

He nodded brusquely. "Oh yes, quite so. Well, Gordon, sorry. Apparently you weren't neglecting my garden any more than the others." That'll hold him, he thought. With a stiff bow, he turned away, going towards his own gate. He had taken only a step or two before he was conscious there was another figure between him and the tall pillars. He had been too concerned with the impression he was making on Gordon to notice where the figure had come from, but it seemed to have emerged from Joseph Sleep's own premises. He couldn't be sure. He *might* have come from Breene's place. As he advanced he recognized young Lane. The suspicion he had come from his garden increased as he saw the fighter hesitate at the sight of him. It was only for a second, however. They came together rapidly. Powerful brute, Sleep thought. The young fellow nodded. "How are you, Mr. Sleep?"

Sleep answered stiffly. "Very well, thanks." He hesitated. "Sorry about your aunt —"

Young Lane muttered "Thanks" and went by without stopping. As he did, Sleep realized he was trying to conceal something in his hand. He caught a glimpse of zinnias and thought they might have come from his own garden, although there were some in Breene's place. His earlier suspicion Lane had been trespassing was confirmed. Could it be that the boy had the same thieving traits as his aunt? Fancy going into his garden in broad daylight to steal flowers.

For no apparent reason, Joseph Sleep suddenly thought of Kitty. He remembered the animal heat and turmoil of her young body when he had come upon her suddenly in the garden. An overwhelming conviction came to him that she had walked straight from Lane's arms when she heard him call. Could it be possible he had witnessed something he had not seen for nearly half a century, the spectacle of a young girl recovering from the throes of carnal passion? Lane had got home only this morning. The thing was impossible. And yet . . . His lips tightened ominously as he walked up the garden path. He heard Fanny calling his name and the sound cut short his speculations. She was standing on the front steps, grumbling because he had kept an omelet waiting.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HALLWAY in Mafia Breene's house was in twilight as he came silently from the rear. It was early afternoon, but the doors leading into the hall were all closed and only a vague glimmer of light drifted through the coloured glasses around the front door.

Breene paused before the grandfather clock, listening intently. There was no sound in the old house, except the slow beat of the clock. Cora was silent in the kitchen. Nothing stirred behind the closed door at the far end of the hall where He

lay. Satisfied he was unobserved, Breene crossed hurriedly to the little sitting-room where Sarah Reckon had hidden. With his key, he unlocked the door into the room beyond and pushed it open. A strong odour of dog assailed him, making him curse silently. He stepped inside, closed the door and locked it.

The room was just as they had left it last night when they carried out the loose body of Sarah Reckon. He glanced from the little marble-topped table with the drainage basin underneath to the rubber tubes thrown on the floor. He must get that mess out of here before Cora came spying on him. The moment he left this room unlocked, she'd be in like a hound dog. He knew she was burning with curiosity to know what they'd been up to in here. At that, it was better to risk her spying than Monk down in the undertaking rooms. Monk had access to the funeral quarters at all hours and might have picked the lock to any room they chose.

Cora was bad enough, but at least she didn't dare pick locks. He was glad it was Sarah Reckon and not Cora who had seen the dog lying on the table with that curious arrangement of pipes, a dog dead and yet not dead. He paused now, considering the perfection of the thing they had proved, that a dog could lie for a whole week, dead to all appearances, yet be revived and turned loose, not much the worse, apparently, for its experience. A little thinner, wobbly on its legs, but nothing a few days of regular meals and exercise wouldn't put right. That incision in the dog's chest was rather bad, but thank heaven the animal couldn't talk.

Gathering up the tubes and drainage basin his mind was busy with the application of their plan to its objective. The room smelled vilely, he thought. He crossed to the windows and drew the heavy curtains. Then he pushed open the windows, letting in a flood of fresh air. From where he stood, he could look through a tangle of shrubbery to the garden wall which divided his property from the cemetery beyond. The geography was perfect. There wasn't another place in the city so well arranged for their plan. It was a daring idea, too daring, perhaps. A little qualm of fear shook his knees for a second, but he braced himself. What could go wrong with it? Once let him get the girl into his possession and things would follow the usual routine. Sickness, death, Palling's certificate, burial permit and burial. That would end matters so far as the authorities were concerned. But it would only begin them for Palling and himself. It was all very simple. He wondered if it wasn't just a little *too* simple.

