

Sneek Peak ~~ Chapter 5

Bang-Bang-Bang. A fist pounds on the door.

"Bella! Open this door! I swear I'll kick it in if you don't. Bella? Do you hear me?"

Bang-Bang-Bang. Sands is determined to talk to me just as I am determined to avoid her.

"Mummy, why won't you let Sands in?" Fi asks.

Bang-Bang-Bang. "So help me God, I'll break a window if you don't let me in!" Sands threatens.

"Go play in your room, sweetie," I avoid Fi's question.

Bang-Bang-Bang. "All right, you asked for it. I'm calling the police. I mean it!" Bang-Bang-Bang.

Abe wanders from his room to the kitchen. "Mummy, I can't play my videogame with all that noise. Can I open the door?"

"No," I say and try to focus on the romance novel I was reading before Sands descended on the comfort of my misery.

The banging stops and I breathe a sigh of relief. I just can't face anyone, not after what happened on the Date from Hell. So at home I stay, avoiding calls, knocks at the door and emails from inquisitive minds.

"Bella! What in the world is wrong with you?"

I nearly come off the sofa in fright and spill my tea across my lap. Sands is standing in the doorway between the kitchen and living room.

"How did you get in here?" I demand.

"Abe let me the back door," she says.

Abe parades into the room. "Look, Mummy, Auntie Sands gave me a dollar!" He holds the coin aloft as if it is the greatest treasure the world has ever seen

"I want a dollar, too!" Fi cries.

Sands pulls another coin out. "Here you go. Now kids, I need to talk to your mummy, so run outside and play awhile."

Abe crosses his arms. "That'll cost you another dollar."

"Scram. NOW," Sands points toward the door. Abe and Fi hustle out. Abe knows he can only push her so far.

Sands plops down on the opposite end of the sofa while I get up. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To get dishtowel to clean up the mess you caused by barging in here uninvited," I reply dryly.

"I wouldn't have been uninvited if you returned my calls in the first place," she retorts. "Now talk. What happened on your date that's so bad to make you cut off your friends?" I ignore her as I grab a towel and mop up the tea on myself and the sofa. "Bella, come on. You can't hide in here forever."

"I might as well," I mutter.

Sands shakes her head. "Cat said you had sleeping pills and liquor. Bella, what were you thinking?"

"What do you think I was thinking?" I snap. "And by the way, tell Cat I want those pills back."

"It's a good thing she took them and cared enough to stop by and check on you. God, Bella, you're so freaking selfish sometimes. Can't you think about anyone but yourself? What about Abe and Fi? What about your dad and grandmother?"

My jaw drops. "Selfish? You're calling me selfish? You have no idea what I've gone through. You have no idea what it's like to be fat and betrayed and abandoned and insulted, so until you do, don't lecture me about being selfish."

Sands relents a bit. "Bella, come on, you know I love you like a sister and I just want to help. We all do."

"So blasting me for supposedly being selfish is your way of helping? Thanks, but no thanks." I drop onto the sofa, which sags under my weight. Like my heart.

"Will you look at yourself?" Sands says.

"I try not to," I grumble.

Sands moves over and places a hand on my arm. "You know what your trouble is?"

I glare at her. "Don't even start. I don't want to hear it."

She grips my arm. "But you need to. Your trouble is that you are so low on yourself, you open up your legs for a hug."

My eye pop out of my head. "Oh. My. God. You think I slept with my date? That's not what

happened at all."

Sands looks confused. "So you're not hiding and tried to kill yourself because you hate yourself for sleeping with him?"

"No!" I bellow. "Sands, given me more credit than that. I did not sleep with him. Not that I would have wanted to from the way he kept texting his ex-girlfriend the entire time, besides the fact he said I was so fat that I probably hadn't slept with anyway for so long that I should take what I can get and was aching for it." Sands looks stunned. "Oh yeah, it's true, he really said that, and then accused me of embarrassing him when I walked out of the restaurant." I held out my arm, which still carried a bruise from Wesley's grip.

