

~ Surreal ~

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A sharply dressed businesswoman reached the front of the line, checking over her shoulder for her group. "I need a table for six, please."

The hostess studied the layout as she collected a handful of menus. "Is your party ready to be seated?"

"They'll be here any minute," the woman answered, glancing back again to the busy hotel lobby.

"Please inform me when all members of your party are present," she said crisply. The menus fell back into the bin and the hostess poised her pen at the bottom of the list of parties waiting to be seated. "Name?"

"The Dellalo Group," the woman said.

From this angle, Judith couldn't see the woman's nametag, but she was sure this wasn't Carmen Delallo. Everyone at the Professional Travel Association convention knew the great Carmen Delallo. As head of a Chicago consulting firm, she was practically larger than life in the travel industry. Each year, her company put out a syndicated study of lifestyles and travel behaviors that predicted all the hot new destinations and amenities. Agencies that could afford her research used it as a roadmap for marketing and advertising, and swore by its recommendations. Some agents said it was as if Carmen had a crystal ball.

Judith worked at a small agency here in New York that specialized in gay and lesbian travel. They couldn't afford to subscribe to the annual study. Instead, they paid a small fee to access some of the data on The Delallo Group's website, since it didn't make much sense to buy volumes of tables just to get a sliver of information on the gay and lesbian market segment. Every nickel her agency invested in advertising, brochures, or research had to come back to them in new business.

"Judith?"

She instantly recognized the voice and cringed inwardly. She had hoped to avoid being seen at lunch today, especially by her coworker. "Hi, Celia."

"Are you"-Celia looked around-"by yourself? Because you can sit with us if you want to."

"Thanks, but I'm supposed to meet someone." Someone who was twenty minutes late.

"Okay. See you later then."

It wasn't a secret that she was job hunting. They all were, ever since Margaret's nephew had taken over the agency. Todd didn't know the first thing about reaching the gay and lesbian market, and he was too stubborn to take advice from his agents. The way business was falling off, there would be layoffs soon. Trying to be proactive, Judith had answered an ad for Durbin Dreams, a mid-sized agency here in Manhattan. Bob Durbin was meeting her for lunch to talk about the job.

"Carmen, over here!" The woman who had signed in The Delallo Group waved through the crowd and the rest of her party bustled forth. "I hope this is okay. I didn't think anyone would want to go out in the rain."

Judith watched them cluster by the doorway, five sharp-looking professionals gathered around their leader, the impeccable Carmen Delallo. She had always been a sucker for Mediterranean women, but Carmen took the look to a whole new level. It wasn't just her olive skin, her onyx eyes, or her collar-length hair so dark it seemed indigo. Carmen's physical features were bolstered by the elegance and grace that came only to women who were certain of their strength. Judith was totally infatuated. Every time she saw Carmen at one of these conferences, she wondered what it would be like to work in her shadow. She chuckled to herself, acknowledging that she also wondered about more personal things.

Bob Durbin shouldered through the crowd and Judith straightened her stance, eager to get on with the next phase of her life, a new job with better benefits, bigger travel budgets, and support staff.

"Hi, Mr. Durbin."

"Julia, sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's Judith. That's okay, I-"

"I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to make lunch today. I just ran into a colleague from our Dallas office and he reminded me of something important we need to discuss."

Judith carefully masked her annoyance. If the asshole was going to cancel, he could have done so twenty minutes ago. But she couldn't let her irritation show. She needed to be polite and get this interview rescheduled. "That's all right. I understand. Maybe we can..." Just like that, Durbin was gone. And to her supreme embarrassment, Carmen Delallo had overheard the whole brush-off.

Apparently, so had the hostess. "Table for one?"

"Fine," she grunted, following her to a row of narrow tables for two against the wall where one side was a bench facing the dining room and the other side a chair. She hated having her back to people when she was alone, so she chose the bench, instantly regretting that she would now have

to face the whole dining room. There she sat, feeling ridiculously conspicuous as the lone, lone diner in the whole place. All she wanted was to eat something fast and get out of there.

A large table was positioned on a riser across from where she sat, and that's where they put The Delallo Group. It was almost as if the hostess knew that most of the convention-goers considered them head and shoulders above the rest. That was one smart group of people, Judith thought. You could hear it in the way they presented data in the sessions, or in what they said as panelists. Every travel agent who knew their work hung on their every word.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the hostess leading Celia and her friends past, so she buried her nose in the menu. Celia hadn't heard her being stood up but she was sure to notice sooner or later that she was alone. By looking occupied, Judith hoped to ward off a second invitation.

To her further consternation, her single status had rendered her invisible to Jose the waiter, who stopped first at Carmen's table to get their orders before ever nodding in her direction. When he finally made it over, she ordered food and drink all at once, choosing the tomato bisque because she thought it would be easy to prepare. When a raucous laugh erupted at Carmen's table, she looked up to see the woman who had checked in with the hostess telling a story. They all had their notebooks out, so it was obvious they were having a working lunch, but they still found time to have fun. That's the kind of atmosphere Judith wanted at work. Too bad she wasn't trained in research. She would just walk over there and introduce herself.

