

her foot coming to rest on the first of the steps—then a single, unbroken progression of lightness, of rising without effort or doubt or fear, of feeling the twisting installments of stairway dropping down beneath her unhesitant feet, as if the momentum of her irresistible rise were coming from the straightness of her body, the poise of her shoulders, the lift of her head and the solemnly exultant certainty that in the moment of ultimate decision, it was not disaster she expected of her life, at the end of a rising stairway she had needed thirty-seven years to climb.

At the top, she saw a narrow hallway, its walls converging to an unlighted door. She heard the floorboards creaking in the silence, under her steps. She felt the pressure of her finger on a doorbell and heard the sound of ringing in the unknown space beyond. She waited. She heard the brief crack of a board but it came from the floor below. She heard the sliding wail of a tugboat somewhere on the river. Then she knew that she had missed some span of time, because her next awareness was not like a moment of awakening, but like a moment of birth: as if two sounds were pulling her out of a void, the sound of a step behind the door and the sound of a lock being turned—but she was not present until the moment when suddenly there was no door before her and the figure standing on the threshold was John Galt, standing casually in his own doorway, dressed in slacks and shirt, the angle of his waistline slanting faintly against the light behind him.

She knew that his eyes were grasping this moment, then sweeping over its past and its future, that a lightning-process of calculation was bringing it into his conscious control—and by the time a fold of his shirt moved with the motion of his breath, he knew the sum—and the sum was a smile of radiant greeting.

She was now unable to move. He seized her arm, he jerked her inside the room, she felt the clinging pressure of his mouth, she felt the slenderness of his body through the suddenly alien stiffness of her coat. She saw the laughter in his eyes, she felt the touch of his mouth again and again, she was sagging in his arms, she was breathing in gasps, as if she had not breathed for five flights of stairs, her face was pressed to the angle between his neck and shoulder, to hold him, to hold him with her arms, her hands and the skin of her cheek.

"John . . . you're alive . . ." was all she could say.

He nodded, as if he knew what the words were intended to explain.

Then he picked up her hat that had fallen to the floor, he took off her coat and put it aside, he looked at her slender, trembling figure, a sparkle of approval in his eyes, his hand moving over the tight, high-collared, dark blue sweater that gave to her body the fragility of a schoolgirl and the tension of a fighter.

"The next time I see you," he said, "wear a white one. It will look wonderful, too."

She realized that she was dressed as she never appeared in public, as she had been dressed at home through the sleepless hours of that night. She laughed, rediscovering the ability to laugh: she had expected his first words to be anything but that.

"If there is a next time," he added calmly.

"What . . . do you mean?"

He went to the door and locked it. "Sit down," he said.

She remained standing, but she took the time to glance at the room she had not noticed: a long, bare garret with a bed in one corner and a gas stove in another, a few pieces of wooden furniture, naked boards stressing the length of the floor, a single lamp burning on a desk, a closed door in the shadows beyond the lamp's circle—and New York City beyond an enormous window, the spread of angular structures and scattered lights, and the shaft of the Taggart Building far in the distance.

"Now listen carefully," he said. "We have about half an hour, I think. I know why you came here. I told you that it would be hard to stand and that you would be likely to break. Don't regret it. You see?—I can't regret it, either. But now, we have to know how to act, from here on. In about half an hour, the looters' agents, who followed you, will be here to arrest me."

"Oh no!" she gasped.

"Dagny, whoever among them had any remnant of human perceptiveness would know that you're not one of them, that you're their last link to me, and would not let you out of his sight—or, the sight of his spies."

"I wasn't followed! I watched, I—"

"You wouldn't know how to notice it. Sneaking is one art they're expert at. Whoever followed you is reporting to his bosses right now. Your presence in this district, at this hour, my name on the board downstairs, the fact that I work for your railroad—it's enough even for them to connect."

"Then let's get out of here!"

He shook his head. "They've surrounded the block by now. Your follower would have every policeman in the district at his immediate call. Now I want you to know what you'll have to do when they come here. Dagny, you have only one chance to save me. If you did not quite understand what I said on the radio about the man in the middle, you'll understand it now. There is no middle for you to take. And you cannot take my side, not so long as we're in their hands. Now you must take *their* side."

"What?"

"You must take their side, as fully, consistently and loudly as your capacity for deception will permit. You must act as one of them. You must act as my worst enemy. If you do, I'll have a chance to come out of it alive. They need me too much, they'll go to any extreme before they bring themselves to kill me. Whatever they extort from people, they can extort it only through their victim's values—and they have no value of mine to hold over my head, nothing to threaten me with. But if they get the slightest suspicion of what we are to each other, they will have you on a torture rack—I mean, physical torture—before my eyes, in less than a week. I am not going to wait for that. At the first mention of a threat to you, I will kill myself and stop them right there."

He said it without emphasis, in the same impersonal tone of practi-

al calculation as the rest. She knew that he meant it and that he was right to mean it: she saw in what manner she alone had the power to succeed at destroying him, where all the power of his enemies would fail. He saw the look of stillness in her eyes, a look of understanding and of horror. He nodded, with a faint smile.

"I don't have to tell you," he said, "that if I do it, it won't be an act of self-sacrifice. I do not care to live on their terms, I do not care to obey them and I do not care to see you enduring a drawnout murder. There will be no values for me to seek after that—and I do not care to exist without values. I don't have to tell you that we owe to morality to those who hold us under a gun. So use every power of deceit you can command, but convince them that you hate me. Then we'll have a chance to remain alive and to escape—I don't know when or how, but I'll know that I'm free to act. Is this understood?"

She forced herself to lift her head, to look straight at him and to nod.

"When they come," he said, "tell them that you had been trying to find me for them, that you became suspicious when you saw my name on your payroll list and that you came here to investigate."

She nodded.

"I will stall about admitting my identity—they might recognize my voice, but I'll attempt to deny it—so that it will be you who'll tell them that I am the John Galt they're seeking."

It took her a few seconds longer, but she nodded.

"Afterwards, you'll claim—and accept—that five-hundred-thousand-dollar reward they've offered for my capture."

She closed her eyes, then nodded.

"Dagny," he said slowly, "there is no way to serve your own values under their system. Sooner or later, whether you intended it or not, they had to bring you to the point where the only thing you can do for me is to turn against me. Gather your strength and do it—then we'll earn this one half-hour and, perhaps, the future."

"I'll do it," she said firmly, and added, "if that is what happens, for them—"

"It will happen. Don't regret it. I won't. You haven't seen the nature of our enemies. You'll see it now. If I have to be the pawn in the demonstration that will convince you, I'm willing to be—and to win you from them, once and for all. You didn't want to wait any longer? Oh, Dagny, Dagny, neither did I!"

It was the way he held her, the way he kissed her mouth that made her feel as if every step she had taken, every danger, every doubt, even her treason against him, if it was treason, all of it were giving her an exultant right to this moment. He saw the struggle in her face, the tension of an incredulous protest against herself—and she heard the sound of his voice through the strands of her hair pressed to his lips: "Don't think of them now. Never think of pain or danger or enemies a moment longer than is necessary to fight them. You're here. It's our time and our life, not theirs. Don't struggle not to be happy. You are."

"At the risk of destroying you?" she whispered.