

KIMANI™ ROMANCE

THE
Beauty
AND THE
CEO



Once Upon a Tiara



Carolyn Hector

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The Beauty And The Ceo

Аннотация

Undeniable chemistry Makeup artist Zoe Baldwin can't believe the gorgeous guy she flirted with on the way to a job interview was her potential boss. So, when Will Ravens, CEO of his family's cosmetics company, tells Zoe her innovative approach isn't right for his brand, she agrees to work alongside him at a beauty pageant to prove her skills. But where there are sparks, there's certain attraction...Will is fighting to keep his family legacy afloat. He's going back to basics at Ravens Cosmetics, leaving no time for romance or Zoe's avant-garde ideas. But despite his intentions, he finds himself falling deeper under Zoe's sensual spell. Amid the chaos caused by company sabotage, can both their career dreams and passionate fantasies come true?

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As she bounced backward with a prolific apology, the wooden rails creaked. The last thing she needed to do was fall into the water with her tablet. She welcomed the strong pull around her waist, and she reached for the impeccably muscular arms.

"Whoa," the deep and now familiar voice said into her ear.

"Mr. Ravens." Zoe gasped. Once her eyes began to focus, she narrowed in on his lopsided smirk.

"Let's see, we've shared a plane, shared a seat on a plane, and I've walked in on you taking a shower."

Heat burned her cheeks. Zoe held her index finger up to correct him. "Almost in the shower."

Will inclined his head. "Okay, almost. However, I do believe we are beyond the formalities. Please call me Will."

Zoe bit the right corner of her bottom lip. “All right, Will. You’ll have to call me Zoe.”

“It’s a pleasure, Zoe.”

He had no idea what a pleasure it was to still be in his arms.

Dear Reader,

It’s pageant season in Southwood, Georgia. Who doesn’t want to be glitized up by none other than renowned makeup artist Zoe Baldwin? Titles are up for grabs, including the position of creative design director at Ravens Cosmetics.

Zoe is one of those women who’s planned out her life at an early age. She expects to end up seated at the corporate table at Ravens Cosmetics—not in the CEO’s bed. But there’s something to be said about the best-laid plans.

I must confess that I am one of those people who cannot leave the house without mascara. I wouldn’t quite call it a dependency—more like a security blanket. And since I cannot seem to apply a wing tip or false lashes like a pro, I get to pay homage to the professionals in *The Beauty and the CEO*.

Carolyn

The Beauty and the CEO

Carolyn Hector



Having your story read out loud as a teen by your brother in Julia Child's voice might scare some folks from ever sharing their work. But CAROLYN HECTOR rose above her fear. She currently resides in Tallahassee, Florida, where there is never a dull moment. School functions, politics, football, Southern charm and sizzling heat help fuel her knack for putting a romantic spin on everything she comes across. Find out what she's up to on Twitter: [@Carolyn32303](https://twitter.com/Carolyn32303).

I would like to dedicate this book to my ambitious daughter and nieces, Haley, Kayla and Ashleigh. I live vicariously through these talented young ladies.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the Galaxy living in my house. Without their cooperation, I wouldn't get any writing done!

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

Morning rays of sunlight created a halo effect around the godlike body of a six-foot-four man strolling through the parting glass doors of Kelly Towers. A collective gasp of soft feminine sighs rose over the swishing sound of the automatic doors closing. With the sun behind him, the man strolled down the red carpet toward the elevator right where makeup artist Zoe Baldwin stood.

Dear Lord, Zoe began her silent prayer, if ever there were a time to get stuck in the elevator, please let it be now and with him.

The denim jeans he wore clung to his powerful thighs. A thin, white, long-sleeved shirt hugged the sculpted muscles of his arms and abdomen. As he came closer, everyone in the lobby turned their heads in his direction. Thick, dark brows framed his eyes. A prominent chin jutted out from the sharp angles of his long, masculine face. Zoe cocked her head to the left and reached up

to touch the signature hoop earrings she was known to wear. Instead of the cool gold circle, Zoe's fingertip brushed against heirloom pearls handed down from her grandmother. The jewels had a reputation for good luck. Perhaps with this fine-as-hell gentleman coming closer, the hand-me-down stories were true.

Though he didn't carry a portfolio, Zoe pegged her soon-to-be elevator companion as a male model. The fifty-three-story Kelly Towers was home to several of Miami's elite businesses. The local news station was housed on ten floors, while Ravens Cosmetics, Zoe's final destination, was housed on the fortieth through the forty-ninth. Modeling and a few talent agencies were sprinkled throughout the other floors. Zoe guessed he'd get off on one of those floors. For her, the only place she needed to be was at Ravens Cosmetics—the home of the oldest and most successful cosmetic line for people of color in the United States and now globally. And if today went as planned at her interview, she could call Ravens Cosmetics home as well.

In an attempt to flirt, Zoe licked her lips, tasting the hint of honey in the concoction she used for lip balm. The response she received from the gorgeous man was a lopsided, boy-next-door smile mixed with a hint of danger. The sensual curve of his full lips begged to challenge the question every makeup-wearing woman pondered: Was he worth smearing her lipstick for? His lips parted into a dashing smile and crinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes. An older model? Twenty-five? Twenty-eight? She'd heard RC was going in a new direction. It was about

time they added someone more age appropriate to their ads for men. The men in the ads for shaving, lotions and other male grooming products were handsome but also extremely young—as in barely-legal-young. Under thirty as a male was far from old, but in the modeling world he might be ready to retire.

“Hello,” he said.

His deep baritone touched her soul. A powerful shiver trickled down her spine while her knees weakened. “Hi,” she replied.

With the limited skills she had in the flirting department, Zoe batted her lashes and damn it if her cell phone didn’t ring. The old-school Prince song indicated the hotline for one of her closest friends. It was almost a bat signal, and when that song rang, Zoe picked up the phone and answered. “Hey, what’s up?”

Lexi Pendergrass Reyes’s cheerful voice came over the line loud and clear. “I wanted to wish you luck before your interview.”

“You’re so sweet,” Zoe said as she offered an apologetic smile to the handsome man. Zoe stepped backward and did a little spin in an attempt to give the stranger a better view of her angles in her black pencil skirt and red silk Rochas blouse decorated with oversize magnolias. She’d received the blouse at a Vogue photo shoot last year, another lucky memento of her work. “Can I call you right back?”

“Of course,” Lexi said, “but don’t forget. On top of wishing you the luck you don’t need, I do have a huge favor to ask of you.”

The flashing triangle light above the elevator doors indicated it was coming in a few seconds. “The answer is yes. I don’t even

have to know what it is.”

“You say that now. Bye, girl.”

Zoe swiped the icon on her cell to hang up the call. She took a deep breath, ready to speak to her male model again. As a makeup artist, she noticed he needed no cover-up. She'd known some models and actors who'd paid to have cheekbones as sculpted as his.

“So,” he began, leaning against the marble wall near the up and down arrow-shaped buttons of the elevator.

“So,” Zoe repeated.

She was prepared to have some form of meaningful conversation in the span of the few seconds provided before the elevator arrived, but that was interrupted when the doors on the first floor, leading to the building's cafeteria, opened up. It was not unusual in a place like this to run into some of the local celebrities. A gaggle of girls screamed at the sight of Zoe. Zoe and her magic beauty box kits were the reason certain faces graced the covers of top beauty magazines. She'd decorated the faces of movie stars, governors and their spouses, singers and television reality stars. Torn between not having seen these ladies in quite some time and getting to the meat of this conversation with the hot guy, Zoe offered another apologetic smile. The man stepped forward and extracted a business card from his back pocket to give to her, then winked before turning to take the door into the stairwell.

“Hey, guys,” said Zoe, slipping the card into the front of her

purse. “What’s going on today?”

The half-dozen girls began to complain all at once about having to come in this morning for a music video which was being filmed in the cafeteria. Something about their makeup not being right and begging Zoe to ace the interview.

“Girl, that outfit is giving me life! There really should be no reason for you to interview,” said Clarita Benson. She was a six-foot-three model in flats.

The next tallest was six-two, a former volleyball star turned model. Her blond hair stuck out at the ends like straw. “I heard Marcus Ravens say you were the best person for the job.”