She laughed softly and shook her head. As if she would ever have the nerve to do something like that. Self-confidence had never been her strong suit.

Thinking she would look less stupid if she were busy, she opened her convention packet. It was full of goodies, including a brochure from The Delallo Group. On the front was a picture of Carmen, her arms folded and her eyes boring into the camera. The photo definitely did her beautiful features justice, but more important, it conveyed confidence and certainty. No wonder people followed her around waiting for whatever information nugget she might share.

Judith's stomach filled with hope every time the door from the kitchen opened, but the staff in the back didn't seem to care that her order was simple. The Delallo Group was served first, sandwiches and salads, it appeared. It all looked good, especially the giant Rueben Carmen was holding up...as if she were offering Judith a bite.

Judith felt her face grow red as she realized Carmen had caught her staring and was grinning directly at her. Nervously, she smiled back, afraid to be too obvious in case her forty-one-year-old eyes were playing tricks on her. She'd had enough embarrassment for one day. When Carmen showed no signs of breaking off the gaze, Judith finally blinked and looked away, thrilled to see Jose headed her way with what looked like a simple bowl of soup.

Finally, she could eat and get out of there.

But just as Jose reached the table, the hostess called his name and he turned his head. Judith watched in horror as the tray tilted, the bowl slid across the plate, and rich, red soup poured into

her lap. Immediately, she and the stunned waiter grabbed every linen napkin within reach to mop up the mess, but once it was gone, there was a prominent stain on her tan skirt. Every eye in the room was on her, no doubt waiting for her to tear Jose's head off. But even in her frenzied state, she collected herself, knowing an eruption would only make matters worse.

The manager rushed over to take charge. "I'm terribly sorry, madam."

She saw Jose cowering as if he feared being deported on the spot. "It's all right. It was my fault. I think I stuck my foot out accidentally."

"We'll be happy to take care of the cleaning, and of course, your lunch is on us."

Judith wanted to point out that her lunch was on her, but that was just too obvious. She wasn't even hungry anymore, but no way was she going to get up and walk out with everyone staring.

Miraculously, Jose brought the next bowl of soup immediately and she nursed it, waiting for all the people who had come in when she had to leave. Celia and her friends walked past, but The Delallo Group stuck around, long after Jose had cleared their dishes. Judith could hear Carmen giving each of her staff an assignment of some sort. Questions were asked and answered, and one by one the notebooks were folded and the staffers left the table. Only Carmen was left to sign the bill.

Judith plotted her strategy. When Carmen left, she would make a run for it, straight for the coat room to get her parka-which wouldn't begin to cover her ruined skirt-and right out the front door. Attending the afternoon sessions like this was out of the question.

Carmen stood, but instead of heading for the exit, she walked over to stand in front of Judith's table.

"Hey, sorry about your accident."

Judith tried to smile, but failed miserably. "Just that kind of day, I guess."

"Yeah, I saw Bob Durbin break your lunch date. That was pretty rude of him if you ask me."

"I guess he couldn't help it if something came up."

"You're more forgiving than I would have been. Same thing with the waiter. That was pretty classy, what you told his boss."

Judith couldn't believe this was really happening. Carmen Delallo was standing there calling her classy and all she wanted to do was gush at her like a starstruck fan. "It was an accident. I didn't want to see him get fired over it."

"Like I said, pretty classy." She stuck out her hand. "I'm Carmen Delallo."

Judith took it in her grip and held it long enough to marvel at both its softness and strength. "I'm Judith...Judith O'Shea."

"Pleased to meet you." Carmen smiled and looked down at their joined hands, which forced Judith to finally let go. "Look, I just happened to have my raincoat with me. I thought we were going out for lunch but my assistant booked us in here." She held out the black overcoat. "Why don't you put this on so you can go up to your room and change?"

"Thanks. I appreciate the offer, but I'm not staying here at the hotel. I'm a local. I have a fourth-floor walk-up in the East Village." She was grateful that her mouth stopped working before she explained that her toilet and kitchen sink were practically in the same room.

"That's okay. Keep it and wear it home. I won't be going out today. You can bring it back tomorrow."

She held it open and Judith gave in, standing up to push her arms through the sleeves and pull it closed in front. "I really appreciate this."

"It's no problem." Carmen straightened the collar and smoothed the fabric. "Looks great on you."

Actually, it was big through the shoulders, but the extra length was good since it went below her skirt hem. It felt expensive. "I'm afraid it's going to come back smelling like tomatoes."

"No big deal. It's washable."

In a nervous gesture, Judith stuck her hands into the pockets and pulled out a small stack of business cards. "Oops, these are yours." She took one for herself and smiled, tucking it back into the pocket. She would memorize it later, right down to the fax.

"Thanks. I'll need these to drum up business."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I've heard people talking this morning about your new service. They're excited about it." They walked out of the restaurant and entered the hotel lobby, where several people made it point to greet Carmen as they went by.

"I hope so. I'm giving a presentation on it tomorrow morning at ten. Stop in if you're interested."

A presentation? Carmen Delallo wasn't just an ordinary presenter. She was the plenary speaker for Saturday, the convention's busiest day. "I'm sure we'll all be there taking notes. And I'll bring your raincoat then."

