

## Sneek Peak~~Chapter 3

I stare at myself in the full-length mirror. "Fat may be what I am, but not who I am," I say. It doesn't work.

There is nothing more terrifying for a fat person than to look into a full-length mirror. Multiple times a day, I traverse the Walk of Shame—also known as the hallway in my home—where at the far end the tormentor hangs. My dearest Pa noticed I didn't have a proper mirror and kindly gave me a full-length one he had lying about. He even came around with the picture hooks and hammer to hang it. What could I do—refuse his well-meaning gift? Until then, I mercifully had just a small face mirror in the bathroom, which allowed me to avoid viewing parts of me I prefer to keep out of sight.

Most days, I make the Walk of Shame with eyes lowered, but try as I may to NOT to look, sometimes I just can't help myself—like now. I am a sucker for self-torment.

"Being fat doesn't define me. It's simply extra baggage which I carry and I won't carry it forever," I tell the bloated image, trying to sound convincing but I'm not so sure. I know all too well the hard work which goes into "losing" extra baggage. And not just a few pieces of luggage—it's a cargo load.

The tormentor reveals all. A huge flabby apron hangs around my mid section. Thunder thighs with Jell-O cellulite glisten and wink in the sun. More gelatinous mass hangs under my arms, which wobbles and rolls and juts out whenever my arms are flush against my body. It's a hard task to not get lost in the disgust of it all. I mean, who wants to look at my fat ugly rolls and love handles? Ironic name, since nobody actually loves them.

But I do have amazing eyes and a great smile, complete with two cheeky dimples. I inherited my best physical features from both parents: my late Polynesian mother's caramel-latte skin, high cheekbones, perfectly oval face and full, pouty lips; and my Pa's glittering emerald-shaped eyes and unruly curly hair.

"I am a strong, beautiful, confident woman, mother and friend. My weight does not enslave me," I pronounce to the woman in the mirror. "Hello, who am I kidding?" I sigh, shoulders slumped. My weight rears its ugly, embarrassing head all the time. To say it doesn't enslave me is highly optimistic at best, a lie at worst. It has been the bane of my existence for most of my 30 years. I stop short at saying affirmations are a waste of time, but some days it's easier to believe them than others. Today is not one of those days.

Defeated, I resumed my usual activity of picking up after my two darling but messy preschoolers. With eyes cast down, I work while trying to avoid the hippopotamus at the end of the hallway. Even still, I nearly trip over an open photo album lying in the doorway to the kids' room. Fi loved to look through the albums. This one contained pictures from university through Fi's birth. University. Back when I was only a few pounds overweight. Back when Tiresa and I were inseparable. The album page was open to a shot of the three of us on the day Mika won

the Student Body President election. We stood with arms around each others' shoulders, wide grins on our faces, a banner behind us emblazoned with, "Mika for Prez."

That was only three weeks after we first met Mika.

"Ko-mo my tang guh," I repeat after Tiresa, who nearly explodes in a fit of silent giggles. We are in the library. I'm supposed to be helping her write a persuasive essay for English Comp, but she's having too much fun teaching me Samoan insults. Insults I never learned while growing up with a white father of Scottish descent while Tiresa grew up with our maternal Samoan grandmother and extended island family.

"What did I just say?" I whisper, trying hard not to giggle because Tiresa is giggling.

"You said, 'dumb bi—'" she wheezes but can't finish the sentence. Tears squeeze out her eyes.

I gasp. "And you said that to your teacher's face?" Tiresa grew up with much more boldness than I did. The worst thing I ever did in class was chew gum. Once.

Tiresa nods. "It's not like she knew what I was saying—until she called Mama Rose and repeated it to her. Mama Rose was on her side until Mrs. Hammond blamed my, "island upbringing" for my attitude." She spoke so loudly, you could hear her through the phone. You should have seen Mama Rose turn red. Aunt Flo actually ran out of the room."

"What happened after that?" I prod. Her Samoan heritage was Mama Rose's pride. You did not joke about it, let alone outright insult it.

Tiresa's eyes sparkle. "Mama Rose called her a muli lapo'a and hung up on her."

"Moo-lee lah-poh-uh," I repeat. "Which means?"

"Fat ass!" Tiresa whispers and we collapse in another fit of giggles.