“I guess we’ll see in a little bit.” Zoe shrugged her shoulders and craned her neck. Thankfully, the elevator doors opened with a loud ding. “Listen, ladies, I’ve got to head off and ace this interview.”

The doors closed as the girls chorused, “Good luck!” Zoe leaned against the back of the compartment. She smiled at her reflection, knowing she’d dressed the part.

In truth, Zoe knew she was the right person for the position as the Creative Design Director at Ravens Cosmetics. She had a BS in biochemistry and an MS in cosmetic chemistry, both from Fairleigh Dickinson University, held a license as a beautician and was the number one most-requested makeup artist at Fashion Week in New York, London, Milan and Paris. Her work with artists at Coachella over the last five years had gotten her noticed for the CDD position at several cosmetic companies.

Zoe only wanted to set roots down in the Miami office of Ravens Cosmetics. Call it a predestined destination. Her great-grandmother Sadie, affectionately known as GiGi, ran one of the largest cosmetology schools in the Southeast. As a teen growing up in Trinidad, Gigi loved getting ready for the masquerade, also known as “Mas,” at Carnival. For a touch of home, she named her new school after the beloved event. Before leaving Mas Beauty School, all the students wanted to be an employee at Ravens Cosmetics, one of the oldest and most successful cosmetics companies founded by an African American woman for people of color. It would be a sign of success to join their company. Tears of pride and joy threatened to escape the corners of her eyes as she realized how close she was to following in her grandmother’s footsteps.

Just last week at the after-party of a successful swimsuit fashion show, RC’s president, Marcus Ravens, had told Zoe the job was practically hers. The models on both of his arms swore Zoe was the best. And modestly Zoe had agreed.

Traveling in fashion circles, Zoe had met Marcus’s other board members, a group made up of siblings and cousins from the large family. Each of the directors represented shareholders, the elders of Ravens Cosmetics.

It had been hard to gauge how some of the Ravens women felt about her. In the world of fashion and cosmetics, everyone was either an enemy or an ally. For a very brief moment in Zoe’s life she’d modeled. Her knowledge of the industry, inside

and out, put her in a threatening position. Plenty of times she'd overstepped the bounds as a makeup artist, questioning the chemicals the other cosmetologists wanted to put on someone's face. She almost became difficult to work with. With her degree in cosmetic chemistry she could easily start her own line. But Zoe wanted stability in her life. Her parents married young before they had a chance to live out their dreams, before settling down. Seeing her parents struggle to stay together while reaching their own goals put a damper on Zoe's outlook on relationships. Things were changing now. She was established and not to mention older than her parents had been when they married. Thirty was rapidly knocking on her door and a faint biological clock was ticking in the back of her mind.

Having reaffirmed her worth, Zoe took a deep breath. When the elevator dinged to announce her presence on the fortieth floor, the doors parted and opened up to a quieter situation than on the first floor. A half-circle African blackwood desk drew Zoe's attention immediately, along with a receptionist who had curly blond hair pulled up in a frizzy ponytail at the top of her head. A headset rested somewhere in the hair, Zoe guessed, because the girl held her finger up in Zoe's direction but finished the conversation on the other end of the line before disconnecting the call.

"Miss Baldwin?" The young girl, whose foundation was poorly blended from her face to neck, rolled her eyes at the sight of Zoe. Clearly not a fan.

Zoe smiled and nodded. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Okay, so, you and the others are in the waiting room over there.”

The others? Using the eraser end of a pencil, the receptionist pointed toward a glass room adjacent to her desk. A minute ago Zoe had been giving herself a pep talk. She was sure the job was hers and she knew she’d earned it. But there were others? She stood at the glass door to the conference room where just over a half-dozen women and men sat waiting at a large oval table made of the same wood as the reception desk. In an instant, Zoe recognized everyone at the table, including Titus, her nemesis.

To make it to this level of her profession, Zoe had come across several—as the young model clients had called them—haters, and Titus was not her number one fan. The one-name wonder scowled through the glass at Zoe, his long, tacky feather lashes clumping together, causing him to have to pry them apart with his loud pink fingernails. Zoe refrained herself from rolling her eyes by sighing instead. The man claimed to be the best yet can’t figure out which adhesive glue for lashes worked best. At the AJ Crimson event last year, Zoe’d almost had to tell him about himself when she found her artist’s kit at his station. He claimed the kit was accidentally placed there but Zoe knew better. He tried to steal it. A makeup artist’s beauty kit was as important to them as a doctor’s stethoscope, a police officer’s badge or even a mechanic’s tools. Zoe admired AJ Crimson for becoming a leader in the beauty world, bringing his popular brand of

cosmetics to pop culture through hip-hop music and current top television shows. How badly did she want the Creative Design Director position? Zoe took a step backward.

“You’re not leaving, are you, Zoe?”

Zoe turned around at the sound of Marcus Ravens’s voice. An automatic smile spread across her face at the sight of him. Marcus was a handsome man, tall, dark and charming. Zoe returned his friendly smile. All the models who did work for RC had gushed about him. “Hello, Marcus.”

“Are you going in?” Marcus nodded his head at the door. The others inside craned their necks.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” said Zoe.

Marcus retreated a step and glanced in both directions down the hall. He stepped closer to Zoe and touched her elbow. “There is, or was,” he said and shook his head. “There has been a slight change of plans. You see, my brother is here.”

Zoe slowly shook her head to the left and then the right. “Okay? I spoke with Donovan last week. He assured me the job is mine. All I’d have to do is meet with the board.”

“It is yours,” Marcus exclaimed. “You know you’re the best person for the job.”

“It seems someone thinks several people are the perfect person for the job.” Zoe inclined her head toward the room of other makeup artists.

“That’s what I’m trying to explain.” There was a panic in Marcus’s deep voice. He pressed one hand on Zoe’s shoulders

as a vein pulsed at his temples, which he tried to cover up by scratching the back of his neck with his other hand. “My brother—my other brother, Will—is responsible.”

“Will?” Zoe repeated. “I thought I knew everyone in your family.”

Back in middle school, Zoe had done one of her best biography reports on the Ravens family. She’d once known their family tree like the back of her hand. The Ravens started at the turn of the century selling beauty products to the wives of the men working on the railroad. It was Marcus’s grandparents, Joe and Naomi Ravens, who’d slapped a label on their business and marketed it nationally. Zoe learned all about the following generations of Ravens through the Roaring Twenties and the forties to the present. The younger generations were all connected via social media. All of the family members worked for Ravens, right?

On numerous occasions Zoe had crossed paths with the Ravens family, either in the Miami Design District or at Miami’s Fashion Week.

“He’s our youngest brother, and my cousins nominated him to be the CEO of RC.”

“Okay?” Zoe said slowly, still not following what that had to do with her and this interview.

“Will believes he should look at everyone interested in being the CDD.”

Zoe’s heart ached with a surge. “I’m not understanding,

Marcus. You're the president."

"The CEO has a little more pull than the president," Marcus explained. "And right now, he's our last chance at keeping RC running."

The rumors were true. Someone wanted to shut down Ravens Cosmetics. Zoe's heart ached as if she'd been wronged. How could anyone think about dissolving this company? Five minutes ago she'd pumped herself up about wanting to board the RC ship. Now it felt like the ship was sailing away while she stood on the pier watching it depart. She asked herself again, how badly did she want to be the Creative Design Director?

"This is then a waste of my time, Marcus. I am too qualified to have to go through a screening process." Zoe turned to leave. Through the glass, Zoe thought she saw Titus mouthing something to her. She was not in the mood for a fight. "Either you like my work or you don't."

With his hands still on her shoulders, Marcus clamped down firmly. He turned her to face him so her back was to the receptionist area. "I do, my brothers and sisters do, and Will is going to feel the same way."

"You guys brought in Titus." A tic began to flutter underneath her right eye. The other makeup artist was good, of course he was. But he'd copied her trademark '80s style. This was too much stress for her. Zoe sighed impatiently. Great-Grandma Sadie would have a fit if she knew Zoe got this far only to abandon her own resolve. "I just can't deal with this, Marcus."

