

Star City

A novel

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Prologue

The acoustics in Orlando's new concert hall were perfect. Melissa Knox bathed in the richness of her own voice as she sang and danced through another rehearsal. Tonight's show would be the next-to-last in her annual tour. She was looking forward to some down time, but until the final curtain dropped in Star City next week there would be no slacking off or cutting corners. Every show would be as good as she could make it.

The twenty-two-year-old was at the top of the American pop music industry and she intended to stay there. She had been singing and dancing since age three in Indianapolis and her skills had been honed in countless beauty pageants, talent shows, county fairs and local television appearances.

A chance encounter with a talent scout while she was still in high school had put her on the road to stardom. That was five years ago, and she already could boast of seven platinum albums, her own designer clothing line and a three-picture movie deal with a major Hollywood studio.

Melissa Knox was the hottest thing since Madonna, more than twenty years younger and twice as pretty. Life was good, despite the

hectic pace that pushed her endurance to the limit. She didn't mind. She welcomed the challenge and always performed at maximum intensity: No slacking, no shortcuts.

Today she felt fine, her voice and body merging with the beat that pulsated to the distant ceiling of the empty concert hall. As she danced, lip-synching her latest hit, her eyes drifted over the few dozen people working near the stage and among the rows of empty seats. One man seemed to be staring at her with special intensity. He was tall, dark and anonymous in a janitor's uniform as he pulled a large wheeled trash can along an aisle near the center of the room.

Melissa instinctively looked for her security guard, but he was at the side of the stage, his chair tilted back against the wall, dozing despite the loud music. Suddenly the janitor stopped and pulled something out of the trash can. His furtive move caused Melissa to focus on him, and what she saw took her breath away. The man was aiming a weapon directly at her.

In the microsecond after she saw the gun a projectile struck her forehead and knocked her flat. Stunned, she lay on the floor of the stage, feeling wetness trickle into her eyes and ears. Screaming erupted all around her. The lights above her spun and dimmed. Melissa knew she was dying.

Seconds passed in which the others on the stage, all the dancers and musicians and technicians, were immobilized with shock.

The security guard awoke and jumped up, realizing something had happened but completely clueless as to what.

Then Melissa sat up. She looked for her attacker, but in the confusion he had disappeared. Left behind on the floor was a red banner emblazoned with the acronym E.A.G.L.E. A door slammed shut at the front of the hall.

Melissa groaned and wiped the blue liquid out of her eyes. She looked at it closely, smelled it, and gingerly felt her bruised forehead. So that was why she was still alive: She had been hit by a paintball.

Only then did America's pop princess begin to curse loud and long.

Chapter 1

His front door was shuddering under the impact of someone's bony fist.

"John Gideon!" his ex-wife yelled.

More pounding.

John Gideon Day cursed and rolled off his couch, the newspaper he had been reading earlier spilling onto the floor.

His black Labrador, Benny, also had awakened in his bed beside the fireplace. His ears were up, his eyes alert.

John opened the door and Nancy Owen brushed past him, her high heels clicking on the hardwood floor. As usual, she was immaculately groomed and well dressed in a simple black dress. She looked, John decided, like a young Audrey Hepburn's evil twin sister.

"Good Lord, half the day is gone and here you are sleeping," she said, noticing his bedraggled appearance. "No wonder you're just a part-time teacher. No ambition."

"At least I make an honest living," he said.

Nancy whirled and the two stood glaring at each other.

John had reason to despise her. When they had married early in the previous year, she had known all about his life as a struggling musician and teacher. He played guitar in local jazz bands and paid the

rent by teaching music at the local community college.

He had joined the National Guard years before as a way to earn extra money, never suspecting he would be called to active duty. They had been married less than two months when he was shipped out to Iraq, and her Dear John letter was in the mail when he was almost killed in an attack outside Fallujah.

