

punctual about his appointments. Please believe me that this is unprecedented."

"I know it." She knew that Ken Danagger was as rigidly exact about his schedule as a railroad timetable and that he had been known to cancel an interview if a caller permitted himself to arrive five minutes late.

The secretary was an elderly spinster with a forbidding manner: a manner of even-toned courtesy impervious to any shock, just as her spotless white blouse was impervious to an atmosphere filled with coal dust. Dagny thought it strange that a hardened, well-trained woman of this type should appear to be nervous: she volunteered no conversation, she sat still, bent over some pages of paper on her desk. Half of Dagny's cigarette had gone in smoke, while the woman still sat looking at the same page.

When she raised her head to glance at the clock, the dial said: 3:30. "I know that this is inexcusable, Miss Taggart." The note of apprehension was obvious in her voice now. "I am unable to understand it."

"Would you mind telling Mr. Danagger that I'm here?"

"I can't!" It was almost a cry; she saw Dagny's astonished glance and felt obliged to explain: "Mr. Danagger called me, on the interoffice communicator, and told me that he was not to be interrupted under any circumstances or for any reason whatever."

"When did he do that?"

The moment's pause was like a small air cushion for the answer: "Two hours ago."

Dagny looked at the closed door of Danagger's office. She could hear the sound of a voice beyond the door, but so faintly that she could not tell whether it was the voice of one man or the conversation of two; she could not distinguish the words or the emotional quality of the tone, it was only a low, even progression of sounds that seemed normal and did not convey the pitch of raised voices.

"How long has Mr. Danagger been in conference?" she asked.

"Since one o'clock," said the secretary grimly, then added in apology, "It was an unscheduled caller, or Mr. Danagger would never have permitted this to happen."

The door was not locked, thought Dagny, she felt an unreasoning desire to tear it open and walk in--it was only a few wooden boards and a brass knob, it would require only a small muscular contraction of her arm--but she looked away, knowing that the power of a civilized order and of Ken Danagger's right was more impregnable a barrier than any lock.

She found herself staring at the stubs of her cigarettes in the ash-tray stand beside her, and wondered why it gave her a sharper feeling of apprehension. Then she realized that she was thinking of Hugh Akston: she had written to him, at his diner in Wyoming, asking him to tell her where he had obtained the cigarette with the dollar sign: her letter had come back, with a postal inscription to inform her that he had moved away, leaving no forwarding address.

She told herself angrily that this had no connection with the present moment and that she had to control her nerves. But her hand

jerked to press the button of the ashtray and make the cigarette stubs vanish inside the stand.

As she looked up, her eyes met the glance of the secretary watching her. "I am sorry, Miss Taggart. I don't know what to do about it." It was an openly desperate plea. "I don't dare interrupt."

Dagny asked slowly, as a demand, in defiance of office etiquette, "Who is with Mr. Danagger?"

"I don't know, Miss Taggart. I have never seen the gentleman before." She noticed the sudden, fixed stillness of Dagny's eyes and added, "I think it's a childhood friend of Mr. Danagger."

"Oh!" said Dagny, relieved.

"He came in unannounced and asked to see Mr. Danagger and said that this was an appointment which Mr. Danagger had made with him forty years ago."

"How old is Mr. Danagger?"

"Fifty-two," said the secretary. She added reflectively, in the tone of a casual remark, "Mr. Danagger started working at the age of twelve." After another silence, she added, "The strange thing is that the visitor does not look as if he's even forty years old. He seems to be a man in his thirties."

"Did he give his name?"

"No."

"What does he look like?"

The secretary smiled with sudden animation, as if she were about to utter an enthusiastic compliment, but the smile vanished abruptly. "I don't know," she answered uneasily. "He's hard to describe. He has a strange face."

They had been silent for a long time, and the hands of the dial were approaching 3:50 when the buzzer rang on the secretary's desk—the bell from Danagger's office, the signal of permission to enter.

They both leaped to their feet, and the secretary rushed forward, smiling with relief, hastening to open the door.

As she entered Danagger's office, Dagny saw the private exit door closing after the caller who had preceded her. She heard the knock of the door against the jamb and the faint tinkle of the glass panel.

She saw the man who had left, by his reflection on Ken Danagger's face. It was not the face she had seen in the courtroom, it was not the face she had known for years as a countenance of unchanging, unfeeling rigidity—it was a face which a young man of twenty should hope for, but could not achieve, a face from which every sign of strain had been wiped out, so that the lined cheeks, the creased forehead, the graying hair—like elements rearranged by a new theme—were made to form a composition of hope, eagerness and guiltless serenity; the theme was deliverance.

He did not rise when she entered—he looked as if he had not quite returned to the reality of the moment and had forgotten the proper routine—but he smiled at her with such simple benevolence that she found herself smiling in answer. She caught herself thinking that this was the way every human being should greet another—and

she lost her anxiety, feeling suddenly certain that all was well and that nothing to be feared could exist.

"How do you do, Miss Taggart," he said. "Forgive me, I think that I have kept you waiting. Please sit down." He pointed to the chair in front of his desk.

"I didn't mind waiting," she said. "I'm grateful that you gave me this appointment. I was extremely anxious to speak to you on a matter of urgent importance."

He leaned forward across the desk, with a look of attentive concentration, as he always did at the mention of an important business matter, but she was not speaking to the man she knew, this was a stranger, and she stopped, uncertain about the arguments she had been prepared to use.

He looked at her in silence, and then he said, "Miss Taggart, this is such a beautiful day--probably the last, this year. There's a thing I've always wanted to do, but never had time for it. Let's go back to New York together and take one of those excursion boat trips around the island of Manhattan. Let's take a last look at the greatest city in the world."

She sat still, trying to hold her eyes fixed in order to stop the office from swaying. This was the Ken Danagger who had never had a personal friend, had never married, had never attended a play or a movie, had never permitted anyone the impertinence of taking his time for any concern but business.

"Mr. Danagger, I came here to speak to you about a matter of crucial importance to the future of your business and mine. I came to speak to you about your indictment."

"Oh, that? Don't worry about that. It doesn't matter. I'm going to retire."

She sat still, feeling nothing, wondering numbly whether this was how it felt to hear a death sentence one had dreaded, but had never quite believed possible.

Her first movement was a sudden jerk of her head toward the exit door, she asked, her voice low, her mouth distorted by hatred. "Who was he?"

Danagger laughed. "If you've guessed that much, you should have guessed that it's a question I won't answer."

"Oh God, Ken Danagger!" she moaned, his words made her realize that the barrier of hopelessness, of silence, of unanswered questions was already erected between them; the hatred had been only a thin wire that had held her for a moment and she broke with its breaking. "Oh God!"

"You're wrong, kid," he said gently. "I know how you feel, but you're wrong," then added more formally, as if remembering the proper manner, as if still trying to balance himself between two kinds of reality, "I'm sorry, Miss Taggart, that you had to come here so soon after."

"I came too late," she said. "That's what I came here to prevent. I knew it would happen."

"Why?"

"I felt certain that he'd get you next, whoever he is."