“Will you at least listen to me first? I’ll get Donovan on the phone.”

“I’m right here.” Donovan’s familiar voice filled the hallway.

Not wanting any pity, Zoe didn’t dare turn around. Like his brother, Donovan had an extremely charismatic smile. Ever the charmer, he always knew how to bring out a natural blush on any model Zoe had worked on. If she glanced at Donovan, Zoe knew she’d swoon, and right now she was too pissed off to be cheered up. She kept her angry focus on the Windsor knot of Marcus’s tie.

“Tell her everything is still going on as planned,” Marcus said over her head to his brother.

“The interviewing process?” Donovan asked, and Marcus nodded. “It’s just a process.”

“Someone too good for an interview?” Another deep voice asked.

While the voice may have been sexy, the tone was not. Zoe spun on her heels, prepared to give this person a piece of her mind when she stopped and gaped. Instead of the fitted shirt and jeans she’d seen him in earlier at the elevator, he now wore a tailored, classically cut two-thousand-dollar navy blue suit with a blue-and-yellow paisley tie. Suits made Zoe’s knees weak the same way lingerie did men’s.

“You?” The man brushed roughly against Donovan’s shoulders without apologizing.

“You?” Zoe repeated. “I don’t understand.” Zoe wondered how she hadn’t recognized the similarities.

“Will, this is Zoe Baldwin, the woman we’ve been talking about.” Donovan clamped his hands on his brother’s back. “Zoe, this is our baby brother, Will.”

“You’re a makeup artist?”

“She’s the B in Beauty Business,” Donovan interjected.

So, the man from the elevator wasn’t a struggling model? Judging from the expensive suit he wore, he was far from struggling. Zoe shrugged her shoulders indifferently. “Artist, genius, whatever you want to call me is fine.”

“How about we keep it simple and call you interviewee number six?” Will asked.

Gone was the charming smile from downstairs. Zoe’s hand brushed against the front pocket where she shoved his business card. She extracted it and fingered the raised letters, assuming it gave the three initials of his position. CEO. Jesus Christ, this man with a dry sense of humor held her fate in his hands. Somewhere in the back of her mind Zoe heard the proverbial ship sound its horn and sail off into the ocean.

* * *

At six in the evening, Will Ravens sat back in his newly ordered chair and tried to get the feel of it and the new position. He was in over his head. As a former professional soccer player for the Texas Raiders, the only thing he knew about women was what he was attracted to. Not being raised in the family business, Will did not possess the same keen cosmetic eye as his siblings. He knew what he’d liked and what he’d seen in the portfolios

from the interviews this afternoon. There was nothing to catch his eye—but that wasn't necessarily true. The woman's face from earlier this afternoon entered his mind. He thumbed through the portfolios of the potential CDDs. A silver paper clip fastened to the manila folder secured a photo of Zoe Baldwin's heart-shaped face to the outside.

How was she the woman behind the makeup and not on the runway? Her flawless sienna-and-gold skin was radiant. Her chestnut-brown hair, secured today at the back of her neck, did not do her justice as the photograph before him did. In it, her mane hung over her shoulders and she smiled for the camera with one raised brow and a playful smile across her face.

“So, what did you think of Zoe Baldwin?”

Will dropped the portfolio at the unexpected interruption and cursed under his breath. “Jesus, Donovan, don't you knock?”

“We're family.”

“All the more reason to knock,” Will joked. The last round of complaints from their cousins were due to Donovan's dating the models. He went through at least one on a weekly basis. They threw themselves at him. The one thing a lot of models wanted more than a modeling contract for a spread in an RC ad was to land one of the Ravens men. Having his brothers in charge of anything dealing with models was as productive as letting a fox guard a henhouse. Fortunately, Will, the youngest of the men, had more common sense.

Less than ten years ago, the new generation of Ravens

had been placed on the board. Everyone owned an equal share of Ravens Cosmetics. Half of Will's cousins wanted to dismantle the company. They were tired of the meetings and responsibilities. Will knew his great-grandparents were rolling in their graves at the idea. For the cousins, even the limited time they had to spend in the office was still too much. Will and his siblings, along with a handful of cousins, wanted to keep the legacy alive. The problem was, they were a band of eight against a band of another eight.

Donovan nodded his head. "Alright, you got me there." He stepped inside Will's office and made himself comfortable in one of the matching leather seats in front of Will's desk. "So, I'll ask you again, what did you think of Zoe?"

"Which one was she?" Will needed to play dumb. When the position opened up, Will was skeptical when Donovan suggested Zoe Baldwin. Given Donovan's track record, Will didn't want to risk any form of lawsuit. Given the chemistry Will felt when he spotted Zoe at the elevator, Will did not want to admit his attraction to a potential employee.

Gossip spread like wildfires in office settings. Kelly Towers, and all the businesses housed on the floors, was not immune to the tabloids. Home to the local news station, celebrity appearances and eager folks trying to catch a break in the media world, this building was often the target of tabloid spies. Will prided himself on his discretion. He took dating a person seriously. In a building filled with scantily clad women and men

representing everything Ravens Cosmetics had to offer, spotting the demure woman at the elevator had been the highlight of his life for the last few weeks. Will's days of going through women were over. He was tired of women impressed by and after his money. Will never realized how much he appreciated the classic beauty of a woman until he'd seen her. She'd worn a simple skirt, a somewhat loud red blouse and pearls at her ears, as well as around her slender neck. When was the last time a woman wore pearls around her neck as a part of an outfit—not several strands of pearls as an outfit?

Will summed up Zoe Baldwin in one word: beautiful. There had been an instant connection between them when he walked into the hallway downstairs. It had been the first time he'd actually passed out one of the business cards he was given when he took on his role of CEO. If his brothers and sisters knew Will had almost asked her out today, they'd never leave him alone about it. His cousins would never trust his decisions if he acted like Donovan or Marcus.

"Y'all talking about the interviews today?" Marcus asked, poking his head in the door.

"Yes," Donovan said, leaning back in his chair to look at their oldest brother. "And Will is trying to act like he doesn't know which one Zoe was."

Marcus chuckled and entered the room. He took the seat next to Donovan and propped his elbows on Will's desk. "The one you drooled so much over, we needed to get the cleaning crew to

mop up the saliva? The one who caused the hallway to become so sexually charged when she and Will laid eyes on each other?"

It was going to take some time for Will to get used to being around his family like this. Luckily his sisters, Dana and Eva, were out of town at a convention. They would already have started planning his wedding. Will needed to get used to the idea of carrying on his grandparents' corporate legacy before he thought about adding to it.

"You ought to go into creative writing," Will said with a dry yawn.

"I've got my hands full being president." Marcus glanced down at his fingers.

As Marcus inspected his cuticles, Donovan and Will dramatically bowed down at the president, a teasing move they did every time Marcus felt the need to inform them of his title. No one wanted to be the president. The president was the face of the company with not as much power as people believed. But if anyone needed to be the face, it was Marcus. He was what Will considered pretty, with soft brown hair and deeply tanned skin, helped out a bit by the Miami sun.

Thanks to a car accident a few years ago, Donovan never wanted to be in the public eye. He wanted to hide the long scar down his cheek from the cameras. No matter the differences Will saw between himself and his brothers, everywhere they went, people always knew they were siblings.

"You guys are jerks, you know that?" asked Marcus with a

tight smile.

“You guys nominated me, a guy with no credibility in the business other than my last name, to be the CEO while I was recuperating,” Will said drily. “So sue me if I don’t feel sorry for you.”

“By ‘recuperating—’” Donovan raised his hands for air quotes “—you mean you were at your sci-fi convention?”

Will pressed his hands on top of the portfolios. “I believe you were right there next to me in a Flash mask.”

Marcus’s head snapped toward Donovan. “You said you were in New York.”

“I was, right after Comic-Con.”

Before his brothers went off on a tangent, Will cleared his throat. “Let’s talk about the interviews today. I’d like to be on a united front before we meet back with the cousins.”

His grandparents carried on a long family tradition of creating products for the community. They’d raised their six kids in a modest four-bedroom home in Overtown, a predominately African American neighborhood in Miami. His great-great-grandmother had sold hair-care products to the women whose husbands worked on the railroads. Skin-care and hair-care products had helped mold the Ravens into a millionaire family back in the day. Will wanted to make sure Ravens Cosmetics made it to one hundred years in business.

