another, or how many pretenses you have to keep up in how many opposite directions. I don't know or care. You can all hide behind me. If you're all afraid, because you've made deals with friends who're threatened by Rearden Metal—well, here's your chance to go through the motions of assuring them that you're not involved, that you're not doing this—I am. You can help them to curse me and denounce me. You can all stay home, take no risks and make no enemies. Just keep out of my way."

"Well . . ." he said slowly, "of course, the problems involved in the policy of a great railroad system are complex . . . while a small, independent company, in the name of one person, could afford to—"

"Yes, Jim, yes, I know all that. The moment you announce that you're turning the Rio Norte Line over to me, the Taggart stock will rise. The bedbugs will stop crawling from out of unlikely corners, since they won't have the incentive of a big company to bite. Before they decide what to do about me, I will have the Line finished. And as for me, I don't want to have you and your Board to account to, to argue with, to beg permissions from. There isn't any time for that, if I am to do the kind of job that has to be done. So I'm going to do it alone."

"And . . if you fail?"

"If I fail, I'll go down alone."

"You understand that in such case Taggart Transcontinental will not be able to help you in any way?"

"I understand."

"You will not count on us?"

"No."

"You will cut all official connection with us, so that your activities will not reflect upon our reputation?"

"Yes."

"I think we should agree that in case of failure or public scandal . . your leave of absence will become permanent . . . that is, you will not expect to return to the post of Vice-President."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "All right, Jim. In such case, I will not return."

"Before we transfer the Rio Norte Line to you, we must have a written agreement that you will transfer it back to us, along with your controlling interest at cost, in case the Line becomes successful. Otherwise you might try to squeeze us for a windfall profit, since we need that Line."

There was only a brief stab of shock in her eyes, then she said indifferently, the words sounding as if she were tossing alms, "By all means, Jim. Have that stated in writing."

"Now as to your temporary successor . . ."

"Yes?"

"You don't really want it to be Eddie Willers, do you?"

"Yes. I do."

"But he couldn't even *act* like a vice-president! He doesn't have the presence, the manner, the—"

"He knows his work and mine. He knows what I want. I trust him. I'll be able to work with him."

"Don't you think it would be better to pick one of our more distinguished young men, somebody from a good family, with more social poise and—"

"It's going to be Eddie Willers, Jim."

He sighed. "All right. Only . . . only we must be careful about it. . . . We don't want people to suspect that it's you who're still running Taggart Transcontinental. Nobody must know it."

"Everybody will know it, Jim. But since nobody will admit it openly, everybody will be satisfied."

"But we must preserve appearances."

"Oh, certainly! You don't have to recognize me on the street, if you don't want to. You can say you've never seen me before and I'll say I've never heard of Taggart Transcontinental."

He remained silent, trying to think, staring down at the floor.

She turned to look at the grounds beyond the window. The sky had the even, gray-white pallor of winter. Far below, on the shore of the Hudson, she saw the road she used to watch for Francisco's car—she saw the cliff over the river, where they climbed to look for the towers of New York—and somewhere beyond the woods were the trails that led to Rockdale Station. The earth was snow-covered now, and what remained was like the skeleton of the countryside she remembered—a thin design of bare branches rising from the snow to the sky. It was gray and white, like a photograph, a dead photograph which one keeps hopefully for remembrance, but which has no power to bring back anything.

"What are you going to call it?"

She turned, startled. "What?"

"What are you going to call your company?"

"Oh . . . Why, the Dagny Taggart Line, I guess."

"But . . . Do you think that's wise? It might be misunderstood. The *Taggart* might be taken as—"

"Well, what do you want me to call it?" she snapped, worn down to anger. "The Miss Nobody? The Madam X? The John Galt?" She stopped. She smiled suddenly, a cold, bright, dangerous smile. "That's what I'm going to call it: the John Galt Line."

"Good God, no!"

"Yes."

"But it's . . . it's just a cheap piece of slang!"

"Yes."

"You can't make a joke out of such a serious project! . . . You can't be so vulgar and . . . and undignified!"

"Can't I?"

"But for God's sake, why?"

"Because it's going to shock all the rest of them just as it shocked you."

"I've never seen you playing for effects."

"I am, this time."

"But . . ." His voice dropped to an almost superstitious sound: "Look, Dagny, you know, it's . . . it's bad luck . . . What it stands for is . . ." He stopped.

"What does it stand for?"

"I don't know . . . but the way people use it, they always seem to say it out of—"

"Fear? Despair? Futility?"

"Yes . . . yes, that's what it is."

"That's what I want to throw in their faces!"

The bright, sparkling anger in her eyes, her first look of enjoyment, made him understand that he had to keep still.

"Draw up all the papers and all the red tape in the name of the John Galt Line," she said.

He sighed. "Well, it's *your* Line."

"You bet it is!"

He glanced at her, astonished. She had dropped the manners and style of a vice-president; she seemed to be relaxing happily to the level of yard crews and construction gangs.

"As to the papers and the legal side of it," he said, "there might be some difficulties. We would have to apply for the permission of—"

She whirled to face him. Something of the bright, violent look still remained in her face. But it was not gay and she was not smiling. The look now had an odd, primitive quality. When he saw it, he hoped he would never have to see it again.

"Listen, Jim," she said; he had never heard that tone in any human voice. "There is one thing you can do as your part of the deal and you'd better do it: keep your Washington boys off. See to it that they give me all the permissions, authorizations, charters and other waste paper that their laws require. Don't let them try to stop me. If they try . . . Jim, people say that our ancestor, Nat Taggart, killed a politician who tried to refuse him a permission he should never have had to ask. I don't know whether Nat Taggart did it or not. But I'll tell you this: I know how he felt, if he did. If he didn't—I might do the job for him, to complete the family legend. I mean it, Jim."

* *

Francisco d'Anconia sat in front of her desk. His face was blank. It had remained blank while Dagny explained to him, in the clear, impersonal tone of a business interview, the formation and purpose of her own railroad company. He had listened. He had not pronounced a word.

She had never seen his face wear that look of drained passivity. There was no mockery, no amusement, no antagonism, it was as if he did not belong in these particular moments of existence and could not be reached. Yet his eyes looked at her attentively; they seemed to see more than she could suspect; they made her think of one-way glass; they let all light rays in, but none out.

"Francisco, I asked you to come here, because I wanted you to see me in my office. You've never seen it. It would have meant something to you, once."

His eyes moved slowly to look at the office. Its walls were bare, except for three things: a map of Taggart Transcontinental—the original drawing of Nat Taggart, that had served as model for his statue—and a large railroad calendar, in cheerful crude colors, the