"Or you could just bring better weather." Carmen smiled one last time and turned to greet a man Judith recognized as the president of the association. Carmen was one of the most sought-after people at the convention.

And Judith was wearing her raincoat.

Judith checked her watch as the morning's first panelists wrapped up their comments. The plenary session would start in twenty minutes, but she wanted time to see Carmen before it started. Not that she was looking forward to giving up Carmen's raincoat-quite the contrary. It was ridiculous to feel that way, but she liked imagining they were personal friends as long as she held it in her possession.

Actually, Judith was already feeling beyond ridiculous. Off the deep end was more like it. After her brush with Carmen at lunch, she went straight home on the subway and changed from her soup clothes. Right away, she took her skirt and the raincoat to the cleaner's for a rush job. Then she went back home and Googled Carmen Delallo.

Unless Carmen was a prodigy-which Judith wouldn't doubt-her graduation date put her in her mid-forties. She had a BA from DePaul in Behavioral Sciences and an MBA from Northwestern. She founded the company fourteen years ago and had collected literally dozens of awards from the industry. But among the hundreds of hits on the Web, there wasn't one single tidbit about her personal life, no mention at all of a husband or kids, or even a favorite travel destination. Judith wouldn't have found that unusual had it not been for the fact that everyone else at The Delallo Group had family information in their bios.

She slipped out of her session to beat the crowd. The main convention hall was mostly empty at a quarter to ten, except for Carmen and all the people who were there to help with the presentation. Judith recognized a few faces from lunch yesterday, as well as the association's vice-president, who was slated to introduce Carmen today. The audio-visual crew from the hotel was testing the equipment and making the necessary last-minute adjustments. In fifteen minutes, this hall would hold over a thousand people.

She felt somewhat guilty for intruding at this critical time, but she had promised to return Carmen's coat before the session. The smart thing would have been to give it to Sandra Grant, the administrative assistant who had arranged their lunch yesterday. But that meant she wouldn't get to talk to Carmen, which was all she had thought about for the last twenty-one hours. She had even worn her best suit, hoping to make a better impression.

She stood off to the side of the platform clutching the coat, feeling every bit like a fan at the stage door waiting for an autograph. As a behavioral scientist, Carmen probably would know why she was acting like such a twit, but damned if Judith had a clue. She just knew that she wanted to be as close to Carmen as she could get. The object of her thoughts finally looked up and saw her. Judith was suddenly terrified that Carmen wouldn't even remember her. But then she smiled and walked over.

"Good morning."

"Hi. I brought your coat...and better weather too, like you said." She handed her the raincoat, feeling like a clumsy dolt for talking about the weather.

"Yeah, I saw the sun this morning. Wish I had a chance to get out."

"It's pretty cold, though. About thirty."

"You forget. I'm from Chicago."

"That's right. You midwesterners are hardy stock."

"You better believe it." Carmen ran her hand across the folded coat.

"I had it cleaned."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. It reeked of tomatoes by the time I got home. I couldn't bring it back like that."

"Still-"

"Carmen, is this the slide you wanted?" It was Richard, one of her research assistants. Judith had memorized all their faces and jobs from the website.

"Excuse me, please. I have to get back to this."

"That's okay. I just wanted to say thanks."

"You're welcome any time." With that, Carmen hurried back over to the laptop to check her presentation.

A few early birds were coming in for the good seats. Celia and her friends were already in the front row. From the way she was acting, Celia seemed equally taken with Carmen Delallo. Judith had just enough time to grab a cup of coffee from the beverage bar out in the hall. As she was going out, she was practically bowled over by Bob Durbin, who mumbled a token apology without even making eye contact. Carmen was right about him. He was rude.

She got coffee and went back in to find a seat, determined not to be as obvious about her interest in the speaker as Celia. She sat in the fifth row on the aisle, but with an unimpeded view of the podium. It was the perfect seat until a woman in a wheelchair arrived with her two companions and asked her to scoot in to make room. That put her behind a woman with big hair, which meant she couldn't see Carmen at all except on the video screen off to the side.

Carmen dazzled the crowd with her presentation, which focused on a new product by The

Delallo Group that tracked the impact of advertising. The more Judith heard about advances in the industry, the more depressed she got about how she had let her career languish by staying at a small shop. She had been an agent for nineteen years and had practically nothing to show for it. Now more than ever, she wanted to get on at one of the big agencies, though she knew she would probably have to start at the bottom and work her way up. She was good enough to advance quickly, though, so maybe it would be worth it.

Besides, she bet Carmen spent a lot of time at the big agencies.

Working at a small shop with a niche clientele, it was easy to feel invisible among agents from the big companies. Their jobs were financially rewarding, and most of them got to tour five or six times a year. A lot of them knew each other, so a convention like this was the social event of the year.

But there was at least one group of people that felt more invisible than Judith did. They were the panelists in the last breakout sessions of the day. With the sun warming up the sidewalks, attendance had fallen sharply after lunch, and the meager audience of seven was fighting to stay awake. Judith probably would have slipped out by now if it weren't so conspicuous.

