

ACCLAIM FOR RACHEL HAUCK

Powerful and relevant, *Once Upon a Prince* is simply put a fun read, the pages flew by. This is classic romnace at its very best. Bravo to Rachel Hauck for creating a story that's sure to touch hearts and souls.

DEBBIE MACOMBER, #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

The Wedding Dress will capture you from page one with a story only Rachel Hauck could weave.

—JENNY B. JONES, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
SAVE THE DATE AND *THERE YOU'LL FIND ME*

The Wedding Dress is a seamless tale of enduring love that weaves the past and present in an intricate, wedding dress mystery. Hauck again manages to mesmerize for well over 300 pages with quirky characters, a compelling plot, and a satisfying happily-ever-after. Highly recommended!

—DENISE HUNTER, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
THE ACCIDENTAL BRIDE AND *BAREFOOT SUMMER*

The talented Rachel Hauck has given us a contemporary love story enmeshed in a fast-paced mystery. Juggle your reading list, y'all. Brimming with the twin themes of redemption and grace, *The Wedding Dress* deserves a spot at the top!

—SHELLIE RUSHING TOMLINSON, BELLE OF
ALL THINGS SOUTHERN AND BEST-SELLING
AUTHOR OF *SUE ELLEN'S GIRL AIN'T FAT*, *SHE
JUST WEIGHS HEAVY!*

Rachel Hauck's writing is full of wisdom and heart, and *The Wedding Dress*, as artfully and intricately designed as the most exquisite of bridal gowns, is no exception. This novel tells the story of four loveable women, miraculously bound by one gown, whose lives span a century. Their mutual search for truth and love—against the odds—will most certainly take your breath away.

—BETH WEBB HART, BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
SUNRISE ON THE BATTERY AND LOVE, CHARLESTON

From the moment I heard about this story, I couldn't wait to get my hands on it. A wedding dress worn by four different women over 100 years? Yes, please! I loved the story of these women . . . and their one important dress. For anyone who's ever lingered over a bridal magazine, watched a bridal reality show, or daydreamed about being a bride, Rachel Hauck has created a unique story that will captivate your heart!

—MARYBETH WHALEN, AUTHOR OF *THE MAILBOX*,
SHE MAKES IT LOOK EASY, AND *THE GUEST BOOK*

A tender tale that spans generations of women, each a product of her time and ahead of her time. A beautiful story laced together with love, faith, mystery, and one amazing dress. Rachel Hauck has another winner in *The Wedding Dress*!

—LISA WINGATE, NATIONAL BEST-SELLING
AND CAROL AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
DANDELION SUMMER AND BLUE MOON BAY



Once Upon a
PRINCE



ALSO BY RACHEL HAUCK

The Wedding Dress

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Dedicated to:

Kendall Alexis

Elizabeth Grace (Gracie)

Suzanna Rae

Avery Lillian

“Grow up to be women of God where
royalty is guaranteed.”



Part One

The Prince

ONE



What did he say? The storm gusts moving over the Atlantic must have garbled his words.
“I can’t marry you?”

Susanna stopped, flip-flops swinging from her fingertips. She’d misunderstood, right? Sand washed out from under her feet as the afternoon tide pulled the waves back into their ocean boundaries.

Adam walked on, failing to notice she wasn’t with him.

“Hey, wait . . .”

On the northern horizon, spikes of gold broke through mustang-blue storm clouds and ignited the dark afternoon with light.

“Adam, what did you say?” Her feet slapped the wet sand where his footprints were already fading.

“This isn’t easy, Suz,” he said, taking one last step, a low breeze nipping at the hem of his cargo shorts.

“What’s not easy?” The man had fought battles in Afghanistan; how could anything on a St. Simons Island beach be difficult?

Her hair blew around her face as she stared toward the dispersing rain clouds. This wouldn’t be the first time a storm had brewed in Adam Peters after he’d returned from a Middle East tour, jammed up and bothered. She’d weather it with him. Again.

Susanna dipped her head to see his averted gaze. “Come on, what’s bothering you? Being stateside? Leaving your men? You’ve done four tours in six years, Adam. It’s okay to do something for yourself.” She wiggled his arm, teasing him, drawing him out. “You’re an amazing marine. Stateside or fighting the front lines.”

