

Sneek Peak~~Chapter 1

Everything at Café Crave is just a little wrong since the new manager took over. It used to be a quaint, comfortable hangout for Sands, Riyaan, sometimes Cat and me to meet up for our weekly therapy debriefs.

The new manager is turning it into one of those up-scale a la carte cafés where yuppies are seen sporting designer label clothes and latest Gucci handbags. The walls are now covered with original artwork from local artists, hung crookedly at different angles each time we come in, as though someone keeps trying to get it right but is unable to do it. It's hardly a place where a fat lady and her eclectic group of friends, including her very own stinky homeless friend, are welcome.

Riyaan, world's best gay friend and coffee barrister extraordinaire, catches my eye as the door shuts behind me. "Large mocacchino?" he calls across the counter.

"Make it a double," I reply and approach the booth where Sands sits. Why can't she remember to get a table?

Booths convey a sense of privacy and intimacy while making it difficult to slide in and out of them, not to mention the table cuts into one's gut.

Another annoying change to the café is the tables are too close. The place is never more than a third full, yet they squeeze in the tables as if anticipating of throngs of caffeine addicts. As a large woman, I am unable to walk through this minefield without bumping into something. I only ever go there when I have no choice and this was one of those times. The gang hasn't met in weeks and Riyaan insisted on meeting here as he was on a break.

"Excuse me, so sorry" I mumble as I bump the arm of a patron and cause her coffee to slosh across her hand. I hope it doesn't scald her. Another patron, chatting loudly on his call phone, grabs his purchase at the cash register and walks toward to the door, except I am blocking his path. He stops short gives me an obvious "Ew" look, then backtracks and takes the long way around the minefield. He lowers his voice and snickers something.

I'm almost to the booth. In my haste to get there, I turn sideways to squeeze between a chair where sits a man with a laptop and a table where a couple, oblivious to the world, makes googly eyes at each other. "Sorry," I say as my stomach knocks the man's head and arm forward. His hand hits a key and the laptop screen goes blank.

"Shit" he mutters. So much for hoping whatever it is is backed up or not important.

Meanwhile, my butt pushes the table behind me backward. "Hey!" the female hisses. I glance over my shoulder and see coffee spilling over the table.

"I do apologize," I offer and duck my head in embarrassment. I'd get out of there but my friends

were waiting. Feeling glares boring into my back and barely muffled snickers from the far side of the café, I slide into the booth across from Sands, who gives me a sympathetic smile.

"How's it going?" she asks.

"Never a dull moment," I reply and risk a glance around the room. A few people hastily look away, but I forget about them when I see someone standing at the café window. It's Cat. I smile and wave her in because she never comes in uninvited.

"Not again" Sands turns to see whom I'm waving at and groans. "Why do you do this every time?"

Cat leaves her rusty grocery basket parked outside and opens the shop door. Just as customers lean away from me as I walk through the shop to make room, they now lean away from Cat to avoid contact with her filth.

She slides in the booth next to Sands just as Riyaan arrives with my drink. "Double mocacchino, darling" he purrs, making the word come out dahh-ling, and sits next to me. Riyaan, my 'knight in pink flamingo armor' (his words), always makes the perfect coffee. His dyed blonde highlights over espresso brown hair makes him look like the specialty coffee drinks he serves.

Cat arches a brow. "Like you need a double." Her breath reeks of cheap beer; her hair (of indeterminate color) looks like it hasn't been washed or brushed in a week; and her frayed, faded clothes smell, but despite being a homeless alcoholic, Cat (short for Catherine, what she was called when she had a normal life, comfortable home and career as a university professor) looks like a scrawny stray cat and can always be counted on to criticize others.

Sands is more sensitive. "What's wrong? Is it your dad? Is he okay?" Her big blue eyes fill with worry.

I nod. "Yes, he's fine. It's just . . ." I'm embarrassed to tell them. It makes me feel like more of a loser than I already am.

"Just what?" Sands prods.

"Out with it," Cat barks.

I sigh. "Tiresa and Mika are getting married." Tiresa is my sister. Mika is my ex-husband.

"Guess you do need a double," Cat quips.

Sands' body appears to deflate and she shakes her head, speechless.

