



*Better to be too skeptical than to be too trusting.*  
~ Chinese Proverb

I arrive at New Hope on Monday morning promptly at eight. Although my prayer for help hadn't been answered yet, I decide to do what I can at the orphanage on my own. I'll just have to start with the tasks that don't require translating.

But first, to reconnect with Lei Ming.

I quickly sign in, then slip past the offices and head straight for her room. Hopefully, nothing, and no one, should stand in my way of spending quality time with her.

From the open Dutch door, I wave down one of the workers scuttling around the room. “*Zǎoshang hǎo.*” I share the good morning greeting I'd practiced all weekend.

She beams her gratitude. “*Xièxiè, nǐ yě yīyàng.*” Without another word, she shuffles off to tend to a crying child.

Taking that as my cue that it's okay for me to enter, I let myself in.

The room buzzes with activity. Several children munch on a late breakfast in highchairs while others zip around the toy area, picking things up and dropping them whenever their interest

subsides. From the cribs, wails of dissatisfaction float across the room as one or two toddlers demand freedom from their temporary holding stations and the pungent odors filling their diapers.

I scan the room for the familiar face, the one whose features I had memorized by studying her photo on my phone every night for the past six weeks. Those huge chocolate brown eyes, chubby cheeks, porcelain skin, and jet-black hair are ingrained in my mind. When I spot Lei Ming by the tiny kitchenette in the corner of the room, my heart races. While every part of me wants to run and pull her into my arms, I have to be careful not to startle her. We will need a proper re-introduction before picking up where we left off.

I repeat my Chinese greeting once more, then trot over to her. She's busy "cooking" something on the stove, and while I don't want to interrupt her imaginative playtime, I can't wait any longer to reconnect with her.

My breath hitches as I stoop to her level. "Lei Ming?"

At the sound of my voice, she turns her head in my direction.

"Hi!" I wave and offer her a friendly smile. "Do you remember me?"

Her lips remain firmly shut as her big eyes size me up. I pray that her steely gaze means her brain is busy making a connection to me. A positive one.

"Hey there, sweetheart." I inch closer to her until we're almost nose to nose and stroke her hair. "Are you having fun in the kitchen?"

She stands frozen in place, her gaze laser-focused on me. I clap my hands and hold out my arms, hoping she'll fall into them, but like a statue, she doesn't move.

I make one more attempt to draw her closer before a loud cry erupts and pierces my eardrums. I wince at the shrieks her small body emits. As the crocodile tears flow down her face, a lump grows in my throat. She doesn't remember me.

Before someone can whisk her away or her cries start a chain

reaction that will make me the disdain of all the workers, I pull Lei Ming into my arms.

“Shhh,” I murmur into her ear while patting her back. “It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s just me.”

She struggles to escape my embrace, so I shift to a bouncing motion like I’d seen others do to restrain and calm her down. Yet nothing seems to work. Clearly, I’m not cut out for motherhood.

Flustered, I roam around the room with her. “*Zǎoshang hǎo*,” I repeat like a broken record before reverting to my native tongue. “I’m the one who read *Spot the Dog* to you.”

Since she can’t understand a word I’m saying, her wails continue. For another five minutes.

When one of the workers heads in my direction, shivers nip my spine. My eyes plead with her for a little more time. She stops short of us and purses her lips before finally conceding.

“It’s okay,” I tell Lei Ming in a soothing tone once the threat of having her taken from me is gone. “It’s been a while, but I’m sure it will all come back to you in a bit.”

I cradle her hand in mine and press my lips against her forehead. Her breathing slows, and she relaxes in my arms. I exhale and pray that she’s remembering who I am and not preparing to share her breakfast all over me like last time.

“See, I’m not so bad.” I crane my neck back and rub my nose against hers. “I just wanted to see you and let you know that I’m back.”

She hiccups and rests her head on my shoulder. With her settled in my arms, I tighten my grip around her frame, which seems lighter than the last time I held her, and nuzzle my head against her neck. The sweet smells of cereal and milk linger on her skin and clothes, perfuming the space between us. I inhale deeply as my heart fills with joy that we somehow managed to connect.

Although I need to get to work on my real purpose for being here, I twirl her around and cherish this precious bonding time.

“We’re going to be together a lot, and maybe someday soon I’ll even get a smile from you.”

She tugs on one of my curls, and I take that as a yes.

Setting Lei Ming back on the floor, I pass her a plastic apple, which she plucks from my hands and pulls towards her mouth. I jump to remove it from her slobbery lips just as Director Wu sidles up next to me.

