

THE HOPEFUL HEARTS SERIES ◇ BOOK THREE

# PERFECTLY MATCHED

LIANA GEORGE



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*To Sandra Byrd, my friend, my coach, my cheerleader. There's no doubt in my mind we were perfectly matched for this journey. I'm forever grateful to and for you.*



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adventure. You said not to be silent, but to go on speaking; to not fear because You would be with me (Acts 18:9-10). As always, You are faithful and true to Your Word.



When the map is unrolled, the dagger is revealed.  
~ *Chinese Proverb*

**T**oday's the day we're going to the chapel ...  
Today's the day we're gonna get ma-rr-ried ...

The modified 1960s lyrics play like a broken record in my head as our plane's wheels skid across the runway at Dallas-Fort Worth airport.

Did I really agree to marry Ben Carrington?

Technically, he accepted my proposal. But the details, usually important to a former professional organizer like me, are trivial now. All that matters is quickly and quietly tying the knot so we can catch the first flight back to China to officially begin the process of adopting Lei Ming and starting this unusual family of ours.

"Ready, Nicki?" Ben asks as the plane comes to a stop at the jetway, muting the music in my head.

I flinch as the simultaneous clicks of unbuckling seatbelts resonate through the cabin and weary travelers gather their belongings. Ready? For what? A marriage of convenience?

Parenthood? Or getting hitched at the Justice of the Peace in the middle of the week without our parents' knowledge?

Although everyone else is standing, I remain seated. A few days ago, our plan didn't sound all that crazy when we shared it with Director Wu and Julia. Now that we're home in the States and actually going to implement it—well, that's a different story.

"Nicki." Ben holds out his hand to me from the aisle. "It's time to go."

Gazing up at him, my pulse races. Despite the long flight and late hour, his face conveys a look of peace and joy. His green eyes sparkle, and his smile stretches from ear to ear, as if he can't wait to make me his bride.

That's Ben. Faithful to his commitments, firm in his faith, and fast to spring into action. A girl would be foolish to let a guy like that get away, and I am not a foolish girl. Lei Ming and I are lucky to have him.

I release the death grip on the metal seat divider and place my hand in his. An electric spark jolts through me when our fingers touch. Whatever fears and doubts had overtaken me when we first landed melt away. We're in this together, for better or for worse, till death do us part, regardless of how asinine our plan may be. "Let's go."

As we scuttle through the crowded airport, Texas seems nothing like what I thought it would be. I only spot a few Stetsons and Western boots at baggage claim, and as we make the two-hour drive toward his hometown of Kilgore, I notice there are more billboards than cows dotting the landscape.

"The Lone Star State isn't what I was expecting," I tell him as images from Westerns on TV and in movies flitter through my mind.

He cuts me a sideways glance and grins. "What were you thinking it would be? Cowboys and cattle around every corner?"

Thankful for the covering of night to hide my embarrassment, I gulp nervously. "No, of course not. I just thought—"



“You just thought there’d be lots of longhorns, ranch chaps, and spurs, didn’t you?” He chuckles. “Don’t worry. A lot of people think that at first, but Texas is like the rest of the States. We just have bigger belt buckles.”

I throw my head back and laugh, grateful for the banter and momentary distraction. “So, did you reserve rooms for us at a hotel?” Although Ben and I don’t know each other well, the fact that we’re Christians means I can rest easy that he wouldn’t have us staying in the same room before we’re married.

At this point, I’m not even certain that will happen after we say *I do*, either.

“No.” He removes his hand from the steering wheel and rubs his stubbled jawline. “I thought we’d stay at my parents’ house.”

A prick of fear jabs at my heart. “Why the sudden change? No one’s supposed to know.” It was a pact we made in China when we first agreed to this marital arrangement. While we knew our parents might not be happy with our hasty decision, we don’t want them to talk us out of it—or worse, insist on a big celebration that we neither have the time nor desire for under the circumstances.

“Don’t worry,” Ben assures me. “They’re not home.”

His words flood me with relief, and my heartbeat returns to normal. “Where are they?”