“Suz?” His tone and the way he collapsed his marine-muscled shoulders made her heart seize. “It’s this.” He motioned to her, then to himself, exposing the tip of his red-and-blue *semper fi* tattoo hidden beneath the sleeve of his white T-shirt.

“This?” She glanced around. “Walking on the beach?”

He made a face. “No, Suz. Why would I not like walking on the beach?”

“I don’t know. You started this.” Impatience. A sign of a brewing argument. “Excuse me if I can’t read your mind . . . What’s bothering you? Did something happen on the tour? Before you came home?” She tossed softballs, trying to get him to swing, to hint at the emotion he was struggling to articulate.

She had twelve years of history to back her up. Twelve years of friendship. Of an ebbing and flowing romance. Of drives up to Quantico when he was in officer candidate school. Of weekends in Atlanta, where she had launched her landscape-architect career. Of four shipping-outs to the Middle East. Of four homecomings.

Susanna had twelve years of letters, emails, phone calls. Twelve years of walks on the beach, of laughing on the Rib Shack’s deck while eating ribs under the swinging strings of light, barbecue sauce slipping down their chins.

Of ups and downs, disappointments, postponements, arguments, and apologies.

All melded into her heart by memories, all a part of the bigger picture. The promise of something more. Commitment. Marriage. Growing old in a St. Simons cottage.

This was Adam’s third day home on leave and he’d been mostly sleeping since he arrived. So when he called her at work

this afternoon and asked her to meet him behind the Rib Shack, she'd dashed out. Didn't even tell her boss she was leaving.

A special call to meet him on the beach? It was romantic rendezvous enough for her. Enough to awaken her hopes for declarations of love, a marine on bended knee, and a diamond ring.

Okay, so she'd always dreamed of getting engaged under Lover's Oak, but far be it from her to nitpick. If Adam was proposing, she was accepting. Any place, any time.

But he wasn't proposing, was he? He barely looked at her. She surveyed his tense stance, his off-kilter, dark, and morose mood.

"Adam, talk to me. What happened over there?"

"I told you, this isn't easy." Adam tipped his head back, squinting up at a circling seagull. "I don't know, Susanna . . ."

"What don't you know?"

"Looks like it's not going to rain after all." He pointed toward the sun's breach through the dark-bottomed clouds and walked forward again.

"Adam, stop . . ." His demeanor awakened all of her dormant insecurities. The kind she had befriended as a girl hiding in her room while her parents fought, smashed Walmart dishes against the kitchen walls, and yelled four-letter words Susanna dared not repeat. "Stop walking away."

She reached for his arm again, a realization setting in that the wind had *not* garbled his words at all. What troubled him was her, their relationship. Not Afghanistan. "You said you couldn't marry me, didn't you?"

"I've rehearsed what I wanted to say." He peered down at her through narrowed eyes, cloaking his warm-chocolate irises. "You're pretty amazing. You know that, don't you?"

"I guess." The confession raised her suspicions more than eased them. Where was he going with this? He was hard to read when his soul was shuttered.

Adam lowered himself down to the beach, hooking his arms

around his raised knees. “I missed the ocean. A couple of my buddies and I made makeshift surfboards and drove way out in the desert to surf the dunes.” He shook his head, angling his hand through the air with a whistle, then a mock explosion. “Crash and burn. We had sand stuck in places we didn’t even know we had places.”

“Sounds fun.” With her gentle response she gave him room to talk, let him figure out words for his internal turmoil. Susanna picked a spot next to him, sat, and dug her heels into the sand, letting the stiff breeze braid her hair across her eyes. “You were saying something about me being amazing?” She nudged his arm with her shoulder.

He’d not said he loved her since he had returned, but after twelve years, some of their affection had dulled. But if he thought she was amazing . . .

“I don’t know of a guy who had a girl wait for twelve years. Through college, officer training, back-to-back tours. Four in six years.” Adam reached out and captured the floating ends of her hair with his fingers, letting the strands weave in the spaces between.

