

THE HOPEFUL HEARTS SERIES ♦ BOOK ONE

PERFECTLY ARRANGED

LIANA GEORGE



Scrivenings
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.

www.ScriveningsPress.com

©2021 Liana George

Published by Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy and recording— without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotation in printed reviews.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-155-9

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-156-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021945604

Editors: Shannon Taylor Vannatter and K. Banks

Cover by Linda Fulkerson, www.bookmarketinggraphics.com.

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

*To Clint, my partner in adventure, the source of my laughter, the love of
my life.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As any author will tell you, writing a book is not a solo job. Yes, writers are notorious for spending lots of time alone creating and polishing their stories, but others assist, encourage, and pray for them on the sidelines and behind the scenes.

I'm no exception.

I've been blessed to have wonderful family and friends who've been with me every step of the way, and to them, I owe an immense debt of gratitude.

For the organizing business aspects and hoarding issues, I relied on professional organizer Hazel Thornton and hoarding specialist Ann Zanon for their expertise and knowledge. I consulted my former Mandarin teacher, Sally Kidwell, to ensure I had my Chinese words, foods, and settings correct. When I needed questions answered about the ins and outs of Hopeful Hearts, I deferred to Claudia Schuenemann, who continues to support the organization even from Germany! Finally, since I have no understanding of medical terminology or issues, I leaned on my dear friend, Lisa Alpeter, RN, for translating my Google research.

A special thanks to my early beta readers for their feedback, which allowed me to improve upon the story in ways I couldn't

have done without their input, and to my hard-working Launch Team for their efforts to let as many people as possible know about this novel.

To Marisa Deshaies, editor extraordinaire, for making my words much better than they really are.

Editors Shannon Vannatter and Kaci Banks, Graphic Designer/Publisher Linda Fulkerson (and the rest of the Scrivenings Press Team). Not only did you believe in and love my story as much as I did, but you also did a fantastic job making it be the best story it could be. I appreciate each of your efforts to send this book out into the world. I'm thrilled to be part of the Scrivenings family!

Some extraordinary friends who have gone above and beyond rooting for me: Elizabeth Barbour, Kathy Brammer, Danielle Hoover, Jon and Regina Mortimer, and Brenda Nyberg. A girl couldn't ask for a better cheering section!

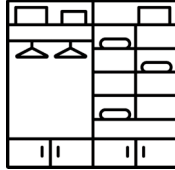
My prayer team - Lisa Alpeter, Lisa Rodriguez, Melanie Sharp, and Teresa Wells - you ladies have stood in the gap for me from the first day I sent you my prayer list to all the other days I called, texted, or emailed you and asked for emergency intercession.

My friend, mentor, and writing coach, Sandra Byrd. I have no doubt God brought you into my life, not once but twice, to guide my writing journey. I am so blessed by you, your wisdom, and your belief in me and my crazy ideas! I appreciate you helping me birth this book, and I look forward to us working together for many more years to come.

My family - first, to my dad, Bobby Bowman, without whom this book would have never been possible if he hadn't called and asked me to look up a mysterious address in Shanghai all those years ago. Next, my two amazing daughters, Kayley and Abbey, I hope my journey is proof that you're never too old to make your dreams come true. I'm so proud of the women you have become and of all that you've accomplished. Finally, to my "Wheel of Fortune" husband, Clint, your love and support mean more than

you'll ever know. I hope we'll continue dreaming big dreams together for a very long time.

Above all else, to God. That you would entrust me with the skills, abilities, and opportunities to share this story with the world is humbling and beyond my understanding. I pray that those who read will draw closer to You and that You, and You, alone are glorified.



The tide must reach its lowest before turning.
~ Chinese Proverb

I 'm hanging up my label maker.

While I'd been certain I would be the next Marie Kondo, organizing superstar, the lack of clients and shortage of funds in my bank account tells a different story. I grab another moving box and glide the packing tape across the bottom to secure it. The screech of the gun as it connects the two flaps resounds as the truth flashes in front of me.

After three years of blood, sweat, and tears, I've failed at the one thing I'd believed I was meant to do.

