

THE HOPEFUL HEARTS SERIES ◇ BOOK TWO

# PERFECTLY PLACED

LIANA GEORGE



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*For Kayley and Abbey, my favorite daughters*

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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

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*Opportunity only knocks once.  
~ Chinese Proverb*

I'm not an expert on Asian culture, but here's what I know about the Chinese New Year celebrations: it's their most important holiday; each year is symbolized by an animal; it's nothing like our Western Christmas; and decorations are a must.

That last detail would explain why the lobby at New Hope Orphanage reminds me of a colorful carnival of sorts when I step back inside after being gone for six weeks. Red and gold cutouts adorn the windows, rooster posters and large banners with Chinese writing cover the peeling white paint on the walls, and globe-like lanterns spin from the ceiling. Every square inch of the usually-bland room has been transformed to pay tribute to this annual fete.

And it's a beautiful sight to behold, so much so that I'm lost in admiration when the receptionist greets me from her spot at the information desk.

"Miss Mayfield, so nice to see you."

I pull my eyes from the festive décor toward the voice

addressing me. “Thanks, I’m glad to be back.” Which I am. I had been counting down the days until my return, excited by the possibilities in store for me, and this place, in the months to come. “I hope it’s okay I’m here. I came straight from the airport.”

“Of course. How can I help you?”

“Is Director Wu available?”

“I’m sorry.” She wrinkles her nose. “Director Wu won’t be back until Monday, February thirteenth, when the Chinese New Year holiday is over.”

“Oh.” My shoulders droop with disappointment. “What’s today?” Between the long-haul travel, jetlag, and the time difference, I’ve lost track.

“It’s Tuesday, the seventh.” She peers down at her desk as if checking her calendar. “Was she expecting you?”

“No, I wasn’t supposed to arrive for a few more weeks, but I took an earlier flight.” I glance over my shoulder and point at the red and gold trimmings splashed across the room. “I wanted to get a glimpse of the celebrations before they ended.” I turn back toward her. “And I need to start working.”

“Well, Assistant Director Chang is here. Would you like to speak with her?”

While I’d be more comfortable meeting with Director Wu, I don’t want to waste any time. “That would be great.”

“Have a seat, and I’ll see if she’s available.” She bows and then scurries off behind the doors that serve as a safety net from the outside world.

I retreat to the waiting area and the same rusty chairs where Ms. O’Connor and I had sat during our first visit two months ago. Little did we know then how much New Hope would change our lives. For the better.

As I plop down onto the cold metal, my stomach growls loudly. I scavenge through my bag for anything that might temporarily appease the beast within and let out a huge sigh of

relief when I find a lone fortune cookie. Success! When I break the hard shell in two, crumbs dust my jeans, and a slip of paper flutters onto my lap. I toss one half of the treat into my mouth and then read the tiny blue words staring back up at me.

*Opportunity knocks only once.*

Although I tend to trust in Biblical proverbs more than random sayings tucked into cookies, this particular adage tugs at my heart. The truth is I only have one shot.

To restore order at New Hope.

To guarantee continued funding for the heart center and the children who live here.

To reconnect with the little girl who stole my heart.

All while the clock is ticking.

“Miss Mayfield?” The receptionist calls out, interrupting my thoughts.

I swallow the pointy pieces lodged in my throat. “Sorry, I was hungry.” Standing, I tuck the other half of the cookie and its fortuitous message in my coat pocket. “Can I see the AD now?”

“I’m sorry.” Frown lines crease the corners of her mouth. “The AD is occupied at the moment. You can wait for her here. I could bring you a snack if you’d like.”

Tempted by her offer of food, I lower myself back onto the chair. “That would be great.”

She bows and strides back toward her desk.

“Wait!” I jump back up.

Pivoting, she gives me a quizzical look.

“Could I go back to the toddler room and wait for the AD there?” I rush over to her. “I’d like to see Lei Ming for a few minutes ... if that’s possible.”

The young woman bites her lip and glances over her shoulder in the direction of the children’s rooms. “I’m not sure if you’re allowed to go back there. The AD—”



“Oh, it’s all right. She’s let me tend to the kids before, and technically I’m an employee here, so it’s really not a problem.”

Like the gatekeeper she is, she sizes me up as if debating whether I should be granted entry or not. Finally, her face lights up. “I guess it will be okay. Let me get you a nametag.”

She promptly returns and hands me my pass.

“Thank you.” I beam my gratitude, then drape the lanyard over my hair, which must resemble a bird’s nest after my lengthy travels.