And then the tears came. I held them on for days but now they flowed freely. Sands hugged me until I could cry no more.

"Thanks," I sniffled as she hands me a tissue. "God, I felt so terrible. I lied about my weight to get someone's—anyone's—attention and instead of looking at the real me, he calls me fat to my face. I hate men. I really do. They don't care about your feelings or your mind. They just care about looks and once they get you in bed, it's all over and they move onto the next woman."

Sands hands me another tissue. "You know that's not true. That's just the excuse you tell yourself because you're so scared of not being accepted. You hide behind your weight and sabotage any real relationships that potentially could be good for you by picking them to pieces. I'm not saying that's the case with this date, but I watch you do it with others all the time."

"Who?" I demand, affronted that Sands can't just commiserate with me. Oh, no, she has to accuse me of wrongdoing.

"Tiresa, Mika, Mama Rose, me, Riyaan—" she rattles off a list.

I am astonished. "May I remind you that Tiresa and Mika sabotaged any relationship we had. Don't you dare blame what happened on me."

Sands throws up her hands. "I'm not blaming you. I'm pointing out your foibles so you can correct them and move on with your life. You need to learn to love yourself and accept that you are a fantastic person, worthy of good things and good relationships. It's only then are you going see the good things in your life and not reject things and people because they're not perfect. You use rejection as a defense mechanism. You reject before you can get rejected. Stop it and you'll find yourself not getting rejected."

"What does this have to do with my rotten date?" I yell.

"Everything!" Sands yells back. "If you accept yourself then you won't lie to others about your weight. If you don't accept yourself, no one else will except for other rejects and freaks."

I sigh and look away. "Since when did you become a psychologist?"

Sands hugs my shoulders. "I don't need a degree in psychology to see what's right in front of me. Bella, I don't mean to make you upset or tell you how to run yours life, and Lord knows I don't have all my ducks in a row. I just—" she grasps for the right words, "—just don't scare me like that again, okay? I was waiting for your call to tell me how the date went when Cat shows up at the gym and tells me she found you passed out and with sleeping pills and you had been drinking. And then you don't return my calls or emails. Do you know how scared I was? Promise me you won't do that again?"

"I promise," I say. "I promise, because I doubt I'll ever go on a date again."

Sands agrees to watch Abe and Fi while I run to the store for a few groceries. There aren't many people in the store in the middle of the afternoon, yet I still duck my head as irrational fears fill my mind that someone from the Yummy's Restaurant or the street or the bus will recognize me.

I head for the fresh food section first. Grapes for Abe, oranges for Fi. I run through the rest of my mental grocery list, hardly looking at the giant pyramid of oranges as I grab them and shove them in a plastic bag.

Bread, cereal, biscuits, I think—and then jump. It's not an orange I'm touching. It's a hand.

I look up and into the green eyes of a man. A not bad looking man. In fact, he's really rather cute with his dark wavy hair—short on the sides and longish on top—medium height and a slight build. The cliché isn't lost on me and I laugh out loud at the absurdity of the situation. They met over oranges at the grocery store, ran through my mind, the result of reading too many romance novels. "I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention," I apologize.

He smiles, the world becomes brighter, and I melt. Of course, my hair isn't done, I wear no makeup and my t-shirt and sweat pants are wrinkled. We were destined to meet because I look my worst.

"No, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention either." He chuckles. "Which can be potentially bad for both of us if we accidentally grab something other than oranges or someone's hand." Now I really laugh. "Or it could lead to a first date. You never know about these things."

Did he really just say 'first date'? I wonder. "When the cops come to arrest you for groping store patrons, I'll be your character witness. Maybe you'll only get probation and a fine," I joke.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. You're just as guilty of groping as I am. Perhaps we'll be cellmates once we're thrown in jail." My laughter echoes through the produce section. "Here, you take it," he hands me the orange.

"No, you had it first," I object and hand it back.

"Too late," he says, grabs three small oranges and juggles them. "I already have what I need."

I applaud. "Bravo, bravo."