He had finally received the letter while in a hospital in Germany, and it was typically businesslike. She realized that their marriage had been a mistake. She had met someone she had true feelings for. She was moving out of John's house right away and moving in with her new love. Terribly sorry. Etc., etc.

Now she was engaged to the guy, a real estate broker named Larry Bonaparte Bancroft, and had taken up the profession herself. She had learned quickly, and soon was making more money than John ever had, thriving in Florida's bustling real estate market.

Meanwhile, his career as a guitarist was history. After returning from overseas he had not felt like starting over in the business. While he barely got by on a small disability pension and his meager teacher's salary, she was working and socializing with Star City's elite.

Bancroft was a pillar of the community, about John's age and already president of the local chamber of commerce — and she didn't let John forget it. Occasionally she stopped by, supposedly to remind

him about some detail involving their recent divorce, but actually to rub his nose in her new success. He assumed today's visit was the same, and she didn't disappoint.

"As you know, I'm the chairwoman of the Star City Festival this year, and I just dropped by to say we won't be needing your dubious talents," she said. "We're ditching most of the local acts and going for more professional entertainment."

"How nice for you," he said. "Frankly, I hadn't thought much about it." Actually, he had been counting on the festival gig to make a few extra dollars, but he wasn't about to admit it.

"Of course you haven't," she continued. "Oh, by the way, you won't believe who I've lined up at the last minute. You'll never guess in a million years, so I'll tell you: Melissa Knox! Her people confirmed just an hour ago. What do you think about that?"

"I'm impressed," John said, and he was. He could tell she wasn't lying by the smug look on her face.

"You should be. Booking Knox is quite a coup for yours truly," Nancy said. "But I can't take all the credit. Larry knows people in the entertainment industry and he pulled some strings. Melissa is doing a show in Orlando this week, so she's close by anyway. It's so nice to be with someone with a little power and influence for a change. And how about you? Are you making any progress at all? Or have you resigned yourself to being a failure?"

She was in fine form today. With his dignity on the line, John grasped at the straws of his meager career.

“Actually, I’m up for a full-time teaching job next year, and in the meantime I’m playing the lottery really hard. If you lend me \$23 million for tickets, I guarantee you a share of the jackpot,” he said.

Nancy rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and fished in her purse for her car keys.

“You’re hopeless,” she said.

She strode past him and paused just long enough to say in a mocking voice, “Goodbye, Benny. Don’t steal anything small.” She slammed the door on her way out.

Having heard his name, the dog lifted his head and made a snorting noise, as if he had smelled something nasty.

“My sentiments exactly, Benny,” John said.

Chapter 2

Melissa Knox's mother also was her manager, and when Roxy Knox heard that her daughter had been splattered with a paint ball, the mother in her was horrified and the manager was infuriated.

Ensnared in the five-star Hotel Bumby in downtown Orlando, Roxy got the word in a cell phone call from Melissa herself, who was shaken and tearful. Roxy couldn't believe it. A man had penetrated her daughter's very expensive security cordon, whipped out a weapon and fired a round directly into Melissa's forehead.

Thank God it had been only a paintball.

Obviously, the man was some kind of nut, she reassured Melissa, who was still weepy and shaking. No sane person would want to harm her. "Everyone loves you, sugar, and don't you forget it," Roxy cooed into the cell phone. "Now I'll handle this. We won't let it happen again. You just go back to rehearsing. You're going to be wonderful."

Her daughter hung up, and Roxy began stabbing numbers into the phone. Within five minutes she had fired Melissa's entire security staff, hired another team of guards, screamed a list of instructions at the local police chief and ordered a masseuse from the hotel's guest services. "Make it snappy. It's an emergency. My neck is in knots," she barked at the switchboard.

Then she put the cell phone down on the arm of her chair and watched it closely, waiting for it to ring.

Seconds later, it chirped.

“You bastard,” Roxy said into the phone. “You insane, miserable bastard.”