I waste no time crossing the dingy white tile to a second set of doors guarding the children against the outside world. As I do, a shiver of excitement courses through me. It seems like a lifetime has passed since I’d last seen Lei Ming or held her in my arms. Now I was only moments away from doing so again.

Inching closer to the toddler room, however, my heart cools. What if she’d forgotten who I was? What if she no longer wanted me to hold her or read to her? Maybe someone else had taken my place. *Please, Lord, don’t let that be the case.*

I gently push open the top of the Dutch door leading to her room and peek inside. The normally busy room is dimly lit and quiet. Naptime. With bated breath, I lean against the bottom half of the door in an effort to spot Lei Ming from my long-distance position. Sensing my struggle, one of the workers rushes toward me. She taps her finger against her lips and invites me inside. I imitate her gesture and tiptoe into the room.

Anxious for a glimpse of my sleeping beauty, I snake through the rows, searching for Lei Ming. All the small bodies look identical in the dark, with their locks of black hair poking up from underneath tightly wrapped blankets. But it only takes me a few minutes to locate her.

With her long eyelashes curled over her eyelids, her thumb hanging from the edge of her mouth, and her cheeks rosy from the warm cocoon she’s wrapped in, she looks exactly how I remembered. I reach down and brush my fingers over her free hand, careful not to wake her.

I'm not sure how long I hover over her crib, but I don't care either. I could spend all day here just watching her. Eventually, a tap on my shoulder indicates my time is up. I blow Lei Ming a kiss goodbye and turn to acknowledge the caretaker's dismissal.

But it's not one of the workers. It's Assistant Director Chang. She points to the door and heads in the direction of the hallway.

I sneak one last look at Lei Ming before following the AD. "*Ni hảo*, Ms. Chang." I survey her no-nonsense attire, the same as in our previous encounters. Dark blazer, white blouse, charcoal slacks, and flats. Her cropped hair, every strand perfectly in place, ages her more than she probably is.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Miss Mayfield." She shuts the toddler room door behind me.

"Please, call me Nicki." My eyes dart between her and the sealed-off room. "Didn't Director Wu tell you I would be returning to do some work here?"

"Yes, I heard." She purses her lips. "Only we weren't expecting you for a few more weeks."

"I was able to obtain all my paperwork faster than expected, so I took an earlier flight. I'm ready to start working."

"Then why are you *here*?" She cocks her head towards the closed door.

"I wanted to check on Lei Ming first."

"Ah, yes, the two of you formed quite a bond during your last visit, correct?"

The word *bond* grabs my attention and causes my stomach to flip. Until recently, I'd been an organizer who saw children as a nemesis to an orderly life. The last thing I'd expected was to form an attachment with one. Now I was curious to see if my and Lei Ming's bond still ran strong while I was gone.

"We did, and I was hoping to spend a few minutes with her before I started working." I reach for the door handle.

"Oh, I don't think that's a good idea." AD Chang places her hand on my arm. "Naptime can last a while, and once everyone is

awake, the caretakers will have to attend to all their needs. It can get chaotic in there, so it's probably best if you try again another time ... when it's less inconvenient."

I shrink back. "O ... kay." While I don't want to interfere with the workers' care, it's probably best if I leave now anyway. I should start working on Ms. O'Connor's list, and had I stayed in there much longer, they'd need a bulldozer to get me out.

The AD offers me a faint smile. "Why don't we go to my office, and you can tell me what you'll be doing here at New Hope."

I glance back at the door, longing for another look at Lei Ming. Sensing the older woman's steely gaze on me and the fact that I don't have any power over or responsibility for this sweet child, I succumb to the AD's wishes. "Sure, that will be fine."

The quick trek to her office doesn't give me much time to think about how I will answer the questions she's bound to ask. I know my assignment. I'm just not sure yet how I'm going to execute it. That's why I came to New Hope first. I couldn't formulate a solid plan of action until arriving and completing an overall assessment of the orphanage. Once I do, I have to get to work. Three months isn't a lot of time to accomplish such a lofty—and critical—mission.

"So," the AD says as we both take a seat in her tidy office. "What exactly do you intend to do here at New Hope as Ms. O'Connor's representative?"

I pull my purse into my lap and retrieve my phone, where I've stored the long list of instructions I was given before I left the States. Scrolling through the document, I debate how much to share with the AD. It would be better, and more professional, if I spoke with Director Wu first and then let the information trickle down as needed. But it seems she's not here, so I have no choice but to fill the AD in.

"It's a detailed list, but basically, Ms. O'Connor would like me to organize all the rooms so they function more efficiently,

and she'd like me to check that all the systems within the orphanage are clear and running well."

