the statue, as for a brief moment of dedication. I'm back—were the only words she had to offer.

"Dagny Taggart" was still the inscription on the frosted glass panel of the door to her office. The look on the faces of her staff, as she entered the anteroom, was the look of drowning persons at the sight of a lifeline. She saw Eddie Willers standing at his desk in his glass enclosure, with some man before him. Eddie made a move in her direction, but stopped; he looked imprisoned. She let her glance greet every face in turn, smiling at them gently as at doomed children, then walked toward Eddie's desk.

Eddie was watching her approach as if he were seeing nothing else in the world, but his rigid posture seemed designed to pretend that he was listening to the man before him.

"Motive power?" the man was saying in a voice that had a brusque, staccato snap and a slurred, nasal drawl, together. "There's no problem about motive power. You just take—"

"Hello," said Eddie softly, with a muted smile, as to a distant vision.

The man turned to glance at her. He had a yellow complexion, curly hair, a hard face made of soft muscles, and the revolting handsomeness belonging to the esthetic standards of barroom corners; his blurred brown eyes had the empty flatness of glass.

"Miss Taggart," said Eddie, in a resonant tone of severity, the tone of slapping the man into the manners of a drawing room he had never entered, "may I present Mr. Meigs?"

"How d' do," said the man without interest, then turned to Eddie and proceeded, as if she were not present: "You just take the Comet off the schedule for tomorrow and Tuesday, and shoot the engines to Arizona for the grapefruit special, with the rolling stock from the Scranton coal run I mentioned. Send the orders out at once."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" she gasped, too incredulous to be angry.

Eddie did not answer.

Meigs glanced at her with what would have been astonishment if his eyes were capable of registering a reaction. "Send the orders," he said to Eddie, with no emphasis, and walked out.

Eddie was jotting notations on a piece of paper.

"Are you crazy?" she asked.

He raised his eyes to her, as though exhausted by hours of beating. "We'll have to, Dagny," he said, his voice dead.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing at the outer door that had closed on Mr. Meigs.

"The Director of Unification."

"*What?*"

"The Washington representative, in charge of the Railroad Unification Plan."

"What's that?"

"It's . . . Oh, wait, Dagny, are you all right? Were you hurt? Was it a plane crash?"

She had never imagined what the face of Eddie Willers would look like in the process of aging, but she was seeing it now—aging

at thirty-five and within the span of one month. It was not a matter of texture or wrinkles, it was the same face with the same muscles, but saturated by the withering look of resignation to a pain accepted as hopeless.

She smiled, gently and confidently, in understanding, in dismissal of all problems, and said, extending her hand, "All right, Eddie. Hello."

He took her hand and pressed it to his lips, a thing he had never done before, his manner neither daring nor apologetic, but simply and openly personal.

"It *was* a plane crash," she said, "and, Eddie, so that you won't worry, I'll tell you the truth: I *wasn't* hurt, not seriously. But that's not the story I'm going to give to the press and to all the others. So you're never to mention it."

"Of course."

"I had no way to communicate with anyone, but not because I was hurt. It's all I can tell you, Eddie. Don't ask me where I was or why it took me so long to return."

"I won't."

"Now tell me, what is the Railroad Unification Plan?"

"It's . . . Oh, do you mind?—let Jim tell you. He will, soon enough. I just don't have the stomach—unless you want me to," he added, with a conscientious effort at discipline.

"No, you don't have to. Just tell me whether I understood that Unificator correctly: he wants you to cancel the Comet for two days in order to give her engines to a grapefruit special in Arizona?"

"That's right."

"And he's cancelled a coal train in order to get cars to lug grapefruit?"

"Yes."

"*Grapefruit?*"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Dagny, 'why' is a word nobody uses any longer."

After a moment, she asked, "Have you any guess about the reason?"

"Guess? I don't have to guess. I know."

"All right, what is it?"

"The grapefruit special is for the Smather brothers. The Smather brothers bought a fruit ranch in Arizona a year ago, from a man who went bankrupt under the Equalization of Opportunity Bill. He had owned the ranch for thirty years. The Smather brothers were in the punchboard business the year before. They bought the ranch by means of a loan from Washington under a project for the reclamation of distressed areas, such as Arizona. The Smather brothers have friends in Washington."

"Well?"

"Dagny, everybody knows it. Everybody knows how train schedules have been run in the past three weeks, and why some districts and some shippers get transportation, while others don't. What we're not supposed to do is say that we know it. We're supposed to pretend

to believe that 'public welfare' is the only reason for any decision—and that the public welfare of the city of New York requires the immediate delivery of a large quantity of grapefruit." He paused, then added, "The Director of Unification is sole judge of the public welfare and has sole authority over the allocation of any motive power and rolling stock on any railroad anywhere in the United States."

There was a moment of silence. "I see," she said. In another moment, she asked, "What has been done about the Winston tunnel?"

"Oh, that was abandoned three weeks ago. They never unearthed the trains. The equipment gave out."

"What has been done about rebuilding the old line around the tunnel?"

"That was shelved."

"Then are we running any transcontinental traffic?"

He gave her an odd glance. "Oh yes," he said bitterly.

"Through the detour of the Kansas Western?"

"No."

"Eddie, what has been happening here in the past month?"

He smiled as if his words were an ugly confession. "We've been making money in the past month," he answered.

She saw the outer door open and James Taggart come in, accompanied by Mr. Meigs. "Eddie, do you want to be present at the conference?" she asked. "Or would you rather miss this one?"

"No. I want to be present."

Jim's face looked like a crumpled piece of paper, though its soft, puffed flesh had acquired no additional lines.

"Dagny, there's a lot of things to discuss, a lot of important changes which—" he said shrilly, his voice rushing in ahead of his person. "Oh, I'm glad to see you back, I'm happy that you're alive," he added impatiently, remembering. "Now there are some urgent- -"

"Let's go to my office," she said.

Her office was like a historical reconstruction, restored and maintained by Eddie Willers. Her map, her calendar, the picture of Nat Taggart were on the walls, and no trace was left of the Clifton Locey era.

"I understand that I am still the Operating Vice-President of this railroad?" she asked, sitting down at her desk.

"You are," said Taggart hastily, accusingly, almost defiantly. "You certainly are—and don't you forget it—you haven't quit, you're still—have you?"

"No, I haven't quit."

"Now the most urgent thing to do is to tell that to the press, tell them that you're back on the job and where you were and—and, by the way, where *were* you?"

"Eddie," she said, "will you make a note on this and send it to the press? My plane developed engine trouble while I was flying over the Rocky Mountains to the Taggart Tunnel. I lost my way, looking for an emergency landing, and crashed in an uninhabited mountain section—of Wyoming. I was found by an old sheepherder and his wife, who took me to their cabin, deep in the wilderness,