

SEVEN

Mary stood in the midst of Erik's work party celebrating the launch of their latest product. Erik received an award and saw to it that one of the computer lab techs got his recognition as well.

After the formalities, Erik went to get Mary another ginger ale. A tall blond man came up to her. "You're with our hybrid geek, Erik, aren't you?"

"Hybrid?"

"Erik's an unusual boy. He can talk to us normal people as well as the techies. Erik's our interpreter. He thrust his hand out to her. "I'm Josh."

She shook it. "Mary."

Josh wouldn't let go of her hand and cupped his other hand over hers as well. "So are you and Erik, like, friends?"

She didn't know how to answer that. What were they exactly? She freed her hand as Erik returned. He handed her a glass then put his arm around her. "Josh."

"I was just telling Mary how special you are."

Erik didn't look convinced. "Right."

Later, on their way home, Erik said, "Thanks for coming with me. I hate going to those things alone."

"If you could endure the third degree from my family, it's the least I could do."

"I like your family. They make me feel welcome."

That was because they were happy that she was finally bringing someone home for them to meet. They were probably all wondering who was going to win by her choosing their "blind date" guy. With Erik, she wouldn't seem to be playing favorites and nobody would be hurt if she picked someone else's picture over theirs. Erik was neutral ground. But she hadn't picked Erik either. He was a blind date, too. And they weren't really dating. Just pretending. She sighed.

[SB]

The following week the phone rang, and Mary picked it up. "Hello."

"Hello?" Phoebe's tentative voice came over the line. "Are you still mad at me?"

She shook her head trying to think what Phoebe was talking about. "Mad at you? For what?"

"The blind date I forced you into with my brother."

The date with Erik had worked out fine, but she didn't want to let Phoebe know that yet. She didn't want Phoebe thinking she could do it again anytime soon. "I'm still trying to think up a way to get you back."

"Well, don't think too hard. I really had your best interests at heart."

"Turnabout is fair play. I have a single brother, too. He'll be by to pick you up in an hour."

Phoebe moaned. "Is this how it felt when I called you and told you—a gnawing twist in the pit of your stomach?"

"That about describes it."

"I am so sorry. Next time I'll give you more warning."

"Phoebe!"

"Just kidding."

"Me, too."

“Your brother’s not coming?” Phoebe sounded disappointed but quickly got over it and said, “Have the pictures started up again?”

“No.”

“So my harebrained idea worked?”

“Sort of. We’re still sort of pretending. Erik’s been working on some of my family’s computers.”

“He what? Did you hold him at gun point?”

“No. Why?”

“My brother has a no-computer rule. He’s been used by so-called “friends” whose computers he fixes, then he never hears from them again. He won’t work on anyone’s computer for free—except mine of course. It’s helped him learn who his real friends are.”

“Well, it was his idea. Not mine.”

“His idea? Really.”

She said “really” like it had a deeper meaning. Was there another reason Erik was helping her family with their computer problems? Maybe Phoebe was wrong about Erik’s determination about not working on other people’s computers.