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You Have Been Disconnected

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Rida Allen

Draumr Publishing, LLC
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You Have Been Disconnected

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Dedication

There is no way I would be able to do any of the things that I do
without the unfailing support of my husband.

His patience is legendary.

His humor is...well, quantity over quality, right honey?

It is not possible for me to find a better role model in life
than my mother. She is strong, loving and supportive.

I only hope to grow up to be just like her.

Prologue



From: Roger Gant <rgant@centreseating.com>
To: Lifecycle Group <lifecycle@centreseating.com>
Cc: Design Group <design@centreseating.com>
Cc: Programming Group <programming@centreseating.com>
Subject: Maritas Project

To all staff,

Due to time and cost overruns, we are moving the Maritas project over to Philanthropy Designs effective immediately. I am requesting that one team member from each of your groups volunteers to work alongside Phil Fink at PD in order to complete this complex project.

Please respond to me ASAP so that we can move remaining team members on to other projects.

*Roger Gant
Vice President, Research & Development
Centre Seating, Inc.*

The groans came almost immediately from around the software programmers' bullpen.

“Is he joking?” someone called.

“We’ve been working on that damn project for months!” another programmer moaned.

“Hey, I’m glad to be rid of the thing. I haven’t *slept* in months!” a third person yelled back.

Matt hunched his shoulders over his desk, trying to make himself invisible. It wasn’t that he disliked working with Phil, it was that the Maritas project was such a pain in the ass that none of them wanted to volunteer.

“Okay, draw straws, guys,” the senior programmer called.

More groans.

Matt stared intently at his computer monitor, hoping that they’d forget about him. He *always* lost when they picked straws.

“You, too, Matt,” his coworker Greg, who sat next to him, poked his arm.

Sighing, Matt swivelled his chair around and snatched a straw. *Dammit*. “Dammit,” he repeated out loud.

“Don’t worry, buddy, you’ll have a great time working with Fink,” Greg said, punching him in the arm when he saw the tiny piece of straw that Matt was left holding. “The Fink-man, the Fink-meister, the Fink-inator.”

“It isn’t Fink that’s the problem.” It was going to take months to get that stupid Maritas project fixed. He only hoped they could do so without him flying into a murderous rage. Turning away from his coworkers, he responded to their boss’ email.

From: Matt Collins <MCollins@centreseating.com>

To: Roger Gant <rgant@centreseating.com>

Subject: Maritas Project ‘volunteer’

Okay, boss, here’s your stooge from programming.

~Matt

Grumbling, he sent the email to his friend Roger, knowing that the guy would get a good laugh at Matt’s expense. It was a short time later when he received his reply.

From: Roger Gant <rgant@centreseating.com>

To: Matt Collins <MCollins@centreseating.com>

Subject: Drop the AK-47

and come down outta the tower. It’ll be okay, Fink will fix everything.

Roger

Fix everything his ass! There was no way Fink was going to be able to just *fix* this stupid software. He knew that the guy was a good programmer, but he'd have to be able to work miracles to fix this shit. He had worked with Fink many times over the past five years and he was a good guy, wrote a mean line of code and was highly efficient...but he had yet to meet the Maritas project. And even though Roger had requested someone from each of the R&D groups to stay on the project, the other two groups had little involvement in the actual programming portion. They would gather together all the original notes and information, pass them along to Fink and make themselves available for Q&A. But beyond that, it was up to him to help good old Fink work his way through the code.

He shuddered, noted in the next email from Roger who was 'volunteering' from Lifecycle and Design, then opened an email message to Fink.

From: Matt Collins <MCollins@centreseating.com>

To: Phil Fink <pfink@philanthropydesigns.com>

Subject: Maritas project

Phil,

Seems we'll be working together yet again. I'd like to say this project is going to be a snap, but it's gonna be hell. Let me know when you have time to get started. I'll check with John in Lifecycle and Cara in Design and make sure they get copies of all the notes and original plans out to you.

Once you've picked yourself up off the floor, get back to me with your plan of attack.

~Matt

He sent the email off and then started the next one to his coworkers in Lifecycle and Design. While he was writing to Cara and John, a new message came in and he paused to see who it was from. It was Fink's response to the Maritas project email, so he stopped to read it.

From: Pfink <pfink@philanthropydesigns.com>

To: Matt Collins <MCollins@centreseating.com>

Subject: Re: Maritas project

Matt,

Not to worry, this will take no time at all. The best way around the mountain is thru it.

Phil

The man had lost his mind. Actually, it was more likely he hadn't taken a look at the software yet. He expected to receive another message once Fink had the opportunity to review the software in its present form versus what Maritas had requested.

It was two days later when Matt received an instant message from Fink.