The caller responded with a strange, metallic laugh. The voice was distorted by an electronic device that left no clue as to age, ethnicity or gender.

“I told you it would be a surprise. Now you know we can reach her anywhere,” the voice said. “Do you still want to play games, or are you ready to pay?”

Roxy almost choked with rage. “Listen,” she snarled into the phone. “There is no way you are going to bully me into paying your little wacko group millions of dollars. You got lucky this morning, but that was a fluke. If you try to hurt my daughter again, we will destroy you, all of you. I promise you that.”

The caller became mockingly sympathetic.

“Now, now, you know we don’t approve of real violence,” the voice droned. “We wouldn’t hurt a bleached hair on her little head. But we can and will disrupt her performances and publicly humiliate her.”

“What do you mean?” Roxy demanded.

“Who knows?” the voice continued. “A custard pie in the face or a shower with cow urine with the whole world watching. It’s up to

you. Her show in Star City is only a week away. If you don't pay, the world will see a Melissa Knox no one will ever forget. E.A.G.L.E. guarantees it."

The line went dead.

"Susie!" Roxy screamed to her assistant. "Bring me a scotch!"

She realized now that she had underestimated that weird little fringe group, Environmentalists Against Growth, Litter and Exploitation — E.A.G.L.E.

E.A.G.L.E. Seven, as the robot-voiced entity had referred to itself, had contacted her months before at the beginning of Melissa's tour. He or she had readily identified the group behind the extortion plot, and even bragged about its accomplishments.

The demands were simple and explicit: Five percent of Melissa's gross income for E.A.G.L.E. plus her public endorsement of their major goals, such as a halt to logging in national forests and a moratorium on growth in congested areas. Other celebrities had been contacted and were cooperating, the caller reminded her, and she had seen their televised endorsements herself.

Roxy had reacted with outrage, then stalled while she consulted her security consultants and attorneys. They advised her to keep stalling while they worked with law enforcement officials to catch the extortionists, but at that point she balked. The caller had warned that bringing in the police would cause the group to strike immediately, and

Roxy was unsure how far the radicals were prepared to go in carrying out their plot.

News reports had described E.A.G.L.E. as a small faction, an offshoot of the animal rights movement, but it was rumored to be well-connected and influential. The group had displayed its skill and ruthlessness by crippling logging equipment in the Pacific Northwest, burning homes under construction in northern California and dynamiting factories in Georgia that dumped pollution into the Chattahoochee River.

Roxy was glad the caller had ruled out serious violence against Melissa, but no mother or manager in her right mind would trust the word of an extremist. Roxy didn't want to further endanger her daughter, but she was determined that she would not give in to the extortionists, either.

She decided to take matters into her own hands. Grabbing her cell phone, she dialed a series of numbers that caused a special private line to ring in Miami.

Chapter 3

The black Lab had come into John Day's life a year before. The puppy with big feet and floppy ears had simply materialized behind him one day as he limped across the campus of Star City Community College. At first John ignored the dog, assuming it belonged to a student who would soon retrieve it. But when he sat down on concrete bench to rest his injured leg, the dog plopped down at his feet and stared at him lovingly.

The Lab had adopted him.

John wanted no part of the dog, and shut the door of the music building in its face. When he came out the same door ninety minutes later, the puppy was still there, but with something extra. While John had been teaching freshmen to read simple music notes, the dog had been busy stealing an expensive digital camera and now held it in its mouth as an offering to his new master.

John took the gift and the dog to his tiny office where he used a computer to print a few flyers announcing that the Lab and the camera had been found. He posted the flyers around the campus, locked the camera in his office and took the dog home. The next day the camera was claimed by its relieved owner, a young woman who thought she

had misaid it. John didn't tell her otherwise.

The dog never was claimed, and John found himself with a live-in companion with a huge appetite for Aipo and other people's property.

There was no denying it: The Lab puppy was a trained thief.