When I open a side desk drawer that holds a rainbow assortment of alphabetically arranged files, my heart flutters at the sight of everything in perfect order - just the kind of thing that would make my mother anxious.

I wince. Mom. Without a job, I have no other choice but to move back home with her.

As if on cue, her familiar blue Honda pulls up outside my window.

Seriously, what else could go wrong today?

Plowing my way through the heap of boxes, I grab my coat and purse from the chair and dash toward the door. Before I can step outside and hide my career woes, my mother walks in.

“Nicki, I ...” Mom closes the office door and studies the room. “What’s going on in here?”

I survey the boxes scattered around the tiny cubicle. “Packing?”

“I see that, but why?”

“I’m closing up shop.” I dig my shoe into the stained beige carpet. “Bridgeport’s Organizing Business of the Year is no longer.”

“What?” Her curly brown hair, which she’d passed on to me, shakes from side to side as she maneuvers her way across the room. “Why am I just now learning about this?”

“I didn’t want to disappoint you.” I retreat to my desk and set down my stuff. “I was going to tell you at dinner later this week.”

“Honey, I could never be disappointed in you.” She reaches for me and cups my chin. Her watered-down rose-scented perfume tickles my nostrils. “I’m sure whatever happened isn’t as bad as you think.”

“It is.” I lower my eyes, too ashamed to match her gaze. The ashen look on my client’s face as her cherished treasure shattered into tiny shards still haunts me, six months later.

“Let me turn on some lights in here and then you can tell me all about it.” She heads back toward the door.

Uh-oh!

I lunge for the light switch, but Mom beats me to it.

“Mom, don’t.” I hold my hand out to stop her.

She clicks the switch on and off. On and off.

Nothing. I lean against the door and close my eyes. My failures continue to pile as high as the snow during our Connecticut winters.

“Why aren’t the lights working?” Mom keeps flipping the switch as if she can make them magically turn on.

“They cut off my electricity.” I drag myself back to my desk.

“Because?” The incessant clicking stops.

I flop down in my desk chair. “Because I didn’t pay the bill.” Rather than dwell on my shortcomings, I dump pens, paper clips, and label maker cartridges from my desktop into the flimsy brown cardboard.

“Oh, Nicki, why didn’t you say something sooner?” My mom traipses back toward me. “Maybe I could have helped.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I have to clean up my own messes.”

She furrows her brow. “I know you like to think you have to handle everything on your own, but I could have at least shared some ideas that might have made a difference.”

I bite my lip. My mother is the last person I’d seek advice from about my organizing business. I love her, but she is clueless when it comes to running things in an orderly and efficient manner. Plus, it was my carelessness that caused me to be in this predicament in the first place. No amount of glue could fix the damage I caused that day. The fewer people I had to confess that to, the better.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, honey.” My mother scans the boxes. “But did you try everything you could think of to get more clients?”

“Of course, I did.” I pull a stack of business cards out of a box and hold them up to her like a deck of cards splayed out across a casino table. “I even made cold calls last week and still ended up with an empty calendar.” I drop the pile of leads onto my desk and free the tears that I’d been forcing back.

“I’m sorry, Nicki, I didn’t mean to upset you. Is there anything I can do to make this better?” Mom wraps my trembling body in her arms.

“No, but thanks for asking.” I wiggle out of her embrace and search for the tissue pack buried at the bottom of my purse.

Once I’ve composed myself, I turn back to her, only to find

her poking around the box I'd allocated for donations. "What are you doing?"

Like a little kid caught stealing from the cookie jar, she quickly steps away from the mound of unwanted items. "Browsing." Dismissing her guilt, she pulls a book from the pile and flashes it at me. Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. "Are you getting rid of this? I thought you idolized the woman."

Wary of her intentions, I bolt across the room and rescue the book from her hands. "To be honest, I've never been a big fan of her methods, but I'm not getting rid of it. I'm... blessing someone else with her knowledge." I place the bestseller back on top of the pile. I knew better than to admit to getting rid of anything.

"You're giving all this away?" She eyes the discards. "There's a lot of good stuff. I could use those manila folders. Oh, and those cute clip holders."

"You and I both know you don't need them," I say, my voice firm.

