



# The Greek Billionaire's Email Bride

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** He ordered a bombshell to make his ex jealous.

What he got was her.

Greek Billionaire Colin Soukoulis needs a wife before his 25-year high school reunion. One click on Heart's Match, and his plan is in motion. But instead of the blonde bombshell he requested, he gets 40-year-old Hope Tiangco—tall, awkward, and nothing like his ex. So why can't he stop thinking about her?

Hope never dreamed she'd become someone's wife, let alone by email. But the brooding man who married her for show makes her feel things she never thought she'd have. Still, when his gorgeous ex walks back into his life, Hope knows exactly where she stands: second place, second choice, second best.

"I'm in love with you, Hope Soukoulis. And it's why I want you to be mine forever, even if I don't deserve it."

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:51 am*

## Chapter One

Colin Soukoulis studied the latest email from his prospective bride, his dark eyes narrowing as he read.

Dear Mr. Soukoulis,

I've attached photos of myself as requested. I understand they might not be what you expected based on your specifications to Heart's Match. I believe Mrs. Takahashi has her reasons for matching us, though I admit I'm not entirely sure what they are.

Regarding this weekend, my foster parents are looking forward to meeting you. They believe we've been dating for two months after meeting at a charity event in Michigan. I apologize for the deception, but I couldn't bear for them to know the truth. They would worry.

I look forward to your cooperation, and I sincerely apologize for the trouble.

Respectfully,

Hope Tiangco

A humorless smile twisted over his lips as he clicked through the attached photos. A tall, slender woman with serious gray eyes and brown hair pulled into a severe bun. Plain features. Sensible clothes. Earnest expression.

Nothing – absolutely nothing – like Princess Halstead.

No, make that Princess HalsteadGarcia.

Why did he keep forgetting that?

Colin closed his laptop and moved to the wall of windows in his downtown office. Twenty-five years he'd waited to show Princess what she'd thrown away when she'd chosen Roland's money over his promise.

And now this.

He poured himself two fingers of scotch, swirling the amber liquid before taking a measured sip. Charlotte Takahashi had been infuriatingly serene when he'd called to question her judgment.

This is what you're paying me for. So trust me on this, please.

Easier said than done, but since Charlottewasthe best in the business, and personally recommended by his friend Lukas Tsaldaris...

Fine then.

With deliberate movements, Colin typed his response.

Ms. Tiangco,

I'll be there at noon on Saturday. I understand your desire to shield your parents from the truth, and I'll respect the narrative you've created.

I must emphasize that our arrangement remains temporary, regardless of what your parents are told. After the reunion, you'll be generously compensated as we agreed.

Colin Soukoulis

He drained his scotch, savoring the burn. Six hours until his flight to Wyoming. Six hours to prepare himself to meet a woman he hadn't chosen, to pretend affection he didn't feel, all for the sake of a decades-old wound that refused to heal.

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Hope's fingers trembled as she read Colin's terse response. Each carefully chosen word drove home what she already knew—she was a business transaction. A means to an end.

Not that she'd expected anything else. Heart's Match had made the terms clear: Colin Soukoulis needed a temporary wife to accompany him to his high school reunion. Afterward, they would part ways, and she would have enough money to finally start the life she'd always dreamed of.

"I can't believe this is happening."

Hope closed the email and smiled as her foster mother came into the room. "You know how old-fashioned I am. I couldn't possibly be with Colin if we weren't married first. But at least that means you can still attend the actual wedding." And that's not quite a lie, Hope reminded herself. There could still be an actual wedding for her foster parents to attend, only with a different groom.

"Colin is amazing, Mom. You'll love him, I promise." Now, these words...could be a lie, but she really hoped not. Her priority was to keep Edith and Frank Barton from worry. They'd taken her in at fifteen: half-starved, skittish, and damaged from years in the foster system. They'd given her stability, love, and a chance at a future. For twenty-five years, they'd been the only real family she'd known. The least she could do was spare them the knowledge that their daughter was desperate enough to agree

to an arranged marriage.

## Page 2

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"Two months," Edith mused, settling into a chair across from Hope. "It seems awfully fast to be getting married."

"Not that fast," Hope reminded her. "We met in high school. Remember?"

"But you also said you two had lost touch. This is just so...unlike you. You've always been so cautious."

Hope touched the ring that Heart's Match had delivered to her doorstep just a day ago. "When you know, you know," she said with forced brightness. "Sometimes it takes forty years to find the right person."

Edith studied her with knowing eyes. "And you know?"

For a moment, Hope considered confessing everything. But the worry it would cause, the disappointment...

"Yes, Mom. I know."

Her phone vibrated, and Hope was thankful for having an excuse to look away and keep Edith from seeing the truth in her eyes.

Proxy marriage contract signed. Flight ETA noon. Will bring car service. No need to pick me up. - CG

The text from her husband was exactly what she would expect from someone like Colin. Distant. Cool. Blunt. He had already been all of those things in high school,

but such behavior was even likelier, considering their situation.

The billionaire had asked for a trophy wife. And Heart's Match gave him Hope: a plain forty-year-old virgin who'd spent nearly two decades making spreadsheets about toilets.

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The regional airport in her hometown was little more than a glorified airstrip with a handful of private hangars. Hope waited on the single bench outside the small terminal, nervously smoothing her simple blue dress—the nicest one she owned.

A sleek private jet taxied to a stop on the tarmac, its gleaming exterior almost blinding in the Wyoming sun. Hope's stomach tightened. Of course Colin Soukoulis had his own plane. What else had she expected?

The jet's door opened, and a man emerged at the top of the stairs. Even from a distance, he took her breath away.

Tall, broad-shouldered, with black hair touched with premature silver at the temples. His face could have been carved from granite—all sharp angles and brooding intensity. He wore no tie with his tailored suit, the top buttons of his shirt casually undone, but the effect was no less intimidating.

This was a man who commanded rooms simply by entering them.

Hope stood, smoothing her dress one last time as Colin Soukoulis crossed the tarmac toward her. His gaze swept over her, dark and assessing.

"Ms. Tiangco," he said, his voice deeper than she'd imagined from their brief phone conversation.

She cleared her throat. "It's actually Mrs. Soukoulis now?"

The reminder visibly disconcerted him, and Hope struggled not to let this affect her. "Just call me Hope, please."

It was a struggle to keep her face expressionless as he took her hand. His palm was warm against hers, his grip firm but not overpowering.

"Hope," he repeated, and the sound of her name in his voice made her cheeks warm.

Up close, he was even more devastating than she remembered. A strong jaw with just the right amount of stubble. Eyes like molten chocolate, intense and penetrating. They were nearly the same height, she realized—her five-nine to his six-four—their eyes almost level when she wore heels.

"You're taller than your photos suggested," he remarked, still studying her.

She had always been this tall. But she supposed he had never noticed since she had never been the type to stand out in their old high school, even with her height.

The silence between them stretched uncomfortably, and Hope shifted on her feet. "Um..." "Think, Hope! What else was there to say?" She cleared her throat again. "Your, um, plane is impressive."

"It serves its purpose."

Spoken like a true billionaire, Hope thought, but not unkindly. It was simply what it was.

Colin glanced past her to the parking lot. "Your car?"



## Page 3

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Hope nodded toward her faded blue Subaru, suddenly conscious of its dents and peeling paint. "I'm sorry. I know it doesn't look much, but it's reliable."

"I'm sure it is."

"I know you told me that I didn't need to pick you up, but I thought having more time together before meeting my parents would be ideal."

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Colin only nodded, and she wondered if he was always this silent. Or maybe he already found her boring?

Hope unlocked the passenger door for him, hurriedly clearing away a granola bar wrapper and an empty coffee cup.

Colin folded his tall frame into the passenger seat, his knees nearly touching the dashboard. In the confined space, his presence overwhelmed her senses—the subtle cedar notes of his cologne, the quiet power radiating from him with each shift of his shoulders.

Hope slid behind the wheel, shrinking beneath the weight of his silent assessment.

"My parents live about twenty minutes from here," she said, starting the engine. "They're... they're good people, but they're not—"

"I understand."

The quiet assurance in his voice startled her into looking at him.

"I know what's at stake. I'll do my part. I promise."

"Thank you," she said simply.

"Tell me more about them."

"The Bartons aren't my biological parents," Hope explained, keeping her eyes on the road as she started the drive back. "They fostered me starting when I was fifteen, after I'd been in several bad placements."

She felt his gaze on her profile but couldn't bring herself to meet it. Her history wasn't something she shared easily.

"They took in a traumatized teenager?" Colin asked quietly.

Hope nodded. "They saved my life. Edith and Frank... they gave me stability. A home."

The countryside blurred past her window—rolling hills dotted with cattle, mountains in the distance, a sky so blue it hurt to look at it. Wyoming's beauty had always been a comfort to Hope. Today, it felt like a reminder of everything wild and unpredictable in her carefully planned life.

"We're here," she said as they turned onto a dirt road lined with aspen trees.

The Barton farmhouse came into view: white with blue shutters, flower beds lining the front porch, and a hand-painted mailbox reading "Barton Family Farm." It was modest but meticulously maintained.

Edith came out to welcome them. "So you're the gentleman who's stolen our girl's heart."

Hope's pulse quickened as Colin stepped forward, taking Edith's weathered hand in both of his.

"Mrs. Barton." His voice transformed, warming in a way Hope hadn't heard before. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Colin Soukoulis."

"Oh, none of that 'Mrs. Barton' business. It's Edith," the older woman said with a smile. "Come in, please. Frank's just getting cleaned up from the barn."

Hope followed them into the modest living room, watching Colin take in the worn furniture, the crocheted afghans, the family photos covering every surface. She tensed, waiting for a flicker of disdain, a tensing of his shoulders, any sign that he found her childhood home beneath him.

Her foster father joined them then, tall and lean, with leathery skin and kind blue eyes. "Frank Barton," the older man said quite simply as he extended a calloused hand.

Hope held her breath as Colin introduced himself and shook Frank's hand firmly. "It's an honor to meet the man who's responsible for teaching Hope to drive a tractor. From her stories alone, I can already tell she's a lot better than most of my ranch hands."

Frank looked as if he had received the greatest compliment. "My girl's always been one in a million."

Hope could only watch in amazement as Colin Soukoulis—billionaire CEO and revenge-seeking husband—went on to skillfully charm her foster parents over Edith's

pot roast dinner. He asked Frank about crop rotation, listened to Edith's stories of Hope's early adulthood, and somehow managed to downplay his own wealth without lying outright. He was... perfect.

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Too perfect.

By the time they moved to the porch for coffee and Edith's apple pie, Hope was thoroughly confused. This wasn't the cool, distant man she remembered or had come to expect from their brief exchange of emails. This was someone else entirely.

"Hope tells us you run that vegetable meat company," Frank said, settling into his porch rocker. "That's mighty impressive."

"Plant-based protein," Colin corrected gently. "And I've been fortunate. The right idea at the right time."

"He's being modest," Hope found herself saying. "Greenbright revolutionized the industry. Colin built it from nothing."

Colin looked at her in surprise, but she pretended not to notice this.

"Frank, why don't you show Colin your workshop while Hope helps me with these dishes?" Edith suggested, gathering plates.

Hope shot Colin an apologetic glance, but he was already rising to follow Frank.

In the kitchen, Edith hummed as she rinsed dishes, passing them to Hope to load in the dishwasher.

"He's handsome as sin," Edith remarked casually.

Hope nearly dropped a plate. "Mom!"

Edith chuckled. "What? These old eyes still work just fine. Though I'll admit, he's not what I expected."

Hope tensed. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, when you said 'CEO,' I pictured someone... colder. More corporate." Edith handed her another dish. "But that man couldn't stop staring at you." Edith's gaze turned knowing. "And it's the same for you. I saw how you've been stealing glances at him all night when you think nobody's looking." Edith dried her hands on a dish towel. "Love happens when you least expect it, especially at our age. Look at me and your father—married at forty-two, after we'd both given up."