“I thought I’d find you in here,” she says.

My gaze veers from Lei Ming to the heart and soul of the orphanage. “Director Wu, it’s so good to see you!” Without asking I carefully embrace the elderly woman. Like my grandmother had, she smells like mentholatum and peppermint.

“So, when did you get back to my beloved *Zhōngguó*?” When she pulls out of our hug, her whole face lights up at the sight of me.

“Didn’t AD Chang tell you I was here last week?” I knit my eyebrows together.

“No, she didn’t.” Her joyfulness diminishes, and the color drains from her face. “Or maybe she mentioned it, and I just forgot. My memory isn’t what it used to be.”

Although we laugh it off, an unsettled feeling forms in my gut. AD Chang had said she’d discuss my work projects with the director before I returned today. If she hadn’t, why not? If she had, should I be concerned with the director’s mental capacities? Either way, I need to find out—not just for my sake but for the future of New Hope as well. After all, I am responsible for determining if the funding should go forward.

“Shall we go to my office and talk?” Director Wu peers over my shoulder. “Or are you still busy in the kitchen?”

I spin around and watch Lei Ming. She’s chatting away to herself while simultaneously banging pots on the stove. As much as I’d love to stay, I need to get busy.

“I think my sous chef can handle things for a bit.”

We exit the toddler room without much fanfare and walk to her office, catching up with each other’s activities since we last

saw one another. She fills me in on her New Year celebrations with her family, and I share my experience at Longchen's last week.

"It was wonderful and one of the many reasons I wanted to return," I say. "I'm not sure how often I'll make it back to China after this, so I want to make the most of my opportunities before leaving."

Within minutes we arrive in her office.

"Let's hope you are blessed with many more visits." Opening the door, she gestures for me to enter.

When I do, I can't help but gasp. Her office is even more cluttered than the last time I was here. I try not to gawk while I scan the cramped space. Piles of paper cover every flat surface, and mounds of folders line the walls as if they were the only things keeping the building erect.

"Have a seat." She points to one of the two wooden chairs across from her desk before closing the door behind us. "Would you care for something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Water?"

"No, thank you." I set my purse on the floor and remove my jacket. "I'm anxious to get to work on Ms. O'Connor's list. I'm already behind schedule."

Director Wu takes a seat behind her desk. "List?"

"Yes, her contingencies for the O'Connor Foundation to continue funding, which I believe she mentioned on her previous visit." I pull my phone from my purse and scroll to the sacred text. "Didn't the AD tell you about it?"

Director Wu's eyes grow dark. "No, but I'll discuss it with her later."

"Okay." While I want to dig more into the lack of communication between the two women, I let it slide and concentrate on what I do have control over. I continue, "Please know that Ms. O'Connor appreciates all the hard work and effort you and your staff have done with the orphanage and heart center. However, she has some significant concerns she would like addressed."

I pause to let my positive words sink in before I drag in the sledgehammer of negativity. “She’d like me to target three specific areas while I’m here. One, the overall organization of the children’s room. I need to ensure they are functioning properly and up to safety and modern standards. Two, update the policies and procedures for the well-being of staff and the children to avoid any liability complications.”

Stopping to catch my breath, I assess her reaction to my words so far. Since she’s unfazed, I proceed. “Finally, she asked that we declutter and digitize all the paperwork for the last five years, especially the financials the Foundation will need. If they continue funding New Hope, they’ll require everything in a digital, easy-to-read, and readily trackable format. Ms. O’Connor wants me to handle that as well.”

“That’s quite the list, Nicki.” Director Wu pushes back in her chair. “I think building the Great Wall was a simpler task.” She chuckles and shakes her head.

“You’re probably right. Believe me, I know firsthand how Ms. O’Connor’s requests can be a bit overwhelming. But as a professional organizer, I’m certain I have a plan that will meet her expectations in the timeframe she’s set.”

“How quickly does she want the work done?” the Director asks.

“By the first of May, so roughly three months.”

“Hmm, that’s not much time. And with the holidays finishing, I may need a few days to get things in order before you start.”

Next week? “That’s kind of you, but not necessary,” I tell her. “I was hoping to start right—”

The office door bursts open, and AD Chang rushes in, red-faced and out-of-breath.

“I didn’t realize we were meeting this morning.” She takes a seat next to me. Uninvited.

The director squints at the AD and frowns. “I assumed since you were already informed about Ms. O’Connor’s requests and

instructions for Nicki to complete, your presence wasn't necessary."

