She chuckled. "The Railroad Unification Plan isn't working, is it, Jim?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're to receive a big cut of the Atlantic Southern's gross income, out of the common pool at the end of the year—only there won't be any gross income left for the pool to seize, will there?"

"That's not true! It's just that the bankers are sabotaging the Plan. Those bastards—who used to give us loans in the old days, with no security at all except our own railroad—now refuse to let me have a few measly hundred-thousands, on short term, just to take care of a few payrolls, when I have the entire plant of all the railroads of the country to offer them as security for my loan!"

She chuckled.

"We couldn't help it!" he cried. "It's not the fault of the Plan that some people refuse to carry their fair share of our burdens!"

"Jim, was this all you wanted to tell me? If it is, I'll go. I have work to do."

His eyes shot to his wrist watch. "No, no, that's not all! It's most urgent that we discuss the situation and arrive at some decision, which—"

She listened blankly to the next stream of generalities, wondering about his motive. He was marking time, yet he wasn't, not fully; she felt certain that he was holding her here for some specific purpose and, simultaneously, that he was holding her for the mere sake of her presence.

It was some new trait in him, which she had begun to notice ever since Cherryl's death. He had come running to her, rushing, unannounced, into her apartment on the evening of the day when Cherryl's body had been found and the story of her suicide had filled the newspapers, given by some social worker who had witnessed it, "an inexplicable suicide," the newspapers had called it, unable to discover any motive. "It wasn't my fault!" he had screamed to her, as if she were the only judge whom he had to placate. "I'm not to blame for it! I'm not to blame!" He had been shaking with terror—yet she had caught a few glances thrown shrewdly at her face, which had seemed, inconceivably, to convey a touch of triumph. "Get out of here, Jim," was all she had said to him.

He had never spoken to her again about Cherryl, but he had started coming to her office more often than usual, he had stopped her in the halls for snatches of pointless discussions—and such moments had grown into a sum that gave her an incomprehensible sensation: as if, while clinging to her for support and protection against some nameless terror, his arms were sliding to embrace her and to plunge a knife into her back.

"I am eager to know your views,' he was saying insistently, as she looked away. "It is most urgent that we discuss the situation and . . . and you haven't said anything." She did not turn. "It's not as if there were no money to be had out of the railroad business, but—"

She glanced at him sharply; his eyes scurried away.

"What I mean is, some constructive policy has to be devised," he

droned on hastily. "Something has to be done . . . by somebody. In times of emergency—"

She knew what thought he had scurried to avoid, what hint he had given her, yet did not want her to acknowledge or discuss. She knew that no train schedules could be maintained any longer, no promises kept, no contracts observed, that regular trains were cancelled at a moment's notice and transformed into emergency specials sent by unexplained orders to unexpected destinations—and that the orders came from Cuffy Meigs, sole judge of emergencies and of the public welfare. She knew that factories were closing, some with their machinery stilled for lack of supplies that had not been received, others with their warehouses full of goods that could not be delivered. She knew that the old industries—the giants who had built their power by a purposeful course projected over a span of time—were left to exist at the whim of the moment, a moment they could not foresee or control. She knew that the best among them, those of the longest range and most complex function, had long since gone—and those still struggling to produce, struggling savagely to preserve the code of an age when production had been possible, were now inserting into their contracts a line shameful to a descendant of Nat Taggart: "Transportation permitting."

And yet there were men—and she knew it—who were able to obtain transportation whenever they wished, as by a mystic secret, as by the grace of some power which one was not to question or explain. They were the men whose dealings with Cuffy Meigs were regarded by people as that unknowable of mystic creeds which smites the observer for the sin of looking, so people kept their eyes closed, dreading, not ignorance, but knowledge. She knew that deals were made whereby those men sold a commodity known as "transportation pull"—a term which all understood, but none would dare define. She knew that these were the men of the emergency specials, the men who could cancel her scheduled trains and send them to any random spot of the continent which they chose to strike with their voodoo stamp, the stamp superseding contract, property, justice, reason and lives, the stamp stating that "the public welfare" required the immediate salvation of that spot. These were the men who sent trains to the relief of the Smather Brothers and their grapefruit in Arizona—to the relief of a factory in Florida engaged in the production of pin-ball machines—to the relief of a horse farm in Kentucky—to the relief of Orren Boyle's Associated Steel.

These were the men who made deals with desperate industrialists to provide transportation for the goods stalled in their warehouses—or, failing to obtain the percentage demanded, made deals to purchase the goods, when the factory closed, at the bankruptcy sale, at ten cents on the dollar, and to speed the goods away in freight cars suddenly available, away to markets where dealers of the same kind were ready for the kill. There were the men who hovered over factories, waiting for the last breath of a furnace, to pounce upon the equipment—and over desolate sidings, to pounce upon the freight cars of undelivered goods—these were a new biological species, the hit-and-run businessmen, who did not stay in any line of business