“Visiting my brother and his family just outside of Houston. They emailed a few days ago and told me, so it works out perfectly.” He places his hand back on the wheel at the two o’clock position. “By the time they return, we’ll be Mr. and Mrs. and have sidestepped any drama surrounding our quick nuptials, keeping our efforts to get married without them safe.” He furrows his eyebrows. “You didn’t mention it to your mom, did you?”

“No, I didn’t.” Heavy-hearted, I peer out my window and study the moonlit terrain. Although it was hard to leave Lei Ming in her fragile condition and wrap my head around the fact that in order to give her a forever family, Ben and I would need

to come home and get married. But that wasn't the most difficult part. It was the decision we made not to tell our parents, stabbing daggers into my heart.

For years, my mother has wanted me to find a knight in shining armor and supply her with a brood of grandchildren. If she knew I'd found Prince Charming and was starting a family sooner rather than later, she'd be over-the-moon excited. But she'd also insist on being present at the ceremony and involved with all the preparations. With Lei Ming's condition still hanging in the balance, we don't have the luxury or the time to plan a big wedding and include everyone.

That's why Ben and I agreed a private civil ceremony was the way to go. From afar, it sounded like a good idea. However, now that I'm back in the USA and hours away from exchanging vows with someone I've only known a few weeks, my stomach knots at the thought my mom won't be a part of my wedding. Even one at the local courthouse. I have no doubt she'd love to be there next to me.

"Hey, you okay?" Ben's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. "Not getting cold feet, are you?"

I look back at him. "What? No." I shake my head. "I was just thinking about my mom, that's all."

"I'm sorry. I know it wasn't easy for us to make the decision to leave our parents out of the loop, but it was the right one. We need to be on a plane back to China sooner than it would take for your mom to arrive here. Plus, my mother is a true-blooded Texan. She doesn't know how to do anything small, especially important events. I promise it would be a nightmare if we told them."

"You're right. It's just harder than I thought it'd be."

"Look, we'll do a nice reception, party, whatever you want with them once we come back with Lei Ming. In time they'll understand why we stayed silent and be happy for us." He pulls the car into a gated entrance.

"I hope you're right." I wrap my arms around my waist. I'm

not a hundred percent sure it will go over with everyone as smoothly as Ben thinks it will.

“Trust me. Everything will be fine.” He rolls down the window and taps in the code to give us access to the estate.

After several minutes of driving down a windy path, the rental car’s headlights finally flash on the front exterior of the Carrington mansion. As I take it all in, my mouth drops open. The sprawling residence looks like a photo straight out of *Architectural Digest*, only more Texas farmhouse than the usual New England Tudor I’m used to on the east coast. However, it’s just as beautiful.

Ben wasn’t kidding when he said his family had money. I squirm in the knowledge that one day I’ll have to show my soon-to-be husband my mother’s house, and it will lack sorely when compared to the Carrington’s luxurious home. I can just imagine Ben staring at her place for the first time, his mouth hanging open too. But for totally different reasons.

I lean forward in my seat, anxious to see what the rest of the house looks like. But when Ben bypasses the circular driveway and keeps driving into the depths of the estate, I know I’ll have to wait for another day to take it all in.

“Where are we going?” I glance back at the massive wood and iron front doors.

“I’m going to park over behind the guest house.”

“Why?” I do my best to temper my fears. Is he embarrassed by me? I can’t imagine that would be the issue. If no one is home, what would it matter? Or does his decision to avoid the main entrance mean he’s uncomfortable flaunting his family’s wealth?

“I don’t want to tip Zelda off,” he informs me, negating my worries. “If she sees a strange car at the front door, she’ll call my parents right away.”

“Who’s Zelda?” I don’t remember him mentioning a sister, but if she had a name like that, I probably would’ve.

“Our main housekeeper. She’s been with our family for years

and knows every inch of this house. When my parents are away, she still comes to check on things. If she happened to stop by tomorrow before we can get to the courthouse ...”

“We’d be done for.”

“Exactly. Zelda would make sure we didn’t do anything until my parents returned.” He brings the car to a stop. “And trust me when I say you don’t want to mess with her.”

I chuckle as we grab our bags from the trunk, imagining what the housekeeper looks like if Ben is afraid to stand up to her.

