood friend with the gifts of grand-daughter and money, secure in the trust of her own simplicity. There was no one else, she explained, in whom she had the same confidence.

Like the letter, the postscript had a last line which almost lifted Joseph Sleep out of his chair. Knowing the uncertainty of human existence, Nina had taken care of

another possibility although admitting its improbability. In the event of Kitty's death, without issue, said this extraordinary last line, the money was to go to Joseph Sleep.

The little spot of warmth in Sleep's mind glowed and waxed. Not that he contemplated for a moment the possibility of death for Kitty. She was young and vigorous. He was old and almost ready to finish his account. But before he did so, he was to have the joy of handling all that money, to manipulate as he desired, as if it were his very own. Joseph Sleep, the man who could write his cheque in six figures. It had a grand sound. He recalled the talk around the old upright iron stove in the general store of that Vermont town about such characters, men "who could write a cheque in six figures." And now he was to be one of them. He wouldn't ever write such a cheque, of course. The money wasn't actually his, but he had the handling of it which was almost the same thing.

And so the time had come, sooner than he hoped, when news came of Nina's death. He had immediately written Kitty, suggesting she come to live with him. It seemed only right and proper, he wrote, that her guardian give her a home. Under his own roof it would be easier to maintain the fiction that she was practically without resources. He had even sent the train money for her trip. By virtue of his office as sole executor, he had arranged for the forwarding of rents and the transfer of bonds. He could still feel the physical reaction he had experienced when the huge bundle of registered mail arrived and he had gone down to place the papers in his own deposit box. He was so engrossed in the joy of handling such sums of money he had almost forgotten the girl. A telegram, sent from Kansas City, told him she was coming, that she was actually on the way. He realized with a shock that he was going to see her in a few hours, that he must be on hand to greet her when the train arrived at the Santa Fe station.

Until that moment he had not even bothered to tell his housekeeper about the girl. The arrangements had been made in a great hurry. He felt a faint distaste, even now, remembering the scene when he told Fanny Smallbone. She had been with him for years, an ageless automaton, almost stone deaf. For some reason, he had shrunk from the task and put it off until the very moment he was leaving the house. Then he tried to tell her without raising his voice, without giving her a chance to read his lips, as if ashamed of something. The realization of his childishness followed. He turned to face Fanny and tell her about the girl. Evidently, for once, she mistrusted her skill at lip-reading, so astounding had she found the news. She stared at him unbelievably. He had been forced to shout so that her ears could hear, and the words, echoing through the old house, had seemed indecent. The fact that he, Joseph Sleep, was bringing a young girl to live with him. He remembered the instant suspicion which had come into Fanny's faded eyes. He was surprised to find how many words it took to explain, how long he had to talk before something of the sharp disapproval went out of her face.

He shouted "guardian" over and over again, and that the girl must have the side room, overlooking the garden. Then he had hastily pointed to his watch, shouted "train" and hurried out the front door, shaken and a little unnerved.

He remembered the time he had stood at the station barrier, scanning the crowds as they came up the ramp. He had no means of recognizing the girl since he had never seen a picture. So he had stood pressed against the iron railings, staring at the first stragglers and then at the swiftly moving crowd, wondering what to do. It was not until the gates were closed again and the place almost cleared that he saw her, a solitary figure behind a modest plinth of baggage, on the far side of the waiting-room. He had plenty of opportunity to study her as he crossed slowly. The appearance of the girl, her air of complete assurance and sophistication, surprised him, somewhat. It was not exactly what he had expected from a small Vermont town.

He was able to approach within a few feet before she noticed him. Then she looked quickly, inquiry in her eyes. She was tall, he saw, taller than himself. She had red hair and the clear skin with the faint over-tone of tawny down which went with the natural colouring. Her eyes were a golden brown and the light in them was hot and provoking. Joseph Sleep had been interested in women once. He knew instantly that Kitty McKay was one of those who would always be a torment and a heartache in the lives of men. Even before she spoke in the rich, unexpected viola voice, he knew it and blessed the years which had rendered him immune.

"You're Mr. Sleep, aren't you?" she asked and smiled. He was a little bewildered at finding himself talking to a red-headed girl on such an unusual basis.

"Stay here while I get a red-cap," he said, and the girl nodded. He returned presently with the porter who gathered her things and followed them out to the ranks of taxi-cabs. Once in the cab, the girl had slewed partly round to look at him. The movement brought one knee against his leg. He felt the firm, velvet curve through the thin stuff of her dress and his trouser. "So you're my guardian," she said. "It's very nice of you to have me. I think I'm going to like California."