Will concentrated on his brothers in front of him. “Who did y’all like?”

“Zoe,” Donovan and Marcus chorused.

Will liked Zoe, but he wasn't sure it was for the same reasons as his brothers. It wasn't like Will to arrive at RC late, as he had that morning. His cousins Katie and Dixon had conveniently forgotten to remind him of the time change for the interviews. And to make matters worse, he'd worked out with Dixon this morning. No wonder Dixon had hopped off the treadmill a few miles sooner than normal. Will should have known better. These cousins were ready to dissolve Ravens Cosmetics. He frowned. Will refused to let that happen on his watch.

“I'm not sure she's what I had in mind for such a position.”

“And what did you have in mind?”

Flipping open the portfolio with Zoe's face on it, Will thumbed through the photographs of all the women and men she'd worked on. “This work is too busy for me. We're here to support the everyday woman, and she paints a face like they're eighties rock stars.”

“Paints a face?” Marcus snickered as if he'd said something erroneous. “What's wrong with that?”

“I want to go in a different direction. I want something more classic.” Will sat back in his seat and poised his fingers like a steeple. “Like a 1940s look.”

“You want to start a new retro look?” asked Donovan.

“See, that's what is wrong with you two.” Will shrugged his shoulders and continued without waiting for an answer. “What's wrong with it? Everyone else is looking for these loud colors

and makeup so heavy the girls resemble raccoons. I'm trying to save the company with something new this generation hasn't experienced."

"And you think you can bring classic back? Women evolved from that style, as well. Zoe is hot right now."

Will shrugged again. Yes, Zoe was hot now and if she worked here, she'd also be un-dateable. "Hey, you guys put me in this position. I can take it, but you are going to have to trust me on this. Tell me the truth, do you really want to bring your lady to Sunday dinner looking like this?" Will held up one of the jobs Zoe had done and shook his head. At the elevator she'd given off a classic vibe, but her body of work on paper did not interest him. "No, I want to take things in a new direction. Trust me."

Chapter 2

By the time Zoe turned the lock on her door at the Cozier Condos off Biscayne Boulevard, she was tired and heartbroken. Humiliated was a better description of her day. Never before had she expected to go through the stressful interview process to prove her worth. Well, maybe not never. Once she'd had to interview for the job as a scoop girl at The Scoop's Ice Cream Parlor back in Southwood, Georgia, when Zoe's love for makeup had exceeded her allowance. She had to prove to the owners she loved ice cream and all of the flavors they had to offer. Hopefully Zoe's most stressful interviews would be her first and her last.

The set of house keys jingled with a clink into the clear bowl on top of the credenza. The weight of the keys shifted the bowl

into yesterday's mail, nudging the silver box with gold writing on top. The latest Ravens Cosmetic Artist Kit filled with fabulous foundation colors had arrived, along with the silver tubes of lipstick. Zoe broke out one bullet-shaped container and inspected the color—No Shade. Usually these beauty boxes excited her, but today's mood rippled with disappointment.

When in doubt, Zoe always called on a hometown friend for advice. On her phone, she pressed the icon she had for Lexi—a tiara—and waited for the beauty queen to answer. While Lexi had gone to a different school during the year, she came home to Southwood for the summers and she and her friends had taken Zoe under their wing.

Lexi answered on the second ring. "How did it go today?"

"It was nothing like I expected," Zoe drawled. She set the phone on the counter and swiped the speaker button for a hands-free conversation while she fiddled around in her condo's kitchen. "I had to wait in the conference room like a person trying to..." Zoe lost her words.

"Get a job?" Lexi provided.

Even though Lexi couldn't see, Zoe rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I have a job. Several of them. Did you forget the MET Awards are coming up next in August and Fashion Week after that?"

Celebrities were already requesting Zoe's help for the big event for Multi-Ethnic Television. She had high-profile weddings in the Midwest on the schedule as well, and a few more job

interviews up north. Travel was her middle name. At least the MET event was going to be held in Orlando this year.

“But you want just the one. You wanted to be in a permanent spot.” Lexi reminded her. “Or, at least, that’s what you told me the last time we spoke. I bet your suitcase isn’t even unpacked from your stint in Hollywood.”

Since her overnight bag was still by her laundry-room door, Zoe decided not to confirm Lexi’s statement. Instead, she hummed a little ditty for a moment while her eyes searched the kitchen counter for something to eat. Finding the bag of roti from Trudy’s, the local West Indian market and restaurant around the corner, Zoe grabbed a piece of the bread made from stone-ground flour and went to the refrigerator for the questionable leftover curry from last week. While the food heated up, Zoe grabbed the phone, took it off the stand and headed off toward her bedroom. Her apartment had only two bedrooms, a small living room and a dinette and kitchen, but it was home—subleased, but still home.

“I can still call in some favors with RC,” said Lexi.

It seemed there wasn’t a person in the fashion world Lexi did not know. Her store, Grits and Glam Gowns, was renowned. As women flocked there for dresses, whether for proms, pageants or weddings, a mention of her product meant everything in the world to a company. Lexi had a lot of power.

“No.” Zoe shook her head. “I want to earn this job without any favors. The president told me I’m golden. But this round of

interviews is thanks to their new CEO.”

“So, who is the CEO of RC now?” Lexi asked. “Donovan?”

“No,” Zoe groaned. “His name is Will Ravens.”

“Wait, the soccer player?”

“No.” Zoe hummed a noise again, kicking out of her heels and footing them into the closet. “He’s the CEO. Donovan and Marcus introduced him to us.”

“Is he hot, like his brothers?” asked Lexi.

“Lexi!” Zoe gasped, wanting more than anything to elaborate on exactly how hot Will Ravens was. “You’re married with a baby on the way.”

“I’m married, not blind,” Lexi reminded her. “If it’s who I think it is, William Ravens played soccer and was hurt during a game. I want to say a broken leg.”

Slipping out of her skirt, Zoe padded barefoot into the bathroom. “Since when did you become the sports fan?”

“You can thank my beautiful husband for that.” Lexi giggled on the other end of the line. Zoe thought it was a nice laugh. She wanted something like that one day. A man who made her blush just by thinking of him. “I’m pretty sure he paused the match to show me the horrific leg break,” Lexi went on.

The corners of Zoe’s lips turned down. “Ouch. Well, this Will Ravens did not show signs of any leg injury.”

As a matter of fact, Zoe thought wantonly, she thought his strut was rather sexy. At least, she had when she thought he was simply a model. As a makeup artist, Zoe was constantly around

handsome men. None of them ever had her wanting to jump in a cold shower. How was it going to work out when she got the job at RC? Zoe shrugged and pushed the thought out of her mind.

“Lexi, what was it you were going to ask me earlier?”

“Oh, that. I need you to come home for an event next week,” said Lexi. “I’m hosting the Miss Southwood Glitz Pageant and I need a nonbiased makeup artist. Please say you’ll come. I’ve booked up Magnolia Palace from Monday to next Sunday. All the judges and working staff will start coming in Tuesday. I want everyone to get to know each other so they can trust their opinions when it comes time to voting and making this the best pageant ever.”

The mere mention of the old hotel, Magnolia Palace, evoked a memory of Zoe’s youth. She closed her eyes and heard the sound of her bare feet pounding down the wooden planks as she raced to jump off the bridge. Her parents met on that same bridge. Her mother had been a model and her father out fishing. He’d certainly snagged the biggest catch of his life that day. “Now, how am I going to say no to an offer like that?”

“You’re not,” Lexi laughed.

“Since I won’t be starting my CDD position any time soon, I’ll be there. Text me the details.”

Zoe swiped her phone to the off screen and stood in the center of her bedroom, contemplating what to do next. She was hungry, but the recent talk of Will Ravens began to make her sweat—again. A shower would do her some good, then she’d eat the

curry.

Fifteen minutes after her ice-cold shower, Zoe padded barefoot back into her kitchen and reheated her food. She'd slipped her cell phone into the front pocket of her fluffy pink bathrobe and felt it vibrate on her thigh as she sat at the counter.