“You can sleep in the guesthouse, and I’ll stay up in my room.” Ben guides me down a lighted trail leading to a quaint cottage next to the pool, where the lingering smell of chlorine floats in the air. He opens the unlocked door, turns on the lights, and moves to the side.

“Wow.” I scan the nautical-themed space that’s double the size of my old apartment. “This is nice.”

“I don’t know why we call it a guesthouse. There are plenty of rooms in the main house. It’s really my mother’s she-shed.” He puts air quotations around his last two words. “Her little sanctuary when she needs her alone time.”

“I get that.” I set my bag on the ceramic tile that looks like whitewashed wood planks. If I had the financial means, I’d have my own private retreat too.

“Do you want something to eat? We have a fully stocked kitchen with state-of-the-art appliances. I’d be happy to cook something for you. I make a mean quesadilla.”

While it’s sweet of him to offer, I don’t think it’s the best idea. I need to get some sleep before our big day tomorrow, and I’m not sure it’s going to come easily. “Thanks, but I think I’ll just send Director Wu a short email to check on Lei Ming and then go to bed. I need to be at my best for when I walk down the aisle as Nicki Mayfield one last time.”

“I understand.” Frowning, he steps back outside. “Get some rest then, Mrs. Carrington-to-be. I’ll come get you in a few hours

so we can head to the courthouse and seal the deal. Once that's done, we can tell our parents."

"Okay." I lean against the door and watch Ben slink away toward the main house. In China, he looks like a giant with his broad shoulders and towering frame. Here, however, he resembles a good ol' mama's boy—the kind who'd be a great catch for some lucky girl. And while I'm grateful to have hit the jackpot, I can't help but wonder if marrying Ben for convenience isn't robbing him and some debutante of true love.

"Ben, wait," I call out to him.

He quickly pivots in my direction. "Yeah?"

"Before I forget ... thank you."

He heads back toward me. "For what?"

Tears form in my eyes as I think about all Ben has done for me in the short amount of time we've known each other — supporting me at the hospital when Lei Ming was so sick, agreeing to tutor Tao so I could gain access to her in the ICU, visiting me in jail, then arranging this crazy marriage scheme. He's gone above and beyond the call of duty. "For doing this for me."

Ben inches closer toward me. "I'm doing this for you, Lei Ming, and me. We're a family now." He bends down and plants a kiss on my forehead. "Go to bed, Sleeping Beauty."

Heeding my Prince Charming's advice, I lock the door behind me, quickly shoot off my email and crawl straight into bed. But instead of sleeping, I lie there and repeat the words "I do" and attempt to pronounce my new name as casually as possible. "Hi, I'm Nicki May—Nicki Carrington."

After ten minutes, it still doesn't roll off my tongue easily.

Worried I'm creating problems where there aren't any, I take a deep breath and remind myself to relax. It will take time for me to grow accustomed to being Mrs. Benjamin Carrington or calling myself Nicki Carrington.

But just like love and intimacy in our relationship, it will have to develop naturally over time for both of us. I squirm

underneath the covers imagining how that will all play out. Thankfully, jetlag finally takes over, and I drift off to sleep before a full picture forms in my mind.

I have no clue how long I've been dead to the world when the sound of the door handle rattling pulls me from my slumber. I bolt up in bed and wrap the covers around me.

As images of Western movie shootouts run through my head, I reach for my phone and call Ben.

"Hello?" His voice is groggy.

"Someone is trying to break into the guest house," I whisper, doing my best to mask my fear.

"What?"

I place my hand over the phone and raise my voice. "Someone is shaking the door handle violently and trying to get in."

"I'm on my way."

Afraid of what, or who, wants inside, I weigh my options. Hide in the closet or under the bed?

I'm leaning towards the former when the cavalry comes to my rescue.

"Mom." Ben's voice booms from the other side of the door.

His mother? I thought his parents were out of town.

I jump out of bed and peek out the front window blinds.

"Ben!" His mom releases her grip on the door handle and hugs her son. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. I thought you were at Jacob's for a few more days." He wraps his arms around her, the look of disbelief on his face matching my thoughts.