PFinkPD: *Got a sec?*

MCollins: *Yep. What's up?*

PFinkPD: *I took a look at the Maritas software.*

MCollins: *Want me to send along an unmarked handgun?*

PFinkPD: *It'll be a snap.*

MCollins: *You're loaded, aren't you?*

PFinkPD: *Nope.*

MCollins: *How exactly do you plan on fixing that piece of crap?*

PFinkPD: *I don't.*

MCollins: *I knew it! You're bailing.*

PFinkPD: *Nope.*

MCollins: *Okay, so spill.*

PFinkPD: *We're going to start over.*

MCollins: *Excuse me?*

PFinkPD: *It'll be easier to start from scratch. Seriously, I sometimes wonder what the programmers in your department are smoking when they write this shit.*

MCollins: *I'll pass that question along and get you an answer by the time you've finished writing the new code.*

PFinkPD: *We, my friend. WE are going to write this software. And it's going to rock. You'll get a bonus. Maybe a raise. Maybe a new company car! In fact, tell Roger to pack up his office because they'll be giving you his job.*

MCollins: *Yeah, okay, enjoy the rest of that fancy mushroom, bud.*

PFinkPD: *I'll send you an outline tomorrow. You'll see, it's gonna be easy.*

Matt held his fingers up to his temple and made a shooting motion with his thumb.

MCollins: *Right. Later, Fink.*

Four weeks later, the software that Matt's entire group had been working on for seven months was completed. And truthfully, Fink had done most of the coding himself, with just minor input from Matt.

When Maritas requested only one small change to the software, Matt knew that it was Fink who was going to be the one to help him get *his* idea off the ground.

Chapter One



There was no easy way to explain why everyone she worked with thought she was a man. It wasn't that she was manly looking...in fact, far from it. She had big boobs, wide hips and, to put it nicely, pleasantly plump thighs. Let's not even discuss the rear end she was dragging around. In addition, the curly mop of strawberry blond hair that she was forever pushing out of her round face was also a clue to her gender. But no, the people she worked with on a daily basis thought she was good old reliable Phil Fink.

There was a reason for the name...Phil had come about accidentally after she found out that they had been assuming for almost a year that she was a man. Fink came about because, well, it was her last name. And for the past nine years, she'd been running her own firm, Philanthropy Designs, where she worked wonders with her computer in relation to design, software programming and internet applications. And for those same nine years she'd been able to work from home, not once gracing the buildings of her most influential clients. Some assumed that Phil Fink had a severe phobia about flying, others suggested that it was a fear of making a formal presentation, and still others considered the thought that Phil Fink was too nerdy for the general public...and the list went on. But no matter, she was well respected in her field and now clients came to *her* begging for her help. She wasn't sure, but she

thought part of her success was because people thought she was a man. While it was a changing field, the computer industry was still mostly male-dominated and you had to continuously prove yourself if you were a woman wanting to make it.

It was easy to continue the charade of being Phil Fink. She communicated only by email and instant messenger, sending files and sharing brainstorming sessions via her high speed digital connection. And when presentation time came around, there was always someone on the client's side who wanted to get ahead by making the presentation on their own. But by this time, all of her clients knew where the ideas, the know-how and the final product had come from. Phil Fink.

And so she had been floating along in her career, not a bump in the road, until now. Now, her biggest client, Centre Seating, wanted her to work directly with one of their software programmers to get a hot new piece of software working. She'd worked with Matt Collins before...he was a good guy with grandiose ideas but he often lacked the ability to put them into play. He was also easy to work with because he knew his limits and took critique easily. But work with him in person? No way! Anything they could do in person, they could do separated by hundreds of miles and clear-cut anonymity.

Dink.

She looked up from her notepad where she'd been scribbling dirty words in response to Centre Seating's request. Her email software had just informed her that she had new messages. She wasn't surprised to see that one message was from the very man who had started this whole fiasco.

From: Matt Collins <MCollins@centreseating.com>

To: Phil Fink <pfink@philanthropydesigns.com>

Subject: your expertise is required

Phil,

C'mon bud, this software could really push me up the corporate ladder. I've been slaving here for years with no hope of upward mobility until now! You're the man who can help me get this job done. Really, it would only take a couple of weeks...

She sucked in a breath at that point. A couple of weeks? Was he kidding?

...to get this done right. I've got the model fleshed out, we just need to get it working in the system. I won't stay a moment longer than I need to and I promise to get out of your face when you tell me to...no questions asked.

~Matt

Matt waited impatiently for Fink's response. Dammit, he didn't give a snap who this guy was or what lifestyle he lived! He didn't care if the guy was the biggest nerd anyone had ever seen, or if he lived in some hole and ate cold pizza for breakfast and pop tarts for dinner. This was his career they were talking about!