"It's about time," Cat continues. "At least they won't be living in sin any more."

"Cat! That's not the point," Sands snaps.

Riyaan's eyes widened in horror. "That's so wrong. Oh, Bella," he rests his hand on mine, curled around the takeaway cup, "I'm here for you. If you need to talk, you call anytime, okay?"

"Yeah," Cat interjects, "if you need to talk or go shopping, it's always convenient to have a gay friend. Especially a pretentious one who insists on mispronouncing and misspelling his name as RHEE-OHN instead of plain old RY-UN."

"CAT!" all three of us say in unison.

As my three friends continue to bite and claw at one another, I think back to earlier that day when I got the news. It was the first bit of solitude I'd had all day. My seven year old son, Abe was out back climbing and exploring the bank of bushland that borders the boundary of our cozy three-bedroom box which we call home. My five year old daughter, Fi, was taking her afternoon nap.

I wanted to put my feet up and enjoy a few moments of bliss, curled up with a good romance story or watch recordings of Shortland Street, which I never get to watch because the kid hijack the TV. Instead, I wandered through the house picking up and putting away clothes, toys and other scattered, abandoned incidentals.

The phone rang. The caller ID flashed—it was Grandma Rose. I hesitated, taking a deep breath, and pick up the headset.

These calls from my grandma started with enquiries about her grandchildren, followed by a tongue-lashing for me not attending or contributing to a family event. They usually end with a lecture on why I should keep in touch with my estranged sister, Tiresa. Why do I even pick up? I asked myself. Because she is family, that's why, the last link to my mother.

"Hello, Isabella speaking." My voice was tight and I sounded hurried and flustered as I picked up a straggly, water-soaked teddy bear. Fi no doubt had given him a bath.

"Isabella?" she asked. My grandma never cottoned to calling me by my nickname, "Bella," which all of my family and friends use instead of calling me by my full name, Isabella White.

"Hi, Mama Rose. How are you?" I asked, cradling the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I continue picking up toys. If I had to listen to another lecture, I might as well redeem the time while doing so.

"Fine, just fine, dear one. How are Fanau o lau fanau?"

"They're wonderful, Mama Rose. Fi hasn't stopped talking about the flax outfit she started making at your house last week, and Abe is determined to build a canoe. He's scouting the tree trunks out back for a suitable base." It was a slight exaggeration, but I learned long ago that it is easier to deal with Mama Rose if you tell her what she wants to hear. The lectures are

shorter that way.

"Ah, that's good to hear. Fa'a Samoa," she replied.

I barely listened as she rambled on, extolling the benefits of teaching her grandchildren about their culture and history. She long gave up teaching me the "Samoan way." Instead, Mama Rose turned the full force of her efforts onto her grandchildren.

I am the firstborn, pride and joy of my soft-spoken yet fiery tempered Scottish Pa, and the second-born of my late mother. She already had a one year old daughter when she met and fell in love with my Pa. I was born twelve months later. Pa raised Tiresa as his own and we were brought up as true sisters until the tender ages of ten and eight, when tragically, unexpectedly, our mother died from cervical cancer and my sister and I were separated. Anxious to get the conversation over, I interrupted. "Mama Rose, what can I do for you?"

Mama Rose hesitated before revealing the reason for the call. "You know that Tiresa and Mika announced their engagement a couple of weeks ago?"

Cold fingers of dread wrapped themselves around my heart. Squeezing, they sucked the air out of my lungs. I hadn't known. And the last five years had not made it any easier to hear the news.

The silence on the phone is heavy as Mama Rose waited for my reply. "Oh, that's nice," I said, but the words sound strained and insincere.

"The family is throwing an engagement celebration for them in four weeks. I want to give you lots of notice so that the children and you can be there. The wedding will be in nine months."

"Mama Rose," I started, resigning myself to her disappointment.

Sensing my imminent refusal, she interrupted. "I will need your help on that day, of course, cooking and such. "I think it would be good if—"

Now I interrupted more forcibly. "Mama Rose, you know I probably won't be invited. I didn't even know about the engagement until now."

