

CHAPTER ONE

Note to my past self: Do NOT, I repeat, do not say yes to marrying the handsome stranger you happen to know absolutely nothing about.

“Do you, Rose Coleson, solemnly declare to take...”

No. Nope.

“Jack Hawthorne to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Hmmm. Let me think about that. I don't. Nope.

“Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and keep him for as long as you both shall live?”

Keep him?

Wide-eyed and a little shaky, I stared straight ahead as the officiant said the words I was dreading. Was I really doing this? When the silence in the mostly empty and sort of depressing room stretched on and it was my turn to speak up, I was on the verge of hyperventilating. I tried my best to swallow the lump in my throat so I could speak, but I was afraid the words that desperately wanted to break free weren't *Yes, I do*.

I wasn't getting married in a lush green garden while the few friends I had cheered us on as I had always imagined I would. I wasn't laughing or crying from extreme happiness as every bride did at one point during the ceremony. I had no beautiful wedding bouquet, only one single pink rose which Jack Hawthorne had thrust into my hands without a word right after we met in front of city hall. I wasn't even wearing a white dress, let alone my dream wedding gown. Jack Hawthorne was wearing a tailored black suit that was quite possibly worth a year of my rent, if not more. It wasn't a tux, but it was just as good. Next to him, I looked pretty cheap. Instead of a beautiful wedding dress, I had on a simple blue dress—it was the only thing I owned that was expensive and appropriate enough for the occasion, yet somehow it was still...cheap—and I was standing next to the wrong man, one who did nothing but frown and glower.

Also, there was the handholding, his grip surprisingly tight around mine, especially compared to my loose hold. Such a simple act, but holding a stranger's hand while you're getting married? Not fun. Hell, forget about handholding—I was about to be the wife of a man I knew nothing more about than what a quick Google search had provided.

Yet I had willingly and knowingly agreed to this, hadn't I?

“Miss Coleson?”

As my breaths started to come faster and panic began to take hold of me, I tried to pull my hand out of Jack Hawthorne's grip only to feel his fingers tighten around mine even more. I didn't know what I was thinking or what *he* thought I was going to do, but I couldn't lie and say running away hadn't crossed my mind.

His tight hold was a small warning, and then it was gone. My gaze jumped to his face, but he was staring straight ahead, eyes on the officiant, his sharp features set in stone. Cold. So cold. I thought I saw a muscle in his jaw ticking, but then I blinked, and it was gone.

The man showed his emotions about as much as a cement block did, so I tried to do what he was doing: focus on the present.

"Miss Coleson?"

Clearing my throat, I did my best to put steel into my voice so I wouldn't cry. *Not here. Not now.* Not every marriage is about love. What had love offered me anyway other than heartbreak and late-night emotional eating?

My heart was beating loud and fast in my chest. "I do," I finally replied with a smile I was sure made me look deranged.

I don't. I think I really, really don't.

As the smiling man repeated the same words for my non-smiling almost husband, I tuned everything and everyone out up until it was time for the rings.

God, to think I had been planning my wedding to a different guy only a few months earlier, and more than that, to think I'd thought weddings were always romantic... This wedding felt more like I was about to skydive from 13,000 feet, something I would much rather die than try, and yet there I was. Not only was I *not* in a garden surrounded by greenery and flowers, the only piece of furniture in the room was a couch that was a rather ugly shade of orange, and for some reason, that single piece of furniture and the color of it annoyed and offended me the most. Go figure.

"Please face each other," the officiant said, and I followed his instructions like a robot. Feeling numb, I let Jack reach for my other hand, and when his fingers gave mine a tiny squeeze, this time I met his questioning eyes. I swallowed, tried to ignore the little jump my heart gave and offered him a small smile. He was truly striking in a cold, calculating sort of way. I'd be lying if I said my heart hadn't given a small jump the first time I'd laid eyes on him. Completely involuntarily. He had the strong-and-silent thing down pat. His equally striking blue eyes dipped

to my lips and then came back to my eyes. When I felt him slowly push a ring onto my finger, I looked down and saw a beautiful wedding band with a half-circle of round diamonds staring back at me. Surprised, I looked up to meet his eyes, but his attention was on my finger as he gently rolled the ring back and forth with his thumb and index finger. The sensation was as alien as it could get.

“It’s okay,” I whispered when he didn’t stop playing with it. “It’s a little big, but it’s okay.”

He let go of my hand and the ring then looked at me. “I’ll take care of it.”

“There is no need to do that. This is fine.”

I didn’t know if Jack Hawthorne ever smiled. So far—the three whole times I’d seen him—I hadn’t been a witness to it, at least not a genuine smile, but I would have assumed if he was marrying someone he was in love with instead of me, there would at least be a small playful grin on his lips. He didn’t look like the grinning type, but surely there would be a hint of it. Unfortunately, neither one of us was the picture of a happy newlywed couple.