No one had ever requested to work with Fink face to face, mostly because they knew from the beginning that he would say 'no'. Everyone at Centre Seating had discussed this guy up and down, wondering why from the beginning he had only been known as Fink in all his correspondence. It was after they'd been working with Fink for almost a year that someone had dared ask if they could call him something other than 'Fink'. Even human resources only knew Fink as his company name...Philanthropy Designs. And to his knowledge, no one had dared to ask where the company name had come from. Well hell, if Fink actually agreed to this crazy deal, and Matt was going to make sure he did, then he was going to find out where Philanthropy Designs had come from. He would come back the office hero with not just the best piece of software ever designed and written, but he would come back with face to face knowledge of the infamous Phil Fink.

He jumped when his email software notified him in a gentle female voice that he had new mail. God he loved that voice...it reminded him of his first lover in high school, a sexy redhead who was all boobs and legs. Sending up a silent prayer, he clicked open the response from Pfink@philanthropydesigns.com. Cursing under his breath, he opened his chat software and searched his list for 'PFinkPD'. Double clicking on the name, he opened a chat window and began typing.

MCollins: *Phil, u there?*

PFinkPD: *No.*

MCollins: *Hey bud, how's it hangin'?*

PFinkPD: *Busy, as usual. U?*

MCollins: *Trying to figure out why a good friend of mine won't lend me a hand...*

PFinkPD: *Look, we can make your software clean and slick through our usual process.*

MCollins: *Not this time, we need to sit side by side and work this shit through. It's too complex to trust to email and chat sessions.*

PFinkPD: *Then find someone else to do it.*

She couldn't believe she'd typed that. Dropping her head into her hands, she moaned and prayed that Matt didn't pass that little remark on to his boss. No matter what, Centre Seating was still her biggest client.

MCollins: *No you didn't just say that.*

MCollins: *Look, you're the man for this job, there's no question. But I have to be able to work with you directly. I know you won't come here to the office, so I'm willing and able to take several weeks out of my life here to come to you.*

PFinkPD: *It won't work. It's better to do it this way.*

MCollins: *We work great together, Phil...this piece of software is going to be da bomb.*

PFinkPD: *All my stuff is da bomb.*

MCollins: *You're right, dude...absolutely. Now help me out here...*

PFinkPD: *Look, give me a week doing it my way. If it doesn't work out, we can always make other arrangements.*

MCollins: *I don't like the look of that 'other arrangements', Phil. I'll give you five days and if I don't like the way it's going, I'm flying out the next day and I'm landing on your doorstep.*

MCollins: *Phil?*

MCollins: *Phil?*

MCollins: *That's it, I'm leaving tomorrow before you can make arrangements to take off.*

She felt like she was going to hyperventilate. It was possible for him to find out her address without asking her, even though she went to great lengths to keep it private. Even her clients' accounting departments only had her post office box on file, but still...

MCollins: *Phil! I was yanking your chain, man.*

PFinkPD: *Look, I know everyone thinks Phil Fink is a big joke, but I'm good at what I do and when I say I'll deliver, I deliver.*

MCollins: *I know that, dude, that's why I want you working on this project.*

PFinkPD: *Then you have to respect my need to do things my way.*

Matt cursed again and pushed his hand through his hair. Phil Fink was right.

MCollins: *All right, I'll give you a week. But if it's not working out the way I feel it should, then we do it my way. Face to face. Period.*

PFinkPD: *I can clear my schedule today and start tomorrow.*

MCollins: *I'll email you what I have so far.*

Swearing, Phil typed in a series of commands, then studied the results. It took her only a minute to send the modified file off to Matt, but she knew what his response was going to be. It was the same response she'd been getting for the past seven days...it wasn't what he wanted.

Dink.

She was swearing before she even opened the email.

From: Matt Collins <MCollins@centreseating.com>

To: Phil Fink <pfink@philanthropydesigns.com>

Subject: CU Monday

Phil,

I've made reservations for Sunday night. I'll go straight to the hotel and be at your office at 8am Monday morning. Please forward directions from the hotel to your office.

~Matt

Dammit. It was Friday afternoon and they'd been working on this stupid piece of software for what seemed like an endless number of hours. And no matter what she did, it wasn't right! She was beginning to think that Matt was purposefully throwing her off so he could follow through with his threat.

When she didn't respond to his email, Matt sent her an instant message.

MCollins: *U still there or u take off for an early weekend?*

PFinkPD: *I'm still here, you slug.*

MCollins: *U get my email?*

PFinkPD: *I got it, dammit.*

MCollins: *I told u it would end up this way. U shoulda just let me come out in the first place, save us both some trouble.*

PFinkPD: *Screw you.*

MCollins: *CU Monday, 8am sharp.*

PFinkPD: *I'm leaving the country. Nice knowing you.*

MCollins: *Have a good weekend, Phil. Enjoy your last hours of freedom.*

Matt logged off before Phil could launch any further verbal assaults on him. He was actually looking forward to seeing Phil Fink work in person. He respected the man and his abilities and wanted to see him work his magic in real life. He was also looking forward to being the office hero as he expected to bring back a shitload of juicy Fink gossip. Grinning, he pushed away from his desk, grabbed his suit jacket and left the office.