My eyes dart between the two women, who stare at each other with such intensity I squirm. While I don't particularly want the AD intruding in our conversation, I need to convince Director Wu to let me start working immediately, and this stand-off is only prolonging the process.

"It's not a problem, Director." I offer up a truce. "The AD is welcome to stay for our discussion." I cut a sideways glance at the AD. "As I was saying, I thought I'd start right away with an overall organization of the rooms first. There isn't much that needs to be done in them except for a few tweaks. It's the policies and procedures, as well as all the paperwork, that will take more time."

"That sounds fine, Nicki," the director chimes in. "We'll be happy to help you any way we can to ensure that you are successful and Ms. O'Connor is satisfied."

"Great, so it's okay if I start today?"

"Excuse me," AD Chang interrupts. Again. "There are a few things I'd like to say."

My head snaps in her direction. Seriously? My patience with this woman is growing thin, and it's only my first day at work. However, as a guest in this country, it's best if I keep my mouth shut. Pouring out my frustrations won't do any good.

"Is it important?" Director Wu sighs, obviously as weary as I am by the AD's obtrusion.

"Yes." The AD opens the folder that's been sitting atop her lap. "After Miss Mayfield mentioned her plans to me last week, I took it upon myself to address some of Ms. O'Connor's concerns. I've typed up a list of the organizational changes I've implemented and had the staff work on these past few days, so all Miss Mayfield needs to do is approve them."

She passes both of us a small stack of papers and continues, "As for the policy and procedures, I have each department working to update their handbooks and should have them in the

next five to seven days. I'll have them translated into English so she can read and sign off on those as well."

I study her notes with consternation. It's a meticulous checklist of the tasks I envisioned myself completing over the next few weeks. As well as some I hadn't considered.

"This is impressive. I can't recall the last time you finished something in such a timely manner," Director Wu says.

AD Chang beams and bows her head. "I think Ms. O'Connor will be pleased."

"But how did you do all this?" I drop the papers into my lap.

"We Chinese are quite adept at doing what is necessary." She narrows her eyes. "Is there a problem, Miss Mayfield?"

"Yes, no ... I mean, I don't understand." I raise my voice an appropriate level without coming across as too irate. "You told me there was no working during the holidays, so how did you manage to get all of this done?"

"You must have misunderstood, and I apologize if I caused you any confusion. Perhaps my English isn't as good as I thought."

"Your English is just fine," I say sharply.

"Good." She turns her gaze back toward the Director. "With the majority of the work completed, it won't be necessary for Miss Mayfield to stay as long as she planned. Perhaps we could arrange some sightseeing activities for her? There are so many wonderful attractions here in Beijing."

I grip the edges of the papers causing them to crinkle under my tight hold. "I appreciate the AD's efforts to assist me with this project. It looks like she did a thorough job. However—"

"It wasn't a problem." The AD dismisses me with a wave of her hand. "I was happy to help. With the first two requests already underway, she and I can start on the paperwork. I've already purchased a scanner. It should be here soon."

"Wait." I hold up my hand. "When did this become a team project?"



AD Chang huffs. “I was only trying to be helpful.” She looks to Director Wu with a pained expression.

“Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate what you’ve done.” I perch on the edge of my chair to stave off my growing irritation and keep myself from blurting out something I’ll regret. “But it wasn’t your job to do all this. Ms. O’Connor requested that *I* do it.”

“Yes, but now it’s done, and you can be finished here sooner rather than later,” she says coyly. “You do have a deadline, don’t you?”

I ignore the AD’s remark and focus my attention solely on the director. “If Ms. O’Connor had wanted you and your staff to handle her agenda, she never would have sent me back here or stipulated that I was the one who was to do the job.”

“I would think it wouldn’t matter who does the work at this point as long as it gets done,” AD Chang says. “Wouldn’t you agree, Director?”

The director remains silent.

“Unfortunately, it’s not up to the Director to agree or not. It’s up to Ms. O’Connor,” I remind them, even though the AD is right.

Considering I’m already behind, I should be grateful for her help. I’m just being territorial. What’s done is done, and I need to let her have her moment to shine. Plus, her efforts will allow me to focus on the more important and most troublesome of Ms. O’Connor’s tasks—the paperwork. It can be very time-consuming to deal with, and twelve weeks may not even be enough for me to get through it all. Especially if I don’t hear from Julia soon.

Yet it might be in my best interests if I removed AD Chang from the equation altogether. Between Director Wu’s comments and the AD’s unusual behavior, something in my gut tells me not to trust her. Does she think I’m incapable? I mean, why else would she do my job for me ... unless she has something to hide.