“It’s not like I was sitting around, Adam. I graduated from college, worked for a big fancy Atlanta architecture firm, started my landscape career, and—”

“And now you work for Gage Stone.”

“Oh, come on.” She regarded him. “That can’t be what’s bothering you. That I work for Gage?” Susanna and Adam had gone to high school with Gage. Been good friends until time and distance pulled them apart. “I moved home to work for Richard Thornton, *the* most prominent landscape architect in the South. It wasn’t my plan for him to die a month later.”

She’d never have returned to the island if Richard Thornton hadn’t pursued her. But an architect mentored by him could write her own ticket.

“Guess death wasn’t part of the equation.”

“No.” Aneurysm. At the age of sixty. Died at his drafting table. In her grief, his wife closed the office and liquidated everything. And Susanna received her first and last paycheck.

“Why didn’t you go back to Atlanta?”

She peered at him. “Do you even listen to our conversations, Adam? We talked about this.”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess we did. You liked being home, right?”

“Once I got here”—she scooped up a handful of sand and let it sift through her fingers—“I felt like I was supposed to be here.”

The day of Richard’s funeral, Mama put Susanna on the Rib Shack schedule. Said it was a family business and Susanna shouldn’t hesitate to take her rightful place. It was Mama’s way of giving her a job without making Susanna ask. She’d made a big stink about going off to college to get *away* from waiting tables and mopping floors. But she welcomed the job while figuring out her next move. Then, a month after Richard died, Gage returned to the island and hung out his architect shingle.

“How’s it going with Gage, Suz?”

“Struggling. He chases every possible job like a dog on the hunt, but with the economy the way it is, people hold on to their money. My shifts at the Rib Shack pay the bills.”

Adam laughed. “I know your mama’s loving that . . . having you back at the Shack.”

“She knows it’s temporary.” Emphasis on *temporary*. The on-ramp to talk about their future couldn’t be any wider. There was nothing keeping her on the island. She was only waiting on Adam to finish this tour and propose.

“Suz.” He cleared his voice. “I’ve accepted an assignment with a new task force in DC.”

“DC? Okay . . .” She could do DC. “I have a connection in Virginia. One of the architects I interned with works for a firm there.” She slipped her phone from her shorts pocket. “I’ll make a note to call her tomorrow?”

He cupped his hand over hers. "I can't give you what you want."

"I don't know what you mean." Her eyes blurred. "W—what do you think I want?"

"To get married."

"Not just *to get married*, Adam. Married to *you*." She blinked her eyes clear as she gazed at him. Marriage was the plan. Since their sophomore year of college.

He sighed and shifted in his sandy seat. Anxiety fueled Susanna's heart.

"Earlier you asked me what happened in Afghanistan." He reached for his shoe, slipped it off, and let the sand run out. "I met someone." His voice faltered, his boldness waned. "Actually, we met in OCS."

"Y—you met someone?" Seven years ago?

"She was dating a guy, I had you. But we were always good friends. Then we were assigned to the same intel unit on this last tour." For a moment, he postured himself like a combat marine. Shoulders square, eyes alert, confident. But in the next second, he seemed every bit like a guy breaking up with his girlfriend and hating it.

"There's . . . you met . . . someone else?" Susanna said, low and soft, weighing his confession through a sheer *déjà vu* veil. Did she dream this?

A blush of rain-scented wind cooled her hot skin and burning eyes.

"Her name is Sheree. We—"

"And you didn't tell me?" She shoved around the coarse granules of sand with her toes. "Adam, battlefield romances rarely succeed. You told me so yourself. You and I . . . we succeed." She tempered the desperation out of her voice. "You just said no other marine had a girl who stood by him for twelve years."

"I know, and it's true, but come on, Suz, did you ever think

twelve years was a long time to date *and* wait for someone? Even for a deployed marine?"

"Yes, but we had a plan." Susanna liked plans. They made life easier, simpler. They made life run smooth. Even a *stupid* plan like waiting until Adam finished his tours before getting married was still a plan.

But he wanted to make captain so he kept volunteering for tours. The plan revolved around Adam's career and sense of duty. But Susanna didn't mind. She didn't. She was in love and love was patient. Right?