You were great today. A decision will be made in a few weeks.

Zoe reread Marcus's text message two more times. How was she supposed to go to bed tonight knowing she hadn't secured the position of Creative Design Director? Her life was being held up by a man she knew nothing about. Where had he gone to school? Had he been a business major or something in the field of cosmetic chemistry? What had Lexi said? He'd played sports before deciding to join the family business? A feeling of dread sunk to the pit of her stomach at the thought of her life being upheld by an athlete. At least she knew that by the weekend she'd be back home in Southwood and away from the drama for a while.

* * *

Will didn't look up from the rest of the portfolios after his brothers left to pick up dinner. In soccer he'd put in his time on the field and in the locker room. He spent more time on the field finessing his skills than in the club, like some of his teammates. Will knew the odds were against him. He had no training and no experience other than on the soccer field. Since coming to RC, Will couldn't remember getting home before the sun set. Trudy's, the West Indian market and restaurant down the block, saw more

of him than his own kitchen.

The grandfather clock in the corner of the office chimed eight. A smile tugged at his mouth. When they were kids, he and his brothers used to play hide-and-seek on this floor of the building. Will's favorite place was in here, where Grandpa Joe shared the office space with his wife. With a chuckle, Will realized why they'd shared an office. If Grandma was going to stay late at work, so was Grandpa. It must have been nice to have someone who stayed with you if you couldn't get home on time.

Now that he wasn't traveling full time or training, Will wondered if any of that would happen to him. Would he have someone to share office space with, or who would sit back with a knowing smile as his children played in here? Grandma Naomi was going on ninety. So far, her six children had blessed her with over a dozen grandchildren.

The stack of portfolios in front of him moved and the top folder shifted. A knock at his door sounded and brought Will out of his daze.

Through the glass door he spotted his identical twin cousins, Joyce and Naomi. Each was beautiful enough to be the face of RC. They were easily six feet tall, with high cheekbones and perfectly arched brows that they loved to raise at Will during their meetings whenever he asked a question about their marketing department. Will considered them allies in this war to dismantle RC. He waved them in.

Joyce, the older by seven minutes, sat down first in one of the

chairs in front of his desk. Naomi, however, crossed the room to admire the photographs Will refused to throw away.

“What’s going on, ladies?”

“We have a great suggestion for you,” said Joyce.

Will sat back in his seat and silently prayed for Marcus and Donovan to return with dinner. Whatever the girls wanted from him, they’d decided to team up.

The reason they worked so well together was they were complete opposites. Joyce was more business oriented. Naomi was more of the partying type, ironic since she was their grandmother’s namesake. Joyce had more of the ninety-year-old woman’s personality, business first.

“Uh-oh, do I need reinforcements?” Will teased and pretended to pick up the black office phone on the corner of his desk. “Marcus and Donovan should be back any minute now.”

“What we are suggesting,” said Naomi from her corner of the room, “your brothers will wholeheartedly agree to, since it will be good for business.”

The deep breath he took brought in her coconut scent, a perfume he recognized from Ravens Cosmetics. “Alright.”

“With you coming on as the new CEO—”

“Coming on?” Will repeated, flabbergasted. “Why does everyone say that as if I had a choice? I believe the two of you were the first ones to second the nomination, knowing good and well I’m out of my league.”

Naomi rolled her eyes. “I would have nominated you first, but

Charles beat me to it.”

“Anyway,” Naomi huffed. “If you are serious about turning things around, we think it would be a great idea for you to fly up to Southwood, Georgia, as our representative.”

“Where?” Will began flipping through the paperwork on his desk. His frat brother, Dominic Crowne, recently moved his luxury car business to a town with that name.

“Exactly,” said Joyce. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk. “I need you to be someplace out of your element. I want you to be a judge at this beauty pageant a business associate of RC’s is having.”

The only thing Will could think of was some guy in a tuxedo holding a long-stemmed microphone and singing to a crowned woman. “No.”

“Will,” Joyce and Naomi wailed.

“What do I know about beauty pageants?”

“You’re a guy, right?” Naomi asked, and answered without waiting for a response. “You just vote on who the prettiest is.”

Zoe Baldwin’s smiling face at the elevator popped into his mind. He’d already met the prettiest woman. “I don’t want to do it. Get Marcus or Donovan.”

“Seriously?” Naomi asked drily. “There’s a reason we’ve learned to knock on the office doors of your brothers. C’mon, Will. It’s important you make a name for yourself.”

“Look, Will,” Joyce snapped, “Ravens Cosmetics is the sponsor at this pageant every year. If you don’t do it, it will be

someone like Charles or Brandon or even Dixon. You and I both know that isn't what we need right now, especially with our other choices being your horndog brothers.”

“Seriously? Me?”

Joyce shrugged her shoulders. “Over the years, Lexi Reyes has been a great asset for Ravens Cosmetics.” She gave a brief history about their former beauty queen and her golden touch, and how the company had been sponsoring her pageants for years. This was the first Will had ever heard of it.

“And so, if you help Lexi out, it will give RC a platform to change the way some consumers see us—we're not simply retro but classic, like you've suggested. Our brand will be the only one used for the pageant. Our gift bags of mascara, eye shadows and lotions will go to all the attendees. Do you know how many Southern women attend pageants? Our research shows most women below the Mason-Dixon Line aren't interested in the avant-garde. We can tap into this community and save RC. And that's what you claimed you wanted to do. Or was that a lie?”

“Hell, no.” Will slammed his hand on the top of the portfolios. “I don't care what our cousins think. RC is not dead.” Will's gut twisted with doubt. The twins made a great point. What he lacked in experience, he made up for in determination. RC was not dead and had another hundred years left. He didn't want to risk ignoring a potential market. But a beauty pageant? He hated himself for being suckered in. “Okay, fine, send me the information. What night do I have to be there?”

“Well, here’s the thing,” Naomi started. “In order for you to be there and be able to mesh with the other judges, you need to be there for maybe a week.”

“What?” Will exclaimed.

Joyce held her hands up to calm him down. “It won’t be that bad.”

“I just started here last month. I don’t have a week to give.” He calculated the forty-plus hours a week he’d already been putting in and knew that time was still not enough. His cousins would be hovering like vultures if he left his throne for more than a few days.

“Think about how committed the family will see you are if you take the time to represent our products.”

She had to go there. Will’s weakness. His family’s legacy was his kryptonite. Sales were down. People were losing interest in Ravens Cosmetics. They wanted something fresh and new. Well, if anyone could go to this Southwood and turn things around, it was him. “When do I leave?”

* * *

Armed with a suitcase filled with cosmetics, Zoe checked her bags at the counter at Miami International Airport on Tuesday morning and got herself cleared through security. If she was lucky, her plane would be there, allowing her to board.

This wasn’t her first trip on a plane. She knew it was best to take a change of clothes in her carry-on. No matter how long or short the flight, Zoe always showered after traveling. For

this two-hour flight, Zoe dressed in a pair of comfy boyfriend jeans, worn white canvas shoes and her favorite loose T-shirt, bedazzled in pink with Wear More Mascara across the chest. As she rounded the corner toward her terminal, she realized she had no such luck. And every seat in the waiting area was taken. Children pressed their faces against the windows, smudging the glass with their sticky hands as they watched the other planes taking off.

Zoe had no patience to deal with the man standing behind her she just caught checking out her rear end. The joker wasn't even embarrassed; he wiggled his brows at her and licked his lips. The only man on Earth, as far as Zoe was concerned, who was allowed to lick his lips at her was LL Cool J.

“Miss Baldwin?” Will Ravens closed the gap from the private area to where she stood. “I thought I recognized you.”

For a moment, Zoe forgot how to speak. Will Ravens, the man she needed to hate right now, stood before her in a pair of jeans and a fitted green V-neck shirt, causing her to melt into a puddle as he smiled at her. Dark hairs were sprinkled across his sculpted jaw. A white sign in front of the blue terminal waiting room where he stood alone indicated the area was for passengers detoured from the hangar. Was the private area for other jets, full planes or those under construction? Zoe's mind raced with questions. Why was he here? Where was he going? How did she look? “Mr. Ravens?”