"The kids weren't feeling well, so we left early this morning." She pulls back from his embrace. "Why didn't you tell us you were coming home?"

"I was going to surprise you." Ben leads her away from the cottage.

"Where are you going?"

"I thought we'd go inside and let Dad know I'm here."

She halts mid-step. “Sorry, but I need to get in my laps. Your brother doesn’t have a pool, and I can’t afford to miss any more days. You go inside and find your father, and when I’m done, you can fill me in on the reason for your unexpected visit.” She marches back toward her she-shed and yanks on the handle again. “Why is this locked?”

“Maybe Zelda locked it since you were gone?”

“Zelda would never do that.” His mom stops jiggling the hardware. “No, something else—”

I hold my breath waiting for her to finish her sentence, but she doesn’t. Instead, she stoops down and picks up my black flats from under the bench next to the door. I slap my palm to my forehead. In China, we always take off our footwear before going inside, so it was a habit.

Now it was a downfall.

“Whose are these?” she asks.

“Aren’t they yours?”

“No, they’re way too small to be mine, and they aren’t Zelda’s either.” She studies my scuffed-up shoes. “Benjamin Carrington, are you hiding something—or should I say someone—you don’t want me to know about in the guest house?”

He guides her away from the cottage again. “My stomach’s growling. Let’s go inside and get something to eat. Then I’ll help you figure out what’s going on with the lock.”

“No.” She stops and tromps back toward her private retreat. “It’s clear you don’t want me going inside, which tells me there’s someone in there you don’t want me to know about.” She returns to the door and bangs on it. “Whoever you are, open up.”

I scramble away from the window. As I do, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Unsurprisingly, my hair’s a mess, my eyes resemble that of a raccoon, my clothes are wrinkled worse than crumpled paper, and the stench wafting from my armpits makes it clear I haven’t showered in days. Not the best way to make a good first impression.

Now what?

Technically, I wasn't supposed to meet his parents until after we said I do. However, like most things in my life lately, nothing is going according to plan. She knows I'm in here, so hiding won't do me any good. I might as well suck it up and get the introductions over with. Awkward as they may be.

Inhaling deeply, I reach for the lock and turn it to the right. The latch clicks open quietly.

My stomach coils tightly as I swing the door wide enough for them to see me. "Hi, Mrs. Carrington. It's so nice to meet you." I hold out my hand to her.

"Who—who are you?" She scans me from head to toe, then looks back at her son.

Blowing out a huge puff of air, Ben's eyes shift from me to his mother. "Mom, this is Nicki Mayfield." He pauses. "My fiancée."

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THIRTY MINUTES LATER, cleaned up and dressed for my big day, I amble toward the main house. As the sun blares from its position straight overhead, sweat drips off me as if I'd just finished a spin class. I'm not sure if it's the sweltering East Texas heat in March or my nervousness about meeting Ben's parents causing me to need another shower, but I do my best to stay cool and calm. We need to advise them of our speedy marriage plans, alone and at the Justice of the Peace, without any drama.

"Nicki," Ben calls out to me from a Pergola-covered seating area next to the pool. "Over here."

I beeline it past the Olympic-sized, peapod-shaped pool and waterfall and straight for Ben.

"Mom, Dad." Ben's face beams. "This is Nicki Mayfield, your future daughter-in-law."

My heart pounds like a jackhammer, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. I want to say something rather than stand there like a statue, but my body refuses to cooperate. This is not how I envisioned meeting my in-laws for the first time.



“Nicki,” Ben’s mom squeals and sprints toward me. “Ben told us about your engagement.” She draws me into her arms and squeezes tight. “I’m so excited.”

I shoot Ben a sideways glance. How much did he tell them exactly?

Ben’s lips stay firmly pressed together.

Uncertain of how to traverse this rocky terrain, I turn back to his mom and say, “That’s great. Considering the circumstances in which we met earlier, I wasn’t sure what to expect.”

“I was just shocked before, that’s all.” She pulls back and holds me at arm’s length. “It’s not every day my son apparently falls in love so fast that he proposes before I even get a chance to hear about you.”