When the last sessions let out, attendees regrouped for a cocktail party. The airlines were sponsoring an open bar, which guaranteed a good showing. Judith wasn't interested in trying to mingle with agents, at least not before she figured out her best options for a new agency. The association sponsored a job board, but every time she went near it, she saw Celia lurking nearby. But Celia was headed into the cocktail party, so now was the perfect time to check the postings.

There were jobs all over the country, including several here in New York, but all were entry level. It didn't matter though. Even at entry level, she would make more money at a big agency than where she was now.

The Delallo Group was looking for an account rep...a research assistant...and a publications director. Judith thought that last one might be right up her alley, since she did all the brochures and ad copy for her agency. It wasn't what she wanted though, even if it meant seeing Carmen Delallo every day. What she did best was put together killer tours for gays and lesbians, the kinds of trips they remembered all their lives. At least that's what they usually said when they got back. She was proud of that.

"Looking for a change of scenery?" Out of the blue, Carmen was leaning over her shoulder, reading her mind.

"Yeah, I think it's time to move on."

"A bigger agency, or do you want to stick with the specialty shop?"

That told Judith she had read her business card, which she had placed in the coat pocket before she returned it. She figured since Carmen was being so nice to her she ought to know the score. And it didn't hurt to put out a feeler. She had no shame.

"I think I'm done with the specialty shops. I like working with the gay and lesbian market, but I think I'd rather be with a larger company."

"Every segment is important to the big houses. They need people like you to reach those markets." Carmen put on her glasses and walked closer to the board. "Have you talked to any of these guys?"

"I was supposed to have an interview with Bob Durbin, but you saw how that worked out."

"Idiot," she mumbled. "I'm having dinner tonight with some friends from a couple of the big agencies. Why don't you join us?"

Judith almost did a double-take, sure she had misheard. "I don't want to horn in with your friends." Yes, she did, but she needed for Carmen to ask her one more time so she could be sure she wasn't just being polite.

"You won't be horning in. We get together every year and catch up. We don't always talk about business but I know they'd both be interested in somebody with your expertise."

"If you're sure..." And if she didn't hyperventilate and pass out.

"Of course I'm sure. But I've got to put in an appearance at this cocktail party first. I'll have my assistant come find you when we're ready to go."

"That'll be great."

They were joined then by the association's president, a former travel agent who now worked in marketing for one of the airlines. "Now don't think for a minute you're going to skip out on our cocktail party."

"Wouldn't miss it, Craig. Judith and I were just headed in." Carmen made the introductions and the three of them walked into the ballroom together.

Judith thought it best to excuse herself before Craig and Carmen simply left her on her own looking like a fool. The first person she saw was Celia, who was eyeing her with obvious dismay.

"Judith! When did you get to be such good friends with Carmen Delallo? I saw you talking with her this morning and now you're walking in with her again."

Judith almost laughed that Celia was clearly more impressed by her association with Carmen than with the president of their organization. That showed just how important Carmen really was. "I met her yesterday. She's really nice."

"You're telling me. And she's hotter than shit."

Judith couldn't argue with that. She and Celia had the same taste in women, which is probably why their own relationship four years ago had sputtered and fizzled before it ever really got off the ground. Looking back on that one, Judith counted herself lucky that their brief affair hadn't ruined their working relationship. She would never make that mistake again.

"Hey, don't say anything to Todd, but you know my friend Cindy?"

Judith nodded.

"She got me an interview with her boss. I'm going over there Tuesday at lunch."

"Celia, that's great!"

"Thanks. I just don't think I can work for Todd much longer."

"None of us can. We'll all be gone before summer, one way or another."

"Have you been looking too?"

Judith figured she might as well confess, since they were in this together. "I was supposed to meet somebody for lunch yesterday but he stood me up."

"Aw, I'm sorry."

"Thanks." Judith had always appreciated Celia's sincerity. She really had been a good friend through the years, even if she was kind of ditzy sometimes. "Carmen's going to introduce me to a couple of her friends from the big agencies. Maybe something will work out."

"I can't get over you and Carmen Delallo being pals. I always wondered if maybe she was on our team, you know?"

"I have no idea," Judith said. Her own gaydar had never been reliable, but she had entertained the possibility, especially after noting the lack of personal information on Carmen's website and the absence of a ring on her left hand. Whatever she was, she made an excellent fantasy.

Sandra worked her way over to where they were standing. "Judith, hi. I'm Sandra Grant. I have the impossible job of keeping Carmen on a schedule and she says you're joining us for dinner."

"That's right."

"We're about ready to sneak out, so why don't you grab your coat and meet me out front?"

Judith turned to Celia. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Have fun."

Minutes later, she was climbing into a cab with Sandra.

"Carmen and the others will meet us there as soon as they can sneak out."

"Who all is coming?"

"Just five of us. Sophia Santini and Priscilla Fowler."

Judith knew that Sophia was a VP at Zeigler-Marsh in New York, and the other name rang a bell. "Is that the woman who runs Fowler Tours?"

Sandra nodded. "In Chicago. Carmen and I met her almost twenty-five years ago when she booked a cruise for us. We've been friends ever since."

This was starting to get a little surreal. Judith didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, but why was she—a lowly travel agent from a floundering shop—being asked along on a friendly dinner with some of the biggest names in the industry?

