

hotel room next morning, in answer to his summons. "What are we going to do?"

He wondered why he had once felt that she possessed some reassuring kind of energy. He was looking at a blank face that seemed composed, but the composure became disquieting when one noticed that it lasted for minute after minute, with no change of expression, no sign of feeling. Her face had the same look as all the others, he thought, except for something in the set of the mouth that suggested endurance.

"I trust you, Miss Taggart. You've got more brains than all my boys," he pleaded. "You've done more for the country than any of them—it's you who found him for us. What are we to do? With everything falling to pieces, he's the only one who can lead us out of this mess—but he won't. He refused. He simply refuses to lead. I've never seen anything like it: a man who has no desire to command. We beg him to give orders—and he answers that he wants to obey them! It's preposterous!"

"It is."

"What do you make of it? Can you figure him out?"

"He's an arrogant egoist," she said. "He's an ambitious adventurer. He's a man of unlimited audacity who's playing for the biggest stakes in the world."

It was easy, she thought. It would have been difficult in that distant time when she had regarded language as a tool of honor, always to be used as if one were under oath—an oath of allegiance to reality and to respect for human beings. Now it was only a matter of making sounds, inarticulate sounds addressed to inanimate objects unrelated to such concepts as reality, human or honor.

It had been easy, that first morning, to report to Mr. Thompson how she had traced John Galt to his home. It had been easy to watch Mr. Thompson's gulping smiles and his repeated cries of "*That's my girl!*" uttered with glances of triumph at his assistants, the triumph of a man whose judgment in trusting her had been vindicated. It had been easy to express an angry hatred for Galt—"I used to agree with his ideas, but I won't let him destroy my railroad!"—and to hear Mr. Thompson say, "Don't you worry, Miss Taggart! We'll protect you from him!"

It had been easy to assume a look of cold shrewdness and to remind Mr. Thompson of the five-hundred-thousand-dollar reward, her voice clear and cutting, like the sound of an adding machine punching out the sum of a bill. She had seen an instant's pause in Mr. Thompson's facial muscles, then a brighter, broader smile—like a silent speech declaring that he had not expected it, but was delighted to know what made her tick and that it was the kind of licking he understood. "Of course, Miss Taggart! Certainly! That reward is yours—all yours! The check will be sent to you, in full!"

It had been easy, because she had felt as if she were in some dreary non-world, where her words and actions were not facts any longer—not reflections of reality, but only distorted postures in one of those side-show mirrors that project deformity for the perception of beings whose consciousness is not to be treated as consciousness.

Thin, single and hot, like the burning pressure of a wire within her, like a needle selecting her course, was her only concern: the thought of his safety. The rest was a blur of shapeless dissolution, half-acid, half-fog.

But this—she thought with a shudder—was the state in which they lived, all those people whom she had never understood, this was the state they desired, this rubber reality, this task of pretending, distorting, deceiving, with the credulous stare of some Mr. Thompson's panic-bleary eyes as one's only purpose and reward. Those who desired this state—she wondered—did they want to live?

"The biggest stakes in the world, Miss Taggart?" Mr. Thompson was asking her anxiously. "What is it? What does he want?"

"Reality. This earth."

"I don't know quite what you mean, but . . . Look, Miss Taggart, if you think you can understand him, would you . . . would you try to speak to him once more?"

She felt as if she heard her own voice, many light-years away, crying that she would give her life to see him—but in this room, she heard the voice of a meaningless stranger saying coldly, "No, Mr. Thompson, I wouldn't. I hope I'll never have to see him again."

"I know that you can't stand him, and I can't say I blame you, but couldn't you just try to—"

"I tried to reason with him, the night I found him. I heard nothing but insults in return. I think he resents me more than he'd resent anyone else. He won't forgive me the fact that it was I who trapped him. I'd be the last person to whom he would surrender."

"Yeah . . . yeah, that's true . . . Do you think he will ever surrender?"

The needle within her wavered for a moment, burning its oscillating way between two courses: should she say that he would not, and see them kill him?—should she say that he would, and see them hold onto their power till they destroyed the world?

"He will," she said firmly. "He'll give in, if you treat him right. He's too ambitious to refuse power. Don't let him escape, but don't threaten him—or harm him. Fear won't work. He's impervious to fear."

"But what if . . . I mean, with the way things are collapsing . . . what if he holds out too long?"

"He won't. He's too practical for that. By the way, are you letting him hear any news about the state of the country?"

"Why . . . no."

"I would suggest that you let him have copies of your confidential reports. He'll see that it won't be long now."

"That's a good idea! A very good idea! . . . You know, Miss Taggart," he said suddenly, with the sound of some desperate clinging in his voice, "I feel better whenever I talk to you. It's because I trust you. I don't trust anybody around me. But you—you're different. You're solid."

She was looking unflinchingly straight at him. "Thank you, Mr. Thompson," she said.

It had been easy, she thought—until she walked out into the street

and noticed that under her coat, her blouse was sticking damply to her shoulder blades.

Were she able to feel—she thought as she walked through the concourse of the Terminal—she would know that the heavy indifference she now felt for her railroad was hatred. She could not get rid of the feeling that she was running nothing but freight trains: the passengers, to her, were not living or human. It seemed senseless to waste such enormous effort on preventing catastrophes, on protecting the safety of trains carrying nothing but inanimate objects. She looked at the faces in the Terminal: if he were to die, she thought, to be murdered by the rulers of their system, that *these* might continue to eat, sleep and travel—would she work to provide them with trains? If she were to scream for their help, would one of them rise to his defense? Did they want him to live, they who had heard him?

The check for five hundred thousand dollars was delivered to her office, that afternoon; it was delivered with a bouquet of flowers from Mr. Thompson. She looked at the check and let it flutter down to her desk: it meant nothing and made her feel nothing, not even a suggestion of guilt. It was a scrap of paper, of no greater significance than the ones in the office wastebasket. Whether it could buy a diamond necklace or the city dump or the last of her food, made no difference. It would never be spent. It was not a token of value and nothing it purchased could be of value. But this—she thought—this inanimate indifference was the permanent state of the people around her, of men who had no purpose and no passion. *This* was the state of a non-valuing soul; those who chose it—she wondered—did they want to live?

The lights were out of order in the hall of the apartment house, when she came home that evening, numb with exhaustion—and she did not notice the envelope at her feet until she switched on the light in her foyer. It was a blank, sealed envelope that had been slipped under her door. She picked it up—and then, within a moment, she was laughing soundlessly, half-kneeling, half-sitting on the floor, not to move off that spot, not to do anything but stare at the note written by a hand she knew, the hand that had written its last message on the calendar above the city. The note said:

Daggy:

Sit tight. Watch them. When he'll need our help, call me at OR 6-5693.

F.

The newspapers of the following morning admonished the public not to believe the rumors that there was any trouble in the Southern states. The confidential reports, sent to Mr. Thompson, stated that armed fighting had broken out between Georgia and Alabama, for the possession of a factory manufacturing electrical equipment—a factory cut off by the fighting and by blasted railroad tracks from any source of raw materials.