I reached for his hand to put on *his* wedding band, but call it nerves, clumsiness, or a sign, if you will—before I could even touch his hand, the cheap, thin ring slipped from my shaky fingers and I watched it fly away from me in slow motion. After the surprisingly loud clinking sound it made when it hit the floor, I ran after it, apologizing to no one in particular, and had to drop to my knees so I could save it before it rolled under the ugly orange couch. Although the light blue dress I had chosen to wear was by no means short, I still had to put one of my hands on my butt to cover myself so I wouldn’t flash everyone as I caught the damn thing before I had to crawl on my knees.

“I got it! I got it!” I yelled a little too enthusiastically over my shoulder, holding the ring up as if I had won a trophy. When I saw the unimpressed expressions around me, I felt my cheeks turn a bright shade of red. I dropped my arm, closed my eyes, and released a very long sigh. When I turned around on my knees, I noticed that my ringless, almost husband had made it to my side, already offering his hand to pull me up. After I got back on my feet with his help, I dusted off my dress. Looking up to his face, I belatedly noticed how stiffly he was holding himself—jaw clenched, the muscle tick definitely back.

Had I done something wrong?

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, thoroughly embarrassed, and got a curt nod in response.

The officiant cleared his throat and gave us a small smile. “Shall we continue?”

Before he could drag me back, I discreetly leaned toward my soon-to-be-maybe husband and whispered, “Look, I’m not sure about...you look...” I paused and released another long breath before gathering enough courage to look straight into his eyes. “We don’t have to do this if you’ve changed your mind. Are you sure? And I mean really, really sure you want to go through with this?”

His eyes searched mine as we ignored the other people in the room, and my heart rate picked up as I waited for his answer. As much as I was reluctant to do this, if he’d changed his mind, I’d be screwed six ways to Sunday and we both knew that.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said eventually.

That was all I got.

Lovely.

What an encouraging start to a new marriage—a fake one, yes, but still.

We walked back to stand in front of the officiant and I quickly and successfully managed to push the ring onto his finger on my second try. It fit him perfectly. Next to the beauty he had gotten me, the flat wedding band I had picked up for him just the day before looked just as cheap as my dress did, but it was the only thing I could afford. It didn’t look like he cared anyway. I watched with curious eyes as he stared down at the ring and then made a fist of the hand I’d just put the ring on, his knuckles whitening with the force of it before he took my hand again.

My attention shifted as I caught the end of the officiant’s words: “...I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

That was it? I was married? Just like that?

I looked at my now official husband and didn’t know how to react for a second. His eyes caught mine. What was a simple kiss after saying I do to a stranger, right? Thinking he was waiting to see what my move would be and wanting to get it over with so we could get the hell out of there, I was the one who took the first step. Our hands still clasped together, I avoided his eyes, rose up on my toes, and brushed a small kiss on his cheek. Just as I let go of him and was about to back up, his now free hand grabbed my wrist in a gentle hold and our eyes met.

For the sake of the few people around us, I forced another smile on my face and watched him slowly lean down to press a kiss to the edge of my mouth.

My heartbeat quickened because I thought he had lingered for a second too long, and that was a little too close and too long for comfort, but considering we were playing a part, I supposed

an innocent kiss didn't mean too much. It didn't for me, and I was sure it definitely didn't for him.

"Congratulations. I wish you two a happy life together." The officiant's voice broke us apart, and I reached for the man's waiting hand.

As our only witness, who I knew for a fact was Jack Hawthorne's driver, shuffled around to congratulate the man who was now my husband, I closed my eyes and willed my heart to take it easy and look on the bright side of things. This whole charade benefitted me more than it did Jack Hawthorne. It didn't matter that I had been engaged to another man, Joshua, just weeks ago. This particular marriage to this particular man had nothing to do with love.

"Are you ready to leave?" my very real and official yet still fake husband asked, and I opened my eyes.

I wasn't. Suddenly I was feeling all hot and cold, which wasn't a good sign, but I met his gaze and nodded. "Yes."

Up until we exited the building, the driver following us from a safe distance, we didn't utter a single word to each other. Then the driver disappeared to get the car and we just stood there, watching the people around us in an awkward silence as if neither one of us knew how we'd ended up out on the street exactly. After a few moments, we both started to speak at the same time.

"We should—"

"I think—"

"We should get back," he said firmly. "I need to be at the airport in an hour if I'm gonna make my flight."

"Okay. I don't want to hold you up. I'm gonna need to change first before I get back to the coffee shop, and I can easily take the subway back to my apartment. I don't want you to get stuck in traffic just because I—"

"It's fine," he answered distractedly. His eyes were not on me but on the black car that had just pulled up to the curb. "Please," he murmured, and I felt his palm briefly touch the small of my back before it was gone then he moved to open the door to the car.