“Is everything okay?” he asked with a tilt of his head.

Blinking and then nodding, Zoe laughed lightly. “Oh, yes, sorry. I must have airport brain.”

“That’s a thing?” Will asked with a crooked grin.

“Yeah, you know, when you have fear of flying.” Zoe inclined her head in the direction of the crowded terminal. “Not necessarily with the whole airplane thing, but who you’re going to end up sitting with.”

Will glanced in the direction she’d indicated and Zoe’s eyes followed. Without any regard for the man currently standing next to her, another stranger blew a kiss at her. “Is it safe to assume you don’t want to end up sitting next to him?”

An Elvis Presley snarl stretched Zoe’s top lip as she shivered. “Exactly.”

“You could end up sitting next to me,” said Will.

Zoe gave her undivided attention back to the hunk before her. “Like you would fly commercial.”

“I’ve flown commercial before.” Will frowned. The corners of his lips turned upside down in the cutest way. “I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth.”

As she took a step backward, Zoe folded her arms across her chest and cocked one questioning brow. Everything about him screamed one percent.

Will pressed his hand against his heart and bowed his head. “For the record, I’ve been on the company plane just a few times.”

“And today makes what? Your tenth time on your private

plane?”

In response, Will nodded his dark head. “Every three commercial trips we get a bonus. We get to bring a guest with us. What do you say? Can I give you a lift?” The humorous tone matched the smirk on his face.

Uncrossing her arms, Zoe shook her head to the side. “What do I say to what?”

“A ride, you know, to wherever you’re going.”

It was as if he was asking her to share his cab with her or giving her a lift from the grocery store. So simple. So easy. So tempting. “You don’t even know where I’m going.”

At the most inconvenient time, a woman’s voice came over the intercom. “All passengers heading for Atlanta, we will begin boarding in ten minutes.”

“I’ll take a wild guess and say you’re headed to Atlanta.”

The idea of squeezing into a seat next to either one of those two men, Will or the man who’d been behind her, did not sit well with Zoe. On the other hand, flying with Will might give her the chance to show off her work. “You can’t be serious.”

“But I am.”

“I don’t want to take you out of your way,” Zoe said chewing on her bottom lip. So many images of having him her way entered her mind. “Where were you headed?”

“If I were to tell you, it wouldn’t even matter. Just know that I am headed in the direction of Atlanta and I don’t mind at all giving you a lift.”

In truth, this deal had been sealed when Will broached the subject. But when one of the kids across the hall screamed he was going to be sick and proceeded to do so, Zoe was sold.

“Well—” Zoe hesitated with another gnaw on her bottom lip “—you wouldn’t even have to take me all the way to Atlanta. My friend was going to pick me up and bring me down south.”

Will stepped aside and waved his arm in the direction of the terminal. “Where exactly are you headed?”

Elated to not have to fly on the crowded plane, Zoe stepped forward into the blue area. “A little town called Southwood,” she called over her shoulder. She walked a few more paces before she realized Will was not behind her. She turned around and found him standing in the same spot. “What’s wrong?”

“Are you attending this Glitz-something pageant?”

A slow smile spread across Zoe’s face. “What do you know about it?”

“My cousins, Joyce and Naomi, talked me into going. They said it would be good for business if I represented the company as a judge.”

“Smart move,” Zoe said with a slight nod of the head. Right now, hearing anything about the twins soured her thoughts. A month or two ago, Marcus had told her about the position at Ravens Cosmetics and got her hopes up. Zoe was supposed to have been a sure thing. Yet here she was, stuck at MIA, contemplating hitching a ride with the man who lacked the ability to see her talents. Zoe cleared her throat.

“I’ve got nothing but smart moves planned for the company,” Will said.

Zoe felt the corners of her eyes tighten with a smirk. Her body leaned forward. She expected Will to add something along the lines of “when you join the team.” All she received was a sneer. “What do you know about the beauty industry?” Zoe boldly asked.

“I know I’m not going to let my family’s legacy fail,” he retorted.

Without him having to say the words, Zoe knew Will was not impressed with her work. Seemed like this week was going to turn out perfect.

When Will flashed a smile, her knees went weak again. According to Lexi’s itinerary, they were going to be sequestered for almost a week. Zoe would be making over all of the contestants. One full week to prove to Will she’d be the perfect person for the CDD job.

A man wearing a dark suit and aviator glasses appeared at the entranceway of the door leading toward the plane. In a ripple effect, the man Zoe assumed was the pilot nodded his head at Will, Will returned the head nod and, in turn, inclined his head to Zoe. “There’s my guy,” Will said. “There’s someone more important in the hangar...”

“You mean more than you?” Zoe gasped sarcastically, her hand clutched to her heart.

“Cute,” he said with a sigh. “So, what’s it going to be, Miss

Baldwin?”

“I’ll go,” Zoe said hesitantly, “but understand that I am going to have to owe you a ride.”

The way Will raised his brows made her shiver with wanton promise. She pressed her lips together and shook her head. Flashes of her naked body curled up in a mixture of his arms and tangled sheets entered her mind. Heat began to boil underneath her shirt. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“I certainly do,” Will said.

The only thing Zoe could do was pray Will hadn’t felt the dampness on her lower back as he pressed his hand there to guide her across the windy airport strip toward the plane. Once they boarded, Zoe realized they were the only ones taking up space on the twenty-two pearl-leather seats. A flight attendant, dressed in a cute thigh-length lavender button-down dress with gold and pearl accessories—staple colors of Ravens Cosmetics packaging—greeted them as they boarded. She lifted her arm effortlessly to point in the direction of all the available seats.

Ahead of Will, Zoe glanced in the direction of the restrooms. Did the mile-high club count if they were the only ones on the plane? She jumped when Will touched the back of her shoulders. His thumb circled the nape of her neck.

“We have our pick,” said Will, “but these are my favorites.” His gentle touch against her skin guided her to a set of seats facing one another with a round coffee table between them. She imagined all the business deals made over that table.

“Thank you again, Mr. Ravens,” Zoe replied with a curt nod of her head.

The perky flight attendant came over to take their order for drinks. Both of them asked for bottled water. When they were alone again, the captain began to take off. Out of the window, Zoe watched her plane still sitting on the runway. Will sat across from her. His long legs stretched out and their knees touched. Zoe sat straighter and crossed her legs together at the ankles.

“Having doubts?” Will’s deep voice brought Zoe out of her zone. She blinked into focus and he explained further. “About coming on the plane with me?”

Zoe kept a straight face and led things in a professional direction. “I do appreciate this. I’m honored to have another chance to speak with you.”

“Are you now?” Will asked with a raised brow.

“Of course,” said Zoe, reaching for her phone from her purse. Her fingers slid across the screen to bring it to life. “This gives me more time to show you what you may not have seen in my portfolio.”

“And give you an advantage over the other artists?”

A cold chill rushed down Zoe’s spine and she offered a tight smile. She slid the phone back in her purse. “Have you ever been to Southwood before?”

“Can’t say that I have,” said Will, crossing one long leg over the other.

Zoe inhaled deeply at the way his thighs rippled beneath the

denim. “Well, you’re in for a treat. It’s like taking a walk into history.”

“Uh,” Will started, “our history in the South?”

“Just wait and see.”

“I take it you’ve been there?”

Nodding, Zoe grinned. “I spent my summers there and the last two years of high school.”

“Your parents aren’t together?”

No one ever asked about her parents. When working, she did most of the talking with her clients. Zoe usually eased models’ fears of being in front of a particular photographer or clients’ nervousness about the events Zoe was getting them ready for. To them, she was a machine. Will made her feel like a person. “They’re together in a sense,” she answered, and then nodded. “They never divorced, but they never truly lived together. My mother, Jamerica, is from Trinidad and she couldn’t stand being away from the islands for too long. And, well, my dad preferred to be landlocked.”

The corners of Will’s mouth turned down. “Does he still live there now?”

“Worried about meeting my father?”

Will uncrossed his legs and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “I haven’t done anything to you yet to be worried about.”