"So you've known Carmen a long time?" She already knew from the website that Sandra had been part of The Delallo Group since Day One, but she was eager to learn whatever she could about Carmen.

"We've been friends for twenty-five years. We were classmates at DePaul, and she's my son's godmother."

Their destination was a hole in the wall on Mulberry, right in the heart of Little Italy. Judith had eaten there a few years ago with a date, an Italian woman who claimed it was the best restaurant in the neighborhood. She wasn't surprised at all that Carmen had found it. Judith imagined her as one with discriminating tastes.

The rest of the group arrived within ten minutes and Carmen made the introductions as the waiter crowded them around a round table better suited for four. Judith found herself sitting between Sophia and Sandra. It was obvious her four companions were close friends, and she loved it when each of them—fashionably slender and stylish—ordered a heaping plate of pasta.

Conversation was friendly and relaxed, and Judith enjoyed seeing Carmen so laid back. Priscilla kept them laughing all through dinner, and that made Carmen even more beautiful as far as she was concerned. Her earlier fears of being out of place among this group of high-powered women were vanquished when Sophia reached over and swiped a shrimp off her plate.

"Hey, you!"

"You want it back?" Judith's fingers hovered at her lips.

Judith answered by forking a small meatball and popping it in her mouth.

"See, I told you Judith would fit right in," Carmen said with a laugh. "By the way, ladies, if you're looking for somebody with expertise in gay and lesbian tours, I caught Judith looking at the job board."

"We have a guy at Z-M who handles that, but he doesn't get many women. I have to remind him every now and then that he needs to plan tours that appeal to both," Sophia said.

"It's kind of hard to do that," Judith answered. "Gays and lesbians tend to like different things, so you usually have to offer two distinct products."

"And you specialize in women?"

"Mostly. Sometimes we team up, but I really like doing women's tours."

Sophia dug out a business card and laid it on the table. "Why don't you give me a call sometime next week?"

Carmen smiled with satisfaction and whispered something to Priscilla.

"Sure." Judith wanted to pinch herself, not believing her luck. "You want another shrimp?"

That brought a round of laughter, after which Priscilla pushed her business card in front of Judith. "And if you ever get tired of New Yorkers like Sophia, come see us in Chicago."

"Will do."

The waiter cleared their table and took dessert orders. Judith accepted Carmen's offer to share a tiramisu and switched seats with Priscilla. From her new position, she noticed Carmen's hands, long and graceful. A shudder passed through her as she imagined what those hands might do.

When they were finished, Sophia reached for the check. "Thank you for coming along, Judith. Since we talked about business, I can write this off."

Outside, Judith suggested grabbing her own cab, since she lived only twelve blocks away. But Carmen wouldn't have it, insisting that she and Sophia would see her home. As they reached her neighborhood, Judith grew self-conscious. The East Village wasn't the worst part of the city, but it could be seedy in places.

"I just love this part of town," Sophia said. "It's so bohemian."

"Yeah, I like a place with character," Carmen added, laying Judith's concerns to rest.

"I really appreciate you guys including me tonight. Who knew conventions could be so much fun?"

Sophia patted her on the back as she got out of the taxi. "Just keep hanging around us. We always manage to have a good time."

Judith hurried upstairs and flicked her light switch to signal that she had made it safely. She still couldn't get over it. Not only was Carmen Delallo one of the nicest women she had ever met, but her friends were wonderful too.

This year's convention had already surpassed any professional experience Judith had ever had. But she was determined to make the most of the last day as well. Carmen wasn't taking part as a panelist today, but Sophia was speaking at the plenary session and Judith wanted to be in the audience to support her new friend-and potential boss.

From her seat in the center section, she saw Carmen come in with Priscilla and the two of them sat about halfway back on the wing, talking softly about something. It reminded Judith of last night, when they had whispered to each other at dinner. Carmen looked fantastic in a dark brown pantsuit with a burnt orange top. Judith had worn a pantsuit today as well, navy with gray pinstripes and a gray silk blouse.

Her heart skipped a beat when she looked up to see Carmen smiling in her direction. Then Carmen motioned something about meeting her in the hallway later. It was all she could do to pay attention to the speakers for the next hour.

The session finally ended and Judith hurried out to the hallway, trying her best to appear casual as she waited for Carmen to appear. It was hard not to feel like a dolt standing around by herself while everyone else was socializing. But Judith didn't want to miss her chance to see what Carmen wanted. When she finally emerged, she was immediately surrounded by a half dozen people all wanting her attention. She broke free for just a moment and handed Judith an envelope.

"Please try to come," was all she said before being whisked away.

Before she ever opened the envelope, Judith knew she would go, even if it was to a monster truck rally. Whatever Carmen wanted. Instead, it was an invitation to a buffet dinner tonight at Tavern on the Green, hosted by The Delallo Group.

The consulting business must be pretty good, she thought.

"Zeigler-Marsh? Judith, that's so exciting!" Celia was almost as thrilled as Judith about the invitation from Sophia to call her next week.

"Shhh, keep your voice down. It's not a sure thing. She just asked me to call."

"But she's a big cheese. If she wants you there, you'll be hired."

