"You did? That's funny. I didn't."

"I wanted to warn you, to . . . to arm you against him."

He smiled. "Take my word for it, Miss Taggart, so that you won't torture yourself with regrets about the timing: *that* could not have been done."

She felt that with every passing minute he was moving away into some great distance where she would not be able to reach him, but there was still some thin bridge left between them and she had to hurry. She leaned forward, she said very quietly, the intensity of emotion taking form in the exaggerated steadiness of her voice, "Do you remember what you thought and felt, what you *were*, three hours ago? Do you remember what your mines meant to you? Do you remember Taggart Transcontinental or Rearden Steel? In the name of that, will you answer me? Will you help me to understand?"

"I will answer whatever I may."

"You have decided to retire? To give up your business?"

"Yes."

"Does it mean nothing to you now?"

"It means more to me now than it ever did before."

"But you're going to abandon it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That, I won't answer."

"You, who loved your work, who respected nothing but work, who despised every kind of aimlessness, passivity and renunciation—have you renounced the kind of life you loved?"

"No. I have just discovered how much I do love it."

"But you intend to exist without work or purpose?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Are you going into the coal-mining business somewhere else?"

"No, not into the coal-mining business."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I haven't decided that yet."

"Where are you going?"

"I won't answer."

She gave herself a moment's pause, to gather her strength, to tell herself: Don't feel, don't show him that you feel anything, don't let it cloud and break the bridge—then she said, in the same quiet, even voice, "Do you realize what your retirement will do to Hank Rearden, to me, to all the rest of us, whoever is left?"

"Yes. I realize it more fully than you do at present."

"And it means nothing to you?"

"It means more than you will care to believe."

"Then why are you deserting us?"

"You will not believe it and I will not explain, but I am not deserting you."

"We're being left to carry a greater burden, and you're indifferent to the knowledge that you'll see us destroyed by the looters."

"Don't be too sure of that."

"Of which? Your indifference or our destruction?"

"Of either."

"But you know, you knew it this morning, that it's a battle to the death, and it's we—you were one—against the looters."

"If I answer that *I* know it, but *you* don't—you'll think that I attach no meaning to my words. So take it as you wish, but that is my answer."

"Will you tell me the meaning?"

"No. It's for you to discover."

"You're willing to give up the world to the looters. We aren't."

"Don't be too sure of either."

She remained helplessly silent. The strangeness of his manner was its simplicity: he spoke as if he were being completely natural and—in the midst of unanswered questions and of a tragic mystery—he conveyed the impression that there were no secrets any longer, and no mystery need ever have existed.

But as she watched him, she saw the first break in his joyous calm: she saw him struggling against some thought; he hesitated, then said, with effort, "About Hank Rearden . . . Will you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"Will you tell him that I . . . You see, I've never cared for people, yet he was always the man I respected, but I didn't know until today that what I felt was . . . that he was the only man I ever loved. . . . Just tell him this and that I wish I could—no, I guess that's all I can tell him. . . . He'll probably damn me for leaving . . . still, maybe he won't."

"I'll tell him."

Hearing the dulled, hidden sound of pain in his voice, she felt so close to him that it seemed impossible he would deliver the blow he was delivering—and she made one last effort.

"Mr. Danagger, if I were to plead on my knees, if I were to find some sort of words that I haven't found—would there be . . . *is* there a chance to stop you?"

"There isn't."

After a moment, she asked tonelessly, "When are you quitting?"

"Tonight."

"What will you do with"—she pointed at the hills beyond the window—"the Danagger Coal Company? To whom are you leaving it?"

"I don't know—or care. To nobody or everybody. To whoever wants to take it."

"You're not going to dispose of it or appoint a successor?"

"No. What for?"

"To leave it in good hands. Couldn't you at least name an heir of your own choice?"

"I haven't any choice. It doesn't make any difference to me. Want me to leave it all to you?" He reached for a sheet of paper. "I'll write a letter naming you sole heiress right now, if you want me to."

She shook her head in an involuntary recoil of horror. "I'm not a looter!"

He chuckled, pushing the paper aside. "You see? You gave the right answer, whether you knew it or not. Don't worry about Danagger Coal. It won't make any difference, whether I appoint the best

successor in the world, or the worst, or none. No matter who takes it over now, whether men or weeds, it won't make any difference."

"But to walk off and abandon . . . just abandon . . . an industrial enterprise, as if we were in the age of landless nomads or of savages wandering in the jungle!"

"Aren't we?" He was smiling at her, half in mockery, half in compassion. "Why should I leave a deed or a will? I don't want to help the looters to pretend that private property still exists. I am complying with the system which they have established. They do not need me, they say, they only need my coal. Let them take it."

"Then you're accepting their system?"

"Am I?"

She moaned, looking at the exit door, "What has he done to you?"

"He told me that I had the right to exist."

"I didn't believe it possible that in three hours one could make a man turn against fifty-two years of his life!"

"If that's what you think he's done, or if you think that he's told me some inconceivable revelation, then I can see how bewildering it would appear to you. But that's not what he's done. He merely named what I had lived by, what every man lives by—and to the extent of such time as he doesn't spend destroying himself."

She knew that questions were futile and that there was nothing she could say to him.

He looked at her bowed head and said gently, "You're a brave person, Miss Taggart. I know what you're doing right now and what it's costing you. Don't torture yourself. Let me go."

She rose to her feet. She was about to speak—but suddenly he saw her stare down, leap forward and seize the ashtray that stood on the edge of the desk.

The ashtray contained a cigarette butt stamped with the sign of the dollar.

"What's the matter, Miss Taggart?"

"Did *he* . . . did he smoke this?"

"Who?"

"Your caller—did he smoke this cigarette?"

"Why, I don't know . . . I guess so . . . yes, I think I did see him smoking a cigarette once . . . let me see . . . no, that's not my brand, so it must be his."

"Were there any other visitors in this office today?"

"No. But why, Miss Taggart? What's the matter?"

"May I take this?"

"What? The cigarette butt?" He stared at her in bewilderment.

"Yes."

"Why, sure—but what for?"

She was looking down at the butt in the palm of her hand as if it were a jewel. "I don't know . . . I don't know what good it will do me, except that it's a clue to"—she smiled bitterly—"to a secret of my own."

She stood, reluctant to leave, looking at Ken Danagger in the manner of a last look at one departing for the realm of no return.

He guessed it, smiled and extended his hand. "I won't say good-