

Excerpts—RING OF STARS

from Chapter 1

Walker Beale considered his options where he halted on the downslope, under the dark trees. He could barely make them out in the thickening air.

One was a twisting ravine that hooked out of sight toward the base of the hill. The second went higher, up a trail as wide as two shoes between knuckles of scrub oak. The last was a rubble road of smooth stones, a dry creek bed that could take them to the lake.

He was still trying to locate the others. They never should have been playing. Crazy. Adults playing hide and seek. He had no idea where they were now. If he shouted their names, he would give up his position. They would come if he could give them a reason. They would follow him if he could show them the way.

Walker scoured the slope for them again. Between the trees the air was pearl-gray and translucent, obscuring as much as it revealed. He wanted to believe it was fog that clouded his view of the wooded hill and the escape routes, but he knew otherwise. He had known for some time before understanding completely. He had begun to know with the first hint of creosote bush and dry grasses, the raw scent of combustion.

The smoke had spread over the top of the hill and down the front, in the direction of the lake. Although he could not feel it where he stood, he realized there must be wind, carrying the fire toward them from the back of the hill where it might have consumed itself. Smoke had tumbled silently over the trees, changing the sun. Bands of light splayed around the limbs.

They were being burned out....

The rumble was oddly discordant, out of place as thunder in a blue sky.

“Jeez,” Rob said.

They checked one another then Walker glanced up, sweeping the sky for any source of a sonic boom. Even as he did, he knew it was not. He could deny it rationally, but the concussion felt like dynamite. It made no sense to him that there would be blasting in a state park on a Sunday afternoon in March.

“What *was* that?” Margo asked the rhetorical question.

Walker thought of saying something reassuring, but he pulled Lynne to her feet instead, and they all went to the edge of the summit. They looked out over the green foothills of the mountain and beyond, the tan and olive valley floor. The pristine afternoon revealed natural Nevada, sun-dried space with green patches under a blue haze. Walker spotted the glint of a tiny lake in the distance and assumed it was a golf course water hazard.

“Don’t say heaven on earth,” Margo ordered. “I want to know what the shit that bang was.”

“Shitty shitty bang bang,” Rob reported, but he was staring too, searching for the source.

Walker was curious, but if pressed, he could not say that he cared what had happened down there. He was envisioning the population of the valley in concrete bungalows and ranch homes with spreading lawns and in motor vehicles foreign and domestic on oil-dark strips of roadway. He imagined the Babel of transmissions vibrating speaker diaphragms like the wings of electronic insects. They were carrying news of the rescued faithful, mindless enticements to buy, putrid vitriol of the political process, and strident bombast of all kinds. Someone was blasting down there, displacing earth on the planet. He took a quiet breath and only appeared to join the others who were full of concern. He could stay where he was forever.

from Chapter 4

“I’m sure guys hit on her,” she said. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking it’s funny you’re saying that about her. It’s you.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re the sexpot. Look at you.” With her shirt halfway undone, the evidence was hard to deny.

“*You* hit on her. You tackled her, as a matter of fact.”

“Let’s not confuse brainball with...other matters.”

“Who’s confused? You seemed to be enjoying yourself.”

He ceremoniously placed his glass on the table at the end of the sofa then went for the midriff, tickling mercilessly. She fended him off, swiveling on the sofa and shoving with both feet. He found them, encased in white athletic socks, like the rest of her, irresistible. He trapped her bare foot under his arm and pulled off one sock. Then, grinning, she dropped her resistance and he wrestled the other off.

His hand was in her shirt, the other behind it, working the flannel off her shoulder. She shrugged under it, assisting, and he felt like thanking her, like laughing. He slipped her sports bra over her head, and the shock of dense, dark waves brushed his arm. He touched her and felt her nipples firm, drawing his tongue.

“Would you be doing this if we were married?” She was joking, but he heard her breathing harder. He removed his mouth, leaving a wet ring.

“Hell no.”

Saxophone tones were swimming around them. They undid their jeans and tugged them off. She was standing before him in white elastic panties, Riviera crescents on her hips. Then she was kneeling.

At first he held her dark shock of hair close to him. He smelled the day’s aromas, sweet and dusky. He cradled her head like a gift. She was drawing on him like an undertow at the bottom of his spine.

from Chapter 8

She gathered her clothes and shoes and bag, checked and focused in the quiet on anything else she may have left, then found her way downstairs. Irrationally, she went into the bathroom, too bright, chrome and frosted glass. When she had dressed she wrote a short note, signed with a sketch of a teddy bear, a joke they shared. She climbed back up to the hum of the fan and left it just inside the bedroom door.