Phil really did consider leaving the country as she spent her entire weekend cleaning her condo. She also spent time cursing her decision to keep her office in her home instead of removing her business from her everyday life. But really, working from home was life at its best, especially since no one ever saw her. She had no receptionist, no assistant, no accounting department and no boss. No one saw her bad hair days, or the zits that burst out during *that* time of the month. There was no one to complain when she worked sporadically throughout the day, sometimes in her pajamas, other times in only her underwear.

And most of all, there was no one to know she was Phyllis Fink and not good old nerdy-guy Phil Fink.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit.” She knelt in front of her couch and checked underneath it to make sure that there was no clothing lost under there. It wasn't that she was a slob, it was that work was her life and she seldom took time to clean properly. Once every two weeks someone came in and did the heavy cleaning but the kind Jamaican woman wasn't due in until the end of next week.

Once she had pronounced the area under the sofa clear, she

swept up the clothing she had found under or on top of other living room furniture and carried it off to the laundry room. She wondered what Matt Collins would think of her condo...and her workspace. It was a far cry from the everyday condo considering it was in a remodeled warehouse. From the outside, the place looked exactly like a warehouse, but inside there were four condos, hers being on the top level. It had cost her a small fortune, but she wanted the top floor so that she could have a two level apartment. In doing so, she was able to put her office in the loft area over one side of the main living areas, and her bedroom and bathroom over the right side of the living areas. The loft was visible and open to the living areas, the bedroom was not. And despite the fact that the outside of the building looked like a warehouse, the inside looked like an upscale luxury apartment with a lovely curved staircase to the loft, a country kitchen and breakfast nook, huge windows in her living room and a very private hot tub and sauna.

It hadn't been easy to afford this place and to revamp it to fit her needs, but thanks to a dear uncle who had left her a small sum after his death, she'd been able to do it. After spending a year in a rental apartment while she was starting up her business, she was glad to have a place of her own to live and to thrive. She was safe and secure in this hideaway, that no one from the outside would ever suspect housed several homes.

With a grunt, she shut the door to the laundry room and made her way upstairs to her bedroom. Did she even have anything to wear while Matt was here? She was used to dressing casually...was that appropriate with a business associate, especially since her office was in her home? Throwing open her closet, she plowed through it to see what she had, and what might still fit. And first impressions were most important...should she go out and buy a business suit so that when she greeted him on Monday she looked professional? Or would that set a bad precedent?

What in the hell was she thinking? There was no way the first impression was going to be a good one. Matt was expecting Phil Fink, the nerd with tape on his glasses and a pocket protector in his stained button down shirt. She knew the things they said about Phil at her clients' offices...she was no dummy. Could she trust Matt to keep Phil's secret?

She flopped back onto her bed, wishing she could contact Matt right now and tell him to stay the hell away from Phil Fink!

Knocking on the bland front door, Matt stepped back just slightly and smiled at the peep hole. When he heard footsteps on the other side of the door, he called out, "C'mon, hurry the hell up, would you?"

"Hold your damn horses!"

He grinned at the response, then took another step back when the door swung open.

"Matt."

"Rog."

Rolling his eyes, Roger motioned for his friend to come inside. "Well, come in already. Melanie is in the kitchen."

Matt smacked him on the shoulder as he passed. "Thanks for the dinner invitation."

"Yeah, well, I figured it might be the last time we see you. I don't expect Fink is going to let you live after you've seen him."

"A kind of 'once I tell you I'll have to kill you' thing?" Matt asked, one eyebrow shooting upward.

"Yeah." Roger closed the door and the two men walked side by side around the corner into the big country kitchen where a small woman with mocha colored skin was standing at the stove.

Matt paused briefly to admire her hair, the tight brown twists were gathered up and spilled over in all directions from the top back of her head. When she turned to greet him, her deep brown eyes were filled with light and joy.

"Hello, Matthew."

He grinned and leaned over to kiss her smooth cheek. "Hello, Melanie," he mimicked.

"I hear you're going out of town," she said, turning away from him to pull open an oven door.

Roger went to take the roasting pan from the oven and his wife flashed him an appreciative smile. "Yeah, he's a brave man." With a clunk, he set the pan down on the stove so the roast inside could be transferred to a serving plate.

"Jeez, you act like the guy is an axe murderer," Matt muttered, his mouth watering at the smell of a home cooked meal. "He's just

a programmer and probably weighs a hundred pounds wet. I don't think he's going to do me any physical harm."

"You have no idea," Roger told him, pulling out a carving knife and checking the edge carefully. He was just slicing into the meat when the doorbell rang.

Matt looked first at his host who was busy with the roast, then at his hostess who was elbow deep in some bowl that was resting in the kitchen sink. "I'll get that."

"Thanks, that would be great," Roger nodded, his eyes jumping to his wife's.

