

Chapter 3

Jill took her seat over the wing and idly watched passengers stow their bags. An inordinate number of svelte blondes seemed to be filing in. Then it hit her, duh. Fellow contestants. The mastermind's website booked them all on the same flight—Miami to Kingston—due to arrive shortly before orientation began.

One cream-skinned goddess with persimmon lips and matching pearls strode down the aisle as if it were a fashion runway. No carryon. Only a petite jacket slung over the shoulder of her gardenia silk dress. She looked neither left nor right, neither faltered nor dodged. Passengers moved out of her way.

Mesmerized, as if by a swaying cobra or a dozen charmers, Jill studied her competition. *Lord, don't let her sit here with me, anywhere but—whew.*

Without seeming to check numbers, the sylph slipped into a seat four rows ahead. How did she do that? Or did she take any seat at will, presuming on the divine right of princesses?

Competition hadn't begun, but already Jill felt out of place and claustrophobic—seized by a desire to escape and breathe freely again. But as she considered this option, a doe-eyed waif with curly black hair stopped in the aisle and examined her ticket stub. Then she stowed an attaché case above, held a Kindle reader in her left hand, and sat down beside Jill. “Hi, you one of the Check-or-Mate maidens?”

“Yes, don't know why. Name's Jill Evert.” She held out her hand.

“Coco Rodgers.” Her grip was surprisingly firm. “I don't know why either, but what the hey, I've never turned down a decent commission, much less a free bundle.”

“You're in sales?”

“Law, most of it pro bono.”

“How do you eat?” The question popped out before Jill thought to think.

Coco laughed and patted her trim tummy. “Very frugally, but it’s very rewarding work. I wouldn’t trade it for all the Applegate billions.”

“Are you—?” Jill began, then noticed the silver Star of David suspended from Coco’s neck.

“Yes, from a long line of Sephardim.”

“Pardon me, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“I know.” Coco grinned. “You thought maybe I was a Christian like you.”

Jill gaped. Something thudded beneath them. Engines whirred.

Coco patted her arm. “Observing mannerisms is part of my job. You remind me of Joe—one of my partners—always proselytizing with puppy-dog eagerness. But he knows better than to start on me.”

The flight attendants began their safety spiel, saving Jill from committing further faux pas. She fastened her seat belt and regarded the demonstration unseeing—her heart pleading with God to cap her mouth and grant Coco as a friend.

Soon they were taxiing. Docked planes and terminals slid by. Chatter filled the compartment then hushed when the captain announced imminent take-off. Jets roared full thrust.

Jill glanced at Coco and found her lost in reading. So Jill gazed out the window and watched the wing climb through layers of mist. Strains of Gershwin’s “Stairway to Paradise” came to mind. She relaxed.

“Did Max grill you on your views of marriage?” Coco asked, startling Jill out of her reverie.

“Max?”

“Sorry, the scout who interviewed you, whichever one he was.”

Jill frowned in puzzlement. “Nobody talked to me.”

“Nobody?”

“Except the guy who delivered the invitation. That’s the first I knew there was a contest.”

Coco whistled through her teeth. “Wow, what’s your special connection?”

Jill looked at her in growing alarm. *Is that it? Was I mistaken for someone else—someone Thornton knew? But no, the chauffeur addressed my cat by name.*

Her seatmate shrugged, her smile fading. “That’s all right. You don’t have to tell me.”

Urgent to explain, Jill poured out her heart. “But I’ve never met Mr. Applegate—didn’t even know he existed. I’m as mystified as you. Really. Please don’t think I have some kind of inside track. I’m just a—” She groped for words to describe her ordinariness. “English professor’s daughter who hasn’t a clue what she’s doing here...but very much needs a friend...like you.”

Coco’s dark eyes lit up again. “Me, too, you. Wouldn’t it be great if they placed us together in the same room?”

Jill nodded and remembered a Jewish prayer. “From your lips to God’s ear.”

They spent the next hour sharing anecdotes of childhood. Jill confessed her first crush, her first date, and her gaffes in trying out for a high school production of “*Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”

Coco revealed how from eight years old she’d dreamed of dancing “*Swan Lake*” at the Met. But her ballet lessons only gained muscled calves and crippled pride. So she channeled her artistic yearnings into pottery and painting.

“Why’d you go into law?” Jill asked. “Seems far removed from the arts.”

With a shrug and squiggle smile, Coco replied, “Ah, well. Since *my* ambitions didn’t seem to be getting anywhere, I gave in to Dad’s—except for the money part. He wanted me to join his corporate law firm that makes millions.”

“So why are you competing, if money means nothing to you?”

“Oh, it’s not for me, it’s for our struggling law center.”

Jill looked at her newfound friend in admiration, floored by her selflessness. “You’d give up ten million for the poor?”

