

Chapter One

Roxanne Dayle scrolled half-heartedly through the channel listing. She was stuck in a rut, to be sure! Another boring evening in front of the TV, then off to work at the same old job...her only job since high school graduation four years ago, but a damn good job, so why did she feel something was missing?

"You just need a man, Roxanne," Jeannie Thompson laughed. Jeannie had been her best friend since the sixth grade.

Where in the world am I supposed to find one? Roxanne wondered. Working in a ladies' dress shop didn't bring her face-to-face with any men except married ones seeking gifts for their wives. And it seemed more trouble than it was worth to go out looking for prospects. Dating...she just didn't like it! Jeannie dragged Roxanne out to bars once a month, and a party occasionally landed her a date, but they were always one-nighters. Something was always wrong with the guy: too square, too wild, sex maniac, unambitious, sloppy dresser, bad complexion... *Am I just too picky?* Roxanne asked herself.

Lately, she'd been content just to curl up with a good e-book or movie. The months stretched into years, and she'd never had a steady boyfriend. She began to wonder if there was something wrong with her.

She sighed, staring into the mirror. *I think I look pretty good!* Clear skin, blue eyes and long, auburn hair. She was a size six, and her wardrobe was the envy of every female in town. Yet she was 22 and dateless. Jeannie suggested that perhaps men were afraid to approach her because someone who looked so good just *had* to have a boyfriend. Roxanne sighed. Jeannie was just trying to be nice.

Nice -- was that the problem? *Am I too nice?* Maybe you had to be a bit of a bitch to attract a man. Perhaps she should smoke, swear, and act tough! *No, that's not me!* She sighed and clicked on the T.V. Another night alone with a movie instead of a date. *And these are the best years of my life?*

She dozed off halfway through a so-so flick, to be jarred awake by the phone ringing. "Who would be calling at 10:30?" she wondered, reaching for the phone. "Hello?"

"Roxanne?" It was Amy Woods, her boss and owner of Amy's Dress Shoppe where she worked. There were tears in the older woman's voice. "Dear, there's been a terrible accident!"

Roxanne swallowed hard. *Has somebody died?* "What happened?"

"The shop's burned down!" Mrs. Woods sobbed into the phone.

"My God! How?"

"It'll be on the 11:00 news," her boss sighed, struggling to regain her composure. "I can't talk any more about it right now, just wanted to make sure you knew."

"I can't believe it," Roxanne murmured.

"I'll call you in the morning. Right now, I just want to try to get some sleep."

"Yes, of course. Don't worry, everything will be all right..."

"Oh, Roxanne...it's just such a shock."

"I know." Roxanne didn't know what else to say.

"We'll talk tomorrow. Good night."

Her head was spinning. *I guess this means I'm out of a job, at least for a while. Thank God I've saved well...* Dazed, she broke the connection and immediately called Jeannie. Roxanne frowned as the recorded message cut in after two rings. *Probably on*

yet another dream date. “Hi, Jeannie, it’s Rox. Call me when you get in, no matter how late. Very important!”

She carried the phone to the kitchen and fetched a Coke from the refrigerator. It was 10:35 p.m., and in the space of only five minutes her entire life had changed. The rest of the world was carrying on as if nothing at all had happened... the movie continued; she imagined Jeannie holding a cocktail in one hand and laughing across the table at her date’s jokes; outside her window, a plane drifted by. Life goes on.

She flopped back onto the sofa, draped an afghan across her lap, and sipped the Coke thoughtfully. Definitely no work tomorrow, perhaps not for a long time. What if Mrs. Woods decided not to reopen the shop? After all, she was sixty-three and quite wealthy. She didn’t *need* the shop to survive. And Roxanne figured that with four years’ experience, two as assistant manager of the shop, she’d have no trouble landing a new job.

So, things really didn’t look that dismal for Mrs. Woods or herself. “Maybe that’s why I don’t feel so badly,” she thought to herself. “Maybe it’s just meant to be. Time for me to move on...time for Mrs. Woods to retire.”

The eleven o’clock news’ headline story was the fire. Roxanne still couldn’t believe it, even as she watched the firefighters through the camera’s eye. She watched the rest of the news while waiting for Jeannie’s return call. At 11:35, the phone finally rang.

“Jeannie?”

“I hope you weren’t asleep. You said to call, no matter how late...”

“I guess you didn’t see the news, but my shop burned down tonight.”

“What!”

“Burnt to a crisp, if the video doesn’t lie.”

Jeannie gasped. “Roxanne, that’s terrible! What will you do?”

Roxanne forced a laugh. “Take a vacation, I suppose. I certainly won’t be going to work there for a while, if at all. There’s noplacel left to go.”

“I’m jealous. I’d love a long vacation.”

“Actually, I’ll probably be stir crazy within a few days. Anyway, I know it’s late and *some people* have to work tomorrow.”

Jeannie cleared her throat. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“How was he?”

“Who?”

“You did have a date tonight, didn’t you?”

“Oh, that.” Jeannie hummed *The Wedding March*.

“Wait a minute -- this was a serious date?”