John found that out the hard way when he let the dog out to do its business in the back yard. The chest-high wooden fence around the property didn't deter it for long. The dog learned it could leap up on the cross-braces and pull itself over. Within days of moving into John's house, the Lab had turned up at his front door with portable radios, garden tools, various articles of clothing and, on one occasion, a vibrator.

Apparently the dog had been owned by a professional thief who had used it as an accomplice. John explained the problem to his neighbors, who soon learned that if anything was missing, to check with the college teacher with the black Lab. The neighbors were quickly seduced by the dog's charm and didn't hold his thievery against him, but John worried that someday the puppy's kleptomania would get them both into trouble.

In the meantime, he decided to call the dog Benny, after his favorite comedian, Jack Benny, a star during the 1940s and '50s. Like the classic comedian's on-screen persona, the dog had a dead-pan expression and a penchant for getting into all sorts of outlandish

predicaments.

John consulted professional dog trainers and used their advice to try to break the dog of its thieving habits, but with mixed success. Benny would stop stealing for weeks, then would backslide, especially when tempted by an especially appealing item such as a laptop computer

John spent many hours putting up flyers describing “found” items, and spent more money than he could afford on newspaper ads trying to find the owners.

Nancy disliked the dog from the moment she saw it, and the feeling was mutual. During her visits to John’s house, she and Benny merely tolerated each other, and sometimes the easy-going dog would respond to her insults with a muted growl. John knew there was no love lost between them — and that was something else he and Benny had in common.

Chapter 4

Shortly after Nancy's latest irritating pop-in, John took Benny for a walk at Lost Manatee State Park on the bank of the Indian River Lagoon. It was a glorious day, with bright sunshine, cotton-candy clouds and a temperature in the low 80s. On days like this, it was easy to understand why thousands of Northerners pack up and move to Florida each year.

Not that he welcomed them. The new arrivals fed the development boom that was steadily stripping Florida of its natural resources. Their new homes were springing up in garish subdivisions, their cars jamming local streets and interstate highways and their children packing local school classrooms.

And once they arrived, few wanted to fork over enough tax money to pay for their impact on the state. Most wanted taxes to stay low, and they voted accordingly. The upshot was that Florida's public institutions and infrastructure were slowly eroding, with some experts predicting worse social and economic problems unless more solutions were found soon.

Star City, which had begun as a bedroom community of Kennedy Space Center during the Cold War space race of the early 1960s, was all too typical of Florida municipalities. It didn't grow so

much as it sprawled, with pavement replacing greenery at an alarming rate.

But John decided he wasn't going to allow that situation to depress him on a day like this. Once in the park, he took Benny off his leash and let him run free. For Benny, who seemed to have a lot of dignity for a young dog, that meant some genteel trotting around, sniffing at various trees and bushes, and not much more — unless he met a cat.

Benny had an unreasonable fear of cats, it turned out. John found that out the day after he brought the puppy home. He had left Benny in the back yard to get used to his new territory, and settled in to play a video game. No sooner had he got started than yelping and howling erupted at the back door.

John jumped up and ran to the kitchen where he peered through the window in the door to see what was chasing the dog, which was frantic to get back into the house.

The only other creature in sight was small black cat crouching about four feet behind Benny and hissing and spitting like a miniature mountain lion. John recognized it as a neighbor's pet. Benny acted as if he were about to have a stroke.

So much for the Lab as a brave hunter. Apparently, the dog at some point had had a traumatic encounter with a cat that had left lasting scars. By the time John got him back into the house, Benny was a

quivering mass of canine insecurity. John sighed and brought him a dog biscuit.

No cats were in sight today, and Benny happily wandered into some bushes on the bank of the lagoon and disappeared from view. John wasn't concerned. He knew there was a small strip of beach beyond the bushes, but nothing that should have posed a threat to the dog.