Frowning at the look that passed between husband and wife, Matt returned to the front door and yanked it open. On the other side stood a tall brunette with almond shaped eyes and fire engine red lips. "Hi, can I help you?"

She smiled and shifted the bottle of wine from her right hand to her left. "Hi, I'm Sarah."

"Hello, Sarah. What can I do for you?" He watched as her smile tilted up at one corner.

"I'm here for dinner. Melanie invited me."

Now he understood the silent communication between Roger and Melanie. "Well then, come in and join the party." Standing back, he waited for her to pass by before he closed the door. "Everyone is in the kitchen."

She sauntered into the kitchen and greeted the couple there.

Matt followed behind her, sending a glare over her head at Roger.

"Sarah, welcome!" Melanie hugged her, then accepted the bottle from her. "This is my husband Roger and his friend Matthew."

Sarah shook hands with them both, her hand lingering a bit in Matt's grasp. "Thanks so much for the invitation, Mel."

"We're glad you could make it," Melanie said warmly. "Roger, why don't you open the wine and set it on the table for dinner."

He took the bottle and turned away from Matt's accusatory gaze. "Great idea."

"We're almost ready so why don't you two go into the dining room," Melanie suggested, giving Sarah a nudge with her elbow. "We're right behind you."

Matt politely let Sarah go ahead of him, then he shot a nasty look at Roger. This wasn't the first time the couple had set him up on a blind date, but it was one of the sneakiest. Had they warned him ahead of time, he would have turned down the dinner invitation. Obviously they knew their matchmaking was getting on his nerves, so they decided to surprise him. Since his parents had left town about a year ago to pursue their greatest wish to travel around the world together, Melanie had assigned herself a combination big sister and keeper. Not only had she been trying to set him up on dates every month or so, she also invited him to dinner at least once a week to make sure he was eating proper meals. The latter he was more than fine with as Melanie was a dynamite cook when she wasn't working on her latest jewelry creation. She had been designing glass beaded jewelry for as long as he had know her and Roger.

He was too much of a gentleman to be rude to Sarah, so he made polite conversation while they waited for their friends to join them. "So, Sarah, how do you know Melanie?"

"We met in our Pilates class about six months ago," she told him.

"That's great," he said, trying not to notice how her dress clung to her breasts. She was pretty for sure, her dark hair swinging around her shoulders in a straight curtain, her brown eyes twinkling with good humor. As she talked about her Pilates experience, she stepped closer to him and touched his arm with slender fingers.

"Dinner is served!" Roger boomed as he entered the room. Setting down a plate of meat and a plate of vegetables that had been roasting in the same pan, he moved aside to let his wife approach the table.

Melanie set the potatoes and rolls on the table, then smiled up at her husband as he held her chair out for her. "Thank you, honey."

He dropped a kiss on her cheek before sliding onto his own chair.

Trying not to roll his eyes, Matt went to Sarah's side and held out her chair for her. When she was settled, he took the remaining chair between her and Roger. "Everything smells delicious," he

told Melanie. "This is a nice send off to a *long* working trip."

"You're traveling for work, Matthew?" Sarah asked as Roger handed her a glass of wine.

Taking the next offered glass, Matt nodded. "Yep, I'll be out of town for weeks, probably. Maybe even months."

Melanie frowned and sent her husband a look as he poured her wine. "It's only a quick trip for some software, Sarah. Right Roger?"

"Sure!" Roger affirmed. "He won't be gone long."

Glaring at his friend, Matt took a gulp of wine before setting the glass down on the table. "So, someone pass me the roast beef."

Sarah swirled her wine around in her glass, her eyes glued to Matt's face. "You work with computers, then, Matthew?"

"Yup, computers. I work really long hours, sometimes weekends, and even when I'm home I'm usually glued to my PC." He accepted the plate from Roger, then dropped two big pieces of meat on his plate. "How about those potatoes, Melanie?"

She sent him a dangerous look before handing over the bowl. "Don't be silly, Matt. I know from Roger that the people in his group work standard hours unless there's an emergency." Turning to Sarah, she sent her a wink. "And Matthew is going to move into management soon, for sure."

Without taking her gaze off Matt, Sarah leaned her chin on her hand and batted her eyes at him. "Management...that's terrific. You look like you work out...what do you do when you're not working on your computer?"

"I'm pretty much a couch potato," he told her, forcing a laugh as he passed her the bowl of potatoes. His eyebrows shot up when he saw Roger jump in his chair.

"We're out all the time, playing racquetball or picking up a game of basketball. Matt's always whipping my a...butt on the courts," he added.

Reaching out, Sarah stroked Matt's forearm with the tips of her fingers. "I bet you're great at all kinds of physical activities," she purred.

His eyes flicked from her hand, to her pouting lips, to the obvious cleavage that was pointed in his direction. "What did you

say you did for a living, Sarah?"

"I'm in sales." One red-tipped finger drew circles on his skin.