"I know," Hope whispered, the lie burning her throat.

Edith squeezed her shoulder. "He's a good man. I can tell. The way he listens—really listens. That's rare."

Hope nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat.

When the men returned from the workshop, Frank was explaining the finer points of his latest woodworking project. Colin listened attentively, asking questions that made Frank stand taller, pride evident in his weathered face.

"We should get going if we're going to make our flight," Colin said eventually, checking his watch.

The goodbyes were lengthy and warm. Edith pressed containers of leftovers into Hope's hands. Frank clapped Colin on the shoulder.

"You take care of our girl," Frank said, his voice gruff with emotion.

"I will, sir," Colin replied, and the gravity in his tone sounded so real that Hope had to look away. "You have my word."

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The road stretched before them, golden in the setting sun as Hope searched for words.

"I appreciate how you were with them. It meant a lot."

"They love you very much."

"Yes." Hope's throat tightened. She adjusted her grip on the steering wheel. "About the pot roast—I should have warned you. Your company being plant-based and all..."

"I still eat ethically raised meat if the situation requires it." Colin straightened his sleeve, his voice cooling to that formal tone she was beginning to recognize as his armor. "It's factory farming I oppose."

The silence that followed felt weighted, full of unspoken things.

Colin shifted in his seat to face her. "What will you tell them when this ends?"

The blunt question hit like a physical blow. Hope stared straight ahead, unseeing.

"That we wanted different things, I suppose."

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"And what do you want?"

The question caught her unprepared. What did she want? Security, yes. A home of her own. But also...

Her fingers gripped the wheel tighter. "Someone to belong to," she admitted, the truth spilling out before she could stop it. "Someone who might want to belong to me, too."

Colin said nothing more as they reached the airport.

His private jet waited on the tarmac, gleaming in the late afternoon sun. A uniformed attendant took Hope's modest suitcase while Colin guided her up the steps with a light touch at the small of her back—the first deliberate contact between them since their handshake hours before. That simple touch sent awareness skittering across her skin, surprising in its intensity.

The interior of the jet was a revelation—all buttery leather and polished wood, with only four oversized seats instead of rows. Hope sank into one, trying not to look as overwhelmed as she felt.

Colin took the seat opposite her, loosening the top button of his shirt. Hope found her gaze drawn to the movement, to the exposed hollow of his throat where pulse beat strong against tanned skin.

"The flight's about two hours," he said, and Hope yanked her attention back to his eyes, embarrassed to be caught staring. "We'll be in Denver before dinner."



Hope nodded, suddenly very aware of how alone they were. The attendant brought them drinks—water for Hope, scotch neat for Colin—and then disappeared into the cockpit.

The engines hummed to life beneath them. Hope gripped the armrests as they taxied, her stomach fluttering with nerves that had nothing to do with flying.

"First time on a private jet?"

Hope loosened her death-grip on the armrests even as a rueful smile touched her lips. "I wonder what gave it away."

Colin smiled, and her heart skipped a beat like she was in the throes of her first schoolgirl crush. "I like that you don't hide it. It's...refreshing."

Refreshing.

She was forty years old, and he thought her...refreshing.

The jet accelerated down the runway, pressing Hope back into her seat. She closed her eyes as they lifted into the air, her stomach dropping with the ascent.

When she opened them again, Colin was watching her. Something smoldered in his gaze, and her breath caught in her throat.

The plane suddenly shuddered with minor turbulence. Hope started in her seat, and Colin reached for her hand. Their fingers brushed. A jolt of awareness shot up her arm. Neither moved away.

As the turbulence subsided, Colin's hand shifted, covering hers. His palm was warm, slightly rough. Hope's breath caught in her throat.

"You read the fine print in our contract?"

Hope swallowed. "You're talking about..."

Seeing that she had a hard time putting it to words, Colin stated bluntly, "Before the flight lands, couples are expected to become comfortable with physical contact. It's in the contract."

A flush covered her cheeks, and she could feel her face burning hotter when she noticed Colin staring at her mouth.

Am I ready for this?

The soft click of Colin's seatbelt releasing seemed thunderous in the cabin. He moved beside her, the leather creaking beneath his weight. This close, she caught new details—fine lines at the corners of his eyes, the subtle notes of his cologne mingling with scotch on his breath, a tiny scar near his jaw.

"May I?"

Hope could only nod, no longer trusting herself to be coherent.

Colin's hand came up to cup her cheek, turning her face toward his. "Close your eyes," he commanded softly.

She obeyed, feeling vulnerable and exposed in the intimate cabin. The anticipation was almost painful.

His lips touched hers, gently. Hope remained perfectly still, afraid to breathe. To move. Or do anything that might break the moment.

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Then Colin's hand slid from her cheek to the nape of her neck, his fingers tangling in the hair at the base of her tight bun. The kiss deepened, his mouth moving more insistently against hers.

A small sound escaped Hope's throat, part surprise, part surrender, and Colin pulled back slightly, his breath warm against her lips.

"Open your mouth, kyria."

The roughness of his voice was unexpected but thrilling, the sound compelling her to obey. And as soon as her lips parted, the kiss deepened with a stroke of his tongue. And the taste of him was wonderfully...virile.

Colin's hand tightened in her hair, loosening the pins that held her severe bun in place. The kiss turned hungry, demanding. Heat bloomed in Hope's chest, spreading downward, pooling low in her belly. She'd never been kissed like this. Never. This kiss made her feel like she was a woman, and that she was wanted. And as to whether that was true or not—her body didn't seem to care.

When Colin finally pulled away, they were both breathing hard. Hope's hair had come partly undone, a few strands falling around her face. Colin watched her with dark, unreadable eyes.

"We'll be landing soon."

The tautness of his voice was unmistakable, and so was the rigid set of his body. It seemed as if he had forced himself to stop. But why that was, she wasn't yet ready to

think of.

She touched her lips, which felt swollen and overly sensitive. Her body was still trembling, and her entire world became even rockier when Colin suddenly reached out, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

The casual intimacy of the gesture felt more shocking than the kiss somehow, and it completely stole her breath.

"You should wear your hair down more often," he said quietly. "It suits you."

Before Hope could respond, he returned to his original seat, leaving her flushed and confused.

The pilot announced their descent into Denver. Hope gazed out the window as the plane dropped through clouds, city lights appearing below.

When she glanced back at Colin, he was watching her with an intensity that made her shiver.

"Welcome to Colorado, Hope." His gaze was shuttered, his tone unreadable. "Let's hope this works for the both of us."

## Chapter Two

Hope stood at the bedroom window, her gaze unseeing despite all five thousand acres of Colin's ranch spread out before her. Right now, all she could think about was that.

His kiss, which had her lips tingling even until now.

She pressed her fingertips to her mouth, replaying the kiss on the plane. Her first real

kiss in nearly a decade. The few awkward embraces she'd exchanged during her thirties hardly counted—nothing like the heat of Colin's mouth, the firm press of his hand at her nape, the way her entire body had responded as if waking from a long sleep.

Heat bloomed across her skin at the memory, and this had her scrambling for something to distract herself.

Aha!

Hope crossed to her suitcase and began unpacking her meager belongings. Her simple dresses and blouses looked plain and dated hanging in the massive walk-in closet, lost among empty shelves meant for a wardrobe ten times the size.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand, with Edith's name flashing on the screen.

"Mom?" Hope tucked the phone between her ear and shoulder, continuing to unpack.

"There you are. Just checking you arrived safely." Edith's voice carried the familiar background noise of the farmhouse kitchen. The clanking of pots. The creaking of wooden planks. And in the distance, the neighing of their two old farmhorses.

"We did. The ranch is..." Hope paused, searching for words that wouldn't reveal too much. "Beautiful."

"And how's your young man? Frank hasn't stopped talking about him. Says he's never met someone who understood crop rotation so quickly."

"He's fine. Busy with work already." She noticed an envelope that had slipped from her suitcase—one she didn't recognize. "Did you put something in my bag?"

"I don't understand. What would I put...oh."

Edith's dismay was audible, and Hope couldn't help but wonder if some divine force was at work. Edith clearly hadn't wanted her to see this.

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A foreclosure notice.

"I didn't want to worry you before you left," Edith was saying miserably. "But the bank called again yesterday. The drought the last two seasons..." Edith continued, her voice strained with false cheer. "You know how it is. But don't you worry. Frank's talking with the credit union about refinancing."

Hope stared at the numbers on the page. The Bartons were three months behind on their mortgage. The property they'd scraped and saved for—the only real home she'd ever known—was at risk.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice came out smaller than intended.

"What could you have done, sweetheart? You've done enough for us over the years. We didn't want to burden you."

The irony twisted in Hope's chest. If only they knew that their financial troubles had given her exactly the push she'd needed to contact Heart's Match. The agency's promise of a generous settlement after a temporary marriage arrangement had seemed like the answer to prayers she hadn't even voiced yet.

"I have some money saved," Hope lied. "I could—"

"Absolutely not. We're just fine. You focus on that handsome man of yours."

Hope closed her eyes, guilt and determination warring within her. Colin's payment would be more than enough to save the farm. All she had to do was play the perfect

wife until after the reunion.

"I love you, Mom."

"Love you too, sweetheart."

The call ended, leaving Hope clutching the foreclosure notice. She tucked it into her underwear drawer, beneath practical cotton briefs that seemed hopelessly outdated in this palace of luxury.

A knock at the door made her jump.

"Mrs. Soukoulis?" A woman's voice. "Dinner will be served in thirty minutes."

"Thank you," Hope called back, frantically searching for something appropriate to wear. In the end, she settled on something simple but classic: a little black dress to make her feel like Audrey Hepburn...even if she actually looked the opposite.

In the bathroom, Hope scrutinized her reflection before slowly pulling the pins from her bun.

You should wear your hair down more often. It suits you.

When she came down, the dining room took her breath away with its vaulted ceilings and modern chandeliers. He had told her earlier he lived in a farmhouse. And maybe it was that. The world's poshest farmhouse, that was.

Colin was already there, and she did her best not to squirm as his gaze swept from her loose hair to the simple dress, lingering in a way that made her skin warm.

He pulled her chair out, and she belatedly hurried to take her place on the table.



"You look different."

"Different good or different bad?"

"Just different."

She had feared and hoped at the same time that he would close to her. And he actually did, which left her feeling terribly self-conscious and excited. But when their first course arrived, and she had her first sip of her soup—

Wow.

Hope took another spoonful, aware of his gaze still on her. "This is amazing. Is everything in this soup..."

Colin nodded. "Homegrown. And the meant, plant-based."

"I need to correct myself then. I think you're amazing, too, with everything you've created. Your groundbreaking work in sustainable farming, the advancements in—" Hope broke off upon noticing how Colin was staring at her. "Did I say something wrong?"

"You're saying everything right," he drawled, "which is not what I expected. Most women would only care to know about my net worth."

"I'm not most women," Hope said lightly.

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"Clearly."

The silence that followed wasn't uncomfortable, but it was charged with something Hope couldn't name.

"Tell me about your job in Michigan," Colin finally said, cutting into his steak.

"It was mostly administrative work for a plumbing fixtures company. Nearly two decades updating spreadsheets about toilets."

"You never thought of changing jobs?"

"It paid the bills. That was what mattered most."

"So you seemed to prize stability over pleasure. And yet you left for this." Colin gestured around them. "A temporary arrangement with a stranger."

"You're forgot 'highly compensated'."

"Is what I'm paying for truly enough, considering you'll have to carry a divorced tag for the rest of your life?"

Having him talk about the end of their marriage within hours of meeting hurt more than she expected, but she reminded herself that he was simply being honest.

