

house in a slum neighborhood, she hesitated, fighting not to ask a question which she desperately wished to ask him.

"Will I . . ." she began, and stopped.

"What?"

"No, nothing, nothing!"

He knew that the question was: "Will I see you again?" It gave him pleasure not to answer, even though he knew that she would.

She glanced up at him once more, as if it were perhaps for the last time, then said earnestly, her voice low, "Mr. Taggart, I'm very grateful to you, because you . . . I mean, any other man would have tried to . . . I mean, that's all he'd want, but you're so much better than that, oh, so much better!"

He leaned closer to her with a faint, interested smile. "Would you have?" he asked.

She drew back from him, in sudden terror at her own words. "Oh, I didn't mean it that way!" she gasped. "Oh God, I wasn't hinting or . . . or . . ." She blushed furiously, whirled around and ran, vanishing up the long, steep stairs of the rooming house.

He stood on the sidewalk, feeling an odd, heavy, foggy sense of satisfaction: feeling as if he had committed an act of virtue—and as if he had taken his revenge upon every person who had stood cheering along the three-hundred-mile track of the John Galt Line.

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When their train reached Philadelphia, Rearden left her without a word, as if the nights of their return journey deserved no acknowledgment in the daylight reality of crowded station platforms and moving engines, the reality he respected. She went on to New York, alone. But late that evening, the doorbell of her apartment rang and Dagny knew that she had expected it.

He said nothing when he entered, he looked at her, making his silent presence more intimate a greeting than words. There was the faint suggestion of a contemptuous smile in his face, at once admitting and mocking his knowledge of her hours of impatience and his own. He stood in the middle of her living room, looking slowly around him; this was her apartment, the one place in the city that had been the focus of two years of his torment, as the place he could not think about and did, the place he could not enter—and was now entering with the casual, unannounced right of an owner. He sat down in an armchair, stretching his legs forward—and she stood before him, almost as if she needed his permission to sit down and it gave her pleasure to wait.

"Shall I tell you that you did a magnificent job, building that Line?" he asked. She glanced at him in astonishment; he had never paid her open compliments of that kind; the admiration in his voice was genuine, but the hint of mockery remained in his face, and she felt as if he were speaking to some purpose which she could not guess. "I've spent all day answering questions about you—and about the Line, the Metal and the future. That, and counting the orders for the Metal. They're coming in at the rate of thousands of tons an hour. When was it, nine months ago?—I couldn't get a single answer anywhere. Today, I had to cut off my phone, not to listen to all the

people who wanted to speak to me personally about their urgent need of Rearden Metal. What did you do today?"

"I don't know. Tried to listen to Eddie's reports—tried to get away from people—tried to find the rolling stock to put more trains on the John Galt Line, because the schedule I'd planned won't be enough for the business that's piled up in just three days."

"A great many people wanted to see you today, didn't they?"

"Why, yes."

"They'd have given anything just for a word with you, wouldn't they?"

"I . . . I suppose so."

"The reporters kept asking me what you were like. A young boy from a local sheet kept saying that you were a great woman. He said he'd be afraid to speak to you, if he ever had the chance. He's right. That future that they're all talking and trembling about—it will be as you made it, because you had the courage none of them could conceive of. All the roads to wealth that they're scrambling for now, it's your strength that broke them open. The strength to stand against everyone. The strength to recognize no will but your own."

She caught the sinking gasp of her breath, she knew his purpose. She stood straight, her arms at her sides, her face austere, as if in unflinching endurance; she stood under the praise as under a lashing of insults.

"They kept asking you questions, too, didn't they?" He spoke intently, leaning forward. "And they looked at you with admiration. They looked, as if you stood on a mountain peak and they could only take their hats off to you across the great distance. Didn't they?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"They looked as if they knew that one may not approach you or speak in your presence or touch a fold of your dress. They knew it and it's true. They looked at you with respect, didn't they? They looked up to you?"

He seized her arm, threw her down on her knees, twisting her body against his legs, and bent down to kiss her mouth. She laughed soundlessly, her laughter mocking, but her eyes half-closed, veiled with pleasure.

Hours later, when they lay in bed together, his hand moving over her body, he asked suddenly, throwing her back against the curve of his arm, bending over her—and she knew, by the intensity of his face, by the sound of a gasp somewhere in the quality of his voice, even though his voice was low and steady, that the question broke out of him as if it were worn by the hours of torture he had spent with it:

"Who were the other men that had you?"

He looked at her as if the question were a sight visualized in every detail, a sight he loathed, but would not abandon; she heard the contempt in his voice, the hatred, the suffering—and an odd eagerness that did not pertain to torture; he had asked the question, holding her body tight against him.

She answered evenly, but he saw a dangerous flicker in her eyes.

as of a warning that she understood him too well. "There was only one other, Hank."

"When?"

"When I was seventeen."

"Did it last?"

"For some years."

"Who was he?"

She drew back, lying against his arm; he leaned closer, his face taut; she held his eyes. "I won't answer you."

"Did you love him?"

"I won't answer."

"Did you like sleeping with him?"

"Yes!"

The laughter in her eyes made it sound like a slap across his face, the laughter of her knowledge that this was the answer he dreaded and wanted.

He twisted her arms behind her, holding her helpless, her breasts pressed against him; she felt the pain ripping through her shoulders, she heard the anger in his words and the huskiness of pleasure in his voice: "Who was he?"

She did not answer, she looked at him, her eyes dark and oddly brilliant, and he saw that the shape of her mouth, distorted by pain, was the shape of a mocking smile.

He felt it change to a shape of surrender, under the touch of his lips. He held her body as if the violence and the despair of the way he took her could wipe his unknown rival out of existence, out of her past, and more: as if it could transform any part of her, even the rival, into an instrument of his pleasure. He knew, by the eagerness of her movement as her arms seized him, that this was the way she wanted to be taken.

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The silhouette of a conveyor belt moved against the strips of fire in the sky, raising coal to the top of a distant tower, as if an inexhaustible number of small black buckets rode out of the earth in a diagonal line across the sunset. The harsh, distant clatter kept going through the rattle of the chains which a young man in blue overalls was fastening over the machinery, securing it to the flatcars lined on the siding of the Quinn Ball Bearing Company of Connecticut.

Mr. Mowen, of the Amalgamated Switch and Signal Company across the street, stood by, watching. He had stopped to watch, on his way home from his own plant. He wore a light overcoat stretched over his short, paunchy figure, and a derby hat over his graying, blondish head. There was a first touch of September chill in the air. All the gates of the Quinn plant buildings stood wide open, while men and cranes moved the machinery out; like taking the vital organs and leaving a carcass, thought Mr. Mowen.

"Another one?" asked Mr. Mowen, jerking his thumb at the plant, even though he knew the answer.

"Huh?" asked the young man, who had not noticed him standing there.

"Another company moving to Colorado?"