“Serious to him. You know old Charlie. He’s only proposed to me five times this year.”

“But you’re just friends! When is he going to give up?”

“You know,” Jeannie said thoughtfully, “I’m starting to weaken. These other guys are such losers, and Charlie makes over a hundred grand, *and* owns his own house, *and* drives a BMW...”

“But you’re not in love with him, Jeannie!”

“I’m only kidding, Rox.”

“Thank God. I simply could not marry anyone unless I was totally, madly, completely in love. I mean, how else could you even consider...*you know*...”

“Sex? Rox, I insist that you not knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“With whom?”

“There must be someone out there who would appeal to you.”

“I’m beginning to doubt he exists!” Roxanne moaned. “There’s not one man I’ve met in the past two years who I even enjoyed kissing!”

“Well, they can’t all be winners. But someday...hopefully soon, it’ll happen. Then you’ll know what all the fuss is about.”

“I hope so. I want to meet someone who will sweep me off my feet, just like in all those old movies.”

Jeannie laughed. “Be patient, girl! You’re not exactly an Old Maid. Maybe during this ‘vacation’ you’ll meet someone.”

Roxanne smiled. “And let’s hope he’s rich, too!”

“You can always have Charlie.”

“No thanks. Anyway, it’s obvious he only has eyes for you.”

“But I’ve never seen him as anything more than a friend. That’s life...anyway, I’ll call you tomorrow,” Jeannie yawned.

Roxanne wasn’t sleepy, and watched an old movie. She finished off a package of Oreo cookies, washed down with a glass of lowfat milk, then got into bed. For nearly another hour she lay awake in bed, remembering Mrs. Woods’ voice and images of the burning building that had been her world for the past four years.

Changes are coming, she thought, and she realized she was smiling. *Time to move on...*

She had a dream that night. Strands of it tugged at her memory the next morning. What an incredible dream!

A long, flowing skirt brushed her bare legs as she walked through a room filled with rattan furnishings and glass tables. A ceiling fan lazily scattered mild tropical air. Twirling, she faced a balcony overlooking brilliant blue water. A clean white beach speckled with umbrellas, folding chairs and bathers stretched out for miles in both directions.

She heard a man’s voice, turned, and the room dissolved. Now wearing a black and gold tankini, feeling the cool evening sand under bare feet and a sea breeze caressing her shoulders, she saw him. He wore a white tank top and raveling cutoffs, the wind wildly animating his sun-streaked hair. His face was indistinguishable in the gray of twilight.

“I know why you’re here, Roxanne.”

“Who are you?” she called out to the stranger.

He simply smiled and held out his arms.

She didn’t recall walking to him, but suddenly they were joined, chest to breast, lips melting together. Each touch sent a charge of electricity through her veins; each kiss left her breathless.

She gasped. They were completely naked in the sand. Her hair and skin blending with that sand, she closed her eyes as his hands held her face. She wasn’t at all frightened. Rather, an overwhelming desire for this man stripped her mind of all rational thought. It seemed she waited hours anticipating that first kiss, longing for it, licking her lips flirtaciously.

But then, she opened her eyes to a rose-colored dawn. Sea gulls swooped and cried. She was alone on the beach. "Why did he leave me?"

Unfortunately, that was it. No kiss. No caress. But that feeling!

Gosh, that's what I want! I just want someone...to make it happen!

Mrs. Woods called at ten o'clock. "Are you all right?" Roxanne asked gently.

"I'm okay, dear. Did you see the news?"

"Yes. It was awful. I still can't believe it."

"There's really nothing left worth salvaging," Mrs. Woods explained. "Of course, I'm fully insured, and all that. I never kept the shop purely for the money, you of all people know, Rox. I needed something to do, so I wouldn't turn into an 'old fogey.'"

"Now, now," Roxanne scolded. "You're one of the youngest people I know."

"That's a very sweet thing for you to say."

"Well, it's true. Maybe having the shop did keep you young."

She sighed. "Well, it's all over now. The shop's gone. I could start up another place, but you know?" She hesitated for a few seconds. "I think not. I think I'd like more time to spend working in my garden."

"Are you saying you'll finally retire?"

"Yes, I think I'll give it a try. If I get bored, I can start another business. There's no hurry. Like you say, I'm just a young woman!"

Roxanne laughed, relieved that Mrs. Woods was taking it so well. "It's true - you're as young as you feel!"

"But you, my ex-employee, I hate to leave you with no job...what will you do?"

Roxanne shrugged, staring at the floor. "Maybe I'll meet someone wonderful and fall in love," she said, dreamily.

Mrs. Woods decided, "I guess that's every woman's dream...to find her prince charming!"

"Yes." She thought back again to her dream, and the fantasy man. "I guess I'm old fashioned, but I think he's out there."

"How 'bout we have dinner tonight? I'll make some calls, and maybe I'll have some job leads for you."

"Sounds good," Roxanne smiled. "Just let me know what time and place."

"I'll call or text you later. Now, have yourself a nice, relaxing day."

"Don't have much choice, do I?" Roxanne was finally able to laugh, and Mrs. Woods joined her.