Not only was Sophia a big cheese at her agency, she was now the incoming president of the Professional Travel Association. And Celia was thoroughly impressed when she came over to grab her coworker.

"Want to ride with Priscilla and me?"

"Sure." Judith picked up her wool overcoat, which she knew would come in handy later tonight when the temperatures dropped below freezing. "I hope you and your friends have fun tonight, Celia. I'll see you at work tomorrow."

"So long."

Priscilla was waiting by the taxi stand. "I just talked to Sandra. She said Carmen handed out forty more invitations today and they're all at the restaurant getting set up for more."

Forty more invitations? All of a sudden, Judith didn't feel so special anymore. "Do you think there's anything I can do to lend a hand?"

"Maybe you can help entertain the west coast agents, you know, give them a little information on what they can do in the city if they hang around tomorrow."

"I'd be happy to." It would be like giving a tour, something she could do in her sleep. And she was especially glad to be able to do something for Carmen for a change.

The three women checked their coats at the restaurant and were directed to the Terrace Room, where Carmen was already chatting up the CEOs and marketing directors at the hundred largest agencies in the country. The Delallo Group was sponsoring this gig to thank their clients and to launch their new service. Practically everyone in attendance was a decision-maker in their agency-everyone except Judith. But tonight, she had a purpose, and without delay, she went straight for the group of west coast visitors and introduced herself. Just as Sophia had predicted,

they had lots of questions about museums, shows, and galleries throughout the city, and she spent more than two hours offering tips on getting around.

When the guests finally dispersed, she grabbed a glass of white wine from a passing waiter. Carmen suddenly materialized in front of her.

"Are you having a good time?"

"I'm having a wonderful time. Thank you so much."

"I heard Sophia roped you into playing tour guide for the west coast group. I really appreciate that."

"Oh, it was no problem at-" Before she could finish her sentence, a man she recognized as the CEO of a timeshare company walked up to Carmen and wrapped her in a hug. He had an entourage in tow and pushed each man forward to make the introductions. More people joined the group, and soon Judith found herself outside the circle. It was awkward, but she was used to it. She turned toward the buffet table and filled a small plate with snacks. Then she found a table in the corner.

Sandra joined her moments later and kicked off her shoes under the table. "My feet are killing me."

"When are we ever going to learn to wear sensible shoes?" Judith joked.

"Never." They looked over at Carmen and the timeshare people. "That's Dave Hinkle. Every time Carmen has to go to his office in Philly, we have to practically shove her out the door."

It surprised Judith to hear there was someone Carmen didn't like.

"Notice he doesn't have any women in his group. That's no accident."

"He doesn't like women?"

"Not for management. He has other notions of where they belong."

Judith nodded. "I can see why Carmen dreads seeing him. Why doesn't she just cut him off?"

Sandra shrugged. "She's thought about it, but he spends a lot of money with us. And she enjoys telling him how much business he misses out on because he doesn't have enough women agents. Besides, she's too nice-one of the nicest people you'll ever meet."

"I can believe that. I really do appreciate all the attention she's given me this weekend, especially including me in dinner last night. I had no idea it was going to be a bunch of good friends. I hope you guys didn't mind me being there."

"Not at all. Carmen said you would bring something interesting to the group and she was right. Everyone enjoyed meeting you." Sandra slipped her shoes back on and stood. "I guess I need to go run interference and move those folks along."

"Good luck." If figurative things really happened, Judith's head would have exploded from Sandra's praise. She couldn't believe all the wonderful things that had happened this weekend. She had new friends, an exciting job prospect, and for the first time in years, a dose of self-confidence. And she owed it all to a chance meeting with Carmen Delallo.

When the small crowd dispersed, Carmen made her way to where Judith was sitting. Without a word, she stretched across the table and snatched Judith's wine glass. In two gulps, she drained it. Then she shook herself from head to toe and blew out a frazzled breath. "Thanks. I needed that."

"You look like you need a whole bottle."

"I'll manage. It's almost over." She looked at her watch. "They're kicking us out of here in a half hour. If you're up for it, I could use a long walk to unwind."

"I'd love it."

Carmen grinned and saluted before returning to her clients.

Judith thought nine o'clock would never get there, but finally it did. They both donned their heavy coats, scarves, and gloves for a walk along Central Park West toward the hotel. When they stepped outside, Judith got the shock of her life.

"I suppose I should have asked you already if you were seeing anybody," Carmen said, looking out into the night.

"I, uh...no, I'm not." Giddiness rushed through her and she shivered. So that was the missing puzzle piece about why Carmen was being so nice to her. And what a lovely piece it was.

"That'll save us an awkward moment or two."

Judith laughed, feeling herself blush.

"I couldn't believe it when I found your card in my coat pocket. I called Sandra and just went nuts. She kept telling me after lunch the other day that she thought you might be gay but I couldn't tell. Her gaydar's better than mine and she's straight. Go figure."

"If it makes you feel any better, my gaydar sucks too."

"You didn't know?"

"I wondered...I hoped."

"I've spent the whole weekend looking for a chance to say, hey, I'm a lesbian too. Let's do lunch." That got both of them laughing and Carmen reached for her hand.

Judith felt the contact all over, even though both of them were wearing gloves.