He wanted to smack her fingers and tell her to keep her hands to herself, dammit. "And what is it that you sell?"

"Pharmaceuticals." When she noted his pointed look at her hand, she stroked him one last time before sitting up. "Before that, I sold medical supplies to hospitals so the transition between the two was easy."

"Why the change?" Roger asked.

She shrugged delicately and pushed some salad around on her plate. "The drugs are lighter to carry."

"Right." He sent his wife a look, but made no further comment.

Matt watched as Sarah ate several pieces of lettuce, a corner of a quarter of potato and several forkfuls of vegetables. "Would you like some roast beef, Sarah?"

Shuddering, she shook her head. "Oh no, I haven't eaten red meat since I was a child. It's bad for your system."

For the first time that evening, Melanie looked flustered. "Oh dear, I'm so sorry, Sarah. Can I get you something else?"

"No, that's quite alright," she reassured her friend. "I'm fine with what I have."

Dinner continued in almost complete silence, although Matt was pretty sure that Sarah tried to play footsie with him under the table at one point. When he didn't respond, she seemed resigned to his disinterest.

Sarah didn't stay for dessert, claiming a headache from the half of glass of wine she had drunk during dinner.

When Melanie returned to the dining room with her homemade cherry pie and vanilla ice cream, the room was still silent. "Okay, okay!"

Matt gave her an innocent look. "What?"

"I'm sorry already!" she exclaimed. "I thought she was your type! Athletic, intelligent, gorgeous..."

"I've told you guys that I'm not interested in a setup. Why won't you believe that I can find my own dates?" he asked, taking the large slice of pie she had dished out in apology.

“You should be settling down with a wonderful woman,” she said firmly. “You shouldn’t be alone.”

“I don’t understand why you think I’m unhappy,” was his soft response. He knew Melanie only had his interest at heart, but he didn’t want her fretting over him.

“It’s not that you’re unhappy, per se.” She dropped two scoops of ice cream onto his plate. “But you could be so much happier with the right woman at your side.”

He grabbed her hand before she could withdraw it. “If I can’t have you, then I don’t want anyone,” he teased.

Blushing, she smacked his hand playfully. “You had your chance, cookie.”

“He did? When? Where was I?” Roger blustered. “You better keep your grubby little hands to yourself, bub.”

“Hmm, maybe *Roger* should go work on this software with Fink and *I’ll* stay here with this beautiful creature.” He winked at her.

Melanie giggled and cut into her own piece of pie.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before Matt spoke again.

“You really thought she was my type?”

Roger threw up his hands in an innocent gesture. “I’d never even *met* the woman before.”

Matt turned back to Melanie. “So?”

“You have to admit, she’s got a great body,” Melanie defended herself.

“In all the time you’ve known her, you didn’t notice how, um, aggressive she was?” he asked mildly.

A blush tinged her cocoa colored cheeks. “I guess I didn’t really spend a lot of time with her outside of Pilates.”

“So you picked her based on her looks?” Roger’s voice was filled with amusement. “Isn’t that kind of shallow, Mel?”

“Hush,” she scolded him. “You’re not one to talk. After all, you picked *me*, didn’t you?”

Reaching out, he hooked a hand around her neck and dragged her closer for a kiss. “Damn right. Best thing I ever did, too.”

Matt watched them, envy sneaking into his heart. Focusing on his plate, he scooped up the last of his pie and pushed back his

chair. "Well, I should be going."

"Yeah, you do that, buddy. You know where the door is."

"Stop that!" Melanie hissed, jumping to her feet. "You don't have to rush off," she said to Matt.

"Actually, I have to get home and do about a million loads of laundry," he explained, "so I can pack for my trip."

Following him to the front door, she asked him, "Do you really think you'll be gone that long?"

"I have no idea, but I have to be prepared to camp out for a couple of weeks, at least."

"And this person you're going to see..."

"Fink," he supplied.

She frowned. "Doesn't he have a first name?"

"Yeah, Phil," Roger said from behind her. "Phil Fink."

"You're going to work around the clock with this one guy?"

"Yep...he's the best for the job at hand."

"Well, I hope he's a nice person and that you're successful in getting what you want," she told him, pulling him into a hug.

"Thanks for dinner, Mel. The food was great."

"We're going to miss you, so work hard and come home soon." She kissed his cheek before letting him go.

"I'm not going to miss you one damn bit," Roger added. "Now get the hell out of here so I can be alone with my wife."

Matt grinned and opened the front door. "I'm going to miss you too, Rog."

"Safe trip, buddy," Roger called after him before closing the door.

Matt arrived at his hotel late Sunday night and went straight to his room and to bed. Upon waking Monday morning, he was struck with the realization that he had no idea where Phil Fink worked or where Philanthropy Designs kept its offices. He nearly leapt out of bed and was just picking up the telephone receiver when he saw the envelope shoved underneath his door. Setting the receiver down, he strode to the door and scooped up the ivory envelope then turned it over in his hands. It had only his name typed on the front. He tore open the flap on the back and pulled out a card with an address and turn-by-turn instructions on reaching

Philanthropy Designs from his hotel. It was a good thing he had dropped Phil an email with his itinerary before leaving town.