"It is what it is," she said with a shrug.

"What about other men? Is there someone who will likely care that you're suddenly married?"

Hope shook her head.

"When was your last serious relationship?"

Hope focused on cutting a piece of asparagus into unnecessarily small pieces. "Define serious."

"Intimate."

The blunt word hung between them. Hope's face burned, but she refused to look away. "Not in a long time."

Colin set down his fork, his full attention now on her. "How long?"

Hope's fingers tightened around her knife. "Quite long."

Colin stared at her, and she had to fight against the urge to squirm.

"You're a virgin."

"Yes." She worked hard to keep her voice steady even though admitting this made her feel horribly inadequate as a woman. "Will that be a problem?"

"Women who've made it to forty without intimacy don't typically sign up to marry strangers."

Hope's eyes widened at his perception. "I never said I hadn't been kissed."

Colin's mouth curved slightly. "Your reaction on the plane said it for you."

The memory of that kiss flooded back, making Hope's lips tingle anew. "I've been kissed before. Just not... like that."

"Like what?"

Hope searched for words that wouldn't reveal too much. "Like it mattered."

Something shifted in Colin's expression—a flicker of vulnerability quickly masked. He picked up his wine glass, breaking the intensity of the moment.

"The reunion is in two weeks. We should discuss how to prepare. What do you know of Princess?"

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Hope chose her words with care. "She was our school's golden girl. Homecoming queen. Prom queen. The girl everyone wanted to date or befriend."

His gaze narrowed. "Our school?"

She nodded. "I was—"

"Don't tell me. I finally remember. You're the valedictorian. You graduated a few years after us."

"Two to be exact."

"How did you end up studying in our school?"

"Edith was friends with the principal. They offered me a scholarship. Free board and lodging. In return, my free hours were spent helping out however way I can."

A flicker of recognition crossed Colin's face. "I remember another thing. I often see you taking care of the cats in the school yard."

Hope could only nod. She had never imagined he had noticed her in any way back then. But whether that meant something in the long run...she didnt want to think of as well.

"This should be a lot easier then," Colin said after a moment. "You already know my history with her."

"I don't know anything about what happened after, though. Were you still together in college?"

"No." Colin's voice was curt. "I promised Princess I'd make something of myself. She didn't believe me. She wanted what was already guaranteed, so she ended up marrying Roland."

The school quarterback, Hope thought, recognizing the name. And another thing she recognized? The hardened expression on Colin's handsome features. It told her that Princess' rejection still stung, even when twenty-five years had already passed.

"Tell me more about the reunion itself." Hope decided it was time to change the subject, and she saw that this was the right thing to do when Colin visibly relaxed in his seat.

"Three days of events. Cocktail mixer the first night. Golf tournament and dinner the second day. Formal gala the third evening."

Hope's stomach dropped. "I don't know how to play golf."

"You won't need to. That's primarily for the men. The wives usually spend the day at the spa."

"And the formal gala? I don't have anything suitable."

"We'll take care of that tomorrow. I've arranged for a stylist to bring options to the house."

Hope blinked. "A stylist?"

"You'll need a formal gown. Jewelry. Appropriate accessories."

They didn't speak after that, with the meal ending in relative silence. When the dessert plates were cleared, Colin stood.

"I have calls to make. Elaine can show you around the property tomorrow."

Hope rose as well, uncertainty making her awkward. Were they supposed to kiss goodnight? Touch in some way? Were they supposed to—

Colin solved the dilemma by stepping back, maintaining a careful distance between them.

"Goodnight, Hope."

Oh.

She told herself she wasn't disappointed as she mustered up a smile. "Goodnight."

### Chapter Three

Hope regarded her reflection in the full-length mirror, barely recognizing the woman staring back. The emerald gown hugged curves she'd stopped bothering to emphasize years ago, its off-shoulder design revealing collarbones she'd never considered worthy of display. Her brown hair, styled in loose waves, fell past her shoulders in a way that minimized the silver strands at her temples, making her look...different. Softer. Less severe.

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The stylist—a tiny, exacting woman named Lala—circled her with narrowed eyes. "The earrings. The diamond drops, not the studs."

Hope switched the jewelry with trembling fingers. The diamonds caught the light, drawing attention to her neck, her jawline.

"Better," Lala declared. "Turn."

Hope rotated slowly, the silk whispering against her skin. Two weeks of fittings, lessons in etiquette, and crash courses in Colin's background had transformed her outward appearance. Inside, she remained the same cautious administrator from Michigan, playing dress-up in a billionaire's world.

"The necklace is too much," Lala decided, removing the glittering pendant. "Your neck is one of your assets. We showcase, not overwhelm."

Assets.

She was still trying to understand how she felt about having her body parts defined in such a way when she heard a voice from the doorway.

"Are we good?"

Hope turned to find Colin watching her, his dark eyes moving over her with deliberate thoroughness. He wore a tuxedo that emphasized the breadth of his shoulders, the lean strength of his body. The silver at his temples caught the light, giving him an air of distinguished authority that made her mouth go dry.



Lala stepped back, assessing them as a pair. "Perfection. Like they were designed for each other."

A flush crept up Hope's neck. They'd barely spoken in the two weeks since her arrival, their interactions limited to stilted dinners and brief strategy sessions about the reunion. Colin spent his days at his office in the city, leaving Hope alone with her borrowed finery and rising anxiety.

"The car is ready whenever you are," Colin said, his gaze lingering on the curve of her shoulder.

The other woman handed Hope a small clutch purse. "Lipstick, powder, breath mints. Essentials only."

Hope took it, feeling like a child being prepped for her first day of school. "Thank you."

Lala departed with a professional nod, leaving Hope alone with Colin for the first meaningful moment in days.

"Nervous?" he asked, stepping closer.

The scent of his cologne enveloped her, and Hope's pulse quickened traitorously.

"Should I be?"

"Princess can be... intimidating."

"So can you," Hope countered with a helpless smile.

Colin didn't smile back, and she had to repress a now-familiar urge to squirm under

his gaze. Why did it seem like he was studying her all the time? Was he trying to look for some flaw? Or something else?

"The dress suits you."

It wasn't quite a compliment, but Hope's cheeks warmed anyway. "The dress costs more than my car."

"Then perhaps it's time for a new car."

Hope shot him a horrified look. "Please don't buy me one."

Colin's eyes gleamed, and her heart tripped at the sight even as her horror grew. "I'm serious——"

Colin suddenly reached out, and she forgot what she was saying as he adjusted one of the diamond earrings Lala had insisted on. His fingers brushed her earlobe, sending an electric current down her spine.

"I'm just as serious when I say this: you belong in beautiful things, Hope Soukoulis."

It was her first time to hear him call her that, and it made her feel so vulnerable that she couldn't help jerking back. "We...we should go." Hope avoided his gaze even as she felt him frown. "I, um, don't believe in being unfashionably late." She could feel him staring at her as she hurried away from him.

She didn't care.

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This marriage wasn't designed to last. She had to do what she could to survive its end.

\*\*\*\*

The ride to his reunion was spent in tense silence. And her tension only grew when they arrived at their destination. Hope's palm grew damp against Colin's as they approached the check-in table. The woman seated there—blonde, petite, with a name tag reading "Kimberly"—looked up and froze.

"Colin Soukoulis? Is that really you?"

Colin's posture shifted subtly, his public persona sliding into place like armor. "Kimberly. You look well."

Kimberly's gaze darted between them, lingering on their joined hands. "No one knew if you'd come. And you brought..." Her eyes scrutinized Hope from head to toe.

"My wife," Colin supplied, his arm sliding around Hope's waist. "Hope, this is Kimberly Davis. We shared AP Chemistry."

Hope extended her free hand, offering a warm smile. "We were in AP Physics together."

Kimberly blinked, confusion crossing her features before recognition slowly dawned. "Wait... you're the quiet girl who aced all the tests? I barely recognized you."

"I remember you, though. I had just transferred then, and you noticed I was lost. You

took the time to show me where my class was."

Kimberley only stared at her. Hope could see that the other woman also remembered what she didn't say, and it was how Kimberley at that time had first called her an 'idiot' for getting lost.

"Small kindnesses matter," Hope added with a smile. "It's nice to see a familiar face after all these years."

The other woman slowly relaxed. "That's true. And I'm sure everyone will be delighted to see you again."

The ballroom buzzed with conversation and laughter, crystal chandeliers casting a flattering glow over the assembled alumni. Women in cocktail dresses, men in suits—all trying to present their most successful selves to the people who had known them when they were young and unformed.

Heads turned as Colin guided Hope through the crowd. Conversations paused. Eyes widened.

"You're causing quite the stir," Hope noted under her breath.

"I can say the same for you," Colin murmured, his hand warm against the small of her back.

A tall, athletic man with graying blond hair approached, his smile wide and practiced. "Colin Soukoulis, in the flesh. You actually showed up."

"Andrew." Colin shook the man's hand. "This is my wife, Hope. Hope, Andrew Thompson. Former basketball team captain, current car dealership owner."

Andrew whistled low, his gaze lingering on Hope longer than necessary. "When the hell did you get married? And your wife...I remember you back then. But I never thought you'd turn into such a knockout."

The possessive tightening of Colin's arm around her waist felt less like performance and more like protection, and it was only when Andrew finally let them go that the tension in his shoulders eased.

Colin guided her toward the bar. "Champagne?"

"Just water, please."

As they waited for their drinks, Hope scanned the room, trying to see which faces were familiar.

"Still nervous?" Colin asked, studying her profile.

Hope accepted her water from the bartender. "Just wondering which shark in this tank will try to take a bite out of me first."

"No one will touch you," Colin stated with quiet intensity. "You're mine tonight. They all know it."

A shiver raced down Hope's spine that had nothing to do with fear.

"There's Roland," Colin nodded toward a portly man with thinning hair who stood near the photo display.

Hope studied him. "He hasn't aged as well as you."

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"Few have." No false modesty in that statement.

"True," Hope acknowledged even as her heart started to ache. "And speaking of rare beings who age like fine wine..."

"Colin Soukoulis." A woman's voice, honey-sweet but edged with steel. And the sound had Colin stiffening in recognition even when he had yet to turn.

He slipped an arm around her, and Hope did her best to relax as she came face to face with the woman who once owned Colin's heart. And maybe, she still did.

"I wondered if we'd see you tonight."

Princess Halstead Garcia.

Twenty-five years had refined rather than diminished her beauty. In high school, she had looked what her name suggested: a princess with the face of an angel. Now, she looked like a golden-haired queen who was used to holding court wherever she went.

"Princess." Colin's voice remained even, but Hope felt the tension radiating from him. "You look well."

"As do you," Princess replied, her blue eyes traveling over him with possessive familiarity before sliding to Hope. "And who is this?"

"My wife, Hope." Colin pulled her closer to his side. "Hope, Princess...Garcia. We were... classmates."

The deliberate diminishment of their past relationship did not go unnoticed. Princess's perfect smile tightened at the corners.

"Wife? My goodness." Princess extended a manicured hand. "What a surprise."

Hope accepted the handshake, noting the excessive pressure Princess applied. .

"I seem to have missed all the news about your wedding."

"Hope wanted a quiet one," Colin answered, "and whatever she wants, I do my best to provide."

Princess's gaze swept over Hope again, lingering on her gown. "That's a lovely dress. Valentino's spring collection?"

"You should ask Colin," Hope answered honestly. "I defer to all of his decisions, sartorially speaking."

"He always did have good taste in women's clothes." Princess's smile held a secret, her eyes meeting Colin's with an intimacy that made Hope's chest tighten. "Remember that little boutique in Austin? You had such an eye for quality, even back then."

Colin's expression remained neutral, but Hope felt him stiffen beside her.

"What is it that you do now?" Princess insisted on asking. "I don't believe you mentioned it."