The man tosses each one high into the air and catches them behind his back, ending his performance with a bow. "Thank you, thank you. I'll be performing on the street corner for the rest of the week and signing autographs." He bags the oranges and hold out hand. "By the way, I'm Jae. With an E."

I'm stunned and delighted he is continuing the conversation. I take his hand. "I'm Bella. With a B."

Jae shakes my hand, a warm, firm grip. "Bella—short for?"

"Isabella."

"A lovely name for a lovely lady," he says, his handshake lingering.

I'm astonished to be standing in the grocery store, making small talk with a cute stranger after an embarrassing encounter. I look like crap but don't care. He's smiling; I'm laughing. Life is good for once.

"And when you're not juggling on the street and groping people in stores, what do you do?" I ask as we finally disengage.

He fiddles with his watch, a very expensive-looking sports watch. "I just opened an adventure tourism company to take people white water rafting, kayaking, hiking, biking, skydiving—you name it."

"Skydiving?" I exclaim.

Jae shrugs. "Yeah, well, it keeps me out of stores and out of trouble for the most part."

I laugh again, my loud boisterous, hear-me-coming-from-a-mile-away laugh. "You are adventurous."

"And how do you keep out of trouble?" Jae asks.

"Who says I do?" I tease and Jae laughs. "Seriously, I'm a stay-at-home mum." The words fly out of my mouth. I normally hide the fact I am unemployed, but what do I have to hide from Jae? What do I have to lose? Nothing, so I might as well enjoy myself while I can.

"Now THAT sounds adventurous," Jae comments. "Motherhood has got to be the most courageous job on the planet." He sounds sincere.

Cute, well-built, good taste in clothes, smart, sympathetic. Not bad, not bad at all, I admire him

inwardly as I nod. "It's exhausting that's for sure. But it's worth it."

"The best things in life are," Jae nods. There is an awkward pause when neither of us speaks. I am reluctant for the conversation to end and, unbelievably, he appears that way, too. I reach for another orange. "Do you shop here often?" he finally asks.

"Usually," I reply, turning to place the bag of oranges into the shopping cart. My butt bumps the display stand and disrupts the delicate balance of the fruit pyramid. First one, then three, then a dozen, then more tumble to the floor with exponential velocity. There's nothing I can do to stop it. It's an orange avalanche as the pyramid collapses and floods the floor with fruit.

"Oh no, oh dear," I panic, scrambling to retrieve some.

"Let me help," Jae says, already crouching down to pick them up.

But it's a hopeless cause. No matter how many we put back, more tumble down. A store employee comes to the rescue.

"No worries, I'll take care of it," he says.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur. My face is burning from embarrassment, not just because other customers are watching and snickering, but because I look bad in front of Jae. My self-esteem crumbles as fast as the pyramid did and I think of nothing beyond escaping the citrus apocalypse as fast as I can.

Without a word, I navigate my cart around the oranges and race for the bakery. In the sanctuary of bread and buns I nurse my wounded pride. So typical, I moan. My fat butt literally gets in the way of me being socially acceptable.

I grab a loaf of bread and try to remember what else I need. Cereal, biscuits—and tampons. That's what keeps slipping my mind. The biscuit aisle is empty, which saves me the trouble of squeezing past other customers and garnering unspoken judgments: she shouldn't eat biscuits; she doesn't need more sweets; yeah, like the low-cal ones will help her.

The cereal aisle is two rows over. I push past the next aisle and see Jae—and speed up before he sees me. One row over, the cereal aisle is crowded with four other carts. I decide to go down it anyway when Jae appears at the opposite end. We catch each other's eye. I panic and whirl my cart around and take off. Abe and Fi can eat toast for breakfast.

It's a relief to get the feminine products aisle. Now I just had to get through the check-out line and I was home free.

"Hey there," says a familiar voice. I look up to find Jae standing in front of my cart.