They walked in silence for a block before Carmen stopped, pulling Judith over to stand next to the four-foot stone wall that lined this area of Central Park. Slowly, her face moved lower until her lips met Judith's in what started as a tentative kiss but quickly escalated into something more intense.

Judith had never been kissed like this, not by someone who seemed determined to pleasure to her mouth with softness and exploration. Carmen's tongue gently brushed her teeth and lips, seeking more with each stroke. Judith heated up so fast she was ready to tear off their clothes.

"Is the rest of you this nice?" Carmen asked, panting with anticipation.

"You'll have to answer that yourself."

"Does that mean you'll come back to my room?"

It wasn't Judith's style to fall into bed so quickly, but no one had ever thrilled her so much. She wanted to ask Carmen what it meant for them, but it didn't matter. People had affairs at conventions, not relationships. She would worry about it all later. "Yes."

Carmen stepped into the street and hailed a taxi. In just minutes, they reached the hotel, which had cleared out considerably since the convention's adjournment. They blew past the lobby to the elevator, where Carmen smothered Judith with a lustful kiss as soon as the doors closed. "Are you warming up?" she asked.

"I've been getting warmer for the last thirty minutes."

They entered her room, a gigantic suite with a bedroom and bath off to one side. A small tray of desserts sat on the coffee table and Carmen snagged it on her way into the bedroom. She set it on the dresser and turned, pulling off her overcoat and gloves and tossing them over a chair.

Judith did the same, also kicking off her shoes. Never before had she had sex that matched the intensity of Carmen's kisses. This would definitely be a night she wouldn't forget, and one she hoped would be the beginning of the most beautiful thing in her life.

Carmen slipped her hands underneath Judith's lapels and pushed the jacket from her shoulders. Like hungry locusts, her fingers swarmed the bare skin at the collar of her silk shirt. They fell onto the king-sized bed and Carmen rolled on top. "I'm ruining your suit," she murmured, her tongue dipping into Judith's ear. Then she delivered another scorching kiss, all the while trailing her fingers lower to brush the back of her knuckles against Judith's silk-covered breast.

"And it's my best one. I had to do something to get your attention."

"You got it all right, the first time I saw you."

"When you held up your sandwich? That was so silly."

"I was flirting. I wanted to see you lick your lips."

"Admit it. You only noticed me because Bob Durbin stood me up."

"Nope."

"Then it must have been my baptism by bisque."

"No again."

It had started as a playful inquisition, but Carmen's denials had aroused her curiosity. "Then why?"

"Actually, I noticed you because you remind me of someone."

That wasn't an answer Judith had expected. "Someone...you know?"

"A friend of mine in Chicago. A good friend."

Judith tried to shake off a sense of discomfort. "Was it somebody you used to be with? Somebody you...want to be with?"

For the first time, Carmen looked uncomfortable too. "It's no big deal. Why don't we talk about something else?" She kissed Judith on the jaw. "Or better yet, stop talking altogether."

Judith struggled to sit up. "I don't think I'm finished with this one. Who is this person?"

Carmen sighed and fell back on the bed. "She's a friend of mine. Her name's Rebecca and we went to college together. I fell for her but she's straight."

"And you still carry a torch?"

"She's married. I'd never mess with that. But we're still friends."

"And I look like her?"

Carmen nodded, looking away. "You could be sisters."

A long, silent moment passed before Judith blew out a big breath. She should have known a woman like Carmen Delallo wouldn't just pick her out of a crowd at random. "Do all your friends know this Rebecca?"

"Yeah."

"And they all thought I looked like her?"

"Yeah."

Judith groaned. "I think this is creeping me out."

"Don't make it worse than it is. All I said was you looked like her. It's not like I'm pretending that's who you are."

"No, but I feel like you're not seeing me. Or if you do, then I'm not a real person."

"What about me, Judith? Just what is it that you find so appealing?"

"How about everything? You're beautiful...you're sexy. Hell, you're Carmen Delallo, for crying out loud."

"Right. So I'm not a real person to you either. I'm not Carmen. I'm Carmen Delallo, head of a company and friend of all the movers and shakers."

Judith was jolted by the truth of Carmen's words. She wasn't in this room tonight because she had feelings for Carmen, but because she was dazzled by the attention of someone so fabulous. The revelation made her ashamed. "You're right. I suck too."

Carmen chuckled. "So much for our fantasies, huh?"

"No kidding. It's a good thing we didn't get too far. I'm kind of old-fashioned when it comes to wanting to hear my own name called out in the heat of the moment."

"And I've been practicing and everything."

Judith chuckled her shoulder. "You have not."

"Judith," Carmen moaned. "Oh, Judith!" She closed her eyes and contorted her face. "Ju-dithhh!"

That sent them both into fits of laughter and Carmen got up to get the dessert tray. When she sat back down, she picked up a petit-four and held it out to Judith's lips.

"We've already had dessert, you know," Judith said, biting off half.

Carmen ate the rest and mumbled, "Think of it as the consolation prize for not getting to have sex."

Judith picked up her jacket and put it on, walking toward the mirror to straighten her collar. Then

she turned and looked at Carmen, who was somberly staring at the floor. Though they had finished things on a funny note, the air was heavy with disappointment.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out, Carmen. Thanks for a great weekend."