"The plan. Forever in perpetuity," he said with a heavy exhale. "Suz, did it ever occur to you that the plan needed to change . . . because we've changed? Did you ever wonder if we'd only stayed together because we were comfortable? That we liked the *idea* of us more than we actually liked us?"

"The *idea* of us?" Where was this coming from? "Yes, I like the *idea* of us. But it stands to reason that if I like the *idea* of us, then I like *us*."

"You're in love with the plan, Susanna. Not me." His words fired silver bullets straight to her heart.

"In love with the plan? Don't talk crazy." She jumped up and dusted the sand from her shorts. "If you want to break up with me, don't blame me or the plan. What kind of girl waits twelve years"—oh, those years suddenly felt like an eternity—"because she loves a *plan*? She'd have to be insane."

But what was the value of a plan if she didn't stick to it? By gum, it's why she waited for Adam. How she survived childhood. How she worked her way through college.

The plan.

She started walking up the beach toward the widening pinwheel of sunlight, Adam's words spinning around her heart.

Did she love the plan more than him?

The fragrance of Adam's skin chased her. His voice came

softly over her shoulder. “I understand the plan. You didn’t want to be like your parents, fighting, divorcing—”

“And remarrying.” Glo and Gibson Truitt were local celebrities among the church crowd. Once a year, they testified in church about their “failed divorce.”

They still snipped and fussed, but they loved each other. Jesus had done some fine work in her daddy and mama.

“But not before you learned to wake up braced for anything. War or peace. You hated waking up in the morning not knowing what kind of day you’d face so you became a planner. Even as a kid.”

“Do you blame me?”

“No, but I’m saying . . .” He slipped his hand around her arm. “Maybe that’s why you clung to our plan. It makes you feel safe.”

“Did you take a pop psych class in Afghanistan?”

He released her and stepped back. “Remember last New Year’s when my dad pulled me aside?”

“I remember.”

“He said if I was going to marry you, I’d best get with it. It wasn’t right to make you wait any longer.”

“I love your dad.” A true, blunt confession.

“So I took a little hop across Europe on my way to Afghanistan—London, Paris—searching for a unique engagement ring. I must have looked at a hundred before I finally found one in a little shop outside Paris.”

“Wait . . . you bought a ring . . . for me?” She took a hesitant step toward him.

“I did,” he said, with a slow, contemplative nod. “Slapped down my credit card, but when the man asked the name of my *amour*, my mind went blank. I couldn’t remember.”

“My name? You couldn’t remember my name?” Sadness butterflyed in her heart.

“Blank.” He tapped his forehead with the tips of his fingers. “I

was distracted, thinking about getting my boots on the ground in Afghanistan, feeling like I was working off a checklist rather than buying a ring for my *amour*.”

“That’s it? You city hop your way over to Afghanistan, and when buying a ring feels like a chore, you decide I’m not the one? That the plan has drained you of love?” She shifted her stance, balancing on a narrow beam of peace and dread, one foot to the other. What happened to her sensible Adam? “Was Sheree with you?”

“No, Suz. Come on. Sheree and I?” Hands on his hips, he looked everywhere but at her. “The moment I pulled out my credit card, I knew I’d found the right ring but not the right girl.” His glistening gaze landed on her face. “Sheree and I didn’t reconnect until a few months ago.”

“You found the right ring but not the right girl?” She crossed her arms, locked her hands on her elbows, squared her back, and raised her chin. “How can you have the right ring if you have the wrong girl? That . . . that makes no sense.”

“I just knew I’d found a ring I’d love to give my fiancée someday, but”—he paddled hard against the conversation stream—“I . . . for the life of me, I couldn’t see myself giving it to you.”

“Adam, you went to Afghanistan seven months ago. You’re just now telling me? We’ve been emailing, talking?”

“I had second thoughts. Maybe it was just cold feet or something. Besides, I didn’t want to break up long-distance. You mean a great deal to me. Twelve years deserves more than a ‘Dear Susanna’ email or hey, ‘Oh by the way,’ on a phone call.”

“Twelve years.” She whirled back toward the Rib Shack. “Twelve years I waited for you, and I get ‘I found the right ring but not the right girl?’”