"Hey again," I reply meekly. I hold a super-sized box of tampons and set it in the cart. What is he doing here? Men aren't supposed to be on this aisle. Isn't there some kind of unspoken

social decorum rule about this? Women don't invade the man cave; men don't invade the tampon aisle. Well, except for the reluctant blokes whose significant others ask them to pick up a few items on their way home from work. I feel my face turning red. If a gal isn't safe here, then where can she escape to?

"Bella, I was wondering if you want to go skydiving sometime," Jae asks.

It takes an effort to not let my jaw drop. "Skydiving?" I blurt.

Jae nods. "Or boating or four-wheeling or something. I need feedback on the services my company provides and thought maybe I could use you as a guinea pig—if you don't mind being used for non-laboratorial experimental purposes, that is. You don't have to jump out of a plane on my account but I would like a woman's opinion on other recreational activities."

The double entendre of his last words dawns on us at the same time. Jae turns beet red. "I apologize, I didn't mean for that to sound like that."

I hold onto my cart, I'm laughing so hard. "I'd love to. . .hee-hee-hee. . .do some experi—ha-ha-mental recreational activities-hee-hees with you." Jae's blush is replaced by a grin and soon he is laughing hard. "Sounds like a lot of fun," I finally am able to say.

Jae's face brightens and I melt again. "Great. Here's my number." He hands me a slip of paper. "Give me a call when you have some time. We'll make a whole day of it. I really appreciate this. You are doing me a big favor."

I try, I honestly try to not laugh. It doesn't work. He catches it, too, and we snicker and snort. "I'm not in the habit of doing favors for strange men, but I'll make an exception this time." How can I not make an exception? A cute guy chases me around a store to give me his number.

Jae is still all smiles. "Terrific. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye," I say as he turns to leave. I stand there staring at the paper. Jae Elliot – 895-184-5346 it says in bold script. I can't believe it. I have the number to a cute guy I just met who wasn't put off by the orange catastrophe or by my weight. An adventurous man who actually wants to spend a whole day with me.

He's gone by the time I roll up to the check-out counter. What a difference a few days makes. The humiliation with Wesley and my subsequent depression melts into oblivion as I think about Jae's smile.

The cashier hands me the receipt. "Thank you, ma'am" I tell her cheerfully. Maybe a bit too cheerfully from the look she gives me. I push the cart through the automatic sliding doors and into the sunshiny, breezy day. I scan the car park but Jae is nowhere in sight. Darn, I think. I had hoped to catch a glimpse of his vehicle. Probably a Jeep or truck since his business was adventure tourism. But no matter: I have his number and all's right with the world.

As I stash the groceries in the boot, I wonder what activities we will do. Skydiving was more than I wanted to attempt. Boating sounded harmless—unless I capsized the boat. Hiking and biking were out—I couldn't keep up with him and no bike had a seat big enough for me. Four-wheeling and white water rafting—now I can try those.

I slam the boot shut, put the cart away in the cart corral and slide behind the driver's seat. I roll down the window as I turn on the ignition. "I can't believe I got his number," I say and pull it out of my pocket for another look: Jae Elliot – 895-184-5346.

And in a gust of wind, it's gone. "Oh, no!" I cry as the paper sails through the air across the car park. I open the door and jog a few steps to catch it, my boobs and flab rebounding with each step. The paper lands on the asphalt and I hurry toward it, but three steps away the wind picks it up and sends it whirling overhead, setting it down several yards away.

I'm puffing from the exertion as I jog again, but as soon as I get close, it flies farther away. I stand there, hands on my hips, trying to catch my breath and debating whether to keep after it or let it go. I really liked what I saw of Jae and wanted to get to know him better, but I just couldn't keep up the chase.

The paper lay tantalizingly on the ground for several seconds, as if it knows I have decided to give up and therefore gave up as well. Then I take a step in its direction and the wind picks it up again.

I return to the car.

"Did you get everything you needed?" Sands asks as I walk through the door.

"And then some" I reply. Sands cocks an eyebrow at me in question. "I also got the number of a gentleman who wants to take me skydiving."