Back downstairs she unlocked the front door quietly and stepped out. She reset the lock, pulled it shut, and tested it. Cathy would be safe. Less safe than behind a cyber lock like her own, but it would have to do for the four hours until sunrise when all demons were dispersed.

She checked the sky for alien spacecraft then crossed the gravel to her car, silver and dew-filmed under the pale light from a slice of moon. In a moment she was back on the two-lane road descending toward the patch of trees. Her window was down and the night air bathed her, cool and fresh. In another few minutes she was on the county line highway with one distant set of tail lights ahead.

She had the odd sense that she was a free adult, answerable to no one else. She had gone into her otherworld and was returning, eyes open. Her own apartment seemed anything but hollow, even inviting. The next day, Saturday, she would sleep late.

She heard a rumbling sound and thought first of the car, but it was somewhere outside the car. It was like water, a heavy wave, distant. Then it was building like low thunder, sustaining itself. A burst of white light hit the road in front of her. Before she could brake or swerve, she was in it. On either side of the car the road shoulders glared chalk-white.

She felt the pulsing of the thunder in the wheel and seat and the pedal. The painful brightness kept pace with her. She had gone out too far. The natural order, which cared nothing about how good a person you were in your own trifling system of values, would have its revenge.

In the next second as she hit the brake, she understood. It was the same frequency laid bare, unmixed with any other, as though the sound man had dropped all tracks but one. It was the same droning that had wakened her, softened then by the ceiling fan. The raw beat of the helicopter weighed down on her solitary, halted car, flooding it relentlessly with light. The blinding white source poured through her windshield. She clamped her eyes shut.

In a few moments the light on her lids changed. The thunder weakened and the white light dropped, and as she opened her eyes and adjusted, she saw red warning lights on the tail and struts of the chopper. It floated higher to the top of the windshield then banked away. She watched until it was gone. In seconds Margo was sitting in silence except for the engine's hum.

Which agency? she wondered. At one time, perhaps even last year, she would have assumed state, probably transportation. Now Fed Sec was more likely. One of the recon choppers everyone read reports of but rarely saw. They were looking for somebody, but not her. She played through the possibilities: secessionist bomber driving a hybrid, Union Fundamentalist avengers of the good reverend who-the-hell Canliss, one of a thousand high-school-age kids sleeping in doorways and alleys, a south LA refugee in the exodus from the race war wanted for cracking windows in Vegas Heights or Xanadu.

Headlights appeared far back in the rear-view. Margo was off the brake and onto the accelerator gingerly, rolling and then picking up speed. She wanted the news and reached for the radio buttons, fast-firing through the ads and talk. She hit Off and rolled and tried to breathe deeply, at the bottom of the lungs. Instead of tuning to the news outside, she tried inside, her own body, which was tightening.

Changes, nearly imperceptible, until all had changed. Not the same country, even at its most struggling and quarrelsome. Changes, she realized simply, rationally. She could adapt. She had. She could survive in the world of her own creation. She had Cathy. Most of all she had her students. She was fortunate. She imagined what it was like for those who had no one, alone for whatever reason in the cold fight, in the emptiness.

She spotted the string of lights off the driver's side, a glowing thread. It could have been a night mirage. As she drew closer the lights separated into clusters, the homes of Settlement City. She had passed the end of the lights when the sky over them seemed to open with a white cone. From that distance she could just hear the dull rotation of the blades. In a moment the sound was gone from her window.

She punched the radio again until a jazz station came in, smoky and cool. In her mirror the cone seemed to be moving down the line, making its way over the bivouac of refugees. She tilted the reflection down and away. Under the merciless light, itinerants were lurching from a few hours of sleep. Children were crying in their beds. She felt rage rising like a personal explosive in her chest.

Margo resolved not to give in. Instead she would tune to the improvisatory cool, and to her necessary things. She was aware of her aura, which rage could puncture. She had not gone out too far, she understood. It was not any fault of hers. She checked her dashboard clock and then focused on the road in the headlights. She took two deep breaths and trusted to she knew not what. She dropped her hands to her thighs and let fate take it, spiring her through the dark.

from Chapter 19

“From what we have been able to determine at this point in time, and I stress that first reports are subject to error, police opened fire and three demonstrators were hit. We do have confirmed reports that one man was wounded in the head, and a witness told us the victim had expired by the time medics reached him. In the park area behind me as you can see, a number of demonstrators and others remain, although police have requested that the area be cleared. It may be significant that they have requested, not ordered, an evacuation of the area at this point. As more is known and the identities of the victims are released, we'll continue to bring you this breaking story. Cassandra?”

