

light and shadow, like a convict behind bars. But they were not bars any longer, they were the cracks of a wall which the John Galt Line had broken, the advance notice of what awaited them outside, beyond the Venetian blinds—she thought of the trip back, on the new rail, with the first train from Wyatt Junction—the trip back to her office in the Taggart Building and to all the things now open for her to win—but she was free to let it wait, she did not want to think of it, she was thinking of the first touch of his mouth on hers—she was free to feel it, to hold a moment when nothing else was of any concern—she smiled defiantly at the strips of sky beyond the blinds.

"I want you to know this."

He stood by the bed, dressed, looking down at her. His voice had pronounced it evenly, with great clarity and no inflection. She looked up at him obediently. He said:

"What I feel for you is contempt. But it's nothing, compared to the contempt I feel for myself. I don't love you. I've never loved anyone. I wanted you from the first moment I saw you. I wanted you as one wants a whore—for the same reason and purpose. I spent two years damning myself, because I thought you were above a desire of this kind. You're not. You're as vile an animal as I am. I should loathe my discovering it. I don't. Yesterday, I would have killed anyone who'd tell me that you were capable of doing what I've had you do. Today, I would give my life not to let it be otherwise, not to have you be anything but the bitch you are. All the greatness that I saw in you—I would not take it in exchange for the obscenity of your talent at an animal's sensation of pleasure. We were two great beings, you and I, proud of our strength, weren't we? Well, this is all that's left of us—and I want no self-deception about it."

He spoke slowly, as if lashing himself with his words. There was no sound of emotion in his voice, only the lifeless pull of effort; it was not the tone of a man's willingness to speak, but the ugly, tortured sound of duty.

"I held it as my honor that I would never need anyone I need you. It had been my pride that I had always acted on my convictions. I've given in to a desire which I despise. It is a desire that has reduced my mind, my will, my being, my power to exist into an abject dependence upon you—not even upon the Dagny Taggart whom I admired—but upon your body, your hands, your mouth and the few seconds of a convulsion of your muscles. I had never broken my word. Now I've broken an oath I gave for life. I had never committed an act that had to be hidden. Now I am to lie, to sneak, to hide. Whatever I wanted, I was free to proclaim it aloud and achieve it in the sight of the whole world. Now my only desire is one I loathe to name even to myself. But it is my only desire. I'm going to have you—I'd give up everything I own for it, the mills, the Metal, the achievement of my whole life. I'm going to have you at the price of more than myself: at the price of my self-esteem—and I want you to know it. I want no pretense, no evasion, no silent indulgence, with the nature of our actions left unnamed. I want no pretense about love, value, loyalty or respect. I want no shred of honor left to us, to hide behind. I've never begged for mercy. I've

chosen to do this—and I'll take all the consequences, including the full recognition of my choice. It's depravity—and I accept it as such—and there is no height of virtue that I wouldn't give up for it. Now if you wish to slap my face, go ahead. I wish you would."

She had listened, sitting up straight, holding the blanket clutched at her throat to cover her body. At first, he had seen her eyes growing dark with incredulous shock. Then it seemed to him that she was listening with greater attentiveness, but seeing more than his face, even though her eyes were fixed on his. She looked as if she were studying intently some revelation that had never confronted her before. He felt as if some ray of light were growing stronger on his face, because he saw its reflection on hers, as she watched him—he saw the shock vanishing, then the wonder—he saw her face being smoothed into a strange serenity that seemed quiet and glittering at once.

When he stopped, she burst out laughing.

The shock to him was that he heard no anger in her laughter. She laughed simply, easily, in joyous amusement, in release, not as one laughs at the solution of a problem, but at the discovery that no problem had ever existed.

She threw the blanket off with a stressed, deliberate sweep of her arm. She stood up. She saw her clothes on the floor and kicked them aside. She stood facing him, naked. She said:

"I want you, Hank. I'm much more of an animal than you think. I wanted you from the first moment I saw you---and the only thing I'm ashamed of is that I did not know it. I did not know why, for two years, the brightest moments I found were the ones in your office, where I could lift my head to look up at you. I did not know the nature of what I felt in your presence, nor the reason. I know it now. That is all I want, Hank. I want you in my bed—and you are free of me for all the rest of your time. There's nothing you'll have to pretend—don't think of me, don't feel; don't care—I do not want your mind, your will, your being or your soul, so long as it's to me that you will come for that lowest one of your desires. I am an animal who wants nothing but the sensation of pleasure which you despise—but I want it from you. You'd give up any height of virtue for it, while I—I haven't any to give up. There's none I seek or wish to reach. I am so low that I would exchange the greatest sight of beauty in the world for the sight of your figure in the cab of a railroad engine. And seeing it, I would not be able to see it indifferently. You don't have to fear that you're now dependent upon me. It's I who will depend on any whim of yours. You'll have me any time you wish, anywhere, on any terms. Did you call it the obscenity of my talent? It's such that it gives you a safer hold on me than on any other property you own. You may dispose of me as you please—I'm not afraid to admit it—I have nothing to protect from you and nothing to reserve. You think that this is a threat to your achievement, but it is not to mine. I will sit at my desk, and work, and when the things around me get hard to bear, I will think that for my reward I will be in your bed that night. Did you call it depravity? I am much more depraved than you are: you hold it as