

The Rocky Road to Romance

Chapter One

Daisy Adams was an enterprising twenty-six-year-old graduate student. She'd written a cookbook called *Bones for Bowser*, and somehow, through sheer tenacity, she'd managed to turn a gimmick into a five-minute slot on WZZZ every Monday morning. She filled her airtime with dog stories and gave detailed directions on how to make homemade dog biscuits, dog soup, and dog stew. She'd become the darling of the morning DJs on the FM stations, who made her the brunt of their jokes, referring to her as the "Dog Lady of Snore," hitting on a tender subject for Steve Crow and his unfortunate luck in call letters.

A few wisps of bangs straggled over her forehead, tortoiseshell combs held her blond hair swept back from her temples, and big, loose curls tumbled in a luxuriant mass down the back of her head and neck to an inch below her shoulders. Her eyes were big and blue, her nose small, her mouth wide. She had a gamine quality to her face that was completely misleading because there wasn't an ounce of gamine in her personality. Her ex-boyfriend had compared her to Attila the Hun, but most people thought she was more like the human version of the Little Engine That Could.

At ten-fifteen Daisy swung into the newsroom. She waved hello to the anchor in the glass booth and gave the Capitol Hill correspondent a bag of experimental snacks for his beagle. She adjusted the strap on her oversized shoulder bag and dropped into a seat beside the editor. "What happened to Frank? I heard him giving the traffic report while I was driving in. He said a rude word and that was the last of him."

"Rear-ended a garbage truck and got buried under half a ton of Dumpster droppings. He's okay except for a broken leg."

Daisy pulled a five-by-seven card from her pocketbook and glanced over a recipe for dog granola. "That's too bad. Who's doing traffic?"

"Nobody's doing traffic. Steve's offered double Frank's salary plus a year's supply of Girl Scout cookies, but nobody'll take it."

Daisy felt her heart jump. Double Frank's salary! "I could do it," she said. "I need the money."

"You need money that bad?"

She bit her lower lip to keep herself under control. This was the chance of a lifetime. She had enormous school expenses, a big rent payment due, a live-in little brother who was eating her out of house and home, and a car that drank a quart of motor oil a week. She was determined to make it on her own. Besides her dog lady job, she worked as a school crossing guard, a cab driver, a waitress on the dinner shift at Roger's Steak House, and delivered newspapers. She'd written *Bones for Bowser* to give herself additional income, but she wasn't due a royalty check

for three more months. If she took the traffic job, she could drop waitressing. Maybe she could even give up the newspaper route. She was doing the dissertation for her doctorate, and she could work on it at night.

She swiveled in her seat and looked across the room at Steve Crow. She'd always been a little frightened of him. With his jet-black hair, dark, piercing eyes, and slightly aquiline nose, he was an intimidating figure. His complexion was dark, his shoulders broad, his hips narrow. The scuttlebut at the station said his father was pure-blood Native American; his mother was Hispanic.

Nervously, Daisy waved at him with just the tips of her fingers. He scowled back and immediately averted his eyes to some pressing piece of business on his desk. She sighed. Stubborn, she thought. She'd nagged him for a month before he gave her the five-minute Bowser spot. She wondered what she'd have to do to get the traffic job.

Nothing ventured nothing gained, she told herself, pushing the hair out of her eyes. She might as well give it a try. "Excuse me," she said, knocking on Crow's open door. "I'd like to talk to you about the job of traffic reporter. I'd like to apply for it . . . just until Frank's leg is better. I wouldn't want to steal his job. Even if I was wonderful, which I'm sure I'll be, I still wouldn't expect you to keep me on. Actually, the timing is perfect because I'll get a royalty check in three months and then hopefully I won't need so many jobs."

Steve looked beyond her, to his secretary eavesdropping through the glass window. He watched Charlene mouth the word "perfect" to him, watched her eyes fill with suppressed laughter. He lifted an eyebrow, and she scuttled away.

Perfectly awful, he thought. Putting Daisy Adams in the WZZZ traffic car was like committing broadcasting suicide. The woman was cute, but her specialty was baking dog biscuits, for crying out loud. True, she received more fan mail than everyone else combined, but that was one of those freak things. She was entertaining. Kind of earnest and goofy all at the same time. Unfortunately, he had no other option. He'd gone through six traffic reporters in the past year trying to find a backup. At least she wouldn't be doing rush hour, he told himself. How bad could she be?

Without waiting for his reply, Daisy added, "And don't worry about my Bones for Bowser spot. I can do it on the road!"

He managed a small smile. "Terrific."

Ten minutes later they were in the Shulster Building parking garage.