Cassandra appeared in the frame behind the anchor desk with sculpted cheekbones and a moony ring of blond hair. Walker was feeling tight in the chest and hung over with anger toward Margo. He clicked the news window shut. In a moment he opened another.

As he scanned the long list in the titles pane, the effect was mildly narcotic. He stopped in the M's and clicked the one that seemed most likely to sustain relief.

Gable was ambling over a dry patch of range land. A close-up showcased the age scars of the old warrior, one eye clenched shut against the sun, his cowboy grin crooked, bemused. But it was Marilyn who stole the shots as she stole all of them, like a supernatural source of gravity bending all light into herself. Soon they were picking up Monty Clift at the bus stop, and he was in the back seat on the verge of DTs and they were all heading for his gig at the rodeo. Walker was feeling at ease with *The Misfits*, their loose adhesion of lost lives, corny but emblematic of a certain American experience, fantasy riders. It was set in Nevada, one he could nearly fantasize that he lived in when it was provisional, unscripted and shambling and free.

from Chapter 22

He retreated to the back and climbed the cement stairs to the projection room. Through the broad window he watched Lynne and Margo roll into a stall in the middle of the huge lot. He stepped back behind the console in the middle of the room. The fat red Start button was waiting. From his vantage point, which could be the highest before the mountains, he glimpsed the first stars over the humpbacked horizon. He tried to imagine that their long-ago light was with him, kindred spirits which, in their inevitable flaming out, did have, nonetheless, their shining time. He let a full breath rise and settle and pressed Start....

They heard it first—the symphonic blast across a galaxy. Then out of a corner of blackness, the glorious stage—the captain's deck of the Enterprise.

An arc of plasma, concussion, then tumult. Roiling smoke and chaos in the engine room. Ricardo Montalban like a falcon with an artificial chest. The illogically tempting young Vulcan, Savick. Kirk facing annihilation. Magnificent on the screen that seemed to float like a huge window on the true dimension of space. The *Wrath of Khan* trailer went black.

The screen refilled with old Hollywood black and white. Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis, and the only Marilyn, females every one. Train engine firing steam as they clicked along in their nylons. The curious cupolas of the old Coronado. All degrees of silver from dark to brilliant. *Some Like It Hot*.

Walker stepped back to the front of the booth. Full Technicolor again, and he was watching through double windows, his own broad window and an apartment window in another century. A New York apartment window on a courtyard where a Scotch terrier rummaged in a bed of geraniums. Miss Lonelyhearts, Miss Torso, the newlyweds, and the cave of the invalid. Jimmy Stewart's binoculars were scanning. Grace Kelly materialized behind him in gold and white. A killer in the door frame and a burst of something once known as flashbulbs. The trailer said *Rear Window*.

A subway ride half a dozen stops and up into a crack of light tied to a flute note that hangs and lifts and banks into a gull over uptown skyscrapers, floats to tar-roofed tenements and unwashed streets. Settles in a concrete court in a box of chain link and the snap of fingers like a pistol shot. Tony and Maria on the fire escape and a rumble in a dance. Cornball romance to the arbiters of taste and the guardians of chic. To the rest, *West Side Story*.

Natalie Wood steps back in time and throws up her arms, a chevron of white on black. She whips them down and engines throttle up. Pure anguish wails from the complicated demi-god, the godfather of Plato and errant son. A time flaring out like three rockets, and there are sirens in the night.

The best place, Walker felt, for the trailer to end, with *Rebel*.

from Chapter 28

He turned the key and eased on the pedal until he felt the rear hold. It seemed to rise. He gave it more, and the Subaru was climbing in slow motion like a whale on its tail. He was full forward in the seat, chest against the wheel. The front tires found the shoulder. The tread churned, getting back inches. The headlights hit the top of the jacaranda. Then all of the tree was lit again, and they were over the hump, back on the level clay.

“Yes!”

“Dammit,” she said, “good job!”

“Dammit yourself,” he said, “good job!”

Then they were laughing silly, Suzanne with her hand over her mouth, wrinkled nose. A pin had been pulled out of them both, and they were free. Instead of leaving the car where the weight of the world had downed it, they were rolling again. The washout was behind them. His stomach hurt from laughing, and he labored for breath. The windshield was starting to fog.

“How far?”

“Right up... just here, off to the right.”