"Nonsense," she huffed. "Tiresa is your blood sister, albeit half blood, but blood all the same. And even if you weren't blood, family is family," she finishes as I mouthed her last words silently in unison. I'd heard it all before.

"Tell that to Tiresa," I spat. "She still hasn't visited Pa since he was first hospitalized with cancer—and that was two years ago. He once was her family, too, you know."

Tiresa hadn't visited Pa for years, another bone of contention between us. When Ma and Pa got together, he promised he would love and support her Tiresa as his own. And he would have.

Although the family had reservations about Ma marrying outside the Samoan culture, Mac had been the best thing for her and Tiresa. They were happy and he was a good man. The family had been wrong to separate us after Ma died. They would have taken both of us, but Mac was adamant. He fought tooth and nail to keep us. It was quite the battle: fiery Scottish hotheadedness met generations of Pacifica island tradition. In the end, Mac lost the battle. He had no formal rights to Tiresa.

It's been twenty-two years since Tiresa was taken from him, yet he never forgot his promise and obstinately waits for her return. Yet Tiresa ignores him despite his failing health. She won't acknowledge him as the doting, loving father he was and still is. If she would just give him a chance, she would see that.

"Well, I know nothing about that," Mama Rose excused, and then skillfully turned the conversation back to her agenda. "But it would be ridiculous if you weren't there. Your sister will need you. Anyhow, you ARE invited because I'm inviting you."

I exhaled, exasperated. "Mama Rose, I can't promise. I'll see how things go. Okay?" "I guess that is all I can ask, dear one."

Phew! The end of the conversation is in sight, I pondered wickedly to myself.

With a few more niceties and a bye-bye, I am granted a reprieve, but the conversation left a sour taste in my mouth. When Tiresa and I were close, I would have been the first person she told about her impending engagement. How times change. A part of me misses that and wishes things could be different, yet another part of me thinks I can never trust her again with intimate details of my life because of her betrayal.

Riyaan's blurred voice focuses back into clarity as I return to the present. He rolls his eyes at Cat, annoyed at something she had said. "So when's the wedding?"

"In nine months."

"Are you going?" he inquires.

"Of course not!" I snap. "Why would I want to see the two persons who stabbed me in the back get married in some rich, extravagant ceremony and overblown reception?"

"Well, I think you should," Riyaan plays with his multiple bracelets and cuffs. "Show them they can't keep a good woman down. Show up on the arm of a drop-dead gorgeous guy and shove it in their faces."

"Like where is she going to find a drop-dead gorgeous guy?" Cat asks.

"Riyaan's right, Bella," Sands nods. "You need to stand up for yourself. Make an appearance to send the message that you're better than them." She giggles. "Even better—wear black."

I sip my mocacchino, the chocolaty-coffee-frothiness a warming comfort. "The only message I'd send is that Mika made the right choice in dumping the frumpy sister for the hot one."

"Not if you lost weight," says Sands. I give her a dirty look. We've been down this road before. She holds up her hands in surrender. "I'm just saying. I can train you. It will take a while but the effort is worth the reward. And then you can show up to the wedding in some slinky cocktail dress and make Mika regret leaving you."

"Of course" I say sourly. "It's that simple. You know successful I've been in the past with dieting."

"Never mind," Riyaan waves the idea aside. "I'll be your date to the wedding just as you are. Forget diets. What do you say?"

"That idea sucks," says Cat. "Gay date with the fat girl: it'll be too obvious that she couldn't find anyone else to go with her."

"Then we'll find someone for her. Do you know of anyone?" he asks Sands. "All my guy friends are gay, which is obviously not acceptable to some persons." He shoots Cat a glare.

"There are lots of guys who have memberships at my gym," Sands offers.

"Are you crazy?" asks Cat.

"That's rich, coming from you," mutters Riyaan.

Cat ignores him. "Using your business to fix up your friend with a date is tantamount to an escort service." Riyaan exhales an over-exaggerated exasperated sigh. "Then we'll find someone online. That's how I found my last two boyfriends. Now, Bella, ignore the major dating sites because you won't find anyone interesting on those. They all lie and are only looking for someone rich. Go right to the niche ones because that's where you'll find the goods."

"Or I can go as your date," says Cat, and her tone is completely serious. "There's no law which says you can't take a straight woman date."