“Yes, I can imagine how confusing this must all be, Mrs. Carrington, and I’m sorry for catching you off guard.”

“Oh, please, don’t call me Mrs. Carrington. That’s my mother-in-law. You can call me Darlene.” She beams. “Or Mom, if you’d like.”

“Darlene is fine for now, Mom,” Ben quickly admonishes her.

“Yes, darlin’, I’m sure Nicki has a mother.” Mr. Carrington steps out from behind his wife and holds out his hand to me. The sweet smell of pipe tobacco accompanies him. “I’m Hank, and you can call me whatever you like.”

“Thank you, Mr.—I mean, Hank.” I reluctantly place my sweaty hand in his.

“Why don’t we all sit down?” Ben suggests.

Breaking huddle, we move to the dark chocolate wicker sofa and chairs covered in palm-tree fabric and coordinating throw pillows. A Texas-sized taco buffet is spread out on the square coffee table, including chips, salsa, fajitas, rice, and beans. Pitchers of lemonade and tea sit on a side table.

“Nicki, what can I get you?” Darlene asks as I plant myself under the ceiling fan.

“I’ll just have some lemonade, thank you.”

I cover my abdomen with my hand and push down on it,

hoping that might suppress any unwelcome hunger growls. Even though I haven't touched any food since the paltry meal on the plane, I can't bring myself to eat. Not only because I'm a sack of nerves, but with my luck, I'd spill salsa all over my *wedding dress*. Since it's the only one I have, I need to keep it spotless for a few more hours.

Ben's dad stops lathering his fajita meat in Tabasco sauce and glances at my stomach. His eyebrows raised high.

"Here ya go." Darlene passes a crystal flute to me. As she does, her enormous pear-shaped wedding ring flashes in my eyes, a subtle reminder that I don't have one. I'm not sure I will, either. It's not something Ben and I discussed.

"You have a lovely home," I tell her.

She brushes a strand of platinum blonde hair, which I'm sure she didn't acquire at the local drugstore, from her forehead. "Thank you, I'll show you around after we eat."

"Enough of the chitchat." Hank sets down the rich red bottle of liquid. "Nicki, Ben's told us all about you and the decision the two of you've made to get married, even though this is the first time we're hearing about you."

I sip my freshly squeezed drink, then do my best to set down what I can only imagine is very expensive stemware with both hands. "I know it must sound crazy, but I assure you that we've given this a lot of thought and prayer and feel strongly this is what we're supposed to do."

"Y'all are serious, then?" Hank's southern accent is even stronger than Ben's. "This isn't some joke?"

"No, we're definitely getting married." Ben props his elbows on his knees. "Today, in fact. At the Justice of the Peace."

"Today?" His mother chokes on her juice.

"A little fast, don't ya think, Son?"

"Is Nicki—" Darlene's eyes drift towards my stomach.

My eyes bulge at her comment as I recall I was rubbing it just moments ago. "Oh, that's not ..."

"Yes, we're expecting," Ben says.

I watch as the color drains from both his parents' faces. What is he doing?

"A little girl." Ben pulls out his phone. "She's eighteen months old, and her name is Lei Ming."

It takes a moment for them to process Ben's words, and once they have, their scrunched-up faces return to a normal state.

"So, Nicki's not pregnant?" Darlene's shoulders relax.

"No, but we've both fallen in love with this little girl in China, and we want to adopt her." He hands them his phone with what I can only assume is a picture of Lei Ming.

When they've finished fawning over her, I take over the conversation and explain the story from the very beginning until the moment we left her in the hospital a few days ago.

"Lei Ming's medical condition is day-to-day and may require more surgery." I wring my hands at the thought of her small body lying in the hospital the last time we saw her. Was she well? I'd checked my email before coming out here, but there was still no message from the director yet.

"If she does need more treatment," Ben picks up the conversation, "Nicki and I want to cover the cost and oversee her care, possibly even here in the States. To do that, though, we need to be her legal guardians – her parents. Even though we're doing this strictly as friends, the sooner we get married, the sooner we can get back and attend to her needs. Plus, we want to start the adoption process before she's matched with another family."