After a few minutes, he was surprised to see Benny reappear with a piece of cloth in his mouth. The strip of cloth was fluorescent pink, with bright yellow daisies on it: a bikini top.

The dog trotted up to him and laid the colorful item at his feet just as a bellow of outrage erupted from the bushes.

"Hey!" a woman's voice said. "Bring that back!"

John considered walking away, but he knew they were busted.

He picked up the bikini top and gingerly walked toward the bushes with it.

"I'll throw it over to you," he said helpfully.

"Well, throw it and stop there," the woman said. "Don't come any closer. It's really sick to train your dog to steal women's clothes."

John threw the strip of cloth into the bushes. He could tell by the rustling sounds that she was retrieving it and putting it back on.

Benny sat smiling happily, as if he were proud of himself.

"I didn't teach him to steal anything. He's a kleptomaniac,"

John said loudly so she could hear. He decided not to share his speculation about Benny's criminal past.

"That's ridiculous," the woman said in a querulous tone. "A dog can't be a kleptomaniac."

"This dog is," John replied. "He'll steal anything that isn't nailed down. I've been trying to cure him of it."

Then the bushes parted and the woman stepped out, and John felt his pulse quicken. She seemed to glow in the sunlight, a girl with strawberry blond hair, a nice tan and, of course, the pink bikini that drew attention to her trim figure.

John was taken aback. He had dated his share of women, but there was something about this one that unsettled him. Maybe it was the spray of freckles across her nose or the determined set of her chin, but whatever it was, he liked it.

He extended his hand.

"I'm John Day and this is Benny," he said. "Sorry about this little misunderstanding."

She slowly extended her hand, squeezed his and then stood regarding him suspiciously with her arms folded.

"Benny is a funny name for a dog," she observed.

"It's after my favorite comedian, Jack Benny," John said. "I'm a music teacher at Star City Community. Are you from around here?"

"I just moved down here from New York, just graduated from

Come...," she said. "I'm going to stay here for a while and help my granáfather."

Suddenly, as if she had reminded herself of an appointment, she glanced at her bare left wrist.

"Do you have the time? I have to get going. I have to get my stuff."

Without waiting for an answer she whirled and walked quickly back toward the lagoon.

"Hey, wait, I didn't catch your name," John yelled after her.

Without looking back, she raised her left arm, spun her hand around and waved bye-bye.

John watched her disappear into the bushes, then he and Benny continued their walk. As the dog played in the sun, it occurred to John that the encounter with the girl had brightened his own day considerably.

Chapter 5

The new Cadillac hurtled south on Interstate 95 like a starship gliding over the pavement at seventy miles per hour. The two occupants wore silly grins and were, in fact, quite pleased with themselves. They sang along with the hip-hop track on the radio and their heads bobbed in time with the music.

Both men were in their early 20s, cheerful and self-confident. The red-haired driver was bigger and heavier than his partner, but his demeanor made it clear that the man in the passenger seat was the boss.

“This was a great day, Jimmy, the best day ever,” the driver said.

Jimmy Boleto turned his benevolent smile toward Frankie O’Brien and reached over to pat his old friend on the shoulder. They had been pals since grammar school in Miami. Frankie was as dumb as a box of rocks, but he had always been there when the chips were down, you had to give him that.

“It was sweet, all right,” Jimmy laughed. “We caught those guards with their pants down and the armored car wide open. Bim, bam, thank you, ma’am. I told my dad it was smart for us to team up with the Jacksonville crew for this job, and I was right. A cool million bucks to show for it. Hundreds and fifties in used, unmarked bills. You can’t

beat it.”

He pulled a large black briefcase from the car floor onto his lap and caressed it as if it were a woman.

“Nobody can say I’m not ready to take over the Florida operation now,” Jimmy said, his voice turning colder. “The great Joe Boleto can sail away on his yacht any time now, as far as I’m concerned. A new day is dawning, Frankie.”