When I recover, I gasp, "And I thought Pa was bad!"

Tiresa looks at me, puzzled. "I don't remember Pa ever saying anything bad or swearing. He was always so sweet."

"He has quite the temper when provoked" I nod. "Once, he got so mad at a man that he threatened to shove bagpipes up the man's backside so that you'd hear Scotland the Brave playing whenever he had flatulence."

Tiresa politely chuckles but I could tell she isn't really amused. I feel sheepish for mentioning Pa. Pa was the only father Tiresa had ever known. After our separation, Tiresa only saw him on the few visits I made to Mama Rose during summers and on holidays. She usually seems angry when I mention Pa, like he abandoned her, not that she was taken from him.

"Tiresa," I place my hand over hers, "Pa would have adopted you, but after Ma died, he didn't have any parental rights to you. The family wanted to take me away, too, but Pa wouldn't let them." "So he fought for you but not for me. I understand. I'm not really his daughter, so it doesn't matter. Maybe it's a cultural thing. Samoans appreciate family more than the Scottish do," she brushes the subject aside.

We were brought up in two different cultures. Pa tried his best to instill the traditions and values of my dual ancestral cultures, both Polynesian and Scottish. However, he knew more about the Scottish heritage than he did about our mother's side. I was brought up practically white and a proud Scot to boot—much to Mama Rose's dismay.

So when we both showed up at orientation at university, we decided to become roommates and reconnect. All the fun and affection we shared as girls came back in a flood. We might as well have been Siamese twins, going everywhere and doing everything together.

"What do the Scottish do?" a voice asks. We look up to see Mika, one of the most gorgeous guys on campus—gorgeous and popular and rich and drives a nice sports car. And he is standing there talking to us!

Tiresa lights up and flashes him her biggest smile and bats her eyes. "They wear kilts commando, for starters." She winks as she says it. How she manages to be a sultry siren on cue is beyond my comprehension. The frumpy artist is my forte.

"And you came by this knowledge how?" he asks, just as teasing as she is.

Tiresa tosses her long hair and laughs. "I know a thing or two."

Mika nods. "Great, because I need the opinion of someone who knows a thing or two about speeches. I'm running for Student Body President and I wrote a speech for the election rally next week, but I'm not convinced that it's as persuasive as it can be."

"Let's hear it," Tiresa flashes her winning smile again.

"Yeah, I was just helping Tiresa write her persuasive essay for English Comp, so we're in the zone for persuasion" I added.

Mika, who hadn't noticed me before brightens. "Are you a tutor?"

I laughed. "Oh, no we're sisters. I'm just helping her, that's all."

"Oh, okay. Well here it goes." Mika pulls out the speech from a folder and reads it quietly.

Tiresa rests her chin on folded hands, watching him intently and smiling all the while. He glances up from the paper, always at Tiresa. When he finishes, she applauds softly.

"So, what do you think?" Mika asks, focused on Tiresa.

She nods eagerly. "I think it's fantastic."

Mika grins. "Thanks." Then he turns his eyes on me and waits for my opinion.

I squirm. It's not every day that Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome walks up to me and starts chatting and wants to know what I think about something. Heck that sort of thing never happens in fairy tales. "Well," I drawl, unsure how to be diplomatic. "It can use some work." Mika's eyes had drifted to Tiresa at that moment, but snapped back to me, stunned. I shrug in apology. "I think you should add a humorous opening statement, followed by three key points about what you will accomplish in office instead of only talking about past offices and awards you've held, and then end with a promise of how the campus will benefit from your leadership and continue after you've graduated."

Mika's brow furrows. "So I shouldn't talk about my qualifications?"

I shake my head. "No, by all means, mention them briefly or list them on a campaign flyer, but you need to give people a reason to vote for you not based on those but on the goals you plan to accomplish and how it will make campus life better."

He pulled out a pen and began to furiously jot down my ideas. "And tell a joke at the beginning?"

"Not necessarily a joke, but something funny. It will evoke an emotion from people and help them to remember you."

Mika looked up, face scrunched. "I'm not good with funny."

"I can think of something for you," I volunteer.

"Me, too," says Tiresa.

Mika bites his lower lip in thought. "Will you help me write my speech? I really need help with it because I really want to win. I plan to attend law school and having won an election, even as stupid as Student Body President, makes my application look better."

