

Sneek Peak~~Chapter 2

Pa lives eight kilometers from my house. It's an easy drive distance-wise, but a hard one knowing what I'll find at the end of the journey.

Pa doesn't use his front door so I slip around the side to the sliding glass patio door—another tormentor to remind me of how I look.

I slide open the door. "Pa? It's me," I call.

"Right here," he mumbles and stirs in his recliner chair.

"Did I wake you up? I'm sorry," I say.

"I dozed off just now" he claims. There's a crossword puzzle a pencil on his lap. "How's my girl?" he asks as I lean down to give him a hug and a peck on the cheek.

Pa is the most constant thing in my life, a sweet man with a fiery Scottish temper when aroused, which wasn't often. Though only 54, he looks a decade older from the trauma of fighting—and beating—cancer. His body was still emaciated, though.

"What brings you by?" Pa asks with his warm smile.

"Can't a girl visit her pa for no reason but that she loves him?" I tease.

Pa studies my face and I know I can't hide this most recent hurt from him. "Come on, now. Tell me what's wrong. There's no use holding it in, you know."

I ease down onto the old sofa, its springs groaning in protest under my weight.

"Well? Get on with it," he orders kindly.

I burst into tears. "Oh Pa!" I sob. "Tiresa and Mika are getting married. I found out through Mama Rose, who wants me to go to the engagement party and the wedding just because they're family. It's not fair. Why doesn't anyone take my side? Mika abandons me and Abe and Fi and Tiresa stabs me in the back, but I'm expected to be nice and act like nothing's wrong!" I bury my face in my hands and let the tears flow.

Pa rises from his chair and comes over to wrap his arms around me. Emaciated as they are, they are the strongest arms in the world to me.

"What did I do to deserve this? I quit school to marry him. I stayed at home to take care of the house and the kids, but I still wasn't good enough. Tiresa swoops in and steals my husband and now she's trying to steal my kids and be their stepmum. Soon Abe and Fi won't like me and won't want to see anymore. They can give them toys and games and everything while I have to

scrimp and save for months to buy things. She did it on purpose. She did it because she's a mean, spiteful komo mai tainga!" I didn't know much of the Samoan language, but I did know the curse words. "Oh, Pa, why does this happen to me?"

I continue to cry while Pa holds me, patting my back and murmuring something soothing yet unintelligible. Finally the tears subside. Pa hands me a tissue from the box on the side table. I blow my nose and wipe my eyes as he sits there, smiling.

"Dearest Bella, you are a wonderful daughter, a wonderful woman and a wonderful mother. I don't know why Mika left you and I don't know why your sister did what she did. She's hurting, too, you know. Ripped from her family at such a tender age . . . no wonder she's untrusting."

"Because she's untrustworthy," I say bitterly.

Pa sighs. "But it's done and there's no going back. Life is like this sometimes."

I wasn't certain if he was referring to Tiresa's betrayal of me or her being taken away. "But life is always like this for me," I grumble. "It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair," Pa continues. "Is it fair that your mother died? Is it fair her family took Tiresa away? Is it fair that I have cancer or that people lose their jobs and homes or that earthquakes happen? No, no, no, no and no. So it's up to you to make it work even when it's not fair. Life is what you make it. You don't have to be a suffering single mother. You aren't the first and you won't be the last. Make your life count and enjoy it and soon someone will come along and love you more than Mika ever did."

"How?" I ask, tears welling up again. "I don't know how."

Pa moves back to his recliner. "Now I've made you tired, Pa. I'm sorry. Is there anything I can get for you? Let me make you a cup of tea."

"That would be lovely," Pa smiles and attempts to adjust the pillow behind him. I get up, sofa springs groaning again, and fluff the pillow for him. "Thank you," he says and takes my hand. "You do so much for others. Make sure you take care of yourself. Make your life count by taking charge. Don't let life run you. YOU run it."

"Of course, Pa, you're right," I sniffle and smile and give him a hug. Easier said than done, I think, but to please Pa, it's easier to pretend I agree.

Pa picks up the crossword puzzle and pencil. "And don't worry about finding the right man. He's out there. And not just any old schmuck. You need someone who sees that your river runs so deep that he can't help falling in."

I make him a cup of tea and a sandwich and serve them on a tray. "I have to go now. Tiresa's arriving soon to pick up the kids."

"Send her my love," Pa says.

"I will, Pa," I reply. But it's a lie. I have no intention of telling Tiresa what he says. She abandoned him and stole my life and doesn't deserve love or trust.

I arrive home just in time pay the babysitter and pack a few clothes for the kids before Tiresa arrives. My stomach is in knots before I hear her car—her very expensive car—pull into the driveway. I don't want her in my home so she waits at the end of the walk, just outside the garden gate while I hustle Abe and Fi out the door.

"Aunt Tiresa!" they shriek and rush to greet her. Each laugh and smile is a stab to my heart. I waddle down the walkway after them and hand Tiresa their suitcase.

She takes it calmly and stands there avoiding eye contact, like she's waiting for me to say something. She knows that I know about the wedding. No doubt she's waiting for some tirade or snarky comment. Instead, I fold my hands and stand there just as calmly. The ball is in her court.