"I hear what you're saying and think it's noble that both of you want to do that for this little girl, but is this the best way to go about it?" His dad shakes his head. "I mean, you two barely know each other, and you want to start a family."

"I know all I need to about Nicki. If it's enough for me, then it can be enough for the both of you too."

My heart leaps at Ben defending me. Not that I need rescuing. I'm more than capable of standing up for myself, but still, it's nice. It's also somewhat alarming because, truth be

told, Ben doesn't know all there is to know about me. Or my mom.

"Well, Nicki, since Ben seems to have such intimate knowledge about you, I'm curious as to what you can tell me about him." A hint of accusation peppers Hank's words.

My eyes dart between the two large men. Is this some kind of test? "Well, I've learned that he's fluent in Mandarin, good at sports, likes to dance, a devoted teacher, and an excellent preacher," I say, recalling the memory of listening to him on stage at church a few weeks ago, before turning back toward his father. "And I'm blessed God placed him in my life."

Unimpressed by my remarks, Ben's dad folds his arms over his chest and leans back against the chair cushion. "Let me get this straight, this arrangement you two have is simply a ploy to adopt a little girl, and y'all are just friends? Nothing ... more?"

"Yes." Ben takes a sip of his tea.

"Are y'all joining your finances, or will you have separate bank accounts?"

"Haven't given it much thought." Ben sets his glass down on the table. Hard.

"What about a prenup agreement?" Hank lurches forward.

"Don't need one. Nicki isn't marrying me for my money."

"That's true," I add, hoping to ease Mr. Carrington's worries.

"Okay, well, what are y'all planning to do about sleeping arrangements? If y'all are just friends, are you going to have your own rooms?"

My pulse skyrockets. Why does he need to know about that?

"None of your business, Dad."

"Hank, that's enough!" Darlene snaps. "It's clear Ben and Nicki have made up their minds, and being the adults they are, we need to support their decision."

"But what about love? Isn't that supposed to count for something in a marriage?"

"Don't be rude, dear. Not everybody is madly in love when they first get married. They can learn to love one another in

time.” She tilts her head at him and smirks. “Believe me when I say it’s happened before.”

“Thank you, Mom.” Ben glares at his dad.

“Ignore your father, Son. He’s just being his usual grumpy self.” Darlene waves a hand at him. “I’m proud of what you’re doing for Nicki and for this little girl, but you had to know we’d have questions and concerns. This is all so sudden, and I’m sure Nicki’s mom feels the same as we do.”

“She doesn’t know.” I bury the guilt festering inside of me.

“This is one of the reasons why we didn’t want to say anything beforehand. We didn’t want any drama.” Ben crosses his arms over his chest. “Nicki and I are adults and have given this a lot of thought. Regardless of what you say or believe about our situation, we’re getting married this afternoon. It would be great if you could be happy for us.”

Darlene perches on the edge of the sofa. “Of course, we’re happy, aren’t we, Hank?”

The elder Carrington harrumphs.

“But I wish you’d wait,” she continues. “Then we could have a small ceremony with a few close family and friends, which would quell any rumors, and would give me time to put on a wedding that’s appropriate for a family of our stature.” She shifts her gaze to me. “As well as enjoy your celebration. We could even arrange for Nicki’s mom to come, too, ’cause it’s all about family now, right?”

For some odd reason, her words strike a chord with me. Not just about my mom but about being family. Is this the best way to start ours? At odds with our parents?

“Nicki and I appreciate the offer, but we’ve made up our minds.” Ben rises from his chair, obviously undeterred by his mother’s words. “The most important thing is Lei Ming’s well-being, and if we had the time for a traditional wedding, we’d have one. But we don’t. We’ll throw some type of party later, and we’ll invite the whole city of Kilgore if you want, but for now, we’re going to the JP.”

He holds out his hand to me, an indication this conversation is over.

My eyes bounce between the three of them. I don't want to be the cause of a rift in their relationship. Hopefully, they'll be at peace with our decision someday soon. I place my hand in his and stand up next to him.

"Then you have our blessing." His mother cocks her eyebrow at her husband. "Right, Hank?"

Hank grunts something that sounds like a yes.

"Good," Ben says. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we're going to get married."