

Chapter I ATLANTIS

When she opened her eyes, she saw sunlight, green leaves and a man's face. She thought: I know what this is. This was the world as she had expected to see it at sixteen—and now she had reached it—and it seemed so simple, so unastonishing, that the thing she felt was like a blessing pronounced upon the universe by means of three words: But of course.

She was looking up at the face of a man who knelt by her side, and she knew that in all the years behind her, *this* was what she would have given her life to see, a face that bore no mark of pain or fear or guilt. The shape of his mouth was pride, and more: it was as if he took pride in being proud. The angular planes of his cheeks made her think of arrogance, of tension, of scorn—yet the face had none of these qualities, it had their final sum: a look of serene determination and of certainty, and the look of a ruthless innocence which would not seek forgiveness or grant it. It was a face that had nothing to hide or to escape, a face with no fear of being seen or of seeing, so that the first thing she grasped about him was the intense perceptiveness of his eyes—he looked as if his faculty of sight were his best-loved tool and its exercise were a limitless, joyous adventure, as if his eyes imparted a superlative value to himself and to the world—to himself for his ability to see, to the world for being a place so eagerly worth seeing. It seemed to her for a moment that she was in the presence of a being who was pure consciousness—yet she had never been so aware of a man's body. The light cloth of his shirt seemed to stress, rather than hide, the structure of his figure, his skin was suntanned, his body had the hardness, the gaunt, tensile strength, the clean precision of a foundry casting, he looked as if he were poured out of metal, but some dimmed, soft-lustered metal, like an aluminum-copper alloy, the color of his skin blending with the chestnut-brown of his hair, the loose strands of the hair shading from brown to gold in the sun, and his eyes completing the colors, as the one part of the casting left undimmed and hardly lustrous: his eyes were the deep, dark green of light glinting on metal. He was looking down at her with the faint trace of a smile, it was not a look of discovery, but of familiar contemplation—as if he, too, were seeing the long-expected and the never-doubted.

This was her world, she thought, this was the way men were meant to be and to face their existence—and all the rest of it, all the years of ugliness and struggle were only someone's senseless joke. She smiled at him, as at a fellow conspirator, in relief, in deliverance, in radiant mockery of all the things she would never have to consider important again. He smiled in answer, it was the same smile as her own, as if he felt what she felt and knew what she meant.

"We never had to take any of it seriously, did we?" she whispered. "No, we never had to."

And then, her consciousness returning fully, she realized that this man was a total stranger.

She tried to draw away from him, but it was only a faint movement of her head on the grass she felt under her hair. She tried to rise. A shot of pain across her back threw her down again.

"Don't move, Miss Taggart. You're hurt."

"You know me?" Her voice was impersonal and hard.

"I've known you for many years."

"Have I known you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What is your name?"

"John Galt."

She looked at him, not moving.

"Why are you frightened?" he asked.

"Because I believe it."

He smiled, as if grasping a full confession of the meaning she attached to his name; the smile held an adversary's acceptance of a challenge—and an adult's amusement at the self-deception of a child.

She felt as if she were returning to consciousness after a crash that had shattered more than an airplane. She could not reassemble the pieces now, she could not recall the things she had known about his name, she knew only that it stood for a dark vacuum which she would slowly have to fill. She could not do it now, this man was too blinding a presence, like a spotlight that would not let her see the shapes strewn in the outer darkness.

"Was it you that I was following?" she asked.

"Yes."

She glanced slowly around her. She was lying in the grass of a field at the foot of a granite drop that came down from thousands of feet away in the blue sky. On the other edge of the field, some crags and pines and the glittering leaves of birch trees hid the space that stretched to a distant wall of encircling mountains. Her plane was not shattered—it was there, a few feet away, flat on its belly in the grass. There was no other plane in sight, no structures, no sign of human habitation.

"What is this valley?" she asked.

He smiled. "The Taggart Terminal."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll find out."

A dim impulse, like the recoil of an antagonist, made her want to check on what strength was left to her. She could move her arms and legs; she could lift her head; she felt a stabbing pain when she

breathed deeply; she saw a thin thread of blood running down her stocking.

"Can one get out of this place?" she asked.

His voice seemed earnest, but the glint of the metal-green eyes was a smile: "Actually—no. Temporarily—yes."

She made a movement to rise. He bent to lift her, but she gathered her strength in a swift, sudden jolt and slipped out of his grasp, struggling to stand up. "I think I can—" she started saying, and collapsed against him the instant her feet rested on the ground, a stab of pain shooting up from an ankle that would not hold her.

He lifted her in his arms and smiled. "No, you can't, Miss Taggart," he said, and started off across the field.

She lay still, her arms about him, her head on his shoulder, and she thought: For just a few moments—while this lasts—it is all right to surrender completely—to forget everything and just permit yourself to feel. . . . When had she experienced it before?—she wondered; there had been a moment when these had been the words in her mind, but she could not remember it now. She had known it, once—this feeling of certainty, of the final, the reached, the not-to-be-questioned. But it was new to feel protected, and to feel that it was right to accept the protection, to surrender—right, because this peculiar sense of safety was not protection against the future, but against the past, not the protection of being spared from battle, but of having won it, not a protection granted to her weakness, but to her strength. . . . Aware with abnormal intensity of the pressure of his hands against her body, of the gold and copper threads of his hair, the shadows of his lashes on the skin of his face a few inches away from hers, she wondered dimly: Protected, from what? . . . it's he who was the enemy . . . was he? . . . why? . . . She did not know, she could not think of it now. It took an effort to remember that she had had a goal and a motive a few hours ago. She forced herself to recapture it.

"Did you know that I was following you?" she asked.

"No."

"Where is your plane?"

"At the landing field."

"Where is the landing field?"

"On the other side of the valley."

"There was no landing field in this valley, when I looked down. There as no meadow, either. How did it get here?"

He glanced at the sky. "Look carefully. Do you see anything up there?"

She dropped her head back, looking straight into the sky, seeing nothing but the peaceful blue of morning. After a while she distinguished a few faint strips of shimmering air.

"Heat waves," she said.

"Refractor rays," he answered. "The valley bottom that you saw is a mountain top eight thousand feet high, five miles away from here."

"A . . . what?"

"A mountain top that no flyer would ever choose for a landing. What you saw was its reflection projected over this valley."