Finally, she looks at her nails and casually says, "You're invited to the engagement party and the wedding if you want to come, but don't expect an official invitation in the mail."

"I'm surprised you're inviting me at all, Judas," I reply coolly. "Makes it rather awkward when the person you crucified is hanging about."

Tiresa looks me in the face for the first time. "Oh, so that's how it's going to be? And you wonder why you aren't getting an official invitation? Mama Rose wants you there for the sake of family, but she forgets how awkward that YOU make everyone feel. So if you insist on coming, make sure you stay out of the way. I know it's difficult, but you can at least try."

With that last stab at my size ringing in my ears, she turns on her high heels (they looked like shoes I'd seen in a magazine and cost more than three months' rent for me) and clomp-clomps to her shiny car. She pitches her voice high as she chats with Abe and Fi, buckles them in before getting in the driver's seat, revs the engine and squeals out of there.

I stand there, angry and hurt and feeling helpless. "Fine," I say aloud thinking about my conversation with the gang earlier. "Something has to be done."

A bottle of wine later, I am confident enough to take charge. I am going to do it. I am going to find someone to fall into my river. I am going to find a date online.

I face the laptop, my window to a new world, and type in the web address which Ryan wrote on a napkin and slipped me with my second mocacchino. The site pops up with a large photo of a young couple in each others' arms smiling back at me, as if it's the easiest thing in the world to find the perfect mate in an online meat market. The tagline actually says, "It's the easiest thing in the world to use our EXCLUSIVE match-making system. Start today and date tomorrow!*" Of course, the fine print at the bottom of the page states, "This site does not guarantee a date the

day after you join." That's always a good sign, I think: a web site which lies. The cost for joining is money I don't have, but I charge it to my close-to maxed-out credit card and take the plunge.

"Congratulations!" the site states. "You're on your way to a brighter tomorrow with a significant other!*" More fine print and lies which I skip over.

Before I can see other profiles, I have to fill out my own:

Name: Isabella White

Age: 30

Height: 5'6"

Weight: 54kg

Occupation: Stay at home mum

I stare at my occupation a minute before erasing it. I can't say I'm a stay at home mum. How dull, how lackluster. I gulp down the last of the wine and tap on the desk and wonder what I should say to make me more appealing. Bank President? Senior Web Designer? Artist? Casualty Nurse?

Several minutes tick by. I conclude that my new career should be one I know something about so that I don't sound like a complete idiot if a man asks me about my job.

Occupation: Housekeeping Manager and
Recreation Director

"That's better," I hiccup, plus it isn't a lie. My days are occupied with cleaning, laundry and entertaining two preschoolers. Manger and director, indeed.

I continue filling out my profile:

Likes: mocacchinos, the beach, good friends

Dislikes: smoking,

Movies, Music, Books: chick flicks, romance novels,
jazz

Hobbies: working out at the gym,

Describe my ideal date: a quiet dinner at a romantic
restaurant on the waterfront; a stroll on the beach

What I want in a mate: kindness, sincerity

One-sentence philosophy I live by:

Again I tap on the desk, wondering what to say. Philosophy? I didn't have one. But by not putting something down, it looks like I'm not goal-oriented, and that wasn't good.

Then I remember Pa's words—surprisingly since my brain is fuzzy from the all alcohol—and type them out:

One-sentence philosophy I live by: Make your life count by taking charge.

There! My profile is almost done. So far so good. "Upload your photo and choose your screen name and get ready to meet your match!*" says the bottom of the page. (*Uploading a photo does not guarantee a match.").

That's not so good. I scan through my picture file for a decent shot, but all show my figure. I crop the best one down to an extreme close up so only my eyes nose and mouth and very little cheek are seen. As the photo is uploading, I type in a screen name to verify that it's not already taken, and then it's done.

I'm online dating. I'm a classified singles ad.

Another page pops up. "Check through our list of nearby singles who may be compatible with you!*"

"Here goes \$49," I hiccup again, my finger hovering above the, "Click Here to Start Your Search for Love!" button when a box pops up.

"KnightinShiningArmor77 wants to chat with you. Accept or ignore?"

I blink and blink again. A man wants to chat with me? Already? Me? I gently click on "Accept," unsure as to what will happen when. A chat window opens:

KnightinShiningArmor77: Hi Saw your photo Nice!

That was fast. Is he serious? Is this a joke? I wonder. Only one way to find out.

ShyNSweet: Thank you

Another line pops up instantly.

KnightinShiningArmor77: Love your profile looks like we'd have a great time on a date. I love jazz and the beach the beach is my fav place

Love my profile? Which parts? This is a good start. At least we have a couple things in common.

ShyNSweet: Nothing better than catching waves or listening to Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday

Catching waves? Why did I type that? Damn wine.

KnightinShiningArmor77: So how did a gorgeous lady like you end up on a singles site

ShyNSweet: Haven't met Mr Right RU him? JK

That's gutsy. Hope it doesn't scare him off.

KnightinShiningArmor77: lol Maybe I am let's find out

This is fast. What if he's a serial killer?