"Colin wanted me to stop working," Hope said truthfully, "so I did."

"How quaint."

"I just believe in the same thing he does. Whatever my husband asks of me, I obey."

Colin's thumb traced small circles against her waist, a silent acknowledgment of her performance.

"Well...it seems I'm intruding, since you two are clearly in your honeymoon stage still." Pain flashed over her face, the sight so unexpected that it had Colin stiffening. "Enjoy it for as long as you can. Because it doesn't last. Not for anyone."

Unease stirred inside of Hope as she watched Princess walk away. And when she glanced up at Colin, the expression on his face made her heart ache even more. He wanted to run after Princess. And the only thing stopping him was her.

The wife he had paid for.

But neither wanted nor loved.

## Chapter Four

"More coffee, Mrs. Soukoulis?"



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Hope managed a smile for Elaine. "Yes, please."

"Mr. Soukoulis had left for a meeting in town an hour ago," the other woman shared while setting a plate of fresh fruit beside Hope's untouched toast. "He asked me to tell you the car will be ready at noon for the golf club luncheon."

Day 2 of the reunion. Hope suppressed a sigh. "Thank you."

"If I may," Elaine hesitated, uncharacteristically tentative. "The blue dress that arrived yesterday would be particularly appropriate for a country club. Classic but not ostentatious."

Hope managed a smile. Even the staff knew she needed guidance in Colin's world. "Blue it is, then."

She traced the rim of her coffee cup absently. She had slept poorly last night, her dreams haunted by images of Colin cheating on her with his ex. But could it really be called cheating when their marriage was nothing but a business arrangement?

Her phone buzzed. It was a text from Edith, and Hope composed a cheerful response, omitting any mention of Princess's dramatics or her own growing confusion about Colin. Some truths were better left unsaid.

She was halfway through her fruit when Colin's name flashed on her screen with an incoming call.

"Good morning." She aimed for casual, missing by inches.

"Hope." His voice held an edge she couldn't identify. "There's been a change of plans."

Her stomach tightened. "Oh?"

"Princess's car broke down outside of town. I've gone to help her." A pause. "I'll meet you at the luncheon."

"I understand." Hope struggled not to think that Princess had deliberately caused this to happen. "I'll see you at noon." After hanging up, Hope stared out at the manicured grounds of Colin's home.

So it began.

Princess's campaign to reclaim Colin's attention after last night's humiliation.

And Colin was already rushing to her rescue.

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The golf club was everything Hope imagined and feared it would be. Every inch of the place spoke of wealth and privilege, and she could only be grateful she had followed Elaine's advice. This way, she looked like she belonged...even when she actually didn't.

Hope checked her watch. Twelve-thirty. Colin still hadn't shown up, and he was already thirty minutes late.

"Mrs. Soukoulis?" A server approached with a flute of champagne. "Your table is ready. Mr. Soukoulis called to say he's been delayed."

Hope was starting to realize how easy it was for her to fake smiling now. "Thank you." And this made her sad.

The dining room buzzed with reunion attendees, the women in summer dresses and pearls, the men in crisp golf attire. Hope made her way to the indicated table, spine straight despite the curious stares following her progress. Alone. Without Colin.

"Hello, Hope. It's nice to meet you again in person."

Hope turned around in surprise. The voice was familiar, and when she saw who it was...

Oh!

"Charlotte," she exclaimed. The other woman was the founder of Heart's Match, and in truth, that was the only reason Hope had found the confidence to send her application. A client of hers had told Hope about Charlotte's business, and afterspeaking to the other woman on the phone, she had been so impressed by Charlotte's sincere but pragmatic outlook that she had asked, quite shyly, if she could send an application herself.

"I heard you remarried," Hope said with a smile.

Charlotte's sensible features turned into a picture of loveliness at the words. "I did, yes. I'm actually here because of Sano's work, but I completely forgot that Colin's reunion is being held in the same place." Charlotte looked at Hope, asking, "How are you two doing?"

"We're, um, doing good."

"I was hoping you'd say you guys were doing fantastic."

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Hope colored. "Oh, but actually—" A commotion caught her attention, and she broke off mid-speech. Why were people looking at her before looking back at...oh.

Her heart plunged to her stomach. A crowd of guests was still blocking her view of who had just come in. But she could easily guess who it was...and of course, she was right, with Colin entering the dining room and causing eyebrows to shoot up upon seeing Princess walking right by his side.

"Do you need me to talk to him?"

Hope slowly shook her head. "This is what I signed up for." She watched Colin's gaze sweep the room until he finally found her, and his body turned rigid when he realized she was with Charlotte.

"But if you do need someone to talk to..." Charlotte touched her arm. "Just give me a call. Promise?"

"I promise. And thank you." Charlotte's offer of support meant the world to her, especially since the contract she signed included a non-disclosure agreement. There was truly no one else to talk to except for Charlotte.

Hope's heart was banging loudly against her chest as she finally forced herself to join Colin and Princess.

He bent to kiss her cheek, the gesture both public and perfunctory. "Sorry I'm late. Princess's car needed a tow."

"I understand." This was the truth, but it didn't keep her heart from breaking. She turned to Princess, saying, "I'm glad nothing bad happened to you."

"You're so sweet." And yet her tone indicated otherwise. "But seriously, thank you for being so understanding," Princess added as she slipped into the chair opposite Hope. "And of course, I'm so grateful to Colin. He's always come running to my rescue, ever since we were kids. And honestly..." Princess released a sigh. "I need someone to lean on right now. Badly. Especially since Roland and I have been..." Her smile turned strained. "We're just having a difficult time lately."

Colin's jaw clenched, and Hope had to bite her lip hard to keep herself from saying anything.

Lunch proceeded with excruciating slowness. Princess dominated the conversation with reminiscences of high school days—stories carefully selected to highlight her history with Colin while excluding Hope.

"Remember that time we drove for like hours for that concert?" Princess twirled a strand of blonde hair around her finger. "Your old truck broke down, and we had to spend the night in that awful motel?"

Colin shifted in his seat. "That was a long time ago."

"But unforgettable. I think it's true, what people often say. The first times are impossible to forget. Or get over with."

Drew came up to them at that moment, reminding Colin that the golf tournament was about to start, and relief flashed over Colin's features.

"I'll have to leave you while I get changed," Colin told her.

Hope wasn't allowed to reply with Princess asking, "May I walk with you? Reception's on the way, and I need to make some calls about the car." Princess then glanced at Hope, her expression hesitant. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not." Hope told herself she meant this, and then she started repeating the words like a mental chant as she watched Princess accidentally trip (over nothing?), which caused her to stumble towards Colin, her breasts pressed against the side of his arm.

Hope forced herself to look away and fixed her gaze on her meal. You have no reason to feel hurt, Hope. You knew what you signed up for. So stop acting like this marriage is real.

Hope had just signed Colin's name to the lunch bill when she received a text from her husband.

Tournament running late. Meet you at hotel after?

Hope stared at the message, reading between the sparse lines. He wasn't coming back to escort her. She was on her own.

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Colin signaled the bartender for the check, watching Princess sway slightly on her barstool. Three martinis had transformed her careful composure into something loose and reckless, her laughter a touch too loud, her gestures increasingly unrestrained. The hotel lounge had emptied considerably in the past hour, leaving them in a bubble of relative privacy he was beginning to regret.

"One last drink," Princess begged.

"I think you've had enough." Colin kept his tone firm but gentle, signing the bill without examining the total. "We should get you to your room."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

The implication hung between them, layered with history and alcohol-induced suggestion. Colin straightened, putting deliberate distance between them.

"I'll ask one of the female staff to assist you." He stood, signaling to a nearby attendant. "You're in no condition to be alone."

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"Always the gentleman." Princess's expression shifted, vulnerability briefly replacing calculation. "That's why I loved you, you know. Even when you had nothing, you acted like you owned the world."

Loved, she said. She said she had loved him, and he used to believe that was true. But now? He was truly starting to question whether love had been present at all...for either of them.

"Let's leave the past where it should be," he said finally. "We've both moved on."

"Have we?" She slid from the barstool, closing the distance he'd carefully established. "Because it feels like we've been circling back to each other for twenty-five years."

"I'm married," he reminded her, the golden band on his finger suddenly heavier than before.

"You barely know her," Princess sneered.

She was clearly talking about the length of time he had been with Hope. But Colin realized that time was not everything.

Sometimes, you just knew.

And that was how it was with his wife. Even though they had been together for less than a month, he already knew Hope as if he had known her for a lifetime. He knew about his wife's quiet strength and gentleness. He knew about her desire to see the best in people—even when there seemed no goodness in them to be found. Or at least



that was how it seemed to him. But Hope somehow managed to prove him wrong each time.

The urge to see his wife seized him out of the blue, and he was at once restless and impatient. Colin signaled to the female attendant now waiting discreetly nearby and placed a hundred-dollar bill on the counter. A much-deserved tip, with how the woman would soon have her hands full with Princess.

Colin turned to leave, but Princess's fingers tightened around his arm, surprisingly strong despite her intoxication. She pulled herself toward him, rising on tiptoes as her free hand caught the back of his neck.

He saw her intention a second before she moved, turning his face just enough that her lips landed clumsily at the corner of his mouth rather than fully on target. The near-miss sent a jolt of alarm through him, not because he was tempted, but because of how instinctively he had recoiled.

Colin stepped back firmly, steadying her with hands on her shoulders, maintaining clear distance. "That's enough."

Hurt flashed in her eyes, quickly masked by drunken bravado. "Your loss."

He guided her gently toward the waiting attendant. "Please make sure Ms. Halstead reaches her room safely," he instructed, pressing a folded bill into the young woman's hand.

"Of course, sir."

As the attendant led Princess away, Colin remained rooted in place, watching them disappear into the elevator. He knew alcohol had lowered her inhibitions, exposed desires she might have otherwise kept hidden. Princess wasn't entirely to blame.

He was.

He should not have been alone with her in the first place. And only now was he starting to realize how all of his actions in the past few days must have brought his wife shame. How the hell had he been so blind?

Colin took the next elevator up, watching floor numbers illuminate in sequence, each bringing him closer to a confrontation he wasn't prepared for. It disturbed him to remember how Princess' attempt to kiss her had left him cold...while he only had to remember the taste of Hope's lips, and he would have a sudden need for a cold shower.

This wasn't proceeding according to plan. Hope was supposed to be a means to an end: revenge, closure, perhaps a business-like companionship. Not someone who made him question decisions made over martinis with a woman he'd once believed was his future.

He would make it up to her, Colin thought grimly as the elevator doors slid open on their floor. He would find the right time to apologize. Acknowledge that he had been an ass. He owed her that much.

And after that...

## Chapter Five

Lala's outfit for the gala on Day 3 was a crimson gown with a deep V-neckline that Hope was starting to lose hope on, pun not intended. It hadn't seemed this deep on their first and second fitting. But now, it was making her feel a little too exposed.

A knock sounded on her bedroom door, and she asked Colin to come in. "What do you think?" she asked worriedly as he entered. "Is it too much?"

"You look breathtaking in it."

"But?" She totally heard a 'but' coming.

Colin's lips tightened. "It's nothing."

"I could just change——"

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"It's fine," Colin said curtly.

Was it just her or was he in a bad mood?

"Is something wrong?" she asked gently.

A muscle started ticking in his jaw.

"Is it Princess? Is she in trouble—"

"Stop being so nice about her."

Her eyes widened, but she was more surprised than hurt by the sharpness of his tone.

"I'm not blind," Colin gritted out. "It took me a while to see the truth, but I know she was deliberately trying to cause trouble between us yesterday."

"I never said—"

"It was just one mishap after another," Colin said with a curl of his lip. "Only an idiot wouldn't have realized what was happening after the fourth or fifth incident."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm the one who should say sorry," Colin said grimly.

Oh no. Here he goes again.