He saw a pair of modest houses and swung into the first drive. He pulled to the end and they sat recovering as the enormous warm flood of relief caught up with them. The headlights glared against the white block and her front window and he lowered them.

“Jesus, thanks,” she said. “That was a nightmare. I can offer you a towel.”

Her forehead glistened. Her fresh scent, foreign in his car, came to him with their humid heat, intoxicating.

“We’re fogged up,” she said and reached the windshield with a Kleenex she must have produced from her pocket or bag. She was clearing the window, reaching the inside of the glass on his side. He knew she could have been getting out instead.

She was close enough that he could smell her hair, moist, new water fresh from the sky, desert flower perfume. He had fought it from the start, but the reasons were slipping away.

His arm went around her shoulder and their faces were inches apart. He kissed her cheek. She turned to him. Their lips met and she drew back, but not in offense.

“What are you doing?” she said, a mild reproach, looking almost confused.

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“No.”

He saw a trace of a smile and then it was gone. They kissed again, longer. He knew well enough what he was doing. He knew by all he had put into fighting it. He felt her hand on the back of his neck. He killed the engine and they were enveloped by the dark.

He undid her top button. They kissed deeper, and the silky fullness of her bra filled his hand. There was a flutter of lightning, and then a rumble. Her hand was on his leg. He had been hit by the narcotic muddy redemption and the sparking wire. He was the monster revived. He was seventeen in the back seat of his hand-me-down Ford Galaxie with Norma Roebuck in the Carolina summer night. They separated and her voice was different, throaty.

“Let’s go in.”

They were out in the rain again and then at her door like kids, she with her blouse open and he in a spell, barely hearing the sound of keys in her bag.

They were inside with her door closed to the world. He was on her throat, deep in her perfume. They were moving together, backing into a hall. His shirt was open and he felt her hands on his chest. She was padding backwards and their mouths locked again. He heard thunder closer. They were in a room that held a hint of her scent, the shape of a bed behind her in the dark.

She lay back and he struggled to pull off her white jeans soaked to the skin. They were both laughing. He imagined it ending there in the moment, open to each other, defenseless but still uncommitted. A flash from her window lit them.

He was in her bed, softer than his, her alien sheet smelling of flowers. The next white flare exposed them both naked, marble-white form and shadow. Suzanne came to him with humbling generosity and in the warm flavor of her skin.

A splash of the lightning covered them, then dark again. Their bodies, revealed starkly then lingering in afterimage, made it seem to him that they had been cast together in a shadowplay, like a film out of time. His tongue was on her leg. Her anklet turned a bright facet, like a trace of lightning.

from Chapter 30

Beside Margo’s head he saw fire whipping up the screen. They had hit the far edge where the shooter on the top had clung to the ladder. No sign of him, only orange flame that curled into a column of smoke. The sight of the huge white canvas caught in fire sat so astoundingly inside Walker that he could not think or move. He knew nothing. Shoulder-launched missile, he guessed. He could save none of them. Suzanne was clutching his arm. Then she was shaking his shoulder.

He looked where she was looking. The shaggy-haired man was pointing, and the one on the ground and the other on top of the wall followed the line of his arm. He was pointing at the truck. Walker saw his gun hand begin to rise.

“Get down!” he shouted. He had a hundred feet or less. He stomped the pedal and the truck lurched. A pop outside and a hit on the body somewhere behind him. Pedal to the floor, engine roaring. The kids screamed. The gate flew at them.

“Down!” In the blur at the edge of his eye Suzanne ducks below the dash. His forearm up in front of his face.

Slamming in, steel on steel, belt wrenching his shoulder.

They bucked and pitched to the right, revving furiously. The driver’s side rose higher and Walker felt them starting to roll. They slammed down, rocked to the left and came upright. Stalled.

They were entangled in the gate, pipes kinked under them like straws, the top hinge of the gate ripped open.

“Oh god, are we—” he heard Margo start.

He squeezed the key over. It caught. He reversed because he had to, toward the guns. Steel mesh and pipe crunched under the rear. The front wheels popped up and back down over the tangle of gate. As he braked, a burst of shots came from behind them. Hammers scattered over the rear panel on his side, one somewhere on the cab. The kids were screaming and Margo pushed them down. Suzanne stiff-armed the dash. He slammed back into Drive and flattened the pedal.

Into the fence again, smash of hollow frame and wire, a pipe canting up, banging Suzanne’s door. In another second they were through it. Off to his left he caught sight of a truck, the one the intruders had used. He coasted for the second he needed to check—the blunt shadow of a driver, no others on the ground. He cut right and accelerated.