Coco laughed. “Are you kidding? I won’t even make it to five hundred thousand. But our center could sure use it.”

“I hope your partners appreciate your generosity.”

“They’d do the same. We don’t have much, but what we do, we share. The five musketeers—all for one and one for all.”

Jill smiled. “Fighting for justice with paper swords.”

“And you? What do you hope to gain?”

As Jill began to explain her mother’s condition, a raven-haired mannequin with flawless alabaster skin and full moist lips stopped next to them in the aisle, blocked by the coffee cart.

“Excuse me,” she said with a look of impatience, first at the attendant and then down at Coco and Jill. “Excuse me.”

Coco flipped the arm rest up and squeezed herself against Jill. The mannequin stepped in, allowed the cart to pass, then continued toward the lavatory. Without a thank you.

“That’s Emma Waters,” Coco said.

“Who?”

“The lobbyist rumored to have compromised a congressman or two in obtaining votes for the aerospace industry.”

Jill frowned. “Then how did she get chosen—wouldn’t rumors like that ruin her chances?”

Coco sniffed. “I can think of a couple of ways. One, she used her charm on a scout. Two, Applegate discounted the rumors. Or both.”

Impressed with Coco’s inside knowledge, Jill asked. “What kind of man is Thornton Applegate?”

“Ha, that’s what we’re about to find out. He keeps himself sequestered from the press and public. Another Howard Hughes. The tabloids would give anything to smuggle someone where we’re going to witness what we’re about to see and hear.”

“Maybe they have. Maybe they’ve made a deal with a contestant or two.”

Coco shook her head. “Once the paparazzi catch wind of this, they’ll be all over the place—airports, hotels, beaches—we won’t be able to move without running into cameras and reporters. No, I don’t know how Thornton’s managed it—perhaps his aides fear him—but you can bet nobody’s leaked the news yet.”

When a shadow fell across their conversation, Jill looked up. Emma Waters stood scrutinizing them, her ruby-red mouth twisted into a vampirish sneer. “You two? Please tell me you’re the help, not contestants.”

Coco shot her a mock-salute. “Off duty, for the moment, Miss Waters. But I’ll press your dress as soon as we arrive.” She winked. “Will there be anything else?”

Emma’s eyes narrowed and color rose to her cheeks. Hatred seemed to erupt from her eyes like an air-to-air missile. Jill held her breath in expectation of an explosion, but Emma

turned on her heel and stalked off.

For a second Jill couldn't breathe. Then, as the shock wore off, she shivered.

Coco patted her hand. "Don't give her a thought. All bile and no bite. Stand up to her and she scampers away."

Jill shook her head. "N-no, you don't understand. She's the woman in Mom's dream."

"Come again?"

With a shaky voice, Jill related the story and finished with, "Don't you see? I can't doubt any longer because I've met two of the three principals. Emma Waters is the 'raven-haired witch' and Thornton's chauffeur is the 'smiling black man.' "

Coco's eyes narrowed. "Wait, I thought you said you had no connection with the man. How did you meet his chauffeur?"

"He delivered my invitation."

"No, it was just some deliveryman in uniform, like the guy that—"

"I saw the limo," Jill insisted. "Same limo as on the website. And same driver."

"Mordecai Jones? Tall? Jamaican? Built like a bodyguard?" Coco's eyes widened with each nod of Jill's head. "Incredible. Simply incredible."

Jill fell silent, reeling in confusion. There had to be some simple explanation.

"Where did you say you lived?" Coco asked.

"Cheyenne."

Coco shook her head in evident disbelief then chuckled. She grabbed Jill's hand and held on. "I don't know what your secret is, my little shiksa, but I'm sticking close to you, until I find out."

Her clasp felt reassuring, something solid and rooted, while unreality swirled around

Jill's head.

"I'll make you a deal," Coco said at last, releasing her hand.

"What?"

"You tithe, don't you?"

"Yes," Jill said, her responses on autopilot in the mental fog.

"And make charitable contributions to non-profit organizations?"

"Sure."

"Here's the deal, then. I watch your back for as many days as I can—even after eliminated from running, if rules permit—"

Jill nodded.

"I keep Emma Waters and others of her ilk from hassling you—"

Jill raised her eyebrow, not for instant doubting Coco's capacity, in spite of her diminutive size.

"And when you come into your prize money—"

"It won't be mu—"

Coco silenced her with an upraised hand and repeated, "When you come into your prize money, pay me—I mean the Cincinnati Community Law Center—a tenth of a tenth—that's fair, isn't it?"

Too dizzy to do the math, Jill nodded. The deal was worth it at any price.

"Good." Coco smiled, the picture of confidence. "We've got ourselves a topnotch corporation."