"I should never have left you—"

She cut him off and did her best to keep her voice steady as she reminded him, "We talked about this, remember? You were very clear about what you wanted from this marriage. And I was just as clear when I told you I was fine with it. So please stop apologizing for something we both signed up for."

"And that's all our marriage is to you, isn't it? A business arrangement."

"There's no need to test me like that" she said lightly. "You're making it sound like you want this marriage to mean something to both of us. But we both know that's not true. So please just take my word for this: I don't have any designs on your fortune. And that won't ever change. What you've promised me once this is all over...it's enough."

Or at least it should be. It had to be. Because otherwise, losing Colin would kill her.

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Colin guided Hope through the entrance, his hand warm against the small of her back. She felt the stares immediately—some admiring, others speculative, a few openly hostile.

They circled the room, exchanging pleasantries with Colin's former classmates. Hope maintained her role as the devoted wife, laughing at appropriate moments, touching Colin's arm with practiced affection. The performance came more easily now, muscle memory after days of repetition.

Too easily, a voice in her head warned. Remember what this is. Remember what it isn't.

"Colin!" A booming voice interrupted their conversation with a retired teacher. "Holding out on us again, I see."

Hope turned to find a tall, broad-shouldered man approaching, his grin wide beneath a carefully groomed mustache. Wilson, according to his name tag, and captain of the wrestling team, if she remembered correctly.

"Wilson." Colin's greeting was cordial but contained. "This is my wife, Hope. Hope, Wilson Bards."

The other man extended his hand to Hope, holding hers a beat too long. "This is quite the honor: to be in the presence of the woman who finally pinned down the unpinnable Colin Soukoulis."

"I, um, feel the same." She couldn't help but smile at his colorful vocabulary even as she carefully extracted her hand from his grip. She had no idea if 'unpinnable' was an actual word, but whatever. She smiled at Wilson, adding, "It's an honor to be in the presence of high school wrestling greatness."

Wilson immediately clutched his heart. "How unfair life is, to fall under the spell of a woman already taken." He then looked at Colin, asking dramatically, "Would you take pity on a poor soul and let me at least enjoy one stolen dance with your wife?" Wilson turned to Hope with a wink, saying, "For old times' sake."

Hope couldn't help laughing despite herself. "We didn't have any old times."

"Recollections can vary," Wilson said piously, "but I still stand by my words." He glanced at Colin then, asking, "It's alright, isn't it?"

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Colin looked at Hope. "Only if it's alright with my wife."

Wilson's hopeful look had Hope laughing again. "Well, in that case—"

He offered his hand to Hope, but just as she was about to place her hand in his—

Oh!

"Good try, Wilson," Colin drawled as instead he caught her hand and slid it into his trousers' pocket instead. "But I think not."

Wilson's laugh was good-natured. "Well, well, well. You were never this jealous, not even with Princess."

"Isn't that to be expected? We were just kids back then. But Hope is my wife." Colin gave Wilson a nod. "We'll see you around."

Hope wasn't even given a chance to say goodbye, with Colin already taking her hand out so he could curve an arm around her waist. And then they were walking away, and it was all she could do not to trip as she did her best to keep up with her husband's long-legged stride.

Hope cleared her throat. "So, I'm not sure what happened—"

Colin looked sharply toward her, and Hope ended up gulping at the fury in his gaze.

"Did you even notice how you had him staring at your breasts the whole time?"

Hope's jaw dropped.

"For as long as you're my wife," Colin said between clenched teeth, "you're to act like it."

"But—"

"If you need an explanation, then think of it this way. You're mine. Everything of you is mine. Got that?"

Before Hope could respond, another former classmate of Colin approached, pulling them into conversation. The moment passed, but the tension lingered, electric and unexplored.

Throughout the evening, Hope noticed Colin's heightened awareness of other men's attentions. The way his hand stayed at the small of her back when the investment banker from Jackson Hole complimented her dress. The possessive brush of his thumb against her wrist when another man told her she had grown even prettier over the years.

It was a side of Colin she hadn't seen before. Territorial. Protective. It should have felt stifling. Instead, it sent shivers of awareness dancing across her skin.

The string quartet transitioned to dance music, couples moving to the cleared floor at the center of the hall. Colin extended his hand to Hope.

"Dance with me."

Colin ignored the surprise that flashed in her eyes as he drew her to the dance floor. He already knew she had meant to turn him down.



Being this close to her husband discomfited her, and Hope's discomfort only grew when she caught sight of a lovely blonde making a splash as she entered the ballroom. "Colin? It's Princess—"

"I don't give a damn."

Her eyes widened. "What's wrong with you? She's just arrived—"

"She has her own husband. Lethimdeal with his own wife. I already have my hands full with mine."

"Excuse me?" He was making her sound so wonderfullytroublesome,when all her life she had gotten used to thinking of herself as dull and boring.

His gaze bored through hers. "You heard me."

"I havenevertried to cause trouble—"

"Then that's even worse."

A choked laugh escaped her despite everything. "What is wrong with you, seriously?"

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"Jealousy."

Hope rolled her eyes. "No, really—"

"And it's not the kind of jealousy I've ever felt before," Colin grated out. "Not even with Princess."

Hope could only stare now that she realized he wasn't joking. Jealous? Her husband was jealous? Over her? How? Why?

"I finally have your attention." Triumph glittered in his gaze. "Good." And he suited action to words by drawing her close.

Oh no.

Hope's breath caught upon finding every inch of her body plastered against her husband's. Around them, other couples danced, but Hope barely registered their presence. How could she, with the way Colin's hand had now curved possessively around her backside?

From across the room, Hope caught sight of Princess watching them, her perfect features arranged in a mask of polite indifference that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"She's watching us," Hope blurted out.

"Ignore her."

"But—"

Instead of answering, Colin covered her mouth in a kiss, and all she could do was hold on to the massive breadth of his shoulders. The kiss deepened. Her senses reeled.

And when he pulled away, her husband said quietly, "I want you."

She didn't even have to think, with her heart already his. "Then take me." Her words had him jerking. It was obvious she had taken him by surprise. It was to be expected, since she had also surprised herself.

But the more Hope thought about it, the more she realized it was what she wanted, and she then heard herself say, "I'm tired of being a virgin, Colin." This was neither a lie nor an absolute truth. Instead, they were words she was pinning her every hope to. Her every prayer. Because she was hoping, once they made love, he would realize the same thing.

This marriage was right. This marriage could last. If they chose each other.

Hope mustered a smile as Colin stared down at her in brooding silence. They had ceased to dance completely, their still figures drawing increasing attention from other guests, and most especially from Princess. But he didn't seem to notice this, and she took it as a good sign.

"I'm not pressuring you or anything." Hope decided to keep things light with a teasing tone. "It's just an, um, offer that I wanted you to be aware of. And in any case, I can always go to Wilson—"

"Try it then, and you'll have his death on your hands."

Hope was about to laugh when she belatedly noticed the rage in his eyes, fueled by jealousy.

"I was just j-joking," she stammered.

"You think it's funny to consider giving yourself to someone else when I already own you?" Colin glared down at her. "I think it's time I give you a lesson of what it means to be mine."

And off they went, with Hope once again half-running to keep up with her husband's pace, andoh!

They had just walked past Princess, and it was as if the other woman didn't even exist for Colin. Hope glanced up, wondering if he was just faking it, butoh!

He had sensed her looking at him, and Colin immediately met her gaze with another glare. "I know what you're thinking."

He did?

"You saw Wilson waving at you," her husband snarled, "and you're already thinking you're better off with him."

What was he talking about?

"You think you'll have a happier and less complicated life with him."

Hope could only blink. She had no idea where all of these thoughts were coming from, but...wait. Was he saying the truth about Wilson waving at her? It would be awfully rude not to wave back, wouldn't it?

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She tried to look around, but the moment she did, Colin jerked to a stop, and Hope gasped as he yanked her toward him. He cupped her chin, his grip fierce.

"Eyes on me, wife," Colin growled down at her, "and no one else. Got it?"

They were on the move again even when she had barely finished nodding, with Colin driven by some inexplicable urge to...oh?

They were inside the elevator in a flash, and her heart leapt to her throat when she realized he was taking her back to their suite. She wanted to say something to diffuse the tension between them, but no words came to mind. All she could do was stare. And feel.

And with the way her husband was staring at her, and the way his glittering gaze was making her burn...

Once inside, he only had one question. "How do you want me to take you?"

Only one word leapt to mind.

"Passionately."

His nostrils flared. "So be it."

Colin claimed her mouth in a kiss that made his intent perfectly clear. She washis. And he would make sure of it by driving her so crazy with need that she would soon remember nothing but her name.

He swept her in his arms without breaking the kiss. Started undressing her as soon as they made it to his bedroom. Then laid her down on the bed before stepping back to strip himself of his own clothes.

Her throat dried as her husband eventually stood before her, his big, hard body magnificently naked.

"I'll let you stare as long as you like next time," Colin said thickly, "but right now..."

He joined her in bed, positioning himself between her legs, and the heat of his body started burning through her every thought.

"Look at me, Hope."

And so she did.

"I want you to look at me and see what you do to me as I take your virginity."

A whimper escaped her at the words. But this soon turned into a gasp as she felt him slowly enter her. The muscles in his arms tensed, and she could see the effort it took her husband to control his thrusts. Inch by inch he drove deeper inside of her, and she couldn't remember feeling anything like it. Couldn't remember being this wet. This sensitive. This filled.

The moment he came into contact with the barrier of her innocence, they both knew it, with how her husband's body turned rigid, and her own breasts started to swell and ache.

"Keep looking at me," he gritted out.

And then he was pushing past it, his shaft claiming her virginity in one forceful and

possessive thrust, and to see the look on her husband's gorgeous face as this happened was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

In that one moment, she realized just how much he desired her. Just how much she mattered. And even though such feelings might not last—she didn't care. Now was the only thing she cared about, and oh!

Her husband was starting to move, and every slide of his length in and out of her was glorious. She could only clutch his shoulders as his thrusts made her feel like she was about to drown any second. She had asked him to take her passionately, and indeed that was what he was doing now.

His mouth latching to the side of her neck, marking her skin to claim ownership.

His lips closing over the tips crowning her breasts.

His fingers digging into the tender cheeks of her bottom.

Her senses started to spiral as his movements became rougher. Faster. Deeper. And finally, oh, finally—

"C-Colin."

She could only cry his name out as she came apart for the first time in her life, and soon after, she heard him growling her name as he followed right behind her.

When Hope woke up in his arms sometime later, it was to find herself draped over him, and a blanket over the both of them. She felt blissfully tired, and this, too, was a first for her. But above all, she felt self-conscious and embarrassed.

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She tried to pull away, but his arms only tightened around hers. "Stay."

A quietly spoken command, but one her body joyfully obeyed for some reason.

He then tipped her chin up, and Hope reluctantly met his gaze.

Oh.

She was afraid she would see something akin to regret, but instead all she saw was the same thing she had seen earlier.

He wanted her still.

And she mattered to him still.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded.

"Any soreness?"

Hope could feel her cheeks burning at the question, and she had to remind herself that she was forty, not fourteen.

"Just a little sore."

"I'm sorry about that—"



Hope opened her mouth to tell him it was fine.

"—but I'm afraid you'll feel a lot sorer by tomorrow."

Oh. Wait.What?

A gasp escaped her when he suddenly sat up and she found herself on his lap, his fingers between her legs, andoh.With just a few strokes, he already had her folds wet and swollen, andoh!He was inside of her once again, with Hope riding her husband all of a sudden, and—

"You wanted me to take you passionately," Colin whispered into her ear. "And I've always been a man of my word."

Oh...thank goodness.

## Chapter Six

"You're quiet," Colin observed, glancing her way as they stopped at a traffic light.