“Everybody’s gonna know that after today,” Frankie said. “I can’t wait until you take over the whole state. I’ll be your No. 2 guy and put the hurt on anybody who gets in our way.”

Jimmy laughed again. “That might be a few years yet, but we’re on our way, pal,” he said.

The two gangsters fell silent, basking in their success, and soon both were struggling to keep their eyes open. It was past midnight and the interstate was nearly empty.

“I’m beat,” Jimmy said. “We’ve been up nearly twenty-four hours. Let’s get off the interstate and check into a motel for the night and get some pizza. Dad doesn’t expect us back until this afternoon anyway.”

“Whatever you say, Jimmy,” Frankie said. “There’s an exit coming up with a motel and other stuff. I wouldn’t expect anything too fancy, though. We’re in the middle of nowhere. Someplace called Star City.”

Chapter 6

The next morning, John rose early to treat himself to breakfast at Myrna's Café on U.S. 1.

After his divorce the café had become a favorite hangout for him, a place where he could get a decent meal after days or weeks of surviving on the standard bachelor's fare of pizza and burgers. The proprietor, Max Kaplan, was a former snowbird in his 70s who, along with his wife, Myrna, had settled in the county permanently two decades before.

They had bought the run-down motel and coffee shop, fixed the place up, renamed it Myrna's Motel and Café, and made a go of it. Then Myrna had died suddenly a few years ago, and Max had carried on alone, each year getting a bit more gray and stooped as the long hours took their toll. Although the business never was a bustling operation, there was a steady trickle of tourists who sought lodging there, and the locals helped keep the café busy.

Max was obliged to hire part-time employees to help him with the workload, but he kept his standards high. The food at the café was tasty and affordable, and the rooms at the motel were clean and reasonably priced.

John was looking forward to eggs Benedict as he drove his silver Ford Mustang convertible to the café with Benny riding shotgun,

as usual. The car was a present to himself for having survived the tour in Iraq. The Mustang's top was up, but the window on the passenger side was kept halfway down so Benny could stick his head out the window and catch the breeze, his tongue flapping in the wind.

This morning the motel parking lot had only a few cars in it, and John pulled up near the café's glass entrance door. Dogs weren't allowed inside, so he snapped a leash on Benny's collar and led the Lab to a steel pole supporting an overhang at the café door. He wrapped the leash lightly around the pole, and the dog, familiar with the drill, sat down politely to await his return.

Inside, a few regulars were drinking coffee while Max wearily wiped down the counter. Dottie Treadway, the café's longtime waitress, was refilling the paper napkin dispensers. She waved at John and the old man looked up, brightening when he saw who had come in. He poured a cup of coffee for his young friend, who took his usual seat near the cash register.

"I got a plate of eggs Benedict on the warmer for you, ten thousand milligrams of cholesterol, you're gonna love it," Max said.

"Sounds good, bring it on," John replied. "I won't be around this burg much longer. Any day now a music company talent scout will come to town, I'll get discovered and it will be L.A. for me. A record deal, flashy cars and loose women. That's what I see in my crystal ball."

“Yeah, yeah, you keep sayin’ that,” Max replied, sliding a heaping platter in front of him. “I’ll be long gone from this Earth before you ever play a place that don’t have chicken wire in front of the stage.”

“Just keep the faith,” John said, attacking the eggs.

The banter was a ritual the two had performed often, the casual exchange of banalities and mild insults with which males had bonded for millennia. Max was one of the good guys, and they were few and far between nowadays.

John was really into the eggs when he glanced up and saw her standing at his elbow: Somehow the girl he had met in the park had materialized beside him, and now she was casually complaining to Max about a problem in the motel office.

“The computer is down again and we need to get it fixed before things get piled up,” she was saying, but her words hardly registered with John. He was too busy trying to put her in context, to grasp the reality of her standing there in a crisp white blouse and dark blue skirt, with a tiny bead of sweat trickling down her forehead over her right eye.