ShyNSweet: Tell me about yourself

KnightinShiningArmor77: I'm a VP for a major company on the North Island. I believe in staying active and lead a very active lifestyle kayaking hiking rugby cricket

Wow, he sounds like a winner.

Yeah I know rugby and cricket? I enjoy both and play in local leagues i love kids and want to coach kids teams one day

He loves kids—even better.

My one vice is coffee I'm a bear until I get that first soy latte;^)

He loves coffee!

How about yourself? Tell me why you're shy and sweet

Oh God oh God oh God what do I say?

ShyNSweet: I enjoy a good coffee as well and spending time with friends at our favorite coffee house. I have a great sense of humor and love to laugh and be outdoors and live life to the fullest.

Since when?

KnightinShiningArmor77: Sounds like my kinda lady When can we meet so I can admire your beauty in person?

"Meet?" I say aloud. And then my conscience (or is the wine?) attacks.

Conscience: Bella, what are you doing? Stop lying to this guy. You aren't being fair by making yourself out to be someone you're not

"But I never thought he'd want to actually meet me," I protest.

Conscience: So tell me again why you just shelled out \$49 to get on this site to meet men?

The minutes tick by and I still hadn't answered. Maybe KnightinShiningArmor77 really is a

valiant man who won't mind my weight. I can't believe I'm in this quandary. Lie and send him into shock when we meet, or take a risk and tell the truth?

I decide to tell the truth. I'm not a liar. I'm not like Tiresa and Mika. I'm better than that.

ShyNSweet: I'm available this weekend but I need to tell you I've put on a few pounds in the past few years I don't have an athletic build

I hold my breath waiting for his reply. KnightinShiningArmor77: Looks aren't everything. I've broken my nose a few times playing rugby, so it's slightly crooked I don't mind a few extra pounds. Its not like your morbidly obese lol? How much do you weigh

"Moment of truth," I sigh and type in my weight, which is significantly higher than the weight stated on my profile.

ShyNSweet: 136kg

And just as instantly as the chat window opened, the text went grey and a message appears:

KnightinShiningArmor77 is no longer online

I wait online a few minutes, but it is safe to assume KnightinShiningArmor77 isn't experiencing a power outage at that exact moment. Nope, he is gone for good.

I log off, shut down the laptop, and open a second bottle of wine.

"Shit," exclaims Tiresa, chipping a nail on the kitchen cupboard as she slams it shut.

"I can tell that today went well," Mika croons from his comfy vantage point on their modern leather sofa. A smirk settles on his full, gorgeous lips. His intelligent dark eyes, which go perfectly with his tall, muscular frame, crease with amusement.

"Yeah. No. It went ok," Tiresa exhales loudly. "It's just Isabella." Reiterating her frustration, she bangs her fist on the marble countertop.

"Oh," he murmurs and turns a page of the latest edition of NZ Lawyer. "What's up now?"

Mika settles his arm on the back of the sofa and looks over his shoulder at Tiresa pouring herself a glass of wine.

"Mama Rose read me the Riot Act this morning about not inviting her to our engagement party—and the wedding." She winces at the thought.

Mika smirks again, typical of his devil-may-care attitude. "That's going to be awkward. Sparks

will fly." He whistles through his teeth, imitating a missile flying to its explosive destination.

"Exactly. Is it too much to actually want to enjoy my wedding day? The last thing I need is my fat, uptight half sister and your ex-wife," she points out, "putting a damper on things."

Mika shakes his head. "Is she still squawking about us?"

Tiresa dismisses the thought with a wave of her hand. "When I spoke to her this afternoon, she told me AGAIN that it was my fault that you and I got together and that I had deliberately set out to seduce you just to bring her down a peg and hurt her." She snorts. "What's up with that? As if everything revolves around HER." Tiresa spoke faster, her pitch rising with each syllable. "She thinks I was jealous of her. Like I would ever be jealous of that nobody. I told her you can't help who you fall in love with. And the way she lectures me about Mac—she has the nerve to tell me I should visit him, as if I don't have better things to do." Tiresa's verbal tirade marches on, while the silence from the other side of the sofa is deafening. To interrupt her was futile—Mika learned this long ago. Better to let her let it out in one blow. Besides, he had his own thoughts to deal with. His ex-wife featured right at the top of the list, although not for the reasons of Tiresa's rant. It occurs to him that the last time he stood before a minister and a crowd of people, it had been Bella next to him. And he had been happy.

"I suppose things haven't been that bad with her lately," Tiresa breaks through his thoughts, "although we hardly speak." Leaning back on the sofa next to him, she begins to calm down. "That's the shame of it. I do miss her. I really do, but I just don't know how to deal with her. She's changed."

"Or maybe we've all changed," Mika adds darkly, hardly realizing he spoke the words aloud until he sees Tiresa's perfectly arched eyebrows pinch together at the bridge of her nose and her deep brown eyes cloud with confusion.

A blessed silence fills the room as she tries to muddle through what was happening in his head. Finally, she shrugs it off and returns to her own selfish thoughts. "Yes. I suppose we have." For once, she leaves it at that.