Fortunately for their plan there was nothing against either Palling or himself. Twenty years in business as an undertaker in Los Angeles. He was known as a reliable if somewhat unsuccessful man.

In his father's day, back in Illinois, when there were fewer undertakers and expenses nothing like as ruinous, undertakers all over the country had averaged nearly two hundred funerals yearly. Now if they averaged fifty they did well as could be expected. With the average city funeral costing about two hundred and fifty dollars, the best a man could make for himself today was about twenty-five per cent. Out of that he had to live and pay running expenses. Nothing like a goldmine in that, Breene

thought bitterly.

It was fortunate he could do his own embalming so he didn't have to keep a regular man. That was twenty-five a week he was able to save.

Breene suddenly realized the electric light was still burning. No need for that with daylight in the room. He switched it off. Pennies could be frittered away if you didn't watch things like that. He hoped this scheme of Palling's would work out successfully. He didn't know how much he was going to get. Palling had been a bit vague about that. Said he didn't know exactly how much old man Sleep had so he couldn't divide until they put the pressure on. He hoped to get quite a few thousand, anyway.

With a last look around to make sure he had collected everything, he pushed the table on its rubber-tyred wheels towards the door. When it was unlocked he tip-toed to the hall to make sure it was still deserted. He hoped to be able to get the table down into the undertaking quarters without being seen by Cora.

Satisfied the hall was clear, he returned for the table and started his journey. Almost at the end of the hall, he paused outside the door of the room where He lived, if such a word could be applied to the existence which went on behind those walls. There was no sound. He must be asleep, Breene thought, for the faint animal breathing which distinguished His waking hours was inaudible. Cora must be in some distant part of the house. Satisfied, Breene went on to the door at the end of the hall. A short flight of steps dropped to the underground corridor which connected house and funeral establishment on Washington Street. Carrying the table, Breene went through the door and started down the steps.

Shoving the table, he walked to the end of the passage where a door gave entrance to the preparation room of his establishment. He left the table behind and went in, expecting to find his apprentice there, but the room was deserted except for the still form of Sarah Reckon on the work-table. There was a shaded light on one side. He couldn't see the necessity for the light himself, but he was never able to persuade Monk to leave bodies in darkness. Wasn't decent, the apprentice said. It was a queer idea and it ran into a dollar or two every month, but Breene felt he had to put up with it. Monk still had nearly six months of his two-year apprenticeship to serve.

After that he'd have to get another apprentice, and you never knew how a new man would turn out. Twenty-five dollars a month with room and sometimes board wasn't good enough for these young whipper-snappers nowadays. They were always asking more. Monk wasn't demanding in that respect.

He crossed to the table and drew back the sheet, revealing the placid features of the woman who had invaded his house last night. He was anxious to examine the place in her hair where Palling had inserted his needle with the full charge of insulin.

He reached up for the overhead travelling light, and drew it closer. Then he parted the brown hair with its frequent strands of white. There was only the tiniest mark where the needle had gone in and you couldn't see it unless you knew where to look. Wonderful, he thought. A mark you couldn't see, a fluid that left no trace. They had

only to give the dose of chloroform first and then the insulin. Long before the chloroform wore off, she succumbed to the insulin, sitting quietly in a chair in her own kitchen.

After he had removed the woman's clothing, he glanced at his watch. Nearly three o'clock. He would have to hurry.

As he proceeded with his task of arterial embalming, long familiarity allowing him to follow each operation almost mechanically, he let his mind run along in more pleasing channels. He would do great things when Palling's scheme had borne fruit. He'd let his present lease run out and take over a bigger place in the heart of the fashionable district. He could put twenty thousand into it, if his share ran to that. Only the very best equipment. Then watch him. He'd put on such a show he'd be the envy of every high-class mortician in the business.