The silence is loud as Riyaan, Sands and I envision Cat in all her homeless, stinky glory appearing as my date to the wedding while the other guests give her a wide berth, staring and whispering in our direction. It was not a pretty picture—except that Mika hated her and it would piss him off to no end to have her show up.

A diplomatic excuse to not invite her as my date presents itself. "I don't even know if I'm invited, so there's no point figuring out who I should take as my date. Can we talk about something else? Please?" I ask.

"Sure, darling," Riyaan pats my hand.

Sands rolls her eyes. "Don't look for a date online. It's dangerous and you don't know what freaks you'll meet. Come to the gym tomorrow and we'll check out the men there."

"I don't want to check out men there because they'll check right out the door once they see me," I complain.

Sands slams a fist on the table. "Then exercise! You HAVE to go to the wedding to show them up and you need to look your best. Make them see that no one disrespects Bella. Ruin their wedding by looking fabulous."

"Oh-oh-oh," Riyaan pants, "I have the best ideas to ruin the wedding. When my cousin got married, someone ran over a skunk in the road next to the place where they had their outdoor reception. The smell ruined it for everyone. Even the cake took on the stench, so what you need to do is get a skunk and place it near the cake. And then you should spike the bride's champagne so she passes out and there's no wedding night—"

"They're past that point already," I point out.

"No, no, no," Sands joins in the conspiring. "Just get drunk before you get there and make yourself vomit on Tiresa's gown." She claps her hands and cackles. "Or when it's time to toast, give a speech about how kind Tiresa is to take Mika off your hands because he could never get it up in bed."

I had enough. Since my friends aren't interested in commiserating with me, preferring to tell me what to do with my life, I had to find sympathy elsewhere. "I gotta run. My dad's expecting me, then Tiresa's picking up the kids at 4 p.m." I slide out of the booth, placing both hands on the table for support. It tips toward me and Cat. In a panic, I lift my hands and start to stand up, but my belly catches on the edge of the table. The table tips the other way, spilling coffee, creamer, sugar and spoons onto Sands and Ryan's laps. "Sorry," I say, blushing with shame. I hate booths.

"Not to worry," says Riyaan, who leaps to his feet and mops up the mess with a towel he has tucked in his work apron. "I'll get you another one to go."

"Make that a double" reminds Cat.

Mama Rose put the phone back on its cradle after her conversation with Isabella. Her shoulders slumped under the overwhelming burdens of family. She leaned against the kitchen sink and stared out the window at the roses below the windowsill. "Lord knows we made mistakes with those girls. They are both as stubborn as oxen being led to shelter."

"Did you say something, Mama?"

Mama Rose looked over her shoulder, surprised to see her other granddaughter in the kitchen.

"Tiresa, my dear, I didn't hear you come in!" She held out her arms to offer a hug.

"No wonder," Tiresa frowned, a skeptical eyebrow raised and a flush reddening her cheeks. "You were busy talking on the phone when I knocked—no guesses as to whom."

Instead of walking into Mama Rose's arms, she lifted her nose and ignored them, handing her a page of notepaper. "Mika's in the car waiting. We're off to the country club to have a look at the venue for the wedding reception."

Mama Rose's heart fell at the dismissal of affection as she took the notepaper. A glance revealed a long list of some sort.

"This is the guest list so far for the wedding," Tiresa said, flicking an invisible piece of fluff from her perfectly manicured fingernail. "Mika's parents put in their preferences and we've added ours. We thought you might want to look it over for the numbers—catering and all that."

As Tiresa talked, Mama Rose watched her, from her tiny red stilettos, strapless tube dress hugging a size eight figure which looks to be a tad on the short side for her towering six foot tall body, to the deep rouge stain on her lips which her nails. A shimmer of pink blush accentuated high, elegant cheekbones, while long black eyelashes framed her big round brown eyes. Long, silky dark brown hair fell gracefully down her back, while the sides were brought up artistically around her face into a fashionable pouf.

Tiresa looks gorgeous, perfect even, Mama Rose mused. Well, except for that eyeful of breasts. They look as if they will tumble out of that tube dress given half a chance. Isabella would never wear something like that.