"Wow!" Daisy said, looking at the station's auxiliary newscar. "It's got enough antennae to get Mars. This is going to be incredible. I think I'm going to like this." She cracked her knuckles, looked up into Steve Crow's face, and felt a shiver run along her spine. She wasn't a shy sort of person, and she wasn't usually uncomfortable with men. She could tick off on one hand the things that truly made her nervous: the dentist, signing her name to her income tax statement,

looking in her rearview mirror and seeing a police cruiser... and Steve Crow. Standing next to Steve Crow was like taking fifteen volts of electricity. He made her feel like her scalp was smoking.

Steve unlocked the car and opened the passenger-side door for Daisy. "I don't have any meetings until one o'clock, so I'll ride the loop with you. I'll do the talking and driving for the first hour, then you can take over."

An hour alone in the newscar with Steve Crow? She'd die. Her heart would stop beating. "That's really not necessary. Not at all. I mean, I hate to take you away from whatever it is that you do. Probably you could just give me a few notes and a full tank of gas and send me on my way."

"You look kind of flushed," Steve said. "You sure you feel okay? You aren't sick, are you?"

"It's you. You make me nervous."

"You mean because I'm your boss? Don't worry about it. Your Bowser spot is secure. Those people out there in radio land love you."

"I know."

"You do?"

"I get a lot of fan mail," Daisy said. "And last week one of my fans said I should be on Good Morning America."

"So what's the problem?"

"I don't know. Isn't that weird? You're just sort of scary. I think it might be something chemical."

He was standing very close to her. Close enough to see the fine texture of her skin, close enough to see that her hair was silky and thick, close enough to see the pulse beating erratically in her neck . . . close enough to be getting a trifle uncomfortable himself. But unlike Daisy, who seemed to be a little vague about her discomfort, he knew for certain exactly where his originated.

"Maybe we just got off on the wrong foot," he said. "I have to admit, in the beginning I didn't see much value in the station running recipes for dogs." In the beginning he hadn't noticed her big blue eyes... eyes the color of cornflowers. In the beginning he'd been a sane, rational human being. And what was he now? Now he was a man lusting after a woman who baked dog cookies. He wondered how that could have happened in such a short amount of time.

Daisy saw his gaze drop from her eyes to her mouth, and she felt her blood pressure inch up a notch. This was ridiculous, she thought. She'd allowed herself to become positively unglued over Steve Crow's high cheekbones and deep, dark eyes. She needed to put things back into

perspective. She didn't even know him! She searched for an appropriate remark. "I'm afraid I might have been pushy about getting airtime."

"You were the most annoying, most persistent person ever to darken my door."

"I was a woman with a cause."

"That'll do it," Steve said. "I hope you don't mind my asking, but I've always wondered if you made these dog recipes yourself. Do you stay up late making dog soup and bacon dog burgers?"

"I never gave a recipe for bacon dog burgers!"

"You know what I mean."

"Some of it's serious. Americans lavish a great deal of time and money and affection on their pets. Sometimes I think it's because of the disappearance of the extended family. We're substituting dogs and cats and hamsters for aunts and uncles and grandparents. And when someone considers a pet as a member of the family, they start to become more concerned with its health and nutrition. I don't think there are many people out there slaving over my recipes for dog granola, but I think some of them pay attention to the advice I give about a balanced canine diet. And I think some of them bake their own dog biscuits once in a while just because it's a fun project for kids. And I think lots of people are listening to me because I'm pop entertainment, I've become sort of a fad."

So not only did she smell great, Steve thought, but she was perceptive, too. Why hadn't he noticed that sooner? He plunged his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "What about your motives? Do you have a dog? Do you feed him homemade liver soup?"

Daisy smiled. She was beginning to feel more comfortable around him. "My motives are terrible. I did it for money. I thought the book would be a novelty item and help me get through my last couple years of school."

Her smile just about knocked him over. It was a wide, generous smile that tipped up at the corners of her mouth and warmed him. If his hands hadn't been stuffed into his pockets, he would have traced a fingertip along her lower lip. "What are you studying?"

She leaned against the car. "Psych. My specialty is geriatric psychology."

She had a soft spot in her heart for dogs and old people. Steve thought that was nice. He wondered how she felt about minorities. Probably, she loved minorities. He was a shoo-in, he decided. He'd buy a dog, introduce her to his grandparents, then show her his bedroom.

"We should get going," she said. "Everyone's probably waiting for a traffic report." She was eager to start her new job, and she was beginning to feel uncomfortable again. She preferred to have Steve Crow's disturbing brown eyes trained on something other than her. She edged her way past him and slunk down into the passenger seat.