Without looking at her, he had answered. "I hope so, Kitty. My house is big enough, but it's rather old-fashioned." She had laughed a little. "That won't matter, Mr. Sleep. My house at home was old-fashioned, too. I like space."

At that moment they passed one of the strange monstrosities with which Iowan architects have tortured Spanish design. Kitty cried out in amazement, her hand still clasping his. It was several seconds before she became aware of the contact. During that interval he had continued to look down at the young, vital hand closed over his own withered one. Once, a long time ago, he would have lifted it to his lips. He remembered now, that long after they arrived at the house in Poldrate Street, the perfume of that clasp lingered about his hand.

It was here in the room now, he realized, the old-fashioned lilies-of-the-valley perfume which she always carried about with her. He looked across the drawing-room at the girl. A queer kind of a party, this, he thought, where nobody talked, only sat

about in a dim and faded elegance, waiting for the time to go home. The men, apparently, had already done so. Where the devil had Palling and Breene got to, anyhow? They had said they were going to see if there had been any business calls for them. He had thought it an odd excuse. Calls could have been relayed by telephone. At least from Breene's house. Cora Blessington could have done that. He remembered that the Palling household was again without a maid. The last had left yesterday, the second in three months. What the deuce was wrong with that Palling woman, anyhow, that she couldn't keep a servant?

Violet hadn't moved since that restless recrossing of the silken knees. She was looking at something. Her eyes were fixed on some object across the room, and from the angle of her head it must be Kitty. Kitty, he thought sardonically, seemed to be asleep. Perhaps he should do something to liven things up a bit.

"Kitty," he said abruptly. The girl opened her eyes and turned. "Would you play something for us, my dear?"

The music, when it came, was thin and scattered. He had never heard it before. The notes seemed to linger in the shadows.

He wished he could see Violet better. He had never realized before how badly the room was lighted. Or perhaps it was his sight which had grown poorer. He was startled to hear Fanny Smallbone saying loudly that supper was ready and would they please come. The woman always spoke much louder than was necessary.

Kitty stopped playing and came around from behind the huge square piano. He was just about to hold out his arm when he noticed the Palling woman. She hadn't stirred. "Come along, Violet," he said. "I've an arm for both of you." She rose then, soundlessly and without effort, her long limbs smooth and swift. He felt Kitty's fingers on his black sleeve and sensed the lilies-of-the-valley perfume while they waited.

Then the fragrance was lost and confused in the sudden, overpowering carnation which accompanied the Palling woman. Between them, one tall and fair, with red hair, and one tall and dark, with heavy masses of raven hair, he walked into the hall. Two tall, slender, passionate women. Thin women were faithless women, he thought. They could have torn him to pieces. Perhaps if he weren't careful they would. What the devil put such thoughts into his head, anyway? Kitty was his ward. She wouldn't do any tearing. Not while she thought herself dependent. He'd take care she thought so for a long time. As for the Palling woman, her husband could take care of her.

What had become of the fellow, anyhow? Here it was after eleven and he was feeling sleepy. He wanted to get this supper over and get them out of his house. "Fanny," he said loudly, "telephone Dr. Palling and Mr. Breene. Tell 'em we're waiting."

Fanny was bending over the long table in the dining-room, lighting candles in the candelabra.

The table was set with a cold supper of salads and meats. Fanny always did this sort of thing very well when she got a chance at it, which wasn't often. He found

himself drawing back a chair. "Will you sit here, Violet? Kitty, my dear, take the foot of the table. You're the mistress, you know."

The girl moved slowly to the place indicated, her hair a dull bronze glow in the candle-light. He wished someone would say something. But no one spoke.

What was that Palling woman staring at Kitty for? He wished he hadn't asked her, hadn't asked her husband, hadn't asked Breene. Where the devil were they, anyway? "Fanny," he said loudly, "I told you to telephone —"

Fanny interrupted in the toneless, high-pitched voice which always made him think of a radio. "They're coming now." She was over by the sideboard, lighting the last of the candles. As she picked up the candelabra and came forward, Palling and Breene came into the room. Palling was first. He noticed the fellow looked quickly at his wife and seemed relieved when she paid no attention. "Sorry to be so long," he said. "There was a call."

He came forward in Fanny's wake. Joseph Sleep noticed little sparks of light on his shoes and trousers. There was the same sparkle around the bottoms of Breene's legs. "You're wet," he said crossly. "Is it raining?" Palling seemed startled as he followed the direction of Sleep's gaze. He shook his head and dropped into a seat. "No," he said. "We — we crossed the lawn. I suppose Gordon's been watering."

