

eagerness to live and that it was this particular eagerness he had always wanted to defeat—he was seeing his face as the face of a killer whom all men should rightfully loathe, who destroyed values for being values, who killed in order not to discover his own irredeemable evil.

"No . . ." he moaned, staring at that vision, shaking his head to escape it. "No . . . No . . ."

"Yes," said Galt.

He saw Galt's eyes looking straight at his, as if Galt were seeing the things he was seeing.

"I told you that on the radio, didn't I?" said Galt.

This was the stamp James Taggart had dreaded, from which there was no escape: the stamp and proof of objectivity. "No . . ." he said feebly once more, but it was no longer the voice of a living consciousness.

He stood for a moment, staring blindly at space, then his legs gave way, folding limply, and he sat on the floor, still staring, unaware of his action or surroundings.

"Jim . . . !" called Mouch. There was no answer.

Mouch and Ferris did not ask themselves or wonder what it was that had happened to Taggart; they knew that they must never attempt to discover it, under peril of sharing his fate. They knew who it was that had been broken tonight. They knew that *this* was the end of James Taggart, whether his physical body survived or not.

"Let's . . . let's get Jim out of here," said Ferris shakily. "Let's get him to a doctor . . . or somewhere . . ."

They pulled Taggart to his feet; he did not resist, he obeyed lethargically, and he moved his feet when pushed. It was he who had reached the state to which he had wanted Galt to be reduced. Holding his arms at both sides, his two friends led him out of the room.

He saved them from the necessity of admitting to themselves that they wanted to escape Galt's eyes. Galt was watching them; his glance was too austere,ly perceptive.

"We'll be back," snapped Ferris to the chief of the guards. "Stay here and don't let anyone in. Understand? No one."

They pushed Taggart into their car, parked by the trees at the entrance. "We'll be back," said Ferris to no one in particular, to the trees and the darkness of the sky.

For the moment, their only certainty was that they had to escape from that cellar—the cellar where the living generator was left tied by the side of the dead one.

## Chapter X IN THE NAME OF THE BEST WITHIN US

Dagny walked straight toward the guard who stood at the door of "Project F." Her steps sounded purposeful, even and open, ringing in the silence of the path among the trees. She raised her head to a ray of moonlight, to let him recognize her face.

"Let me in," she said.

"No admittance," he answered in the voice of a robot. "By order of Dr. Ferris."

"I am here by order of Mr. Thompson."

"Huh? . . . I . . . I don't know about that."

"I do."

"I mean, Dr. Ferris hasn't told me . . . ma'am."

"I am telling you."

"But I'm not supposed to take any orders from anyone excepting Dr. Ferris."

"Do you wish to disobey Mr. Thompson?"

"Oh, no, ma'am! But . . . but if Dr. Ferris said to let nobody in, that means nobody—" He added uncertainly and pleadingly, "—doesn't it?"

"Do you know that I am Dagny Taggart and that you've seen my pictures in the papers with Mr. Thompson and all the top leaders of the country?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then decide whether you wish to disobey their orders."

"Oh, no, ma'am! I don't!"

"Then let me in."

"But I can't disobey Dr. Ferris, either!"

"Then choose."

"But I can't choose, ma'am! Who am I to choose?"

"You'll have to."

"Look," he said hastily, pulling a key from his pocket and turning to the door, "I'll ask the chief. He—"

"No," she said.

Some quality in the tone of her voice made him whirl back to her: she was holding a gun pointed levelly at his heart.

"Listen carefully," she said. "Either you let me in or I shoot you. You may try to shoot me first, if you can. You have that choice—and no other. Now decide."

His mouth fell open and the key dropped from his hand.

"Get out of my way," she said.

He shook his head frantically, pressing his back against the door. "Oh Christ, ma'am!" he gulped in the whine of a desperate plea. "I can't shoot at you, seeing as you come from Mr. Thompson! And I can't let you in against the word of Dr. Ferris! What am I to do? I'm only a little fellow! I'm only obeying orders! It's not up to me!"

"It's your life," she said.

"If you let me ask the chief, he'll tell me, he'll—"

"I won't let you ask anyone."

"But how do I know that you *really* have an order from Mr. Thompson?"

"You don't. Maybe I haven't. Maybe I'm acting on my own—and you'll be punished for obeying me. Maybe I have—and you'll be thrown in jail for disobeying. Maybe Dr. Ferris and Mr. Thompson agree about this. Maybe they don't—and you have to defy one or the other. These are the things you have to decide. There is no one to ask, no one to call, no one to tell you. You will have to decide them yourself."

"But I *can't* decide! Why me?"

"Because it's *your* body that's barring my way."

"But I can't decide! I'm not *supposed* to decide!"

"I'll count to three," she said. "Then I'll shoot."

"Wait! Wait! I haven't said yes or no!" he cried, cringing tighter against the door, as if immobility of mind and body were his best protection.

"One—" she counted; she could see his eyes staring at her in terror—"Two—" she could see that the gun held less terror for him than the alternative she offered—"Three."

Calmly and impersonally, she, who would have hesitated to fire at an animal, pulled the trigger and fired straight at the heart of a man who had wanted to exist without the responsibility of consciousness.

Her gun was equipped with a silencer; there was no sound to attract anyone's attention, only the thud of a body falling at her feet.

She picked up the key from the ground—then waited for a few brief moments, as had been agreed upon.

Francisco was first to join her, coming from behind a corner of the building, then Hank Rearden, then Ragnar Danneskjöld. There had been four guards posted at intervals among the trees, around the building. They were now disposed of: one was dead, three were left in the brush, bound and gagged.

She handed the key to Francisco without a word. He unlocked the door and went in, alone, leaving the door open to the width of an inch. The three others waited outside, by that opening.

The hall was lighted by a single naked bulb stuck in the middle of the ceiling. A guard stood at the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor.

"Who are you?" he cried at the sight of Francisco entering as if he owned the place. "Nobody's supposed to come in here tonight!"

"I did," said Francisco.

"Why did Rusty let you in?"

"He must have had his reasons."

"He wasn't supposed to!"

"Somebody has changed your suppositions." Francisco's eyes were taking a lightning inventory of the place. A second guard stood on the landing at the turn of the stairs, looking down at them and listening.

"What's your business?"

"Copper-mining."

"Huh? I mean, who are you?"

"The name's too long to tell you. I'll tell it to your chief. Where is he?"

"I'm asking the questions!" But he backed a step away. "Don't . . . don't you act like a big shot or I'll—"

"Hey, Pete, he is!" cried the second guard, paralyzed by Francisco's manner.

The first one was struggling to ignore it; his voice grew louder with the growth of his fear, as he snapped at Francisco, "What are you after?"

"I said I'll tell it to your chief. Where is he?"