A work emergency required Colin to drop by his office even though it was close to midnight, and when he had asked her to come with him, she hadn't hesitated to say yes. As for the reason she was quiet...

Last night's memories were still mortifyingly fresh in her mind, and it didn't help at all that Colin insisted on having her sit on his lap as soon as they slid into the backseat of his car.

"Can I just, um, scoot over—"

"No."

"I think I'm too heavy—"

"You're not."

Feeling his hard thighs under her were a distraction. But when she started to squirm, and she felt something under her also start to throb—

Her husband's eyes gleamed. "Everything alright?"

Hope could only croak out her answer. "Yes." "No."

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"You don't look comfortable."

"I'm not," she admitted helplessly.

"Good."

She choked at this, but her husband was unaffected. Colin Soukoulis, billionaire and bully extraordinaire. Whoever would have thought?

He cupped her chin, and she immediately turned her gaze to his, having now recognized this as his silent command to look at him.

Sex, Hope had come to realize after spending just one night in her husband's arms, was not simply satisfying each other's desires. Sex illuminated. It was why she was now more aware of the little nuances in her husband's character. Sex also revealed. And sometimes, these were things that one didn't even know about one's self, like how one night alone would make her addicted to her husband's touch. But most worryingly of all, sex had the power to destroy barriers, even if these were walls that were meant to protect one's self from hurt.

"I can feel you worrying, Hope." Colin's voice was difficult to read, and this bothered her more than she was willing to admit. "Do you have any regrets?"

She shook her head. "You?"

"Only one."

Her heart threatened to crack.

"And it's the amount of time we wasted. I should have made you mine from the start."

Her husband was really a bully!

She made a face, he smirked, and the tension disappeared between them. He gripped her hair, his gaze darkening with desire. "May I?"

"You don't have to keep asking for permission," she said shakily. "I'm yours, always—"

The rest of her words was left unspoken, and all she could do was melt against his arms as Colin started kissing her with hunger that only seemed to grow moment by moment.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled into an underground parking garage beneath a gleaming glass-and-steel building in downtown Denver, and Colin reluctantly lifted his head. He watched in amusement as his wife flew into a panic when she realized they had already reached Greenbright's headquarters.

She scrambled off his lap as she frantically combed her hair through her fingers. He took pity on her and caught her wrist. "Leave it be. The office will likely be empty at this time. And even if there were—I'd like them to see you this way."

"Messy?"

"Owned."

Color burst in her cheeks. Well, then. That made it official: Colin Soukoulis was awfully good at making her feel giddy like a teenage girl.

The elevator whisked them up from the basement parking to the top floor in no time, but it was just as Colin predicted. There was no one around, and even the executive lobby was empty, the reception counter unoccupied.

His corner office was exactly what she expected. Vast space. Luxurious furniture with a masculine bent. And of course, panoramic cityscape views that only billionaire ranchers like Colin could afford.

"I'll need an hour to get my work done."

Colin's apologetic tone had Hope quickly shaking her head. "It's fine," she reassured him. "Take all the time you need."

"If you need anything, just press the Service button. We have staff on duty in the ground floor lobby."

"It's just an hour, Colin. I can entertain myself, I promise."

Colin could see that his wife found his concern amusing. But what Hope didn't know was how rare it was, this ability to entertain herself as she put it. If he were to ask, he knew she would likely say that it came with the territory, being someone in her age. But that was not true at all. He only had to be with her for days, and he already knew that Hope had always been like this.

Selfless.

That was what her ability to entertain herself boiled down to. Her willingness to understand his need to attend to an emergency. Her desire to put the people around her at ease, even when they had never felt the same care towards her. His wife was selfless, in the way the girl he once loved was selfish, and had always been so.

Hope couldn't help but notice the way his phone kept buzzing with what seemed like unanswered texts and calls. Her instincts told her this could only be one person. And the fact that Colin had no trouble ignoring Princess' demands for his attention had her heart racing and aching all at the same time.

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Is this really it, God?

It had been so long since she had last prayed to Him, and only now did she realize it was because she had grown impatient. She had lost all hope of her life ever changing, of finding true love. And so she had convinced herself that God was too busy for her.

Until now.

Until this.

The day she signed up to be Colin's email bride, she had done so with the thought that their marriage came with an expiration date. But this time, it suddenly felt as if she was about to burst, and her whole being filled by what she was named for.

She suddenly had hope.

From God.

And that was the best hope there was or could ever be.

Hope was lost in the book she was reading when Colin startled her out of her thoughts as he swept her off the couch and carried her to his desk.

"What are you doing?"

"Something I've been thinking about since we came here." Colin stepped between her legs, the intimate position causing Hope to swallow hard.

"If you don't want this, now's the chance to tell me."

Hope knew that was exactly what she should do. This was his place of work. This was still a public place. And what about security cameras—

His gaze turned knowing. "No one will see us."

How was that possible when—oh!

A clap of his hands, and the lights in his room went out, and she even heard the doors automatically lock itself.

"Colin!" Wasn't that as good as telling his security department what they intended to do?

"Yes or no?"

He fitted his body closely against her as he spoke, and the throbbing evidence of his desire was her undoing.

"Y-Yes—"

She wasn't given a chance to say anything else. Everything was happening too fast, with her husband clearing his desk with one sweep as he made her lie back. Her entire body ached with anticipation as she listened to him unzip herself. She could feel herself growing wet, and her fingers gripped the edges of his desk. But no matter her ardent efforts to prepare herself for a sensual onslaught—

Aaaah!

It still wasn't enough, the masterful strength of his first thrust more than enough to



make her see stars. Her lips parted, his name just about to spill past her lips—

"This is Garth from Security."

—when someone suddenly knocked on his door.

"Anyone there?"

Her husband covered her mouth even as he continued with his thrusts. His security officer was still standing outside the door, and the thrill and fear of possibly getting caught made her more sensitive. Desire was starting to make her head spin, and she had the craziest urge to moan. How was it possible that she could feel him thrusting deeper inside of her without making a sound?

She needed, oh she needed—

Outside, they heard the security officer turn away, his footsteps fading just as everything became too much, and she couldn't bear it any longer.

She needed to let go, and so she did.

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She cried his name out against his hand.

Locked her legs around his waist as he came inside of her.

I love him. I love him. I love him.

There was no hiding from the truth now.

She loved him.

So much.

But would he ever love her back?

### Chapter Seven

Hope adjusted the shawl draped across her shoulders and did her best to smile as camera lights flashed around her. Life as Mrs. Colin Soukoulis lately was best summed up as attending one ball after another, and she had decided to take things one day at a time so as not to be swept away by the surrealness of it.

Another week had passed since their first night together. She had been sleeping in his bed ever since. Keeping him company at work. Wherever he went, he wanted her with him. What they could do together, they did. But one thing they had yet to discuss was the future of their marriage.

Tonight's ball had laid out separate red carpets for men and women, and when Hope

entered the ballroom, she saw that Colin wasn't yet at their table. There was not a single familiar face either...except for Roland?

The last time she had seen him was on the first day of Colin's high school reunion. She had heard rumors about his troubled marriage with Princess, and the latter's words had as good as confirmed this. The other woman had also implied, albeit in not so many words, that he would soon move away...while leaving his wife to fend for herself on her own.

Unease stirred inside of Hope when she realized Roland was heading straight at her.

"Hello, Hope."

He looked discomfited and determined at the same time, and Hope's unease grew. Was he about to ask her something about Colin and—

"I know you have no reason to believe me, but Maria..." Relief flashed over his features when he seemed to spot someone behind her. "There she is."

Hope turned in time to see another woman join them. Short curly hair, a pleasantly round face, and eyes that were both cheerful and wise.

"This is Maria, my fiancée."

His...what?

Maria nodded understandingly. "It's just as we suspect. Princess hasn't told anyone about the divorce, has she?"

Hope shook her head. "I had no idea." Did Colin? And if he did, why had he never told her?

"Princess made a deal with Roland. She would agree to a quick divorce and not make a fuss...but only if he agreed to keep their separation a secret."

"For what reason?" Hope asked in confusion.

"To earn everyone's pity," Maria said bluntly. "Your husband's, most of all. Roland had to declare bankruptcy three months ago. Princess had taken out loans without him knowing, and all so she could live like a queen."

"I did my best to provide for her," Roland said reluctantly. "But it was never enough for her."

"When Roland asked for a divorce," Maria continued, "it was around the same time she received the invitation to the reunion. Right after that, she came up with her own deal. She would sign the papers, but he had to keep it a secret."

Hope could only listen in growing disbelief and unease as the two took turns in explaining the rest of their story. When Maria realized what price Roland had to pay for his divorce, she had been adamant that Roland talk to her or Colin.

'What you do about this knowledge is up to you. We just didn't want the destruction of your marriage on our conscience.'

The couple's words continued to linger in Hope's thoughts even though the couple was long gone, and the ballroom suddenly felt too noisy and stifling. She sought escape by means of the surrounding gardens through one of the double doors, and Hope struggled to keep her silk heels from sinking as she followed a winding path bordered by sculptured hedges and marble statues of Greek deities.

What do I do now?

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She considered relaying to Colin what the couple had told her. But for what purpose? And what if it caused her husband to feel protective and defensive toward Princess? He might have seen through the other woman's ploys, but those actions of hers only made Princess desperate, not evil.

But if she were to tell him about how Princess was largely to blame for Roland's financial woes, what then? Would he believe her? What if he didn't? Should she stay in a marriage that clearly had no foundation on trust?

Footsteps on the garden path drew her attention. Colin approached, his eyes made dark by concern. "You had me worried, kyria. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"I'm sorry," she apologized right away. "I just needed some air."

His gaze narrowed. "Has something happened?"

Hope weighed her options, torn between confrontation and caution. No matter how many times she thought about the couple's words, it just didn't feel right to speak badly of Princess. And so instead she heard herself say, "I don't know what to think of us anymore."

She felt him stiffen, but she couldn't make herself take the words back. Because she realized now that they needed to be said.

"Please tell me the truth," she said shakily. "Am I allowed to have hope about our marriage? Because if you still don't see me in your future, then maybe, you should let me go—"

"Never."

The fierceness of his answer stunned her, with his tone bordering on savage.

"How many times do I have to tell you this?" Colin bit out. "You're mine—"

"But what about you?" It was her first time to cut him off. "W-What about you, Colin? Are you—"

"Yes."

Hope's throat tightened.

"I've never said this to anyone," Colin said tautly, "but if you have to hear the words—"

"Yes." It was her turn to say the word, albeit in a tremulous whisper.

"I'm yours." Her husband held her gaze as he said it, and Hope's lip started to tremble.

"I'm all yours."

She tried so hard to control herself, but it was just impossible. The moment she heard him saying it again, she started to cry, the tears running endlessly down her cheeks.

Colin...was hers.

Was this real? Was this truly happening? Was her husband truly hers?

Colin cupped her face, and her tears ran even faster.

His gaze captured hers, and it was like seeing eternity in his eyes.

"Do you need me to spell it out?"

Spell out what?

"I'm in love with you, Hope Soukoulis. And it's why I want you to be mine forever, even if I don't deserve it."

## Chapter Eight

"You're quiet again."

It was the morning after...that. She had woken in his arms. He had made love to her again before breakfast. And it was just now, when they were having coffee, that Colin spoke of the elephant in the room.

Hope struggled to find something to say. Remembering how she always abandoned all inhibitions in his arms was usually what caused her embarrassment. But right now, what she had a hard time facing was the memories of Colin telling her the truth about her feelings.

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"I don't expect an answer from you."

That he believed there was a need to say this had her gaze flying to him in dismay. "I know that."

"Then stop acting like I'm invisible."

She hadn't even realized that was how her actions seemed to him until he spoke, and her horror grew. "I'm so sorry, Colin. It's not like that at all." And this time, embarrassment wasn't enough to stand in her way.