"We are thinking along the lines of a big traditional dinner," Tiresa prattled on, never looking Mama Rose directly in the eyes. She looked anywhere else, shifting uncomfortably from heel to heel, feeling out of place in the modesty of Mama Rose's quaint kitchen where she grew up and once called home. "We can self-cater at the country club. Mika and I thought the aunts and you could organize the menu and run it by us. We're trying to keep the expenses down." Mama Rose's lips curled into a rueful smile. Yes so you can splurge on that big honeymoon shopping spree you have planned in Paris. Her thoughts wandered down the same road they usually traveled. If only her darling namesake, Rosalie, were still here. How different their lives would have been. Instead, they were left with one sister, so hard and unforgiving, a bitter shadow of her former vibrant self. The other sister was self-absorbed, focused on her image and negligent of others. She didn't care who she hurt along the way, as long as she carried a Gucci bag and wore Jimmy Choo pumps.

What happened to the soul sisters who never spent a moment away from one another? They played hard, fought even harder, and were the first to come to the other's defense. They were loyal and content, the result of a strong, happy family. But look at them now: who would have thought all this could happen, all over a man?

A horn tooted, dragging Mama Rose back to the present. Tiresa stopped talking and looked

down at her watch. "Is that the time? I really must dash." She turned on her heel, saying goodbye over her shoulder, when Mama Rose stopped her.

"Tiresa, have you told your sister about your engagement yet?"

Tiresa whirled around with angry eyes. "You know very well I haven't. You were just speaking with her."

"Don't you think at the very least you should invite her to the party?" Mama Rose suggested, placing the guest list on the countertop. "I assume her name is also here."

Tiresa rolled her eyes. "Bella made it very clear how she feels about me and all I did to deliberately ruin her life." She glanced at her watch. "Besides, she is like a fish out of water at our family gatherings. It's uncomfortable for everyone."

"Uncomfortable for you," Mama Rose challenged. She tried to bring them together at every opportunity, seeking to absorb Isabella back into her traditional Pacifica family. Yet whenever she attended their gatherings, there was a wall around her. It was as if Bella was out of place and didn't quite belong. It had taken a while for Mama Rose to realize that she had been brought up "white," with very little links her to her blood family and Pacifica cultural. To Mama Rose, this was the saddest thing of all, the worst consequence of their actions taken twenty-two years ago.

"Tiresa, she is your sister. You can't just ignore the life you two had and the family you still have."

"I don't ignore her," Tiresa countered coldly. "I send her presents and wish her happy birthday and Merry Christmas. Bella's just—well, she's awkward. She doesn't fit into our lives anymore." The cruel words fell into silence. "I know you girls have a tumultuous history," Mama Rose began. Stealing a husband would do that to any relationship. "But is it too much to ask for both of you to at least make an effort with each other for your niece and nephew? After all, you are going to be their stepmum. Regardless of the circumstances, this wedding is a special time for Mika and you. It would be wrong if the WHOLE family isn't there to share it with you, including your sister. She may choose not to come, but the choice should be hers to make. It's the least you can do, considering the damage already done to your relationship."

"Mama, I really have to go," Tiresa's shoulders slumped slightly in defeat. "I'll invite her when I'm ready." She hoisted her purse onto her shoulder and tossed her perfect, silken hair. "I suppose there's nothing wrong with an extra wedding present. Although knowing how skimpy Bella is, it will probably be a plastic plate from the two dollar shop and not good enough for a dog to eat from." With that, Tiresa turned on her heel and dashes out the door without saying goodbye.

Mama Rose looked down at the guest list. Scanning through the hundred plus names, she sees they are written in order of monetary priority: who has the most money and who will give generous wedding gifts at the top, while those who can't afford much near the bottom.

Surprisingly, there is not just one but two very important names missing from the list: Isabella's—that was expected—and her own.

With a sigh, she took the list and picked up the phone, dialing her oldest daughter, Flo, to get started on organizing the catering.

She might have missed out with Isabella and created a monster with Tiresa, but she certainly wasn't going to skimp on giving her three-quarters Samoan blood grandchildren the cultural grounding which their own mother missed. That included a traditional Pacifica wedding with all the bells and whistles.