"What are all these gizmos?" she asked, patting the dashboard.

Steve moved to the driver's side and slid behind the wheel, taking a fast survey of the equipment. "You have three scanners, a two-way radio, car phone . . ." He fiddled with the scanners. "It's been a lot of years since I've done a traffic report."

"I didn't know you were a traffic reporter."

He turned the key in the ignition and backed out of the parking space. "I've done just about everything there is to do in radio. I started as an intern when I was still in high school, and over the years I've worked my way around the newsfloor."

"Came up the hard way, huh?"

"Not exactly. My dad owned a radio station."

"Oh."

He paused for a minute on the off-ramp while he blinked in the sudden glare of the sun. "You sound disappointed."

"No. Just surprised. I've never met anyone whose father owned a radio station."

Steve shrugged. "The ancestral land turned out to have lots of oil. Several years ago my dad was told to diversify his holdings, and communication was an area that appealed to him."

"Does he own WZZZ?"

"No. He owns a network in the Southwest. When I got out of college I decided I wanted to make my own success, so I stayed on the East Coast."

Steve called in to the studio on the two-way radio to let the editor know he was on the road and would be broadcasting.

"Every fifteen minutes you get a sixty-second spot," he told Daisy. "You watch the clock on the dash and when you're coming up to newstime you use the headset to listen for your cue from the anchor."

He clicked the scanners on and showed her how to use them to get the priority channels.

"We'll take Route 66 to the beltway, then head north. We want to avoid the oil spill on the outer loop. You always want to avoid traffic."

He looked at the clock. It was eight minutes after eleven. He turned the volume down on the scanners and put the earplug in his ear.

"This is Steve Crow giving you the WZZZ traffic report," he said into the two-way radio. "Hazmat teams are still on the scene of that oil spill on the Braddock Road off-ramp, but traffic is finally moving around it. Keep to the two left lanes... "

Daisy felt a jolt of fear hit her stomach. Steve was doing fifty, weaving in and out of traffic, broadcasting live, talking off the top of his head, cramming as much information as was possible into a sixty-second slot. Daisy stared at him openmouthed, wondering how he'd managed to make a newscast out of the squawking coming off the scanners. And she was wondering how she was going to do it. She needed notes to relay a dog-food recipe! And if that wasn't problem enough, she was uncoordinated. She couldn't chew gum and drive at the same time. What was she thinking of? Money, she reminded herself... that's what she was thinking of. Pure unbridled greed had led her to the WZZZ traffic car.

Steve gave his name and call letters, removed the earphone, and put the two-way radio back into its cradle. "It's really not so bad," he said. "A good memory helps, and you need to be able to talk fairly fast, giving continuous information."

"No problem," Daisy said. "This doesn't look too tough. I can do this." Daisy, Daisy, Daisy, she silently screamed, stick with waitressing! Keep the newspaper route!

For the next hour they drove north on the beltway, passing from Northern Virginia into Maryland, then south toward the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. Daisy concentrated on the scanners and tried composing traffic reports in her mind. She was used to talking on the radio... at least she had that going for her, she thought. She didn't usually feel stage fright.

At six minutes to twelve Steve handed Daisy an auxiliary earplug and the handset for the two-way. "I'll keep driving. You do the talking this time."

She felt her throat constrict and her eyes glaze over. Her mind went blank. The sound of the anchor cuing in the traffic report came loud and clear through the earplug. The anchor repeated the cue and Steve tapped Daisy on the top of the head with a rolled-up newspaper that had been lying on the front seat.

"This is Daisy Adams," she said. "WZZZ traffic at eleven-fifty-five."

There was a long pause while she bit her lip. Steve hit her on the head again and she snatched the newspaper from him while she frantically groped for something to say. "Traffic is . . . um, the same as before," she finally said. "If you listened fifteen minutes ago, then you pretty much know what's going on. Stay tuned for an update. We'll let you know if the traffic changes. This is Daisy Adams signing off."

There was a pause about four heartbeats long before the anchor resumed broadcasting. The man's voice sounded strangled, and Steve had a horrifying image of the entire newsroom doubled over with laughter.

"Oh my Lord," Daisy said. "I couldn't think of anything to say!"

Steve noticed his knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel. Relax, he told himself. It wasn't the end of the world. It wasn't nuclear war. It wasn't famine in Ethiopia. It was just a one-minute traffic report. And this was an emergency situation. Besides, she'd probably be fine. She just needed more time. When they were done driving the loop he'd park her somewhere and let her listen to the scanners. The next time she could take notes and read from them when her airtime came up.