Sleep grunted. "Humph, that fellow. He never does anything he doesn't have to. He'd lean on the shovel 'til the handle rotted." Palling was opening a bottle of beer. Sleep asked him a question. "What took so long, Palling?"

Palling's hand shook so that a few drops spilled on the cloth. "There was a call," he said. "Breene waited while I took care of it."

Sleep was surprised. "You mean you went to see a patient?" Palling hesitated: "No. Not exactly. I called on the telephone."

For the first time Violet Palling looked at him. "Who was it, Ivar?"

Sleep saw Palling's face twitch. Something seemed to pass between him and his wife, he couldn't see what it was. He wished there was more light. Damn his eyes, anyhow. "Fanny, more candles. Quick, do you hear?"

The Palling woman was still looking at her husband, but he wasn't paying any attention. "I walked around to the drugstore," he said. "Got the prescription myself. That took time."

Breene looked at him over his glass and seemed about to say something. Mrs. Palling cut in: "Ivar, I asked you who it was?"

Palling drank some of his beer. "Oh, a woman," he said. "Over on Eighteenth Street. Heart. I sent something with digitalis. See her tomorrow on my rounds."

Violet Palling was looking at her husband with a curious, intent stare.

"I didn't know you had a patient on Eighteenth Street," she said.

Palling went on spreading apple butter on a piece of bread.

"Neither did I," he answered carelessly. "She just called around and left her name."

Curious, Sleep thought. Very curious, indeed. "How could she call when you



haven't any servant?" he asked. "You haven't, have you?"

Palling looked at him out of his narrow eyes. In the bright light of additional candles which Fanny had gone on lighting, Sleep thought the fellow looked positively vicious. He wondered what the mouth was like hidden under the shadow of the neat little Vandyke beard. If he hadn't known what he did about Palling, he might have felt afraid of him. But, knowing that, there was no reason to fear.

"She didn't call on the telephone," Palling said. "There was a note stuck in the front door. People do that, you know, when they're taken suddenly. If they haven't got a regular man, they hunt up the nearest medico in the telephone book." He glanced at Breene. Sleep thought there was something appealing, almost furtive in the way he did it. Breene held out his glass to Fanny. "If you don't mind," he said. "You're making it so hot here with all those candles, I've got to have something more to drink."

Sleep suddenly felt very hot himself. There was moisture running down his forehead. The silly woman had gone on lighting candles until there were dozens. The room was positively unbearable. He felt faint and got up a little shakily. "Excuse me," he said, and walked towards the hall. He heard chairs being pushed back behind him, and then a hand steadied his arm. It was Kitty, smiling and looking concerned. "I'll take you into the library," she said. Nice of the girl. No one had ever done anything really kind to him, not in many years. He glanced back. The others were all watching. "Tell that woman to put out some of those candles," he said. Kitty guided him across the hall. He heard Palling's voice. "Maybe I'd better help." "Stay where you are," he said loudly. At least he thought he said it loudly, but it sounded only a whisper in his ears. Somehow he was lying on the leather couch in the library with the cool feel of it coming through his thin dinner clothes. Kitty was bending over him. He could see the bronze halo around her head.

Palling was there, too. He seemed to be doing something with his tie and collar.

His collar was open now and he seemed to be able to breathe easier. Confound it, he mustn't lie here. He ought to be in the dining-room with the others. They'd be guzzling more of his port than he intended. He tried to rise, but Palling's hand pressed against his shoulder. "Lie still, Joseph. You'll be better here for a while."

He made no further attempt to rise. He was feeling better now, more aware of what was going on. But there was no point in letting Palling know. Maybe if he played 'possum for a bit he'd find out something. This fainting spell should be a warning to him, he thought. It would never do to have a seizure and have Fanny call the nearest medico, as Palling said people usually did. Palling was the nearest, of course, and he'd be a fool to let him have the chance of messing about if he was really seriously ill. Very nice for Breene and Palling if he, Joseph Sleep, died suddenly in an attack like this. Palling could issue the death certificate. Breene would handle the burial service. Neat, damned neat. Sleep shivered a little at the neatness of it.

"He's cold," he heard Kitty say. "I'll get a cover."



"That's right," Palling said. "Fetch something warm." He was fumbling in his pocket. Sleep experienced a momentary sense of terror. "Don't leave me, Kitty." He was sure he spoke loudly this time. His voice sounded strong even to his own ears. He was up on one elbow, holding out his hand to Kitty. He wasn't going to be left alone with Palling, not if he knew it. "I'm all right. I'm not a bit cold." Kitty stopped and came back. Palling tried to shove him back on the pillow but he wasn't having any of it. "Take your hands off me, Palling. Do you hear?" The doctor's big hands seemed all over him, shoving him back. "There, there. Just lie down and rest —" Sleep pushed him aside and sat up. "Be damned to you, Palling. What have you done with my tie?"