She loved him, after all. Even before he had fallen in love with her, he had already stolen her heart. But for some reason, she just...couldn't make herself admit this.

And why was that, God? I love him, but I can't seem to make myself say the words. Please help me understand.

But even as her heart cried these words out to the heavens, Hope was already moving, even stumbling in her haste as she jumped out of her chair so she could rush to her husband's side and throw her arms around his neck.

"I'm sorry, Colin," she whispered. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

He pulled away as if needing to see the truth in her eyes. "You'll only hurt me if you leave."

"I won't. I promise."



And she meant it.

At that time.

But afterwards?

Colin kissed her on the forehead before letting her go. She settled back in her chair just as her phone vibrated against the table. An unopened email from Charlotte awaited her, and she thought nothing of this as she clicked on it.

But apparently, its contents turned out to be everything.

Subject: An official transcript of all correspondence between Heart's Match and Clients Soukoulis, Colin and Tiangco, Hope

Hope could feel her face draining of color as she read what her husband initially had to say.

I asked for someone to make Princess jealous. But you're choosing to send me someone that could turn me into a laughingstock?

"Hope?" Colin immediately headed to her. "What is it?"

She wanted to say the words, but it hurt too much just thinking about them. Her fingers loosened, her phone dropping to the floor with a painful thud.

Colin bent down to retrieve it. And she knew the exact moment he realized what had happened, with his handsome face turning ashen.

"Hope—"

"D-Don't." Because if he lied, she would know it, and that would make things even worse.

Her husband swallowed hard. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too." For herself. For him. For everything.

I don't understand, God. I just don't. Please tell me what to do now.

She tried to look at her husband...and realized that just the sight of him hurt. The knowledge had her jerking to her feet, but when he also stood up to reach for her—

Hope instantly recoiled, the mere thought of having to bear his touch making her want to throw up. "Don't!"

Colin's arms fell stiffly against his sides.

"I need space," she said stiltedly.

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"Let me drive—"

"I can't even bear to look at you!"

The words were already out of her mouth before she even realized what she was saying.

No. No. No.

"I see."

The pain in his tone was impossible to ignore. But she was just hurting too much to hurt for him, too.

"I can't let you drive. You understand that, right?"

Hope nodded.

"My driver will take you wherever you want. At least let me do that."

She nodded again, and with her gaze downcast, she saw his fists clenching hard until his knuckles had turned completely white.

"Hope, please. I love—"

No!

She turned and walked away, not wanting him to finish the words in her hearing.

No, no, no.

How could he say he loved her when he had thought being with her would turn him into a laughingstock?

\*\*\*\*

Everything was already taken care of when she arrived at the hotel. A suite booked under her name. Room service already waiting when she got to her room. A private butler to take care of her every need.

It was all very thoughtful of him, but this only made her curl up on the carpeted floor as sobs started rocking her body. Didn't such actions indicate guilt, not love? Colin felt bad, so of course he wanted to make it up to her.

Hope eventually cried herself to sleep, and it was already dark outside when she woke. Her head pounded dreadfully, and it took her an eternity to get to her feet.

Oh.

When she stepped out of the bedroom, the first thing she saw was the box of medications already waiting for her on the coffee table. She wished she could convince herself this was the butler being thoughtful, but she knew in her heart this was Colin's doing, too.

A new selection of food had also been delivered, and of course it contained all of her favorites. Colin must be feeling terribly guilty, but realizing this only made her feel worse.

Something else on the coffee table caught her eye.

A Bible.

The kind that was always supplied in hotel rooms. Distributed by the Gideon Society if she wasn't mistaken.

She sat on the couch, legs folded under her, and reached for the Bible. Its weight was both familiar and unfamiliar, reminding her of the days she was a little girl, and she had talked to Him all the time. But she had eventually stopped, having convinced herself that God was too busy for someone like her.

I'm sorry, God.

Because somehow, despite this gnawing pain inside of her, she felt His presence more keenly than ever. She opened the Bible, and Hope found herself reading the Book of Judges, Chapter 6.

"If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who speak with me."

She knew this story. And the person speaking was what the society was named after. Gideon. He was chosen by God, but because he had a hard time seeing past his inadequacies to realize God's greatness, he had asked for a sign.

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And as soon as this thought popped in her head—

Ask for a sign.

Hope started crying again.

Go on, child.

Because even though she had given up on Him, God had not given up on her. And it was why He was here now, when she needed Him the most, and even when she didn't deserve Him.

"I'm tired, God," she choked out. "I'm just so tired of trying to figure everything out on my own. I'm tired of acting like I can do things by myself. And I'm sorry for even thinking that I could."

Her gaze turned to the window, and starry skies stared back at her like silent witnesses from the heavens.

"I don't know what to do about Colin. But I know that I can trust You to tell me what to do. So p-please God.P-Please..."

She was sobbing so hard she had to try and try again until she was finally able to speak.

"Give me a sign," Hope said brokenly. "If you want me to fight for Colin, if you want us to be together, show me. Please."

She closed her eyes, and an image of a hawk flashed in her mind.

It was His sign.

If she were to see one, then she would know what to do.

## Chapter Nine

Hope's phone lit up with a new text message, the third from Colin today:

Would you have dinner with me tonight?

She set aside the novel she hadn't really been reading, staring at the message with mixed emotions. Five days since she'd moved into the downtown hotel. Five days of contemplation, of measured responses to Colin's increasingly earnest attempts at reconciliation.

The flowers had arrived first—an extravagant arrangement of exotic blooms that filled her hotel room with heady fragrance. Lovely, thoughtful, but somehow missing the point. Yesterday, a velvet jewelry box had been delivered, containing a platinum pendant that matched the emerald earrings he'd given her before the reunion. Beautiful, certainly, yet it felt like he was courting someone else entirely—someone impressed by luxury rather than substance.

Hope's fingers hovered over the reply button. She needed to face him, to explain what she was feeling, what she was waiting for. But not in a public restaurant, surrounded by other diners and expectations.

Can we meet privately instead?

His response arrived almost immediately:

Name the time and place. I miss you. I love you.

The swiftness of Colin's reply hurt. She could practically feel his desperation. His frantic need to see her. Talk to her. And beg for her forgiveness. But a part of her was still terrified this was just guilt talking, and he would one day think of her as someone who could turn him into a laughingstock...again.

Hope's phone rang just as she was about to have a shower, and she answered the call as soon as she saw her foster father's name flashing on the screen.

"Hope?" Frank Barton's familiar voice, rough with emotion, filled the line. "Is that you, sweetheart?"

"Dad?" Concern immediately replaced caution. "What is it?"

"Yes, yes." Frank's laugh emerged wet, as if through tears. "Better than okay. I'm calling because—" He broke off, clearly overwhelmed. "I don't even know how to say this."

Hope's grip tightened on the phone. "What's happened?"

"Your husband." Frank's voice strengthened with obvious gratitude. "He didn't just stop the foreclosure, Hope. He paid off our mortgage. Every cent. The ranch is ours free and clear."

Hope sank onto the edge of the bed, shock stealing her words momentarily.



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"There's more." Frank sounded almost giddy now, the gruff rancher overcome with emotion. "He set up a drought fund for all the small ranchers in the county. Anyone who needs irrigation improvements, who's struggling with the changing climate—they can apply for grants through the Barton Rural Sustainability Foundation."

Hope tried to process the magnitude of what Colin had done—not just saving her foster parents' farm, but establishing a foundation that would help countless others in their community. And in her foster parents' name, too!

"When did this happen?" she managed finally.

"Papers arrived by courier this morning." Frank cleared his throat, clearly trying to regain composure. "Your Colin said not to tell you until everything was finalized. Wanted it to be a proper surprise." He hesitated, then added, "He came to see us in person. Nine days ago, if I remember correctly. Spent hours asking about our greatest concerns for the community, what would make the most difference for folks struggling here."

Nine days ago.

This was before she had received Charlotte's email. And even before the night he had told her he was in love.

"Give him a proper thank you from all of us, will you?"

As the call ended, Hope sat motionless, overwhelmed by the implications of Colin's

actions. This wasn't manipulation or calculated strategy. This was understanding on the deepest level—recognition of what truly mattered to her, what provided genuine security beyond material comfort.

He had seen her. Truly seen her. And this time, for better or for worse, she also believed he had spoken the truth...when he said he loved her.

Hope's fingers trembled as she typed out a message and hit Send before she could change her mind. It took only mere seconds for a reply to arrive, and scant minutes for Colin to knock on her hotel room door.

"I'm here." His voice was fierce with emotion. His face more handsome than she had allowed herself to remember. But she noticed how he also seemed to have lost weight, and his clothes were far from their usually impeccable state.

"Come in." Her voice came out stilted, and it surprised her to see pain flash over his features. What was that about?

He entered the room and closed the door behind him. Hope had this grand plan of inviting him to take a seat and talking things out like adults. But as soon as he faced her again, the words simply flew out of her mouth.

"Why didn't you tell me about the mortgage?"

Colin stilled. "Who told you?"

"Frank. Not that it matters." She looked at him searchingly. "Why did you do it?"

"Because they're your parents. And it was also the right thing to do."

He had no ulterior motives, in other words. And she believed him. But then...she had

always recognized the goodness in Colin. That had never been the problem between them. Or maybe it was. He had been too good to Princess. And seeing that had started to hurt more and more.

"I have something to show you."

Her head lifted, in time to see Colin pull out a crumpled manila envelope from his jacket pocket. The action lacked the usual sophistication she was used to seeing from him, and knowing that she had something to do with this hurt.

Hope accepted the envelope, moving to the small desk to open it. Inside, she found legal documents bearing the letterhead of Colin's attorneys.

A post-nuptial agreement?

She looked at him in confusion, but Colin only nodded. "Read it," he encouraged quietly. "All of it."

Hope returned her attention to the document, and confusion gradually turned to shock. He was giving her half of everything except control of his businesses. Regardless of whether they stayed married or not.

All of it spelled one thing.

He loved her.

And if he had done this earlier, she would have flown straight into his arms, and they could live happily ever after.

But now?

"I realize I've been doing everything wrong the past several days," Colin said tautly. "The flowers, the gifts, asking you out again and again. It's easily something I could have done for any other woman. But you're not any other woman. You're my wife. The woman I've fallen in love with. The only one I'll ever love."

Hope was stunned when Colin suddenly closed the distance between them as he went down on one knee. He slowly reached for her hands, and she started to cry, realizing that he was giving her all the time in the world to reject his touch.

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*Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 7:52 am*

He loved her. He really loved her. Colin...loved her.

But it was too late.

"I'm sorry for hurting you," Colin said hoarsely. "I wasn't just a fool. I was also heartless and full of it. Seeing the look on your face when you found out—" His voice cracked, and so did her heart.

I asked for someone to make Princess jealous. But you're choosing to send me someone that could turn me into a laughingstock?

"It killed me to see that. And I know it would kill me again if I were to ever say anything like it about any other person. Because you...you make me want to be a good person, Hope. You make me want to change. And that's why, even though I know you deserve someone better—"

Colin brought her hands to his lips, and slowly, she felt his own tears wet her skin.

"Please, kyria," Colin said raggedly. "Please come back to me."

\*\*\*\*

Her husband was gone.

She was all alone again.

She had told him her conditions, and he had agreed to it.

If all of this had happened even just two days ago, it would have been so, so easy to just forgive. And assume that she already knew what she was doing, and that she had everything under control.

But not anymore.

This time, things would be different. This time, she wouldn't let the world and its lies fool her into thinking that she knew better than God. Because she didn't. She never did.

Jeremiah 17:9-10 The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.

The phone in her hotel room started to ring, and Hope reached for the receiver with shaking hands.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Souloukis. We've been informed that your driver is here to pick you up."