"I'm sorry too. You want me to walk you down?"

Judith shook her head. "I'll be fine. Would you do me a favor and pass on my apologies to Sophia? I don't want to put her on the spot."

"Aw, go ahead and call her. We're all grownups and I don't have to tell her anything about tonight. Besides, I think they could use somebody like you at Z-M."

Judith leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then stepped into her shoes. Coat in hand, she turned one last time and smiled. "I may not know you, but I think you're a pretty good soul."

"...yes, you can start the tour in Geneva, but not for the budget you gave me." Judith covered the phone and blew out a breath of frustration that sent her bangs skyward. "Because the hotels are double what they are in Frankfurt."

She watched as Celia got up from her desk to greet the flower delivery boy, who presented her with a dozen red and pink roses. Celia and her friend Cindy had elevated their friendship to romance over the weekend, and Judith was happy for them.

"Sure, we can start over. But if you want me to put this together, you guys need to get on the same page and tell me what you want." She was usually more diplomatic, but her patience with these women—who had changed their plans five times—was fading fast. "Okay, give me a call and we'll try it again." She hung up and closed the folder.

"Don't people like that just drive you crazy?"

Judith shrugged. "You know how it is. They get excited and start pulling out maps and travel books. Then they see how close they are to someplace else they want to go." Celia obviously had sensed her foul mood and was downplaying the fact that she had just gotten flowers for Valentine's Day. "Those are very pretty."

"Thanks. Cindy's a sweetie."

Judith was still feeling the sting of what had happened with Carmen on Sunday night, and it wasn't just the lingering embarrassment about how she had behaved. She also had begun to

recognize that some of her feelings about Carmen were genuine, not at all tied to how important she was or who her friends were. It was funny the way she had moaned her name and broken the tension at what could have been an extremely awkward moment. And then she had playfully fed her dessert and offered to walk her out. Carmen Delallo-the woman, not the company head-really was a sweet person.

"Wow, I did not know this," Todd said, emerging from his office with his *New York Times*. "Orlando is the top vacation destination in the country, but I bet nobody can tell me who's number two."

In unison, Judith, Celia, and the two other agents groaned, "Branson, Missouri."

Todd looked at all of them in amazement. "So how come we're not doing two tours a week to Branson? Who's on it?"

Judith rolled her eyes at Celia, who covered her mouth to hide a snicker. Todd just didn't get it at all.

A second delivery boy came through the door, this time carrying a gorgeous arrangement that drew everyone's attention. The crystal vase overflowed with long-stemmed tulips in white and lavender.

"Judith O'Shea?"

She gaped, speechless at hearing her name. Surely, there was some mistake.

"She's over there," Celia said, nodding in her direction with a growing smile.

Judith fumbled in her pocket for a tip and made a place on her desk for the fragrant bouquet. Nervously, she plucked the small envelope from its holder and withdrew the card.

Roses are red

Tulips are lavender

What would it take

To get on your calendar?

Beneath the poem was the Chicago phone number she had committed to memory only four days

ago.

Judith drew her cell phone from her desk and walked toward the door, stopping by the coat rack to bundle up. "I think I'm going to take a little walk." She looked at Celia and caught a wink.

"Take your time. We'll hold down the fort."

A place like New York didn't offer much in the way of privacy, but Judith had always appreciated how easy it was to blend in with the fabric of the city. She walked briskly to a park three blocks away and settled on a bench, going over in her head what she wanted to say. Finally, she took a breath and dialed.

"Thank you for calling The Delallo Group. How may I direct your call?"

"This is Judith O'Shea. I'd like to speak to Carmen, please."

Moments later, the line was answered by a familiar voice. "Judith," Carmen moaned. "Oh, Judith."

She burst out laughing. "I just love an obscene phone call in the middle of the day."

"I'm really glad you called," Carmen said seriously. "I was worried you might not."

"How could I not? The flowers are beautiful."

"I'm glad you liked them. I, uh...it turns out I have to be at Zeigler-Marsh for a meeting on Friday and I was wondering if maybe...you might be interested in having dinner and seeing a show."

Yes, Judith wanted to see her again, more than anything. But knowing Carmen, she would make reservations at one of the trendy restaurants and score the best seats for the hottest show in town. "I'd love to, but under one condition."

"What's that?"

"I want you to stay over and spend the next day with me in the Village." She wanted Carmen to see her in her own world, just in case the real Judith wasn't someone she wanted in her life.

"Sounds like an adventure."

"Do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal. And I can't wait."

"Me neither."

"Judith, I really am sorry about last weekend. You may not believe this, but I got home and realized that Rebecca didn't have anything to do with what I was feeling about you."

"I believe you. Because I realized there was more to you than just a hot-shot businesswoman."

"Do you think that means there might be something there?"

"I hope so. I sure would like to find out." Judith felt a surge of giddiness-the same she had felt over the weekend whenever Carmen showed her attention-and forced herself back down to earth. "But this time, I want to get to know the real Carmen."

"What if the real Carmen isn't all that special?"

"I'm betting she is."

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Happy Valentine's Day to all!

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