A smile slowly spreads across her face. "See? What'd I tell you? How about that." She pauses. "Skydiving? When?"

My shoulders droop. "Never. I lost his number."

"You did what? How?"

I start putting away groceries. Sands grabs a few items. "The wind blew it out of my hand. I ran across the parking lot to get it but couldn't."

"What's his name? We can look him up online."

I stash the oranges in the refrigerator. "I didn't get his last name, just his first. It's Jae with an E. He runs an adventure tourism business."

"Jae with an E? That's weird. But it might make it easier to find him. How many Jae's with an E who run adventure businesses can there be?"

Before I can reply, the phone rings. The caller ID flashes Tiresa Vaega, the very last person in the world I want to talk to after this latest letdown.

I walk away from the phone. "Who is it?" Sands asks as she helps put away the groceries.

"Tiresa," I grumble.

"Bella," Sands says in her best mother voice, "what did I just tell you not one hour ago about sabotaging relationships?"

"Sands, I'm not in the mood to be told again that I'm not officially invited to their engagement party and how I need to keep a low profile to as not to embarrass her."

"How do you know that's what she's going to say?"

"Because that's what she said the last time we talked."

"Maybe she's trying to build bridges or wants to ask for your forgiveness."

I laugh. "Tiresa doesn't want my forgiveness and she burns bridges, not builds them."

The phone stops ringing as the answering machine picks up: You've reached the White residence. Leave a message and one of the crazy kids living here will return your call as soon as possible. Thanks and ta-ta. Two clicks sound and then Tiresa's voice invades my home: "Bella, I need to know what you're wearing to the engagement party."

I roll my eyes. "I love how she assumes that I am attending, like I can't wait to celebrate her—"

"Shh!" Sands hushes me.

Tiresa continues: "A lot of my business clients and Mika's attorney friends are invited and I can't have you dressed in some cheap knit crap from the dollar store. So let me know what you have. I'm even willing to buy you a decent dress if you don't have one and you don't have to pay me back. Call me." Click.

I glare at Sands, who shrugs. "It's not the most diplomatic way to build a bridge, but it's a start." She tries to sound hopeful.

I grab the box of tampons and storm to the bathroom. "That's not a bridge. That's a burn."

Jae pulls out of the grocery store car park in his Jeep, a grin on his face. The orange accident

was hysterically funny, but he forced himself to not laugh when it happened, not when it was a laugh at someone else's expense.

Most of the people he associated with in his former career in the fashion world would sneer at the mishap and the woman involved—especially her. Obesity is not attractive and she wouldn't grace the cover of *Vogue* anytime soon. Yet Jae credited himself for looking past surfaces to find the real person, which is why he was glad to chat up Bella. Instead of dismissing her because of her weight, he discovered a woman with a vibrant sense of humor.

It was a leap of faith to leave his comfortable, established career as co-owner of AmandaE Boutiques, but after his business partner and wife, Amanda, divorced, he grew less and less satisfied with the fashion world. It was a world where the zingers he just spoke would have gotten him a tight slap across the face or handed apartment keys by models, or slapped on the butt and hustled into the nearest closet by his gay designer friends.

Bella did neither and that was refreshing. She assumed he wasn't hitting on her. Refreshing—yeah, that was it. Those witty retorts, those sparkling eyes, and when she laughed, she didn't hold back, as if showing too much emotion was a bad thing (like in the fashion world). Bella was the real deal.

Jae pulls into the alley way behind his new loft apartment and parks in the cramped covered yard. "Bella," he says to himself as he climbs the stairs to the loft and unlocks the loft door. She said she was stay-at-home mom but didn't wear a wedding ring. It makes him wonder what charms the father saw in her. Perhaps she wasn't always so fat. Surely she had been curvaceous.

His imagination begins to wander. Amanda was as skinny as a model, bordering on anorexia. Jae couldn't abide the feel of bones. Hugging Amanda was like hugging a skeleton hanging in a biology class. But a full hip, a plump breast and shapely legs set him on fire.

Bella she said she'd call. He hopes she will soon.