“Suz, I’m being honest.” Adam ran backward in front of her, his knees high, his form perfect. “If you stop and think, you’ll realize you feel the same way.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel, Adam. Just don’t.” She tried to sprint around him, but he switched directions and kept in step with her. “Try to make yourself feel better by roping me into your wild decision.”

Not the right girl . . . His words reverberated through her, to her very core.

“You know I’m right.”

His words, his tone, a clarion bell to her heart. Oh mercy, how could it be? Yes, he was right, he was right. And it galled her. “I don’t know what to say to you right now.” Susanna maintained her march toward the Rib Shack’s beachside deck. How had she not seen it? Was she so stuck and stubborn?

“Susanna, the last time I was home, we only saw each other six times. You never came up to Washington.”

“I was working. I have a job.” She lengthened her stride. “I didn’t see *you* hightailing it home.”

“You were working at the Rib Shack.” He made a wild one-arm gesture toward the restaurant. “You could’ve taken off anytime you wanted.”

She exhaled and stopped midstride. “If you want to break up with me, then do it. But don’t you dump your guilt on me.”

“No guilt dumping here. Just making observations. Suz, you know I’m right. We aren’t each other’s true loves. We were a high school romance that somehow got away from us.”

“Got away from us? Who plans marriage like that?” Susanna pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead and turned for the edge of the Atlantic where the evening tide was rolling in. With each swoosh of the foam against the sand, realization washed over her. How had she not seen it? Truth awakened in her thoughts, her heart, and the edges of her senses.

“We were both comfortable. Our relationship was good. Safe. We do like each other, Suz. A lot.”

She peered at him. “I’m twenty-nine, Adam. I want to get married. You’re the only man I’ve dated since I fast-danced with

Bobby Conway at the seventh-grade fall dance.” She flung her arms wide. “Now what? You’re done with tours, ready to settle down, make a life for yourself in the States, and suddenly I’m not the right one?”

She rehashed what her heart already knew because it was how she processed. She fought because her dignity demanded it. But the fire of her vehemence never truly flared.

“What? You want me to marry you just *because*?” He looked incredulous, sounding half terrified.

“Yes, Adam, yes. I do.” Her inner fight tumbled over the ravine of her resolve. She wasn’t going to just walk away from twelve years with an, “Okay, sure, I’m jiving with you. Glad we cleared this up. Have a nice life.”

“You don’t mean it.”

“We’ve said ‘I love you.’ We’ve planned a future together.” She poked his chest with her forefinger to the rumble of sudden, low-passing thunder. Grit rose in her soul. “We. Had. A. Deal.”

Adam gripped her finger. “I love Sheree. Reconnecting with her was when I really knew you and I didn’t love each other in a husband-wife kind of way. If you’d met the right guy and I came home to propose, you’d be the one standing here telling me the ring was right but I was all wrong. You’d know you don’t love me as a woman should love the man she’s going to marry.”

“Stop telling me how I feel.” She gripped her hands into fists. He was such a commander—of men, of her feelings. This habit of his had spiked many of their arguments.

“Then look at me.” He motioned to her with two fingers, then swung them around to his sharp unwavering gaze. “Look here. Tell me you love me like a woman should love a man she’s going to marry.”

“I don’t even know what that means. Love is love.”

“I could break into song over Sheree.”

“Ha, song. Has she heard you sing?”

“Yes, and she lets me sing anyway.”

Susanna folded her arms with a sigh. Any defense she might muster weakened in her heart. “But you don’t want to break into song over me.”

“I don’t. I’m sorry.” His gaze spoke of his regret.

“Yeah, well, me too.” She started up the dunes toward the Rib Shack. Mama, her baby sister, Avery, everyone was waiting inside for the news.

Engagement news.

“Suz?”

She glanced over her shoulder at Adam. “I’m fine.” She didn’t wait for his response, just skirted around the sea oats and up the path to the deck.

Slipping on her flip-flops, she avoided the kitchen and the hovering expectations by heading for the parking lot.

She’d never been into romance, fairy tales, knights in shining armor, or handsome princes riding up to save the day. Just a happily ever after with her strong hometown marine. Now what was the plan for the rest of her life?