

ing stare of his eyes. "I'm Dagny Taggart. Would you make it known, please, that I'm alive and that I'll be in New York this afternoon?" The plane was about to take off and she escaped the necessity of answering questions.

She watched the prairies, the rivers, the towns slipping past at an untouchable distance below—and she noted that the sense of detachment one feels when looking at the earth from a plane was the same sense she felt when looking at people: only her distance from people seemed longer.

The passengers were listening to some radio broadcast, which appeared to be important; judging by their earnest attentiveness. She caught brief snatches of fraudulent voices talking about some sort of new invention that was to bring some undefined benefits to some undefined public's welfare. The words were obviously chosen to convey no specific meaning whatever; she wondered how one could pretend that one was hearing a speech; yet that was what the passengers were doing: They were going through the performance of a child who, not yet able to read, holds a book open and spells out anything he wishes to spell, pretending that it is contained in the incomprehensible black lines. But the child, she thought, knows that he is playing a game; these people pretend to themselves that they are not pretending; they know no other state of existence.

The sense of unreality remained as her only feeling, when she landed, when she escaped a crowd of reporters without being seen -- by avoiding the taxi stands and leaping into the airport bus—when she rode on the bus, then stood on a street corner, looking at New York. She felt as if she were seeing an abandoned city.

She felt no sense of homecoming, when she entered her apartment; the place seemed to be a convenient machine that she could use for some purpose of no significance whatever.

But she felt a quickened touch of energy, like the first break in a fog--a touch of meaning —when she picked up the telephone receiver and called Rearden's office in Pennsylvania.

"Oh, Miss Taggart . . . Miss Taggart!" said, in a joyous moan, the voice of the severe, unemotional Miss Ives.

"Hello, Miss Ives. I haven't startled you, have I? You knew that I was alive?"

"Oh yes! I heard it on the radio this morning."

"Is Mr. Rearden in his office?"

"No, Miss Taggart. He . . . he's in the Rocky Mountains, searching for . . . that is . . ."

"Yes, I know. Do you know where we can reach him?"

"I expect to hear from him at any moment. He's stopping in Los Gatos, Colorado, right now. I phoned him, the moment I heard the news, but he was out and I left a message for him to call me. You see, he's out flying, most of the day . . . but he'll call me when he comes back to the hotel."

"What hotel is it?"

"The Eldorado Hotel, in Los Gatos."

"Thank you, Miss Ives." She was about to hang up.

"Oh, Miss Taggart!"

"Yes?"

"What was it that happened to you? Where were you?"

"I . . . I'll tell you when I see you. I'm in New York now. When Mr. Rearden calls, tell him please that I'll be in my office."

"Yes, Miss Taggart."

She hung up, but her hand remained on the receiver, clinging to her first contact with a matter that had importance. She looked at her apartment and at the city in the window, feeling reluctant to sink again into the dead fog of the meaningless.

She raised the receiver and called Los Gatos.

"Eldorado Hotel," said a woman's drowsily resentful voice.

"Would you take a message for Mr. Henry Rearden? Ask him, when he comes in, to—"

"Just a minute, please," drawled the voice, in the impatient tone that resents any effort as an imposition.

She heard the clicking of switches, some buzzing, some breaks of silence and then a man's clear, firm voice answering: "Hello?" It was Hank Rearden.

She stared at the receiver as at the muzzle of a gun, feeling trapped, unable to breathe.

"Hello?" he repeated.

"Hank is that you?"

She heard a low sound, more a sigh than a gasp, and then the long, empty crackling of the wire.

"Hank!" There was no answer. "Hank!" she screamed in terror.

She thought she heard the effort of a breath—then she heard a whisper, which was not a question, but a statement saying everything: "Dagny."

"Hank. I'm sorry—oh, darling. I'm sorry!—didn't you know?"

"Where are you, Dagny?"

"Are you all right?"

"Of course."

"Didn't you know that I was back and . . . and alive?"

"No . . . I didn't know it."

"Oh God, I'm sorry I called, I—"

"What are you talking about? Dagny, where are you?"

"In New York. Didn't you hear about it on the radio?"

"No. I've just come in."

"Didn't they give you a message to call Miss Ives?"

"No."

"Are you all right?"

"Now?" she heard his soft, low chuckle. She was hearing the sound of unreleased laughter, the sound of youth, growing in his voice with every word. "When did you come back?"

"This morning."

"Dagny, where were you?"

She did not answer at once. "My plane crashed," she said. "In the Rockies. I was picked up by some people who helped me, but I could not send word to anyone."

The laughter went out of his voice. "As bad as that?"

"Oh . . . oh, the crash? No, it wasn't bad. I wasn't hurt. Not seriously."

"Then why couldn't you send word?"

"There were no . . . no means of communication."

"Why did it take you so long to get back?"

"I . . . can't answer that now."

"Dagny, were you in danger?"

The half-smiling, half-bitter tone of her voice was almost regret, as she answered, "No."

"Were you held prisoner?"

"No—not really."

"Then you could have returned sooner, but didn't?"

"That's true—but that's all I can tell you."

"Where were you, Dagny?"

"Do you mind if we don't talk about it now? Let's wait until I see you."

"Of course I won't ask any questions. Just tell me: are you safe now?"

"Safe? Yes."

"I mean, have you suffered any permanent injuries or consequences?"

She answered, with the same sound of a cheerless smile, "Injuries—no, Hank. I don't know, as to the permanent consequences."

"Will you still be in New York tonight?"

"Why, yes. I'm . . . I'm back for good."

"Are you?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm too used to what it's like when . . . when I can't find you."

"I'm back."

"Yes, I'll see you in a few hours." His voice broke off, as if the sentence were too enormous to believe. "In a few hours," he repeated firmly.

"I'll be here."

"Dagny—"

"Yes?"

He chuckled softly. "No, nothing. Just wanted to hear your voice awhile longer. Forgive me. I mean, not now. I mean, I don't want to say anything now."

"Hank, I—"

"When I see you, my darling. So long."

She stood looking at the silent receiver. For the first time since her return, she felt pain, a violent pain, but it made her alive, because it was worth feeling.

She telephoned her secretary at Taggart Transcontinental, to say briefly that she would be in the office in half an hour.

The statue of Nathaniel Taggart was real—when she stood facing it in the concourse of the Terminal. It seemed to her that they were alone in a vast, echoing temple, with fog coils of formless ghosts weaving and vanishing around them. She stood still, looking up at