

## FIVE

Mary looked through her peephole. Erik? What was he doing here so early? She opened the door.

Erik held out a bouquet of pink roses. "I hate to come empty-handed."

The carnations he'd given her over two weeks ago on their first "date" were getting a bit wilted, but she'd trashed the worst offenders and tried to keep the rest as long as possible. She drank in the sweet scent of the roses. "Thank you. They're beautiful. I'll go put these in some water."

Erik followed her into the kitchen.

"You're early. I talked to my baby sister, and she said we aren't due at their house for two hours." She opened the cupboard above her refrigerator and tippy-toed but could only finger the vase she was reaching for.

He reached over her and retrieved it, handing it to her.

"Thank you." She gazed up at him.

After a moment, his eyes widened, and he looked away. "I thought we'd get dinner first."

"Your timing is great." She filled the vase with water. "I just got home and was about to start dinner."

"I'll be saving you the trouble then."

She wrinkled her nose. "It wouldn't have been any trouble. It was a TV dinner. Four minutes in the microwave and *voila*."

"I'm all too familiar with them. I'm glad I'm saving you from such a fate."

After cutting off the ends of the roses, she put them in the vase. "Let me run up and get ready."

"Do you mind if I boot your computer while I wait?"

She would think he would have had enough of computers with his work and her family's computers. "Knock yourself out."

She put on a pink skirt and white blouse. Maybe it was too dressy looking? She didn't want him to think it meant more than it was. Maybe she should change? No, he was taking her out to dinner, and that did call for something other than jeans.

Later at the restaurant, Erik held out her chair.-

"I'm surprised Britney didn't invite us for dinner."

He sat down and opened his menu. "Are you disappointed?"

"Not at all. It gets a bit tiresome being under a microscope, and I felt bad for you being scrutinized by my over-eager family."

"I don't mind. To be honest, your sister did invite us for dinner. I turned her down. Told her I was busy."

"Busy? But you came early for me."

"I planned to be busy taking you to dinner."

She smiled. "So you *are* tired of my hovering family."

"I thought it would be nice to spend some time together without them."

*Yes, it would.*

The waiter came and took their order.

While they were working their way through their salads, Erik asked, "Why is your family so bent on you having a boyfriend?"

“Because boyfriend leads to fiancé, which leads to husband, which equals happiness.”

“Are you unhappy?”

“No. I love my work. I have a nice little house. Great friends, like Phoebe. I belong to a book club. I’m content.”

“And your family can’t see that?”

“They think I will be happier if I find someone. It’s just the way my family thinks.”

“Will you?”

“I won’t know until I get there. But I can’t wish for something I don’t have now or it will make me discontent.”

“So, you are happy being single, but you can see yourself being happily married as well?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He seemed oddly satisfied with that.  
Was he trying to figure her out? But why?