A chill of excitement ran down Zoe’s spine. What kinds of things would he do? Just the thought of his lips on her collarbone

steamed her throughout her body. Even with her last official relationship, Zoe never daydreamed about what his lips would do. Shaun Jackson had been sweet, hunky and driven, but never enough for Zoe to get distracted from her own goals. This was a perfect example of why she carried a change of clothes with her in her carry-on bag. Zoe cleared her throat and tried to stay focused on the prize. What she wanted was the Creative Design Director position. She was not going to sleep her way to the top. She'd never had to before, and she wasn't going to start now.

“Alright, I'll drop it for now,” Will said, interrupting her thoughts. “Will you be staying at your father's?”

Zoe shook her head. “Dad is away this summer. But, even so, I won't be staying there.”

An inquisitive brow rose on Will's face. “No?”

“I heard that everyone involved with the pageant is going to be at Magnolia Palace.”

“Is it someplace special? My cousins gushed when they told me about it.”

“I am biased,” Zoe began, a smile touching her face at the vast memories. “My folks met there when my mother was on a photo shoot. He proposed there, as well.”

A sad sigh struggled in the back of Zoe's throat. She wanted what her parents had, minus the not living together. A long-distance relationship worked for them, but not her. As much as work kept Zoe busy, she didn't have time to nurture a relationship. Soon Zoe was going to want someone she could

wake up to every day. Work had always been important and the proverbial someday lurked around the corner. Once she got the position at Ravens Cosmetics, Zoe planned on settling down. There were a few potential men in Miami, but no one worth giving up her goals for. Zoe needed a man as driven as herself.

“Well, I can’t wait to see this place,” Will concluded with a dazzling grin.

“Me, either,” Zoe beamed. “During high school, Magnolia Palace sort of crashed and burned. But recently it was bought and renovated. I’m excited to see the changes and I can’t wait to walk along the pier.”

For a moment, Zoe held her breath. Given her creative job as a makeup artist, she lived in a fast-paced world. People wanted fast-paced things. A walk along a pier on a lake was not fast-paced.

Will nodded his dark head. “Well then, I am excited to see it and take this walk, as well.”

A spark went off in Zoe’s heart and another heat wave of desire coursed through her veins. What she needed more than anything was a splash of cold water across her face. Maybe taking this flight had been a bad idea after all. With a combination of these close quarters, Will’s sexy smiles and not having sex in six months, her senses were on high alert. Still determined to see Will as her future boss, Zoe rose from her seat and started to move around the coffee table. At the most inconvenient time, the small aircraft hit an air pocket, sending Zoe stumbling right into

Will's lap.

Graciously he opened his arms and accommodated her on his lap until the turbulence ceased. One of his hands braced her back and the other secured her thighs against him. Another jolt sent Zoe's arms flailing and, rather than hit him in the face, she wrapped them around his shoulders, bringing them nose to nose. Zoe inhaled deeply. One millimeter closer and their lips would be touching.

"Ahem." The flight attendant cleared her throat from her end of the plane. Zoe scrambled out of Will's lap and headed off to the bathroom. "The captain sends his apologies and wanted to let you know we'll be landing shortly."

Zoe closed the door behind her and an overhead light turned on. A deep red tint stained her cheeks. What had she almost done? She wanted the job. But not this way. This really was going to be the longest week ever.

Chapter 3

Check-in at the Magnolia Palace started at noon. Thanks to the fact that there had been no more turbulence, Will and Zoe were able to land practically in the backyard of Southwood, Georgia, and arrive in town extra early. Dominic Crowne had moved his business, Crowne Motors Restoration, here because he wanted a quiet place in the country. Dominic restored classic cars and test-drove them on his private track; he imported foreign vehicles, as well. Dominic and Will had pledged together at Stanford. They were friends as freshmen, but brothers by

graduation.

When Will had played in Germany with the Teufels, Dominic came to every match when he was in town. After Will returned to the States with the Texas Raiders, Dominic had come to his matches whenever he was close enough. In fact, Dominic was at the game when Will had failed to qualify for the World Cup team. The limp was faint, the scar healed, but the painful disappointment of his lifelong dream being taken away from him would remain.

Will's thoughts turned to the passenger seated comfortably next to him in the shiny black 1963 Maserati 3500 Vignale Spyder, loaned to him by Dominic. Ever since Zoe had plopped down on his lap during the turbulence, Will couldn't get her out from under his skin. Even while teasing him, she dazzled him with her smile. It was too early to tell if the smile she offered was from the woman he met at the elevator or the woman who wanted the position.

“And you're telling me you don't come from a privileged background?” Zoe was saying, apparently oblivious to the way she made him feel. Her arms were folded across her chest, making her cleavage more noticeable in her V-neck T-shirt.

Will glanced over and felt the tension in his shoulders leave at the sight of her easy smile. “Hey, membership has its privileges.”

Zoe's lashes fluttered against her high cheekbones. The sun spilled through the windshield and highlighted the gold tones of her dark skin. A pair of gold earrings highlighted her

cheekbones. “I guess I can’t complain too much. I might still be sitting on the plane in coach if it weren’t for you.”

“A compliment?” Will clutched his heart with his left hand before flicking the left turn signal to turn into the Magnolia Palace, as the voice from the GPS on his phone instructed.

“You’re funny.”

“I’m hoping you will get the chance to see I am a fun guy,” Will said.

“What does it matter?”

Will slowed the vehicle down. “I am not crazy for thinking about the moment we first met at the elevator, Zoe.”

“Well...” Zoe’s voice was slow and hesitant. She chewed her bottom lip and cut her eyes toward the passenger-side window. “Maybe not completely crazy.”

“How about I save you the trouble of trying to impress me with your work? I have major plans for Ravens Cosmetics and after our interview I believe your work is what I’m looking for. Why let our creative differences get in the way?” Will asked, and Zoe’s mouth gaped open once again. A jolt of energy streamed through him. He was not his brothers, but he sure did sound like them. He didn’t like the idea of mixing business and pleasure for a night or two. Will differed from his brothers that way. He wanted permanent, but was it possible Zoe was the one? “Okay, I’ll back off. I’m the crazy person.”

The tires crunched over the unpaved red clay driveway. Blooming magnolia trees lined the way up to the hotel.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” Zoe finally said. “But when I met you that morning, we probably could have made a go of things. Honestly, I thought you were a model and I was willing to give up my rule about dating clients.”

“And now?”

Zoe shook her head from left to right. “Now, no way. You’re going to be my boss.”

“You don’t have the job yet,” Will said, raising his brows. He was turned on by her confidence.

“I will.” Zoe sighed. “It was meant for me to work at Ravens Cosmetics.”

“Oh, really now?” Will drawled and shook his head. “Did you see us together in your crystal ball?”

“The comedian again,” Zoe retorted with a bored yawn. “I may tell you about it one day. Until I decide to share with you, you need to get used to the idea of us being nothing more than employer and employee.”

That idea didn’t appeal to Will. The hour and a half they’d been together already hadn’t been enough. Maybe he should have flown into Atlanta to give them more time to get to know each other on the way down to Southwood. On the other hand, if by any miracle Will changed his mind about Zoe’s work, they would end up working together. The last thing he needed was future tension between the two of them over a fling. With half the cousins tired of the business, and Donovan’s trysts, Will didn’t need the hassle. “Think you can at least settle on us being

professional friends?”

There had been many times over the last month when Will resented having this CEO position. Now was one. But if Zoe only wanted to remain friends, he'd respect that. Hopefully there'd be plenty of cold water in this Magnolia Palace.

The Magnolia Palace sat on ten acres of lush green land, embraced by thick weeping willows in the back and strong magnolia trees that lined the paved circular driveway, which ended in front of the steps of the white plantation-style home. Four white columns reached from the wraparound porch to the second floor and up to where there seemed to be a balcony at the top of the roof. Someone stood at either of the long slit glass panes on both sides of the massive black double front doors.

