

It seemed to Rearden that his consciousness shot forward ahead of his body, it was his body that refused to move, stunned by shock, while his mind was laughing, telling him that this was the most natural, the most-to-have-been-expected event in the world.

Francisco smiled, a smile of greeting to a childhood friend on a summer morning, as if nothing else had ever been possible between them—and Rearden found himself smiling in answer, some part of him feeling an incredulous wonder, yet knowing that it was irresistibly right.

"You've been torturing yourself for months," said Francisco, approaching him, "wondering what words you'd use to ask my forgiveness and whether you had the right to ask it, if, you ever saw me again—but now you see that it isn't necessary, that there's nothing to ask or to forgive."

"Yes," said Rearden, the word coming as an astonished whisper, but by the time he finished his sentence he knew that this was the greatest tribute he could offer, "yes, I know it."

Francisco sat down on the couch beside him, and slowly moved his hand over Rearden's forehead. It was like a healing touch that closed the past.

"There's only one thing I want to tell you," said Rearden. "I want you to hear it from me: you kept your oath, you *were* my friend."

"I knew that you knew it. You knew it from the first. You knew it, no matter what you thought of my actions. You slapped me because you could not force yourself to doubt it."

"That . . ." whispered Rearden, staring at him, "*that* was the thing I had no right to tell you . . . no right to claim as my excuse . . ."

"Didn't you suppose I'd understand it?"

"I wanted to find you . . . I had no right to look for you . . . And all that time, you were—" He pointed at Francisco's clothes, then his hand dropped helplessly and he closed his eyes.

"I was your furnace foreman," said Francisco, grinning. "I didn't think you'd mind that. You offered me the job yourself."

"You've been here, as my bodyguard, for two months?"

"Yes."

"You've been here, ever since—" He stopped.

"That's right. On the morning of the day when you were reading my farewell message over the roofs of New York, I was reporting here for my first shift as your furnace foreman."

"Tell me," said Rearden slowly, "that night at James Taggart's wedding, when you said that you were after your greatest conquest . . . you meant me, didn't you?"

"Of course."

Francisco drew himself up a little, as if for a solemn task, his face earnest, the smile remaining only in his eyes. "I have a great deal to tell you," he said. "But first, will you repeat a word you once offered me and I . . . I had to reject, because I knew that I was not free to accept it?"

Rearden smiled. "What word, *Francisco*?"

Francisco inclined his head in acceptance, and answered, "Thank you, *Hank*." Then he raised his head. "Now I'll tell you the things

I had come to say, but did not finish, that night when I came here for the first time. I think you're ready to hear it."

"I am."

The glare of steel being poured from a furnace shot to the sky beyond the window. A red glow went sweeping slowly over the walls of the office, over the empty desk, over Rearden's face, as if in salute and farewell.

## Chapter VII "THIS IS JOHN GALT SPEAKING"

The doorbell was ringing like an alarm, in a long, demanding scream, broken by the impatient stabs of someone's frantic finger.

Leaping out of bed, Dagny noticed the cold, pale sunlight of late morning and a clock on a distant spire marking the hour of ten. She had worked at the office till four A.M. and had left word not to expect her till noon.

The white face ungroomed by panic, that confronted her when she threw the door open, was James Taggart.

"He's gone!" he cried.

"Who?"

"Hank Rearden! He's gone, quit, vanished, disappeared!"

She stood still for a moment, holding the belt of the dressing gown she had been tying; then, as the full knowledge reached her, her hands jerked the belt tight—as if snapping her body in two at the waistline—while she burst out laughing. It was a sound of triumph.

He stared at her in bewilderment. "What's the matter with you?" he gasped. "Haven't you understood?"

"Come in, Jim," she said, turning contemptuously, walking into the living room. "Oh yes, I've understood."

"He's quit! Gone! Gone like all the others! Left his mills, his bank accounts, his property, everything! Just vanished! Took some clothing and whatever he had in the safe in his apartment—they found a safe left open in his bedroom, open and empty—that's all! No word, no note, no explanation! They called me from Washington, but it's all over town! The news, I mean, the story! They can't keep it quiet! They've tried to, but . . . Nobody knows how it got out, but it went through the mills like one of those furnace break-outs, the word that he'd gone, and then . . . before anyone could stop it, a whole bunch of them vanished! The superintendent, the chief metallurgist, the chief engineer, Rearden's secretary, even the hospital doctor! And God knows how many others! Deserting, the bastards! Deserting us, in spite of all the penalties we've set up! He's quit and the rest are quitting and those mills are just left there, standing still! Do you understand what that means?"

"Do you?" she asked.

He had thrown his story at her, sentence by sentence, as if trying to knock the smile off her face, an odd, unmoving smile of bitterness and triumph; he had failed. "It's a national catastrophe! What's the matter with you? Don't you see that it's a fatal blow? It will break

the last of the country's morale and economy! We can't let him vanish! You've got to bring him back!"

Her smile disappeared.

"You can!" he cried. "You're the only one who can! He's your lover, isn't he? . . . Oh, don't look like that! It's no time for squeamishness! It's no time for anything except that we've got to have him! You must know where he is! You can find him! You must reach him and bring him back!"

The way she now looked at him was worse than her smile—she looked as if she were seeing him naked and would not endure the sight much longer. "I can't bring him back," she said, not raising her voice. "And I wouldn't, if I could. Now get out of here."

"But the national catastrophe—"

"Get out."

She did not notice his exit. She stood alone in the middle of her living room, her head dropping, her shoulders sagging, while she was smiling, a smile of pain, of tenderness, of greeting to Hank Rearden. She wondered dimly why she should feel so glad that he had found liberation, so certain that he was right, and yet refuse herself the same deliverance. Two sentences were beating in her mind; one was the triumphant sweep of: He's free, he's out of their reach!—the other was like a prayer of dedication: There's still a chance to win, but let me be the only victim. . . .

It was strange—she thought, in the days that followed, looking at the men around her—that catastrophe had made them aware of Hank Rearden with an intensity that his achievements had not aroused, as if the paths of their consciousness were open to disaster, but not to value. Some spoke of him in shrill curses—others whispered, with a look of guilt and terror, as if a nameless retribution were now to descend upon them—some tried, with hysterical evasiveness, to act as if nothing had happened.

The newspapers, like puppets on tangled strings, were shouting with the same belligerence and on the same dates: "It is social treason to ascribe too much importance to Hank Rearden's desertion and to undermine public morale by the old-fashioned belief that an individual can be of any significance to society." "It is social treason to spread rumors about the disappearance of Hank Rearden, Mr. Rearden has not disappeared, he is in his office, running his mills, as usual, and there has been no trouble at Rearden Steel, except a minor disturbance, a private scuffle among some workers." "It is social treason to cast an unpatriotic light upon the tragic loss of Hank Rearden, Mr. Rearden has not deserted, he was killed in an automobile accident on his way to work, and his grief-stricken family has insisted on a private funeral."

It was strange, she thought, to obtain news by means of nothing but denials, as if existence had ceased, facts had vanished and only the frantic negatives uttered by officials and columnists gave any clue to the reality they were denying. "It is not true that the Miller Steel Foundry of New Jersey has gone out of business." "It is not true that the Jansen Motor Company of Michigan has closed its doors." "It is a vicious, anti-social lie that manufacturers of steel products