Stopping to catch my breath, I cut my eyes toward the AD, whose face is unmoved, so I continue reading. "Lastly, she'd like me to declutter, scan, and digitize all the paperwork at the orphanage for the last five years and bring it into the Twenty-first Century for easier access. The O'Connor Foundation, which we hope will oversee the funding from now on, will prefer to receive all the records in a digital format."

The AD holds out her hand. "May I see that?"

I clutch my phone against my chest. "I'd prefer to give the list to Director Wu first, and then she can fill you in as she feels necessary. I've provided the overall scope. That should be enough until the director returns."

"When you say 'paperwork' ..." Her eyes narrow. "What exactly are you referring to?"

"The documentation required for adoptions and for the treatments the children receive from the heart center, as well as just the papers to keep a place like this running—"

"So, you'd need to see all of it?"

"Yes," I say, surprised by her line of questioning. "Is that a problem?"

"No," she snaps. "I mean, we just have to take into consideration that there is a lot of private information in the paperwork, and we can't just let anyone have access to it."

"I understand that, but you have to know that if I can't do the job I was asked to do, then the orphanage, as well as the heart center, will lose its funding. I'm part of the organization now, so nothing is off-limits to me. I promise I will keep personal information strictly confidential."

"I'm fully aware that the continuation of our organization depends on us pleasing you." She folds her arms on her desk. "Of course, you'll have whatever you need."

"I appreciate that."

“Well, it sounds like you have been charged with a large task. I’d be happy to help you make speedy progress. How long do you expect it will take you to finish everything?”

“I think I can get it done fairly quickly if I have the proper support,” I say. “But my deadline is the first week of May. Ms. O’Connor will submit the necessary documents to the Foundation for their meeting sometime later that month. I plan to return home after that.”

“And you wanted to start today?” The AD blinks rapidly.

“I thought I’d use the time to go through all the rooms and do some needs assessments so I can get them and the storage closets in order first.” I rise from my chair as proof I’m ready to work. “It shouldn’t take me too long to do that.”

“Why the rush?” AD Chang matches my stance.

“As I said, I’m on a tight deadline. Ms. O’Connor expects me to get started right away, and I don’t want to disappoint her.” I pause. “In any way.”

“You are aware, Miss Mayfield, that we are still observing Chinese New Year, correct?”

My ears perk up at the mention of the well-known holiday. “Of course, the decorations are amazing.”

“Then you’ll understand why I must request you return once it’s over to start working.”

“I’m sorry, but why do I need to wait?”

“You may not realize it,” she says, a hint of irritation lacing her voice. “But our country honors these fifteen days by not working unless absolutely necessary. That’s why Director Wu is not here. And it seems that for you to accomplish what you’ve been sent here to do, you’ll need her assistance with your ... long list of actions. Unfortunately, she won’t be available to discuss anything until the new year celebrations are finished, which is still a few days away.”

She steps closer to me, and I can make out the taut lines around her face.

“Plus,” she continues, “that will give the Director and me time to discuss how we can best help you. Given Ms. O’Connor’s demands and timeline, we’ll need to prepare a few things before you start. I’m sure you won’t mind giving us some time to ... how do you say? Get our ducks in a row?”

I consider her request. I’d hoped to hit the ground running, but as I did show up unannounced, the least I can do is give them time to prepare for my unexpected intrusion into their space.

“If you think that’s best, then sure.” I try to hide my disappointment.

“It is.” The AD sprints toward the office door.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say the woman didn’t want me around any longer. I shake my head. No, I’m sure that’s just brain fog and jet lag toying with my mind again. She knows I have to complete my job for her to retain hers.

A yawn escapes from my mouth as I follow her. “Oh, excuse me.” I clamp my hands over my lips. “I guess I’m more tired than I realized.”

“You’ve had quite the day, Miss Mayfield.” She places her hand on my shoulder and guides me into the hallway and toward the exit. “Use the next few days to rest and recover from your long journey so you can be sharp when you return. Travel can take a lot out of you, and you’ll need to be at your best for the work ahead.” She pushes the glass door open for me.

“That’s true.” I strut back outside. “I’ll look forward to seeing you and the Director Monday morn—”

“Goodbye then.” She shuts the door behind me with swift precision and without further discussion.

I stare at the doors and question my quick exit. Why was the AD so anxious to have me leave? Had I offended her by keeping the task list from her? Or is there more to it?

As my driver speeds away from the orphanage, I take one last look over my shoulder at New Hope. I’m not sure what, if

anything, is going on there, but I refuse to be sidetracked from fulfilling Ms. O'Connor's directives. Even by the AD. As my fortune cookie message so aptly reminded me earlier, opportunity only knocks once.

And I intend to make the most of it.