Kitty held it out. "Here it is. Let me help you." While she put it in place, he looked at Palling maliciously. The doctor returned his glance sulkily. "Thought you had me that time, didn't you, Palling? Well, you didn't and you're not going to, either. Thanks, Kitty, my dear. Now let's be getting back to the others."

He got briskly to his feet, feeling quite all right. Kitty held out her arm to steady him, but he took it instead and laid it gallantly on his own. Then, with a bow to Palling, he led the way from the library.

In the hall he stopped and looked back. Palling hadn't stirred, and Sleep felt a sudden coldness around his heart. The fellow was looking at his desk and, it seemed, at one particular drawer. Locked though it was, there was a secret in that drawer which didn't seem any too safe, not with Palling's eyes on the woodwork. Nina's letter was there and some other papers which told far too much about Kitty and her money and his own relationship to both. "Palling," he said sharply. The doctor seemed to come to himself with a start and followed swiftly into the hall. It was impossible, of course, that he could know anything about Kitty and the money, but it was odd that he should look at that particular drawer and appear to go into a trance about it. "Suppose you take Kitty's other arm, Palling." Damn it, he'd share an arm with the fellow, but nothing else. And tomorrow — no tonight — before he went to bed, he'd take those papers out of that drawer. Tomorrow they'd go into his safety-deposit box.

Kitty leaned closer. "Are you sure you're all right, dear?" He found her eyes rather disturbing, even at his age. "You really ought to go to bed, Joseph." That was Palling on the other side. Blast the fellow's impudence, calling him Joseph.

"When my guests are gone, *Doctor* Palling." He hoped the emphasis would make his meaning clear. They were at the dining-room door now. The others looked up. It was just as he had feared. The port decanter was in the act of crossing the table from Breene to Mrs. Palling. "Hello," Breene said in a thick voice. He looked at Sleep with blood-shot eyes. "Feeling all right now?" As he spoke he fumbled for his glass, knocked it over and spilled a dark red petal across the cloth. "That's too bad," he mumbled. "We were jus' having some of your port. Very good port. Very good."

Sleep handed Kitty to her chair. Then he answered Breene. "Thanks," he said. "I feel much better now. Sorry to have left you. Fanny, bring another bottle of port.

The decanter seems to be empty."

Fanny shuffled forward to take the decanter. "It was full a few minutes ago," she grumbled. Sleep nodded, looking at Breene. "Yes, I know," he said. "And now Mr. Breene is full. Very full. Nevertheless, bring another bottle." He gave the order loudly, confident it would never be carried out.

### CHAPTER THREE

"FACE" GORDON was in no particular hurry about going home.

With his magazines, he covered a wide range of streets. Silently he entered garden after garden, slipping copies under doorways or into letter boxes where his customers would find them. The new torch was a joy. With its white beam poking into dark corners he broke up more than one tender scene. If his departure was a trifle hurried at such moments, accompanied by threats and abuse, he took comfort from the fact that he had added to his store of knowledge concerning the habits of men and women.

"Face" was at the age when he was extremely curious about a great many things, not the least of which was life. A solitary, with no friends, he had discovered an exciting pastime which could be enjoyed at its best during these nocturnal deliveries. To be frank about it, "Face" Gordon was a Peeping Tom. Silent in his black tennis shoes, he discovered dozens of windows where the curtains were carelessly drawn. Experience and long familiarity with his route had taught him the retiring hours of dozens of citizens and citizenesses, who had no idea, as they disrobed, that a pair of very curious eyes watched their every move.

Tonight's entertainments, he felt, were not up to the usual standard. True, he witnessed a violent quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz, who occupied lower floor, seven, in the Abigail apartments. He was charmed when the gentler member of the act neatly retired her husband from the conflict with a well-aimed hairbrush. In the next street he was a delighted witness when that Fryer woman, entertaining a strange male in her bedroom, was thrown into a frenzy of back-pedalling by the unexpected return of Mr. Fryer. From his vantage point outside the bedroom window, "Face" heard her lord's somewhat unsteady feet coming along the pavement in sufficient time to beat a safe retreat into the bushes. He lingered to see the trespassing stag come hurriedly through the window and make his way to the street. There the stranger paused in the shadows.

"Face" considerably waited until some very necessary adjustments had been completed before advancing silently.

"Paper, mister?"

The startled Lathario gave a convulsive leap, almost losing the garment so recently drawn into place. "Where in blazes — ? No, I don't want no paper. Beat it."