Resistant, she plops down into the shabby chic chair I bought at the flea market when I first rented my office space. "That's not true," she says with a pout.

I refuse to argue with her. "I'm glad to see you, Mom, but why are you here?"

She pulls on her tattered orange coat. "I—I wanted to see if it would be all right with you if I invited someone to join us for dinner this week, and I thought it would be best if I asked you in person."

"Bring someone to dinner?" I balk. It's been almost ten years since my dad suddenly died from a stroke, but I just can't imagine that she'd start dating again. "Like a man?"

"Yes!" She smiles, her face glowing. "I'm so glad you're open to the idea, Nicki."

"Uh, I don't know what to say, Mom," I stutter. "You've caught me off guard." I lean against my desk and clench my

fingers around the edge. “Have you been seeing someone?”

My mom’s mouth hangs open. “Of course not, Nicki. I could never replace your father!”

Relieved, I loosen my grip. “Then who do you want to bring with you?”

“Eleanor’s son, Drew. Remember I told you about him? He’s a doctor, good-looking, and single.” She fidgets. “She told me at work this morning that he’s considering going on one of those online dating apps, and I just figured since you were both unattached, why not skip all that digital mumbo-jumbo and introduce you to each other?”

I sigh. “Mom, we’ve talked about this.”

“But, Nicki, you’re twenty-six and not even dating. How will I ever have grandchildren if you aren’t interested in spending time with someone?”

Someone? I lean over and place my hand on her shoulders. “I don’t need a man right now, and I certainly don’t want children.” I raise my eyebrows. “Not today and not anytime in the future, either. You know that.”

She waves a hand at me. “Don’t start that nonsense about kids and the mess they make. Find and fall in love with your prince charming, and you’ll see things differently. I’m sure of it.”

“I appreciate your efforts, but I’m not looking for someone in shining armor to save me, a fairy tale romance to sweep me off my feet, or the ooey, gooey slobber of a baby right now.” I spread my hands out and whirl around. “As you can see, I’ve got bigger things to be worried about.”

When I’ve stopped being dramatic and turn back towards her, she’s staring at me with laser focus.

“Never say never, dear. But you’re right. Now probably isn’t the best time for me to bring this up.” She stands. “I’ll let you get back to it.” She shuffles to the door, occasionally stopping to peruse a box’s contents and pull an item out.

“Mom ...” I growl.

“All right, all right.”

“Thank you.”

She opens the door allowing the frigid fall weather to seep into my office. “Oh, do you need a place to store your boxes? I’m not sure your tiny apartment can hold all this stuff.”

“Where do you suggest I put them?”

“You can always leave them at my house.” Her smile widens, and I know she’s mentally calculating all the goodies she’d discover foraging through my stuff.

“That’s okay. I’ll figure something out. You don’t need to worry yourself.” I wave goodbye. “See you Thursday. Same place, same time?”

“Same,” she says. Blowing me a kiss, she quickly closes the door.

I stare at the ceiling. I’ve got to find a job and fast. Otherwise, I’ll be back under the same roof with her, her clutter, and the constant threat of her interfering in my romantic life. I definitely can’t have that.

I’m not sure she wants that, either. She didn’t suggest I move in. Her only concern was my boxes. Go figure.

Bolstered by this truth, I pull my phone from my back pocket to recheck my email inbox. Empty. No one seems willing to take a chance on me because there are zero responses to the applications and CVs I’ve submitted. I exhale and pray for something to come through soon. It has to.

I rub my hands together to get the blood flowing and resume my packing. Before I can, though, I glance over at my donation pile. Something is missing. I search high and low for the item I know was just there. After a few minutes of fruitless digging, I surrender and accept the facts. Somehow my mom managed to sneak off with my Marie Kondo book.

Chuckling, I reach for another box. It would be an act of God if my mother cracked open the book and actually followed the Japanese guru’s organizing advice. Heaven knows Mom won’t listen to mine.

TWO HOURS LATER, I've emptied my office and loaded all the boxes into my dilapidated Toyota Yaris, officially bringing my business to an end. There's barely room for me to sit and drive, but I squeeze in. Pulling out of the strip mall parking lot, I glance at all the boxes piled up around me.