Good old Phil, what a guy. Matt should have known that Phil would never leave a stone unturned or a line of code incomplete. He tossed the card onto the bed and went in to shower. He had no familiarity with the area, so he hoped the instructions were correct, otherwise he had no way of contacting Phil. No one had ever spoken to him on the phone and there had been no phone number listed on the card.

After showering and throwing on clothes, he snatched up his briefcase, which held his laptop and the papers they needed, grabbed the directions and left the hotel room.

The directions were fairly simple so he was glad he had chosen the hotel he did. He was not surprised to drive into an industrial type area as many computer firms picked those areas for the cheap space. Evidently Philanthropy Designs was no different. The front door to PD's offices was locked and Matt wasn't sure exactly how to alert anyone he was there. He saw no doorbell, no intercom system and no access panel. For a moment, he stood there dumbly, unsure of what to do. Should he pound on the door, look for a window, call a shrink? He scratched his cheek, stepped back to look up at the building, squinted and then cursed.

As if he had said a magic word, a buzzer sounded and he heard a latch slip away. Quickly, before his luck could change, he grabbed the door handle and pulled open the heavy metal door. The card in his hand indicated that PD was on the top floor of the four story building, so he stepped up to the elevator and pressed the UP button. The elevator creaked and groaned and he wondered wildly if it would even carry him to the fourth floor.

When the door cranked open, he stuck his head inside and was surprised to find that the elevator was decorated in shades of beige and green. It almost looked like it belonged in a fancy hotel instead of some run-down warehouse. Before he could change his mind, he took a big step into the elevator and pressed the button for the fourth floor. Closing his eyes, he sent up a silent prayer as the doors cranked shut again. However, as the elevator began to ascend, he found that the noises he had heard in the lobby were not present. Talk about major sound proofing!

The elevator stopped smoothly and let him out on the requested floor, unharmed. He stepped into a small area, much like the lobby downstairs, and was faced with one bland, unmarked metal door. There were no windows, no signs, no decorations, just the now closed elevator doors behind him and the plain door in front of him. Was this a bad neighborhood? Was there some kind of security risk here he was unaware of? He shuffled his feet, readjusted his briefcase in his hand and knocked loudly on the door, hoping someone would hear him. Once more he heard the metal rasp of a lock being disengaged, and then the door swung inward. Although he couldn't see anyone holding open the door, he could see into the offices...only to find that they looked a helluva lot like someone's home.

Stepping forward into the doorway he called out, "Hello?" He nearly hit the doorway header when a woman slipped out from behind the door and greeted him softly. She smiled and invited him into the foyer before closing the door behind him. Taking a moment to orient himself, he decided that this pretty, if plump, redhead had to be Phil's assistant or receptionist.

"Matt?"

He nodded and stuck out his hand to shake hers. "Hi there, I'm here to see Phil Fink. He's expecting me." She looked at him oddly, but shook his hand anyway. She had a nice, solid grip and he noticed immediately that she had pretty fingers with fire engine red fingernails. As she released his hand, he looked around curiously, wondering now if maybe this was Phil's wife. Boy would the office have a field day with this! Nerdy Phil Fink had himself a hot little wife stashed away. Maybe he kept her prisoner so she wouldn't know that there were studly guys out there in the world. Turning back to her, he realized she was waiting for him to say something. "Is Phil here?" She screwed up her pretty face and continued to watch him. After another moment, she spoke.

"Follow me."

He watched her turn away from him and stride confidently across the apartment toward a curved wood stairway that led to an upstairs area of some sort. It was a pleasure, actually, to watch her walk. She had a nice hippy sway to her stride that reminded him how long it had been since he'd taken the time to go out with

a woman. As he trailed her up the stairs, he realized that she wore some kind of scent that followed in her wake, flowing toward him like the skirt she was wearing flowed around her legs. At the top of the stairs, he realized that the loft area was a home office...and man was it a grand setup. Even *he* didn't have this nice a setup at Centre Seating's offices. Setting down his briefcase, he turned back to his guide and smiled at her. "Are you Phil's assistant?" She crossed her arms over her generous chest and gave him a good, hard, glare...one that changed her face from pretty to very obviously insulted.

"No, you slug...*I'm Phil.*"

It was a good thing he had already set down his briefcase, otherwise he would have dropped it. As it was, his jaw fell to the floor and his eyes probably bugged out of his head. "*What?!*"

Sighing, she dropped into her expensively ergonomic Aeron chair. "You might as well sit down before you fall down."

He couldn't associate the nerdy Phil Fink he'd known for five years with the husky-voiced woman sitting before him. Squinting, he sat in the available chair and pressed his lips together tightly. "You're not Phil."