"Sure," I reply, blushing.

Mika's smile is the sun. "Great. Terrific. I'm Mika, by the way. What is your name again?" He holds out his hand for me to shake.

I take his hand shyly. "Isabella. But you can call me Bella."

From that moment forward, it was the three of us. The Three Musketeers, partners in crime, inseparable and incorrigible. Mika won the election (his speech—rather, my speech) received a standing ovation, as did his acceptance speech (also written by me). He was the devil's advocate, arrogant, confident and always right, even when he was on the wrong side of the

argument.

Tiresa was the dreamer of the trio. She always came up with madcap ideas. She took no thought to the consequences, but somehow always seemed to land on her feet—elegant, size 8 feet which supported her six foot tall, gorgeous body with supermodel features. Those features now earn her a six-figure salary as a PR executive in the music industry.

Then there was me, the creative one. I was studying for a Fine Arts Degree in design and drawing, when I wasn't contributing editorials to the campus newspaper and writing Mika's column for it. However, my main role became caretaker. It was a course of study in itself to look after those two. I wrote for Mika; made sure as Student Body President that he wore the right color shirt and power tie to important campus events; tutored Tiresa; made sure she woke up in time for class; and was always the designated driver. Always. It was widely accepted that Mika would choose one of us as his partner. What a surprise when he chose me. Little old dumpy me who caused Tiresa no end of grief with my lack of fashion sense ("You can't wear red with pink—it's not Valentine's Day!"). Me, whom no one ever noticed when Tiresa was around, which was all the time. Sure, Mika and I were compatible in the way we thought. In fact, we were a very good match in that respect. He had ideas; I knew how to execute them. But based on looks, anyone would have guessed he'd pick Tiresa. A gorgeous wife on the arm of a successful lawyer would have been the icing on the cake. A curvaceous, delectable, Tiresa-shaped cake, not the bulging apple pie which was me.

Dropping out of school after one year and marrying Mika after he graduated and started law school seemed as natural as breathing. It was an extension of the role I had already assumed. When I wasn't writing speeches and papers and articles for the law school journal and doing research for Mika, I cooked and cleaned for him, did his laundry and ran his errands. And as his wife, I had the right to expect him in bed. Or so I thought.

Fi was barely two weeks old; I struggled with postpartum depression. It was so bad that Mama Rose had taken Abe for a few days just to give me a little break. I felt like I was hurtling through the abyss of nothingness. The doctor prescribed me some pills but warned me that I had to stop breastfeeding so Fi wouldn't be affected. So much for losing all my pregnancy weight the easy way. Breastfeeding burned calories like nobody's business. I'd lost all of my pregnancy weight with Abe that way, but by that time I was already two stone overweight. Now I had two more stone on top of that to lose. Or not to lose. I just didn't care.

Fi was sleeping in her bassinet and I was staring at the TV, which was turned off, when Mika got home from work that Monday evening. I heard his car pull up, heard the car door open and slam shut; heard the side door open and close; footsteps on the new wood floor. Then he was standing in between the TV and me.

"I don't love you any more. I know you have this postpartum depression thing but it's not that. You're not the woman I married and I haven't been happy for a long time. Tiresa and I have been seeing each other for a few months and she wants to move in, so you'll need to pack your things and be out by the end of the week. I'll support the kids, of course."

He wasn't remorseful. He made the decision without giving me a choice, without discussing our relationship to see if it was salvageable. I probably could have forgiven him, but he wanted her. I was not enough for him. What does she have that I don't? I ask inwardly. Automatically, my head answers for me: everything. She has everything. She is still a gorgeous island princess with a successful career, a busy social calendar, enough designer clothes to open her own shop—and Mika.

Since the marriage ended, the relationship between them and me became nonexistent. Talk is mediated through our lawyers. Tiresa picks up Abe and Fi, nephew and niece and soon-to-be stepchildren (no pregnancy stretch marks on her, not when she can get kids the easy way), on Thursdays. Mika, who is usually busy at the firm, returns them home on Saturday evenings. That's it. They never ask for my forgiveness; I never offer it. It is the black hole in my soul.

I catch a glimpse of the hippo at the end of the hallway again. Damn.

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The park wasn't too crowded, which made it easier for Mika to keep an eye on Abe and Fi.