Maybe Mom was right – how can I possibly fit all of this stuff in the shoebox apartment I call home without suffocating? I have to store these boxes elsewhere.

Instead of turning left on to the I-95 toward my place, I reluctantly drive to Mom's house. While I love my mother dearly and enjoy her company, I don't go there often. Better for us to meet at a location that isn't packed with unnecessary clearance items and stuff even antique collectors consider junk. It's just easier that way.

As the sun sets on familiar sights, my heart pounds faster. It's been at least three months since I last trekked through the neighborhood where I grew up. I reduce my NASCAR speed as I approach my old street and Mr. Davidson's house, where a classic red Ford pickup sits in the driveway.

Across the road, Mrs. Collins's garden of breath-taking gold, red, and orange foliage trickles from the front door to the street. Stopping in front of her mailbox, I roll down my window and inhale the sweet aroma that lingers over her lush fall nursery. I only wish she would work her magic in our yard next door.

Unable to avoid reality forever, I pull my car into my mom's driveway and turn off the engine. Her yard is a neglected jungle of flora and junk.

Over the years, she acquired stuff to ease the pain of losing my father, while I'd found solace in having things tidy. It was as if her disorganization made my desire for order even stronger. Unable to stomach the clutter she coddled and craved, I purposely created space between us for the sake of our

relationship and moved out. Otherwise, I risked losing another parent.

As I contemplate what might happen if I were to live with her again, my phone blares, “Let It Go”—every professional organizer’s favorite theme song—from the deep recesses of my purse. Happy for the distraction, I answer it without hesitation. “Hello?”

“Is this Nicki Mayfield with Save My Space Organizing?”

My pulse quickens at the unfamiliar female voice and her inquiry into my now-defunct company. “This is Nicki. How can I help you?”

“Nicki, hello! I’m so glad I was able to reach you,” the sweet voice continues. “My name is Heather Campbell. You called and left a message for me last week.”

Oh, the cold calls.

“Yes, Mrs. Campbell, about that—”

“Please, call me Heather,” she interrupts.

“Okay, Heather.” I squirm in my seat. “I appreciate you calling me back.”

“It was perfect timing, really. My boss, Katherine O’Connor, needs your organizing services right away.”

Woefully aware of the unfortunate timing, I press my forehead against the steering wheel.

“I’m sorry, Heather, but I’m afraid I’m not in a position to help you right now.” I don’t have the guts to tell her I’ve kissed my organizing days goodbye.

“Oh, I’m sure you’re quite busy, but I’d love it if you’d reconsider.”

I suppress a laugh at her incorrect assumption. She couldn’t be more wrong about my workload. And now that the door to my business is officially closed, I’m not certain I want to re-open it either. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t.”

“Please, Nicki, I’m desperate,” she pleads. “I made a mistake, and there aren’t any other organizers who can assist me on such

short notice.” Her voice cracks. “I’m willing to pay double your rate for your services.”

At her confession, my chest tightens. I’m all too familiar with costly mistakes. They caused my downfall.

I glance up from the steering wheel and survey the chaos that is my mother’s front yard. Between the overgrown trees, knee-high grass, and mishmash of debris, it’s hard to tell where the yard stops and the sidewalk starts. If this is what the outside looks like, I cringe to think what’s inside.

The reality is, while there’s a place for me in my mother’s heart, there isn’t any in her home.

Perhaps one more organizing job could hold me over until the next job, pay my rent, and keep me from sleeping under the freakishly scary dolls my mom stored in my old bedroom the last time I ventured inside.

Quietly questioning my decision, I rescind before I can change my mind. “I’d be more than happy to help you, Heather.”

“You’re a life-saver, Nicki!” Her voice rises a notch. “I can’t thank you enough. I’ll text you the address and meeting details in a bit.”

“Perfect.” A warm feeling washes over me. *Maybe there’s hope.*

“Oh, one more thing, and I’ll let you go,” Heather says. “Are you familiar with Marie Kondo’s methods? My boss is a big fan, and it would be a bonus if she knew you used them.”