Shoot!

I didn't know him enough to argue about how I'd get home, not to mention arguing was the last thing I had in me to do. In the time it had taken us to walk outside, I had started to feel sick to

my stomach with each step. As he stared at me expectantly, I tried not to drag my feet too much as I took his unspoken offer and got in the car.

When he got in after me and closed the door, I shut my eyes with the finality of everything.

Fuck me, I'm married. Didn't matter how many times I repeated it to myself, I still couldn't believe I'd agreed to this.

"Everything okay?"

The hard, rough tone of his voice broke me out of my jumbled thoughts, and I turned my head to look at him with a small smile. "Of course. I should really say thank yo—"

"You don't need to." He gave me a curt nod before I could even finish then focused on his driver. "Raymond, change of plans. We need to drop by the apartment first, and then we will head to the airport."

"Yes, sir."

I swallowed and fisted my hands on my lap. *Now what?* I thought. *Now do we talk? Do we not talk at all? How does this work?* Surprisingly, he was the first one to break the bleak silence.

"I might be out of reach for a few hours each day, depending on my meetings, but I'll get back to you as soon as I can." Was he talking to his driver or me? I couldn't tell. "If something comes up with Bryan or even *Jodi*, if they give you any trouble about our marriage, leave me a message. Don't talk to either one of them until you hear back from me." Me then. He was staring straight ahead, but he was talking to me because Jodi and Bryan were my cousins. "If everything goes as planned, I'll be back in a week at most." He paused. "If you wish...you can accompany me."

Nope.

"Oh, thank you, but I can't. I need to work on the coffee shop, and as much—"

"You're right," he interrupted before I could finish. "I'd rather go myself as well."

Well, then...

I nodded and looked out the window. I wasn't sure if I'd managed to hide my relief well enough. Him being away for a week meant seven more days I could take to come to terms with my decision. I'd take every extra minute I could get.

"Where are you going again?" I asked, realizing I had no idea.

"London."

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to visit London—anywhere in Europe, really. You’re lucky that you get to travel. I don’t know if lawyers do a lot of traveling, of course, but…”

I paused and waited for him to say something, if nothing else just to help me make pointless conversation, but I had a feeling it wasn’t happening. I wasn’t wrong.

“Do you have a client in London?” I tried again, but I knew it was hopeless.

Jack lifted his arm and checked his watch while shaking his head as an answer to my question.

“Raymond, take the next turn. Get us out of here.”

When there was nothing but silence in the back of the car, I closed my eyes and pressed my temple against the cold glass of the window.

Ever since I’d said okay to this crazy plan, I had done my best not to think about it too hard. Now it was too late to do any kind of thinking. We hadn’t even had time to discuss where I would live. With him? Without him? Would we even get along if we lived together? *Joshua*... Would he hear that I had gotten married? And so soon after our breakup, too. Suddenly, every single question I had and ones I hadn’t even known I had all rushed into my mind all at once.

Ten minutes had passed where no one in the car had uttered a single word. For some reason, that was causing me to panic more than anything. What had I gotten myself into, really? If I couldn’t even manage to have a simple conversation with the guy, what the hell were we gonna do for the next twelve or twenty-four months? Stare at each other? Feeling sick, I pressed my palm against my stomach as if I could hold it all in—all the emotions, disappointments, forgotten dreams—but it was too late for that. I felt the first tear slide down my cheek, and even though I quickly tried to brush it away with the back of my hand because there was no reason for me to cry, I couldn’t stop all the others that followed. In just a few minutes, I was full-on silently crying, the tears a quiet stream I didn’t know how to stop.

Very aware that my mascara had probably made a mess of my face, I cried without making even a peep until the car came to a stop. When I opened my eyes and realized we were heading toward the wrong side of Central Park, I forgot about my tears and looked at Jack.

“I think…” I started, but the words died in my throat when I saw the expression on his face.

Oh shit! If I thought he had been angry when I dropped the ring, I was sorely mistaken. His brows snapped together as his eyes roamed my face and the tension in the car tripled.

I tried my best to wipe the evidence of my tears away without looking into a mirror. “This is the wrong side—”

“Take her to the apartment, please. I’ll get to the airport on my own,” Jack said to the driver. Then his expression closed up, his face blanking as he addressed me. “This was a mistake. We shouldn’t have done this.”

I was still staring at him in shock when he got out of the car, leaving his bride—AKA me—behind.

This was a mistake.

Words any girl who had gotten married only thirty minutes earlier would want to hear, right? No? Yeah, I didn’t think so either.

After all, I was Rose, and he was Jack. We were doomed from the very beginning with those names. You know... the *Titanic* and all that.

The number of times Jack Hawthorne smiled: zero.