She crossed her legs, adjusted her long skirt and then looked him in the eye. "Yes, I am."

"That's funny...very funny. Where is Phil hiding? I knew he didn't want to do this, but I didn't think he had the balls to come up with this kind of prank. Really, it's good, it's funny. You can give me the address to Philanthropy Designs' office and I'll be on my way. No sense in wasting any more of your time," he rambled, his eyes bouncing everywhere but on her.

"You let me know when you're done," she told him, fanning out her fingers and studying her newly polished nails. She *never* got her nails polished, let alone get her toenails polished...something funky old Matt Collins would never know if he didn't quit making her want to really slug him. She let him sit there and stew for a few minutes while she looked him over covertly. He was fine looking, no doubt about that. She had secretly hoped he'd be the nerd he was expecting *her* to be, so that this would all be easy. A nerd would understand why she did what she did, but not this man. This man would never understand. He had probably spent

his whole career cruising through because he was not only a *man*, but a good-looking one at that. He had light brown hair that was parted on the side and he wore it a bit too long to be fashionable. His eyes were the color of liquid brown sugar and right now, just as hot. She watched as he clenched a nicely formed hand into a fist and glared at her nonchalant posture.

“You’re Phil.”

She held out her hand again and introduced herself, “Phyllis Ann Fink, President and owner of Philanthropy Designs.”

He glared at her outstretched hand, then up at her. “What kind of joke is this?”

Sighing, she let her hand drop and cocked her head. “It’s not a joke and honestly, I’d appreciate it if you kept this whole thing to yourself.”

“Are you *shitting me*?”

She almost grinned, but upon seeing the anger in his face, she smothered the smile. “Look, I have a very good reason for letting people think what they do.”

“‘Letting people think what they do’?” he growled. “You lied to all your clients, telling them you were Phil Fink! There’s got to be some kind of law against that!”

“I never lied to anyone, Matt,” she said softly. “Someone assumed something and I let them. I haven’t hurt anyone or done anything illegal. I do my job and I do it extremely well. Period. What other people think is their business.”

“Everyone thinks you’re a nerd!” he blurted.

She did smile this time. “I know.”

“They think you have a rampant fear of flying.”

“I know.”

He studied her for a moment. “They all believe you’re a man. No one ever questioned it.”

“Why *is* that, Matt? Because I’m extremely good at my job? Because I work hard, deliver my work on time and often *early*? Because I’m in the computer industry, because I own my own business?” She tapped a nail against the arm of her chair. “I corresponded with everyone as PFink because that was my email address and that was my screen name. When people addressed me over those mediums, it was as ‘Fink’. I know they all got a laugh

over it, but it's not the first time someone had made fun of my last name. I've lived with that legacy for twenty eight years. I never said I was a woman because, frankly, I saw no reason to. It wasn't important to my duties or my capabilities. I was about six months in with Centre Seating, in a brainstorming session, which I was participating in over instant messenger, as were several others. Someone, and I can't even tell you who, said, 'Fink's right...he always knows what to do with that shit.' At first I thought it was a typo, then someone else made a similar statement, referring to me as a 'he'." She shrugged and met his gaze again. "I began to realize that they were regarding me highly, but as a *man*. Would I have received that kind of praise as a woman? Maybe, but maybe not. So I didn't correct anyone and when someone finally said to me, 'I hate calling you Fink...what's your first name?' I merely answered, 'Phil'. I'd been called Phyl on and off all my life, what was the big difference between an 'i' and a 'y'?"

"Evidently it's the difference between you and Phil," he answered, but his anger was fading. Really, the whole thing was a misunderstanding. "So why let it go so long? You've proven yourself and your abilities, why not tell people the truth?"

"Because who cares?!" she said angrily, pushing to her feet. She paced back and forth along the loft, her bare feet sinking into the beige carpeting on every pass. "What difference does it make if I'm a man or a woman? I do my job, I deliver my work, that's it."

"If that's the case, Phil, then why not tell people?" he asked softly.

She dropped back into her chair. "Because I like the way things are. I like the respect I receive as Phil, I like the way people interact with me. If I'm all the sudden Phyllis instead of Phil, people will treat me differently." Looking him in the eye, she wanted to beg, but didn't. "Don't tell anyone."

He raised an eyebrow at the command in her tone. "I'll think about it."

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth. "Okay, don't tell anyone while you're here. You can take that long to decide if you'll keep my secret or not."

He couldn't believe how amazing her lips were. "Yeah, right,

okay...I won't say anything...for now."

With a decisive nod, she indicated his briefcase with her chin. "Okay, so let's get started on this piece of crap you call software."

Groaning, he set his briefcase on a cleared space on the desk and snapped it open. "Whatever you say, *Phil*."

She rolled her eyes and opened the version of the software she had saved on her desktop.