"T-Thank you. I'll be down in a minute."

"Understood, Mrs. Souloukis."

She found herself starting to cry again as she packed her things. To hurt her husband continuously was not an option, but to resume their marriage just like that wasn't in the cards either. She had told Colin she was willing to come back and think things through while staying with him under one roof. He had accepted her terms and given Hope his word about waiting.

I don't care how long it takes, Hope. You're giving me a chance. I can't ask for more.

She wiped the tears away before heading down to the lobby. But as soon as she was inside his car and on her way back to his home—

He loves me, God.

And I love him.

These two things were true, but she also knew it was not enough. It never was. For a marriage to truly work, God had to be a part of the equation.

He had to have chosen Colin for her and Hope for him.

And that was why...

I'll wait, God.

Just like Colin.

No matter how long it took.

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She would wait for His sign because she was placing all of her trust in Him, the way she should have done from the start.

### Chapter Ten

A week passed in careful coexistence.

Breakfast in the kitchen each morning, separate activities during the day, and dinner together in the evenings, conversation flowing more easily as days passed, though certain topics remained untouched.

Not once did Colin press for resolution or clarity about their future. Not once did he attempt to rush her carefully measured pace. Instead, he demonstrated patience and gentleness, and his willingness to wait had her praying even harder every night.

Please, God. Please.

It was Wednesday afternoon when Hope found herself unexpectedly alone in the main house. Colin had back-to-back meetings downtown and security was on roving patrol of the property perimeter while the household staff was out in the garden for specialized training. Their billionaire boss had developed something that could elevate home gardening to a whole new level, and who better to include in its trial run than his own staff?

With no one else around, Hope found herself cherishing this unique time of solitude, and she decided to curl up on one of the comfy armchairs scattered around the front porch. She was about to start reading when the sound of tires on gravel interrupted



the silence, and Hope glanced up just in time to see a convertible pull into the circular drive.

Princess.

Hope's stomach tied itself in knots as she watched the other woman step out. Gorgeous like always, Hope thought absently. She really couldn't blame Colin for falling hard for the other woman. Most men would.

Princess' hardened expression as Hope stepped out to meet her halfway had her hesitating. The other woman was usually careful in keeping her real feelings behind a mask of helpless femininity. So why was she different now?

"Hello, Hope. Colin told me he had meetings throughout the day—"

Impossible.

"And that had me thinking...today might just be the best time to speak to you alone."

Princess' words also had Hope thinking, and that was how she needed to pray for protection from any kind of attack. Because the other woman meant to make trouble, that much was clear.

Hope reluctantly invited Princess to join her on the porch. She settled back into her armchair while the other woman took the couch and crossed her legs.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

"It's fine. I don't mean to take up much of your time." Princess looked around.  
"You've made yourself quite at home."

"It is my home."

"Temporarily."

Hope's eyes widened.

"Someone saw you speaking with Charlotte Takahashi. That tells me everything I have to know, and it's why I've come here."

"I'm afraid I don't understand—"

"I'm offering you a graceful exit. I'm not sure what lies you've fed—"

Hope shook her head. "I've never—"

The other woman cut her off with a scornful look. "And you expect me to believe you just because you said so?" Princess' words took on an irritable tone. "You're a woman, Hope. Underneath your goody-two-shoes image is a woman, and we all operate the same way. We'll do whatever it takes to keep our man."

Princess couldn't be any more wrong, Hope thought. But she also realized that the other woman might not yet be ready to accept the truth.

"You may have him fooled right now, but it's not going to last. Colin is mine. He's always been mine. Even when I was married to someone else. Even when twenty-five years had already passed since he last had a taste of my body." Princess' expression turned vengeful. "He's always been mine, and can we just be real for a second here? Do you really think someone as boring as you has a chance against someone like me?"

Hope kept waiting for her to feel hurt, but her heart remained free from pain.

Because of God.

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And another thing that He had changed?

The ability to view Princess without the green lens of jealousy and instead see her for who she really was: a woman who had also been let down by the people she cared for, which in turn made her mistake money as the only reliable thing in the world.

Hope cleared her throat. "I know you care for Colin—"

"Stop it."

The sudden sharpness of Princess' tone startled her, and the way Princess also jerked to her feet was equally startling.

Hope stood up and looked at Princess uncertainly. Why did the other woman look so furious all of a sudden?

"Do you think I don't know what you're doing?" Princess spat. "You think you're so much better than me, don't you? So much nicer and kinder?"

"I never—"

"Colin will always be mine," Princess said in a hard voice. "I'm his first love. And you're nothing but a replacement."

Hope couldn't speak, her attention stolen by the red-tailed hawk circling the sky.

It was a sign.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" the other woman was screeching. "Are you trying to piss me off by acting like I'm not even here?"

Her tears started to fall, and Hope's eyes closed just as Princess charged toward her.

Thank You, God.

"You bitch—"

The words startled her into opening her eyes again, and all she could see was Princess with her hand already raised.

But the slap never landed, with a strong grip intercepting Princess' wrist mid-swing.

Colin.

"That's enough, Princess."

The muddy tracks on the porch made Hope realize he had come her from the garden, but neither Princess nor her had heard his footsteps.

The other woman whirled around, her expression one of hurt. "Colin, it's not what you think! Your wife—"

"I heard everything," he said curtly. "I was here the whole time."

Princess shook her head wildly. "Can't you see she's manipulating you—"

"The only person attempting to use anyone is you." Colin's voice remained steady, though tension radiated from his tall frame. "It's over, Princess. Whatever history we shared, whatever connection you imagine between us—it's finished."

"Because of her?" Princess spat, glaring at Hope with undisguised hatred. "A woman you bought—"

"It doesn't matter how two people meet, Princess. And I think it's time for both of us need to accept that. Hope is it for me. And that will never change."

Colin turned towards Hope.

And it was this that seemed to destroy Princess. It was as if she had suddenly lost her mind, and she turned toward Hope, her face a picture of rage and insanity.

"This is all your fault!"

It was not Colin who held her back. This time, Colin's security came out of nowhere, flanking Princess on each side as they carried her off the porch.

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"Hope?" Colin's gorgeous face suddenly filled her vision as he stood in front of her, his features dark with concern. "Are you alright? I'm sorry you had to—"

Whatever he intended to say disappeared as Hope launched herself into his arms, nearly toppling him backward with the unexpected motion. His arms closed around her automatically, steadying them both.

"I love you," she declared, the words bursting from her like water through a broken dam. "I love you, Colin Soukoulis."

Colin froze, clearly struggling to process the sudden shift after so many days of distance, and she cupped his face with shaking hands.

"It's not a dream."

Because she could see that was what he was thinking.

"This is real."

Because this time, they had His blessing.

"I love you—"

His arms finally wrapped around her, the strength of his embrace nearly crushing her.

"I love you, Hope." His voice was raw. "I love you." And his own hands were shaking as he cupped her face. "I love you. Thank you for taking me back."

## Epilogue

Warm water cascaded over Hope's shoulders, washing away the lingering scent of smoke from the evening's barbecue. She closed her eyes, savoring the quiet moment after hours of celebration. Colin had outdone himself with the surprise party, having transformed the ranch's courtyard into a festive gathering space for her forty-first birthday.

Hope smiled as she recalled the unexpected guests who had arrived this afternoon. Charlotte Carmichaels Takahashi and her younger husband Sano had flown in from San Antonio specifically for the celebration. With them were "San Antonio's Finest Eligibles"—four devastatingly handsome billionaires who'd apparently been friends with Charlotte's late FBI agent husband. The men had immediately bonded with Colin, falling into conversation as if they'd known each other for years rather than hours. Their inside jokes and easy camaraderie had transformed Colin from reserved host to relaxed participant, a side of him few people ever witnessed.

But the real revelation had come when the wives had pulled Hope aside during dessert, their expressions conspiratorial as they shared champagne on the veranda.

"Charlotte's quite proud of her success rate," Isla had commented with a knowing smile.

"Success rate?" Hope had questioned, glancing toward where Charlotte stood chatting with the gathered husbands.

"All of us," Hilary had clarified with a sweet smile, gesturing around their intimate circle. "We're just like you..."

It took her a moment to understand what this meant.



Oh!

"You mean..."

The four Heart's Match wives nodded.

"But you all seem so..."

"Perfect for each other?"

"Yes!"

"If you only saw how Nicholas and I were at first," Tabitha said with a wrinkle of her nose, "when he thought I was more suitable for his son."

"Or Logan and me," Tilly said with a grin. "I started out as his nephew's nanny, you know."

Hope turned her face into the shower spray, letting water sluice away the day's makeup. Their stories had reassured her in ways she hadn't realized she needed. The unusual beginning of her relationship with Colin wasn't a flaw to be overcome or a secret to be hidden, but simply the first chapter in a continuing story.

All of this, God. It's because of You. Only You.

The shower door opened behind her, cool air briefly interrupting the steam before Colin's warm presence filled the space. His hands settled at her waist, lips finding the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder.

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"Happy birthday," he murmured against her skin, the warm water creating rivulets between their bodies.

Hope leaned back against him, accepting his solid strength. "Thank you," she whispered, steam swirling around them in delicate patterns.

Colin gently guided her toward the built-in marble ledge at the far end of the spacious shower, sitting down and drawing her onto his lap. Water cascaded over them both, catching the light in diamond-like droplets against his bronzed skin. His hands settled at her waist, thumbs tracing small circles that felt both comforting and intimate.

Her husband looked down at her, his dark eyes softening as they met hers through the misty air, his gaze questioning. It was obvious he had sensed instinctively that it wasn't just the party she was being grateful for, and just this inexplicable connection alone...

Even this was a gift from God, Hope thought, and speaking of gifts...

"Thank you," she whispered again, droplets clinging to her eyelashes as she blinked up at him.

"For what, kyria?" His voice was low, barely audible above the steady rhythm of water against tile.

"For being in this journey with me." She was already crying even before she finished speaking, her tears mingling with the shower spray streaming down her cheeks, her heart feeling so full as the loveliest memories played in her mind. Colin saying yes to

praying with her. And later on, Colin reading the Bible on his own. And her husband even being the first to wake up to have quiet time with God.

Colin brushed wet strands of hair from her face, the tenderness in his touch making her heart clench.

"I love you, Hope."

"I love you, too," she sobbed, her hands finding purchase on his slick shoulders, "and I love you so much more because of how you love God, too."

"Ah." Steam curled around his smile, softening the strong lines of her husband's face.

"W-Who knew I'd be such a big crybaby at this age, r-right?" She attempted a laugh, the sound echoing softly in their sanctuary of glass and marble.

"I think it's cute," her husband said gravely, water droplets catching in his dark lashes as he studied her face, "but if I may ask for one thing..."

Hope perked up at this. Finally! Colin had never asked her for anything while she was always so excited and eager to give him everything. "What is it?"

"I think we need to pray that you don't cry so easily." His hands tightened slightly at her waist, the shower's steady stream creating a private cocoon around them.

Oh. Okay. Really?

She tried not to sound disappointed as she asked, "That's it? Really?"

"It's of the utmost importance."

"Why?" Hope struggled not to worry and overthink as she waited for his answer.

"Because it's clear you haven't noticed..." His gaze traveled slowly over her face, his expression softening further as water traced paths between them.

Oh no.

It was really getting harder and harder not to worry now. Had Colin suddenly realized he could have married someone younger and prettier and—no, wait, she wasn't allowed to think that, was she? Colin was no longer the old Colin. Colin was—

"The changes in you..."

Had she gotten fatter? Uglier? What changes could he be—

"You, my beautiful wife, are pregnant."

—joking about?

She was about to laugh when their gazes collided through the steam, and her smile faded while her heart raced.

Oh, my Lord...

She and Colin were having a baby?

Was there no end to how wonderful life could be, truly?

Why was God so, so good?

The End