

NINE

When the doorbell rang, Mary opened her door to Erik, who laden with plastic shopping bags in one hand and a box of tangy smelling food in the other arm. “Erik. I wasn’t expecting you. Whose house and computer this time?”

“Yours. I brought dinner”—he nodded to the box, then the bags—“and computer parts. I hope you like Chinese.”

She closed the door behind him. “I don’t understand.”

Erik set the bags down and headed for the kitchen. “Your computer system is pretty old. I thought I’d upgrade some of the parts.”

“It’s only three years old.”

“Computer technology changes at the speed of light. As soon as you carry it out of the store, it’s basically out of date.” He set the box on her kitchen table. “R & D already has the next best thing in the works.”

“You shouldn’t have gone out and bought anything for my computer.”

He took white cartons out of the box and lined them up in a straight little row. “I didn’t. I had the spare parts already.”

“You’re kidding. They just happened to be lying around?”

“They’re parts that I took out of my computers when I upgraded them. No sense letting them go to waste.”

Computers, with an ‘s’? “How many do you have?”

“Working?”

Was there any other kind? “You have a computer that doesn’t work? Why keep it?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Plates?”

“Oh, yeah.” She set plates and forks on the table.

“I have ten nonworking computers I use for parts. Eight working ones.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You have eight computers? Isn’t one enough?”

“Not really. I have a high-powered one I do all my work on. I have one hooked up to the Internet to surf with. I have one machine decked out for gaming only, best video and sound cards, the works. Then I have three laptops.”

“That’s only six. What are the other two for?”

“They are older ones I don’t use much. Sometimes I’ll do some diagnostic on them or use them with older program versions.”

She conceded. Her brother and Phoebe were right. Erik was a bit of a geek. But he was a very nice and very sweet geek. Her heart added, “And he was her geek.” But that wasn’t true.

He prayed, and they ate. After dinner, she showed Erik to her computer. He stared at the big rubber exercise ball she used as a chair. “It’s better for your posture. It makes it more difficult to slouch.”

He sat on it, then turned soulful eyes on her.

She smiled. “I’ll get you a chair.” The exercise ball was an acquired taste.

Erik booted up her computer and got into diagnostic windows she didn’t even know existed.

She sat on the ball next to him gently bouncing. “Why are you doing this? And don’t tell me it’s because my computer needs it.”

After a moment he said, “I figured out why you were upset the last time.”

She hadn't been upset, just confused. "Why do you think I was upset?"

"I was fixing everyone else's computer in your family and ignoring yours."

"You think I was trying to manipulate you into working on my computer?"

"Not manipulate. But I could see you were hurt."

That wasn't what hurt; it was how real it was starting to feel, but how real it wasn't.