She caught him staring and turned to say something caustic, then her eyes widened with recognition.

“Well, well, look who the cat dragged in — or, rather, the black dog dragged in,” she said. “Where’s your partner, off swiping things off clotheslines?”

John tried to keep his cool as he wiped his mouth.

"He's outside, and he doesn't usually steal clothes," he said.

"He must have liked your scent."

"Well, that's flattering, I guess," the girl said.

Max was looking back and forth at the two of them like a referee at a tennis match.

"Hey, you two know each other? I was just going to introduce you."

"We don't really know each other, but we did meet yesterday for just a minute. It's indelibly burned into my brain," the girl said.

"Well, let me make it official," Max said. "John Day, this is my granddaughter, Libby Thomas. Libby, this is John Day, an old friend who thinks he's a musician."

John and Libby nodded at each other politely. John broke the silence by saying, "I had no idea you were Max's granddaughter. Small world and all that."

"Small town certainly," Libby said. "Like I told you yesterday, I'm just down here to help out Max for a while, then I'm heading back to New York. There's not much around here that appeals to me. Nice meeting you again."

And with that she turned on her heel, navigated through a line of tables and went through a door leading to the motel office.

Max, a little embarrassed by her abrupt manner, covered by

pouring John another cup of coffee.

“She’s a little temperamental sometimes, but she’s a good kid,” Max said. “Her being here is really a big help right now, more than she knows. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

John sensed Max was hinting at more than he was saying, so he pressed for more information.

“What’s going on? Are you having trouble with this place?”

Max glanced around at Dottie and the other customers, and lowered his voice.

“Not so much with this place as keeping this place,” he said. “I borrowed pretty heavily on the business to put Libby through Cornell. My daughter couldn’t help much, being a single mom and all, so I was glad to do it. But I’m afraid I might have bitten off more than I can chew, you know. There’s a balloon payment that came due yesterday, and if I can’t pay it, the mortgage company will grab this place right out from under me.”

John was concerned, and flattered that Max would share his problem. It was the first time they had discussed such a serious subject, and John knew it had not been easy for Max to open up like that.

“How much money are we talking about, if you don’t mind my asking?” John said.

“A little over a hundred grand,” Max said. “And that’s about a hundred grand more than I got right now.”

John winced and sipped his hot coffee. "I wish I could help you, but you know my situation," he said. "Still, if there's anything I can do, just name it. I'll co-sign another loan or anything, just say the word."

Max laughed and slapped John on the forearm. "Thanks, pal," he said. "But getting a broke music teacher to co-sign for me probably wouldn't do me a lot of good. Still, I know you mean it and I appreciate it. Don't worry, something will turn up. Max Kaplan always lands on his feet. You'll see."

"I don't doubt you," John said. "Tell you what, I'll do my part by having a slice of apple pie with this coffee. Make it a big one."

Chapter 7

“You’re a man of vision, Larry. That’s what I love about you. Nobody else in this town can see the big picture like you.”

Nancy Owen lifted her shapely left leg out of the bubbling water and used her big toe to caress the right cheek of her fiancé sitting across from her in the Jacuzzi. The pair were supposed to be working this Saturday morning, but instead were relaxing in a back room of Larry Bancroft’s elaborate suite of offices on Main Street in Star City.

Larry called the apartment his Nooner Nook, and bragged to his friends that he had seduced dozens of women there. Actually, he had been obliged to settle three sexual harassment lawsuits for large sums and had chalked up only one success besides Nancy.

His conquest, as he liked to think of her, was a middle-age woman who had guzzled too many banana daiquiris at a chamber of commerce luncheon they had both attended last year. She had latched on to him and insisted that they go to his office for a private conversation. When they were alone, she had ripped off his clothes and had her way with him.

Of course, Larry had proudly told his friends that he had seduced her. In business, appearances were everything, and the Nooner Nook had been invaluable in establishing his persona as a local real