

pressing her mouth to his, his other hand moving from the shoulder blades under her thin blouse to her waist, to her legs. She whispered, "And you say I don't need you . . . !"

She pulled herself away from him, and stood up, brushing her hair off her face. He lay still, looking up at her, his eyes narrowed, the bright flicker of some particular interest in his eyes, intent and faintly mocking. She glanced down: a strap of her slip had broken, the slip hung diagonally from her one shoulder to her side, and he was looking at her breast under the transparent film of the blouse. She raised her hand to adjust the strap. He slapped her hand down. She smiled, in understanding, in answering mockery. She walked slowly, deliberately across the room and leaned against a table, facing him, her hands holding the table's edge, her shoulders thrown back. It was the contrast he liked—the severity of her clothes and the half-naked body, the railroad executive who was a woman he owned.

He sat up; he sat leaning comfortably across the couch, his legs crossed and stretched forward, his hands in his pockets, looking at her with the glance of a property appraisal.

"Did you say you wanted a transcontinental track of Rearden Metal, Mr. Vice-President?" he asked. "What if I don't give it to you? I can choose my customers now and demand any price I please. If this were a year ago, I would have demanded that you sleep with me in exchange."

"I wish you had."

"Would you have done it?"

"Of course."

"As a matter of business? As a sale?"

"If you were the buyer. You would have liked that, wouldn't you?"

"Would you?"

"Yes . . ." she whispered.

He approached her, he grasped her shoulders and pressed his mouth to her breast through the thin cloth.

Then, holding her, he looked at her silently for a long moment. "What did you do with that bracelet?" he asked.

They had never referred to it; she had to let a moment pass to regain the steadiness of her voice. "I have it," she answered.

"I want you to wear it."

"If anyone guesses, it will be worse for you than for me."

"Wear it."

She brought out the bracelet of Rearden Metal. She extended it to him without a word; looking straight at him, the green-blue chain glittering across her palm. Holding her glance, he clasped the bracelet on her wrist. In the moment when the clasp clicked shut under his fingers, she bent her head down to them and kissed his hand.

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The earth went flowing under the hood of the car. Uncoiling from among the curves of Wisconsin's hills, the highway was the only evidence of human labor, a precarious bridge stretched across a sea of brush, weeds and trees. The sea rolled softly, in sprays of yellow and orange, with a few red jets shooting up on the hillsides, with

pools of remnant green in the hollows, under a pure blue sky. Among the colors of a picture post card, the car's hood looked like the work of a jeweler, with the sun sparkling on its chromium steel, and its black enamel reflecting the sky.

Dagny leaned against the corner of the side window, her legs stretched forward; she liked the wide, comfortable space of the car's seat and the warmth of the sun on her shoulders; she thought that the countryside was beautiful.

"What I'd like to see," said Rearden, "is a billboard."

She laughed: he had answered her silent thought. "Selling what and to whom? We haven't seen a car or a house for an hour."

"That's what I don't like about it." He bent forward a little, his hands on the wheel; he was frowning. "Look at that road."

The long strip of concrete was bleached to the powdery gray of bones left on a desert, as if sun and snows had eaten away the traces of tires, oil and carbon, the lustrous polish of motion. Green weeds rose from the angular cracks of the concrete. No one had used the road or repaired it for many years; but the cracks were few.

"It's a good road," said Rearden. "It was built to last. The man who built it must have had a good reason for expecting it to carry a heavy traffic in the years ahead."

"Yes . . ."

"I don't like the looks of this."

"I don't either." Then she smiled. "But think how often we've heard people complain that billboards ruin the appearance of the countryside. Well, there's the unruined countryside for them to admire." She added, "They're the people I hate."

She did not want to feel the uneasiness which she felt like a thin crack under her enjoyment of this day. She had felt that uneasiness at times, in the last three weeks, at the sight of the country streaming past the wedge of the car's hood. She smiled: it was the hood that had been the immovable point in her field of vision, while the earth had gone by, it was the hood that had been the center, the focus, the security in a blurred, dissolving world . . . the hood before her and Rearden's hands on the wheel by her side . . . she smiled, thinking that she was satisfied to let this be the shape of her world.

After the first week of their wandering, when they had driven at random, at the mercy of unknown crossroads, he had said to her one morning as they started out, "Dagny, does resting have to be purposeless?" She had laughed, answering, "No. What factory do you want to see?" He had smiled—at the guilt he did not have to assume, at the explanations he did not have to give—and he had answered, "It's an abandoned ore mine around Saginaw Bay, that I've heard about. They say it's exhausted."

They had driven across Michigan to the ore mine. They had walked through the ledges of an empty pit, with the remnants of a crane like a skeleton bending above them against the sky, and someone's rusted lunchbox clattering away from under their feet. She had felt a stab of uneasiness, sharper than sadness—but Rearden had said cheerfully, "Exhausted, hell! I'll show them how many tons and dollars I can draw out of this place!" On their way back to the car.