They ran screaming up the play set ladder and then screaming down the slide. "Daddy, Daddy, push me!" they shrieked for Mika to push them on the swings.

Mika preferred taking them to the newer park near his house, but the kids like their old neighborhood park better. For Mika, it reminded him of embarrassing moments with Bella after she gained all that unsightly weight. Once, while sliding down the old-fashioned metal slide with Abe, she got stuck and a line of impatient kids had already started sliding behind her, causing a traffic jam. Bella shifted her massive hips so that only one butt cheek was on the slide while the other hung over the edge as she scooted to the bottom. Another time, he mounted one side of a see-saw with Abe while she sat on the other. She crashed to the ground while he and Abe rocketed upward. It was a good thing he had a tight grip on Abe lest the toddler would have catapulted over to the North Island.

"Hey kids, let's get an ice cream," Mika called after they had exhausted most of their energy and weren't climbing and running anymore.

"Yay!" the shrieked and ran to him. The ice cream shop was just across the street. Once they were settled on the outdoor café table, Mika cleared his throat.

"Abe, Phoebe, there's something I want to talk to you about," Mika began. Neither child acknowledged that he had said anything, so absorbed they were in licking their cones.

"You know how Mummy and I aren't married anymore."

"Yeah, we know that," Abe shrugged. "You divorced Mum because you don't love her anymore."

"Yeah," Fi agreed with ice cream smeared across her chin.

"That's not true," defended Mika. "I'll always love your mother because she is your mother, the mother of my children. But sometimes people change. Mum just isn't the same person as she used to be."

"Who did she used to be?" asked Abe, eyes growing wide. "Was she a bad guy?" Mika chuckled and rubbed Abe's head. "No, nothing like that. She's just different from when we got married. But now I love your Aunt Tiresa, which is why we're going to get married. What do you think about that?"

"I love Aunt Tiresa," Fi announced. "She smells pretty and lets me play dress up with her clothes."

Mika smiled at his daughter, who never failed to charm him with her sweetness. He glanced at Abe, who bit off a part of his cone with a loud crunch. Melted ice cream dripped onto the table. "What about you Abe? What you think?"

Abe shrugged again. "I don't know. Can I have a PlayStation when you get married?"

"No, you may not have a PlayStation. You already have a room full of toys and a playroom full of more toys," Mika sighed. "How do you feel about me marrying your aunt? She's already family and you like her. Isn't that good?"

Crunch-crunch, Abe's slowly chewed his cone. "Yeah, I like her. Are you going to divorce her when she changes?"

Mika is stunned by the question and disconcerted to find two pairs of eyes—Bella's eyes—staring at him awaiting his reply. Abe and Fi had Bella's eyes but his smile. Their mixed racial ancestry was evident and made a strikingly beautiful result. Family, friends and strangers alike complimented him on his beautiful children.

"Of course not," Mika replied.

"But you divorced Mum when she changed. Maybe she'll change back and you can marry her again," Abe suggested.

"And then we can all live in your big house and Aunt Tiresa, too," Fi planned.

"No, she can't live with us," Abe contradicted his sister. "Mummy will be there."

Fi danced in her seat. "Can I be the flower girl when you and Mummy get married? Aunt Tiresa told me I couldn't be the flower girl when she gets married because she doesn't want one."

Mika grimaced. The conversation was not going well. The kids never followed the script in his head on How Things Ought To Be. If Bella were here, she'd know how to answer them. She always had a way with words. Her wedding vows were especially touching, some of the most moving sentiments he had ever heard expressed.

He wondered if Tiresa would write her own vows and if they would be just as beautiful as her sister's. The news that she did not want a flower girl, with Fi the obvious would-have-been choice, was upsetting to hear, as was learning that she had discussed the issue with Fi already.

Mika shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Uh, Aunt Tiresa and I haven't talked about the wedding ceremony yet." Which would soon have to be rectified, since he had assumed that Abe would be the ring bearer and Fi the flower girl. Tiresa and he had only discussed the budget and honeymoon and reception details, but the actual ceremony, the part which really counted, was yet to be canvassed.

"I have an idea," Abe spoke up. "Why don't you change and be the same as Mummy and then we can live together and Aunt Tiresa can visit us."

Mika opened his mouth, but no words came out.