Whatever her reasons, she's been entirely too eager to get rid of me from the moment I arrived.

"Director Wu." I break the quiet that has settled over the room. "I'm fine with the AD's assistance. Once I evaluate what she's done and find it suitable, I'll be happy to sign off on it. Going forward, however, I won't need her help."

The AD bolts from her seat. "How do you plan to translate all the documents to know how to properly organize them?"

"Yes." Director Wu leans on her desk. "How were you going to handle that?"

While I have someone in mind, Julia's not locked in to help me just yet. But I'm not going to admit that to them.

"I've arranged for a translator, so I won't need your assistance," I say to the AD. The fiery look in her eyes screams her unhappiness with my declaration. "Plus, for the O'Connor Foundation to consider New Hope as a financial recipient, the paperwork should be handled independently and not from within the organization."

"Of course, I hadn't considered that." Director Wu fingers one of the pearls on her necklace. "We'll leave the paperwork and translation in your hands then. You have full access and freedom to do what you need. Don't you agree, AD Chang?"

The AD glowers at me before addressing the director. "Fine."

"Good." The director rises from her chair, a skeptical look coloring her face. "She can start with the paperwork in your office then, and you can translate for her until her help arrives."

"What? No!" The AD steps toward the director. "I—I need some time to get things tidied up in my office. Since I was busy organizing things for her these past few days, I have neglected the space, and it's not conducive for that type of work right now." She walks backward toward the doorway. "I'll let you know when it's a good time for you to come in."

Without further discussion, she leaves, slamming the door behind her.

"I'm sorry, Nicki." Director Wu saunters around her desk,

shaking her head. “I don’t know what is going on with her, but I’ll look into it. She’s never acted like this before.”

Unsettled by Chang’s reaction and hearing that it’s out of character, I attempt to tamp down my worries. “I know she was just trying to help, but Ms. O’Connor was clear about her instructions. We both know how much is riding on this.” A picture of Lei Ming in her kitchen flashes through my mind.

“I do,” Director Wu agrees, “and I have complete confidence that you’ll do a wonderful job and ensure that the children here at New Hope are well taken care of for years to come.”

Standing, I blush at her words. “I appreciate that.” I grab my jacket and purse. “But I should probably get busy. I’m just not sure exactly where to start now that my plans have changed.” And without someone here to translate for me, there’s not much I can do.

“Well, you may not be interested in my opinion, but perhaps you could begin here in my office?”

“Here?” I scan the crowded room.

“Yes, it might be a good idea to do some decluttering in here.” She surveys the room. “That way, it will be easier for you and your assistant to sort and organize everything.”

My stomach sags with dread. There’s no doubt the Director’s office is the cog in the wheelhouse of the orphanage’s paperwork, but I’m not sure this is a room I want to handle right away.

From the looks of the leaning towers of yellowed manila file folders that are about to tumble, the musty smell of old paper wafting through the air, and the documents jutting out of the file cabinets looking for escape, my organizing gut tells me this room will need extra attention. In my professional opinion, it would rank on the hoarding scale; I’m just not sure to what extent.

It’s also eerily reminiscent of another space I’m all too familiar with—my mom’s house.

I shiver at the memory of attempting, unsuccessfully, to remove the stacks of clutter that had overtaken my childhood

home. I couldn't do anything to help my mother then, nor could I now. What if working with the director yielded the same results? Disappointment like that would only hinder me from what I was sent here to do.

As I rack my brain for an excuse to offer the director, my eyes land on a collage of photos tucked in the far back corner of the room. The cheerful faces of children who had passed through here on their way to a better life returned my gaze. That's when it hits—none of this is about me.

It's about the heart center and the hope it offers.

It's about the children who, for whatever reason, have been left behind.

It's for Ms. O'Connor and the legacy she can leave one day by funding this place.

And after holding her in my arms this morning, I know it's about Lei Ming too.

Whatever personal fears I may carry are insignificant compared to New Hope's success.

I tear my watery eyes from the collage and focus on Director Wu. "I think that's a great idea." I push up the sleeves of my sweater. "Are you ready to start now?"

The elderly woman's face glows. Always a good sign.

"Let me just double-check my schedule. I don't think my first meeting is until ten." She sidesteps a box of Chinese New Year decorations and meanders back to her desk.

I cast a sideways glance over my shoulder and assess the possibilities of where we could work in that short amount of time. "We could probably knock out a few of the bookshelves and newspaper piles. What do you think, Director?"

"That sounds like a—"

Turning around to glean her thoughts, I watch in horror as she trips over a stack of file folders and crashes to the ground.