It amazed Will how quickly the business mentality switched on in his mind. As a businessman realizing that the majority of his cosmetics were used in magazine editorial pieces, Will immediately thought this place would be the perfect background for a print layout. He scolded himself for thinking of work. Finally he understood what his parents meant by not letting it consume him. After seeing what the business did to his siblings, his father had tried to dissuade his children out of participating in the company. But it was in their blood. And when Will's brothers and sisters learned of their stake in the company, wild horses couldn't have kept them away. His parents might have sent him away to special soccer camps and facilities, but eventually, Will ended up at Ravens Cosmetics. And, yes, it was consuming his

life. At least there was a bit of a break right now—sort of. He liked loud noise and the busy life. But he guessed for one week he'd be able to tough it out.

From the way his cousins described what his time in Southwood would be like, he'd assumed he would be stuck in a room watching pageants on television to get caught up. One look at the sprawling grounds and Will longed to stretch out in one of the hammocks and read a book. Although Will hated to admit it, he was looking forward to spending a week here and discovering all about the South. Even though Miami was in the south of Florida, it was not the South.

Relaxation called his name. As he thought about sleeping in, his attention turned toward the passenger beside him who was wiggling in her seat with anticipation. How was he supposed to relax with her near him? Hopefully she'd hang out with her friends and stay out of his hair, although he fully expected her to wear him down about his decision. Zoe was out of the car before he placed the car in Park.

The massive doors of the B and B opened. Will expected a tuxedo-wearing butler to step out of the doors, but instead, a tall African American woman with long blond hair stepped onto the wraparound porch carrying two mason jars of a brown iced beverage.

The moment the woman and Zoe locked eyes, Zoe squealed and, out of the corner of his eye, he was sure she pawed the ground like a bull and ran toward the other woman. The woman

turned to give the man standing behind her the glasses and met Zoe at the bottom step. The two embraced in a screaming hug. Clearly they knew each other, Will thought to himself. He'd grown up with sisters and knew how overly excited they were to see their friends. Will also knew it was best to stand back and wait until the lovefest ended. He clasped his hands behind his back and waited. The man now holding the glasses stepped off the porch with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

"I never get this kind of greeting when I come home," he said, pushing one of the glasses into Will's left hand.

The frosted glass cooled Will's palm. He stepped forward and for a shake. "Will Ravens," he said.

"Hey, Will," said the man with the firm grip. "Stephen Reyes, husband of this squealing ball."

The squealing ceasing, the blonde woman stepped to the side, and that's when Will noticed a very round belly. Given the fact his sister had kids, Will guessed the woman was seven months along. She stood with her hand on her hip and glared at her husband. "Did you just call me a ball?"

"No, dear." Stephen winked before giving his wife his undivided attention. "Why would I say something like that?"

Zoe linked her arm with her friend's and dragged her over to where the two men stood. Stephen handed Zoe the other glass. "Will, this is one of my oldest friends, Lexi Pendergrass."

"Lexi Pendergrass Reyes," interjected Stephen with a dramatic roll of his R. "And why does she get to call you her

oldest friend but I can't?"

"Because I know things." Zoe laughed. Will liked her laugh. It was light, bubbly and friendly. Zoe reached over and gave Stephen a hug. "As I was saying, this is Will Ravens."

Stephen leaned forward and whispered, loudly enough for Will to hear, "We'll have to have a real drink later, Zoe, so you can tell me what you know."

"Will Ravens?" Playfully, Lexi stepped between the pair and, instead of a handshake, gave Will a hug. "How on Earth did the two of you manage to arrive together?"

"I would have been here much later had Mr. Ravens not offered me a seat on his plane."

"The company's plane," Will clarified. "I spotted Miss Baldwin at the airport seconds before she was harassed by a..." He turned his attention to Zoe for a moment. "What would you call a wannabe LL Cool J?"

Zoe's eyes widened. A set of dimples popped up on her cheeks. "Exactly."

"Aren't you the superhero?" Stephen inquired with a humorous chuckle.

Lexi elbowed her husband in the ribs and kept talking to Will. "I cannot thank you enough for everything Ravens Cosmetics has done for the pageant. And for taking the time out of your schedule. I can't imagine coming into your position, you wanted to leave so quickly."

"Well, I'm sure you know how it is when Naomi and Joyce

ask a favor,” Will began with a chuckle. He took a sip of his beverage. The thick syrup coated his throat and he realized it was sweetened tea.

“Asked, or more or less forced you?” Lexi joked, hitting the nail on the head. “I know how they can be, so I have to apologize. I’m sure you’re out of your element.”

Beside him, Zoe snickered.

“I want to learn every nook and cranny of Ravens Cosmetics. If coming to your lovely city is one of the tasks, well, it’s worth it.” Will cleared his throat. “Besides, I’m always up for a challenge.”

Lexi offered one last hug and pulled away. “Good. Let me show you guys to your rooms. Stephen’s cousin just bought and renovated the place. I’ve got everyone working on the pageant sequestered here for the week, so I’m playing hostess today.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if that was necessary, but any words were lost as they followed Stephen and Lexi into the foyer of the Magnolia Palace. The black hardwood floors absorbed their footsteps. Adorning the walls were old pictures of a family—perhaps the people who originally owned the home. There were two large rooms, one on either side of the hallway. One appeared to be a sitting room, the other a library filled with shelves of leather-bound books. They traveled farther toward the wide-set staircase, which curled and broke off in two different directions. Light spilled in from the upstairs balcony over the crystal chandelier, creating a prism effect against the white walls.

Will's room was upstairs near the back of the house. The ceilings were high and the walls painted a pale blue. More portraits hung from the walls in gold frames. He went inside to decompress, but got caught up in the view from the balcony. The lush green backyard was neatly trimmed. A wooden path led to the docks, which jutted into the deep blue water of a round lake surrounded by more trees. Off to the side, on land, Will spotted a hammock and visualized himself in it with his shoes off and curled up with Zoe.

Will scolded himself for his obsession with Zoe. She'd made it clear she did not want to get involved with him. And she was right. Will needed to focus on the future of the company. He willed himself not to fall for the pretty smiles. Pretty faces were a dime a dozen and usually accompanied by a motive. Zoe was no different. Still, though, the confidence she'd exuded in the car was impressive as well as a turn-on.

This was not Will at all. He expected this lustful behavior from Marcus and Donovan. Will prided himself on being in control, but with Zoe, common sense went out the window. Did he dare hurt her feelings and let her know he did not see her in the future of Raven Cosmetics? Would it make her feel better to know he at least saw her in his future?

Thinking of her made him stiffen all over. He needed to splash some water over his face. Will moved over to the door he assumed would lead to the bathroom and yanked it open; a scream came from the other side. Upon further inspection

he groaned. There stood Zoe with a fluffy blue-flowered towel wrapped around her silky dark brown skin. The sun filtering through the white-lace curtains highlighted the gold undertones of every curve.

“I guess Lexi forgot to mention the shared bathroom.” Zoe recovered with an airy laugh.

Damn, this was going to be the longest week ever.

* * *

No amount of hot water could wash off the humiliation of her potential boss walking in on her almost naked body. How was she going to look him in the eyes now in a potential board meeting? After a disastrous moment before her after-travel shower, Zoe changed into black leggings and a black-and-white-checkered T-shirt long enough to cover her behind. She headed downstairs to the patio with her tablet in hand, hoping to take some amazing photographs of the setting sun. Because she and Will had gotten there early, the other guests hadn't arrived yet. Dinner was in an hour and a half, giving Zoe much-needed time to get reacquainted with the pier. She trotted barefoot across the grass to the dock, where the afternoon sun warmed the wooden planks.

Bright shades of orange, red and yellow smeared the horizon. With her breath caught in her throat, Zoe stood at the curve of the railing, in the same spot her father had knelt to propose to her mother. With the Magnolia Palace reopened, this would be the perfect spot for her father to re-propose to her mother. Zoe smiled at the horizon with excitement. She snapped a few

pictures before deciding to return to the back porch.

The oversize white swings—and the fact that a producer friend had just sent her an advance copy of a superhero movie she'd worked on—helped put pep in her step. There was nothing better than the good people winning.

Zoe turned to head back to the porch, but she careened into a hard body. As she bounced backward with a prolific apology, the wooden rails creaked. The last thing she needed to do was fall into the water with her tablet. She hadn't even sent any of the files to her Cloud. She welcomed the strong arm around her waist and reached for the impeccably muscled arms.

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