

an endless distance, as if stretching into other towns and oceans and foreign lands, to encircle the earth. The green glow had a look of serenity, like an inviting, unlimited path open to confident travel. Then the lights switched to red, dropping heavily lower, turning from sharp circles into foggy smears, into a warning of unlimited danger. She stood and watched a giant truck go by, its enormous wheels crushing one more layer of shiny polish into the flattened cobbles of the street.

The lights went back to the green of safety—but she stood trembling, unable to move. That's how it works for the travel of one's body, she thought, but what have they done to the traffic of the soul? They have set the signals in reverse—and the road is safe when the lights are the red of evil—but when the lights are the green of virtue, promising that yours is the right-of-way, you venture forth and are ground by the wheels. All over the world, she thought—those inverted lights go reaching into every land, they go on, encircling the earth. And the earth is littered with mangled cripples, who don't know what has hit them or why, who crawl as best they can on their crushed limbs through their lightless days, with no answer save that pain is the core of existence—and the traffic cops of morality chortle and tell them that man, by his nature, is unable to walk.

These were not words in her mind, these were the words which would have named, had she had the power to find them, what she knew only as a sudden fury that made her beat her fists in futile horror against the iron post of the traffic light beside her, against the hollow tube where the hoarse, rusty chuckle of a relentless mechanism went grating on and on.

She could not smash it with her fists, she could not batter one by one all the posts of the street stretching off beyond eyesight—as she could not smash that creed from the souls of the men she would encounter, one by one. She could not deal with people any longer, she could not take the paths they took—but what could she say to them, she who had no words to name the thing she knew and no voice that people would hear? What could she tell them? How could she reach them all? Where were the men who could have spoken?

These were not words in her mind, these were only the blows of her fists against metal—then she saw herself suddenly battering her knuckles to blood against an immovable post, and the sight made her shudder—and she stumbled away. She went on, seeing nothing around her, feeling trapped in a maze with no exit.

No exit—her shreds of awareness were saying, beating it into the pavements in the sound of her steps—no exit . . . no refuge . . . no signals . . . no way to tell destruction from safety, or enemy from friend. . . . Like that dog she had heard about, she thought . . . somebody's dog in somebody's laboratory . . . the dog who got his signals switched on him, and saw no way to tell satisfaction from torture, saw food changed to beatings and beatings to food, saw his eyes and ears deceiving him and his judgment futile and his consciousness impotent in a shifting, swimming, shapeless world—and gave up, refusing to eat at that price or to live in a world of that kind. . . . No!—was the only conscious word in her brain—no!—

no!—no!—not your way, not your world—even if this “no” is all that’s to be left of mine!

It was in the darkest hour of the night, in an alley among wharfs and warehouses that the social worker saw her. The social worker was a woman whose gray face and gray coat blended with the walls of the district. She saw a young girl wearing a suit too smart and expensive for the neighborhood, with no hat, no purse, with a broken heel, disheveled hair and a bruise at the corner of her mouth, a girl staggering blindly, not knowing sidewalks from pavements. The street was only a narrow crack between the sheer, blank walls of storage structures, but a ray of light fell through a fog dank with the odor of rotting water; a stone parapet ended the street on the edge of a vast black hole merging river and sky.

The social worker approached her and asked severely, “Are you in trouble?”—and saw one wary eye, the other hidden by a lock of hair, and the face of a wild creature who has forgotten the sound of human voices, but listens as to a distant echo, with suspicion, yet almost with hope.

The social worker seized her arm. “It’s a disgrace to come to such a state . . . if you society girls had something to do besides indulging your desires and chasing pleasures, you wouldn’t be wandering, drunk as a tramp, at this hour of the night . . . if you stopped living for your own enjoyment, stopped thinking of yourself and found some higher—”

Then the girl screamed—and the scream went beating against the blank walls of the street as in a chamber of torture, an animal scream of terror. She tore her arm loose and sprang back, then screamed inarticulate sounds:

“No! No! Not your kind of world!”

Then she ran, ran by the sudden propulsion of a burst of power, the power of a creature running for its life, she ran straight down the street that ended at the river—and in a single streak of speed, with no break, no moment of doubt, with full consciousness of acting in self-preservation, she kept running till the parapet barred her way and, not stopping, went over into space.

Chapter V THEIR BROTHERS’ KEEPERS

On the morning of September 2, a copper wire broke in California, between two telephone poles by the track of the Pacific branch line of Taggart Transcontinental.

A slow, thin rain had been falling since midnight, and there had been no sunrise, only a gray light seeping through a soggy sky—and the brilliant raindrops hanging on the telephone wires had been the only sparks glittering against the chalk of the clouds, the lead of the ocean and the steel of the oil derricks descending as lone bristles down a desolate hillside. The wires had been worn by more rains and years than they had been intended to carry; one of them had kept sagging, through the hours of that morning, under the fragile load of raindrops; then its one last drop had grown on the wire’s