He was glad he'd been able to persuade Lane to let them have the funeral tomorrow morning. The sooner the better under the circumstances. His mind came around to the business of the scissors in the garden. Palling was a fool to have made an issue of it. He should have realized the tramp was only grabbing for something he thought might bring a few cents in a pawn-shop. But Palling had to get on his high horse and draw attention to himself. Breene was anxious to know what had happened after he turned the corner. Unconsciously, he hurried.

He completed his task and was just about to go into the store-room for the modest casket selected to hold Sarah Reckon, when Monk came in with a message. Someone wanted him on the 'phone, he said. It was Union headquarters calling. "It's about Gordon."

"I suppose he hasn't paid his dues," Breene snapped, washing his hands. He used Gordon as his driver when the hearse was necessary. As a driver, he'd been forced to join the drivers' union.

He left the preparation-room and walked along the corridor to the little office behind the slumber-room where he kept his desk. The telephone receiver dangled from the wall-'phone. As he crossed, he noticed a movement behind the desk and "Face" Gordon stood up. "Hello, Mr. Breene," he said grinning.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Breene growled. He picked up the receiver. "Hello."

A tired masculine voice at the other end drawled a threat. Unless his driver complied with union rules at once, Breene's business would be picketed.

"How much does he owe? All right. I'll send it if you let me have the bill." He hung up and turned to scowl at young Gordon. "Why doesn't that old man of yours pay his union dues?" he snapped. "Tell him I'll fire him if I have another complaint."

"I'll tell him, Mr. Breene. Everybody's riding him these days, it seems like."

"Yeah? Who else?"

"Mr. Sleep was after him just now for not watering his garden last night. Said he did yours and Dr. Palling's. I told Mr. Sleep he was wrong 'cause I knew my dad

hadn't watered any of the lawns last night."

Breene stared at the boy. "Why was Sleep so sure your father had watered the other lawns?"

"Search me, Mr. Breene. Say, I almost forgot. Mrs. Palling sent me in with a message. She's giving a party tonight an' she wants you to be sure an' come."

"All right."

Breene watched the boy as he walked along the corridor towards the front door. He stopped to stare into the slumber-room and then went on. He was always prowling about, Breene thought. This wasn't the first time he'd let slip a bit of useful information. So Sleep had noticed the drops of water on their trousers and remembered them. Drops they'd got when they went through Sarah Reckon's garden. The crafty old devil. What else had Sleep found out? Could he have discovered Sarah Reckon's garden had been watered last night and suspect they had been in it?

CHAPTER TWELVE

DR. PALLING called the little room off the front hall his consultation-room, but it was rarely used for that purpose because patients seldom found their way into Poldrate Street. Among the miscellany time had gathered in its crowded space was an exhibit which fascinated Violet Palling. She never failed to pause before the human skeleton which dangled at the end of a spring from a kind of steel gibbet erected on a movable platform. Cunningly wired, so that all the joints moved easily through the full compass, the skeleton was rarely quite motionless. The overhead spring, fastened to a staple let into the skull, was very sensitive. The skeleton responded to the slightest tremor communicated from the floor and with the tips of its toes just touching the platform of its stand, danced delicately, almost mincingly upon occasion.

Violet, entering the consultation-room in search of pencil and paper, paused before the skeleton. She wanted to make a list of things required for her party. But the fascination of the dainty dancer stopped her. She stood staring at the naked thing, its bones the colour of old ivory. With the tip of her finger she set it dancing. As it nodded and dipped she found her own shoulders keeping time with its movements. She wondered what its story might be, what thrills of passion had trembled there among those bones when the spaces were filled with sentience. She crossed to Palling's desk and switched on the lamp. Like most rooms in the house, particularly the lower floor, the consultation-room was perpetually in twilight.

Hastily she made out her list of things required for the evening. She wanted something which would appeal to each of the men present. It was important they should all be pleased with the party. She wrote a long list of necessities, tasty tid-bits to be