

Sneek Peek ~~ Chapter 6

"Cheap knit crap from the dollar store'," I mimic Tiresa's self-righteous tone. "I'm even willing to buy you a decent dress'." I scowl as I examine the black dress which had been purchased for the date with Wesley. It was more than decent—in fact, it had cost a bit more than I could reasonably afford—and would fit in with Tiresa's and Mika's engagement party, which was certain to be on par with a black tie affair. Now I just needed a new pair of shoes since the heel broke off my sandal.

I park my car just off Trafalgar Street and make my way down the crowded sidewalk toward Hannah's Shoes, where I hoped to purchase the same sandals I bought for the date with Wesley. There weren't many styles in my size, let alone could accommodate my fat feet, so I often bought a couple pair of the same shoes.

At a corner I run into Cat. "Cat! How are you?" I ask.

I was the first to befriend Cat, who has lived on the street for a decade. Initially, I felt sorry for her and gave her an old winter coat of mine, which progressed to spare change here and there, then invitations to have coffee. Feeling sorry for Cat didn't do any good, however. Her mind half gone from alcohol and a successful career lost, Cat survives quite well on the streets, her brutal honesty put to good use and her "It could be worse" attitude keeping her afloat

She looks at me up and down. "I see you're finally off your face," she comments.

"Uh, yeah," I stammer. "Thanks for checking in on me the other night. It was a pretty horrible night."

"Try living on the streets," Cat retorts unsympathetically.

I sigh. Typical Cat: unsympathetic at best, uncouth at worst. "Where are you headed?"

She shrugs. "Nowhere, last I checked."

"I'm going shoe shopping. Want to come along?" I invite. She falls into step next to me, both of us shuffling along, me from my weight and her from having nowhere to go in particular and being older. "So are you going to give me back my sleeping pills?"

"Nope. Sold those to a drug dealer."

"You didn't!"

"It's a living," she shrugs and glances down. "What do you need new shoes for? Not going on another date, are you?"

"Tiresa and Mika's engagement party."

"Well, well, aren't we the glutton for punishment," she cackles.

I stop and stand aside to let another pedestrian pass by, the sidewalk is so packed. Most people avoid contact with Cat because of her smell and looks, but my size makes me little harder to circumnavigate in a crowd. "I'm just trying to keep the peace in the family for Mama Rose's sake. Otherwise I wouldn't go near the place, not for a million dollars."

"The poor can't afford to be choosy," she intones.

I accidentally jostle her when another pedestrian rushes by. "Oops, sorry. It's not about poverty. It's about pride. I can live with being poor, but I at least like to hold up my head with some dignity. Having my ex and sister publicly rub their affair in my face isn't worth winning the lottery."

But that is exactly what is going to happen, I think to myself. They'll be all smiles while I sit there in pain, toasting their happiness and pretending everything is fine, just fine.

Cat glances at me sideways. "You have pride? Now I've seen everything."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demand.

Cat looks into the distance. "You've got an embarrassingly loud laugh and a wide load to match it. You surround yourself with people who are just as embarrassing and messed up as you, so there's little chance of you being rejected or excluded. You're a coward and that's nothing to be proud of."

My jaw drops. "Where is this coming from? I can't believe you said that. I thought we were friends. Think of all the times I've help you, let you take a shower at my place, bought you lunches. And this is what you think of me? The embarrassing basket case?" As I speak, we approach a shop with a rack of items just outside the door, making even less space on the sidewalk. I skirt around the street side of a post box because of the traffic jam the racks are causing. "I'm not a coward," I add just as I stumble into Cat and knock her into the street—and into the path of an oncoming bus.

The bus driver slams on his brakes and blasts the horn. Cat like her namesake, springs out of the way with an agility which betrays her age. "Are you okay?" I ask breathless from the near-miss.

"Why wouldn't I be? My friend tries to kill me. I'm fine," she says, straightening her dirty cap.

"Sorry," I murmur. "No, I'm not sorry. What you said hurts my feelings." Nothing like a crazy, alcoholic homeless woman to make you feel badly about yourself.

Cat nods thoughtfully. "I guess this means you won't buy me a cup of coffee?"

I open mouth to give Cat a good tongue lashing just as a dark-haired man comes around the

corner, heading straight for us. It is Wesley. He's on the phone, gesticulating wildly and talking in a very loud voice as if to prove he is important. He doesn't so much walk as strut.

The words stick in my throat. It's only been a week since our date and all the memories of the tragedy rush in like flood. The last thing I want is for him to cause another scene, one which will be punctuated with texts to Michelle the ex-girlfriend. "Gotta go," I blurt and dash into the nearest shop. I don't see its name but do notice a sign on the door which says, "Grand Opening."

I peer between two mannequins in the window display. Cat stares at me like I've gone mad and shuffles away. I don't feel badly deserting her like that, not after what she said. All that matters is avoiding that bastard.

I scurry farther into the store, glancing over my shoulder to make sure he doesn't come in. I don't suppose he will: this is a ladies' clothing store. Upon closer inspection, I see it's an upscale clothing store. "AmandaE – The Place for You" a poster on the wall proclaims. I'd heard of AmandaE before, seen their full-page ads in glamour magazines. I pick up a price tag from a ruffled chiffon blouse, then another on a leather blazer, then another on a pair of twill trousers. Just as I suspected: there is nothing I can afford in here. I look around for the "Women's" sign for the plus size clothing section. There is none. "AmandaE – Not for Me," I quote under my breath. Not a knit or jersey garment in sight, either. "Definitely Tiresa's kind of store."

I roam through the racks of stylish clothing, not so much looking at them as much as keeping an eye on the door for Wesley to pass by so I can go back outside. My heart sinks at the next glimpse. Darn it—the jerk now stands in front of the store, still talking and laughing and gesturing. I'm trapped.

"May I help you?" a female voice breaks into my musings. I turn to find a pale, pretty, stick thin store clerk, looking like she just stepped off the catwalk and into a pile of poo. She can barely keep her lip from curling.

I glance around for an excuse to be in a store which is obviously not for women of my size and see a sign for shoes. "Yes, I'm looking for a pair of sandals. Do you carry any?"

The clerk actually huffs with disgust. "A few." She spins on her heel and walks away. With a glance at Wesley's back, I follow. The shoe department is so small that I can stand in one spot and see all the selection.

"What size?" the clerk asks non-too-nicely.

"Uh, eleven," I reply, sitting down.

She makes another huffing noise. "We don't carry many shoes in that size."

Fear of meeting Wesley is replaced by offense at the clerk's attitude. "Then why don't you check for some?" I suggest through gritted teeth.

Another lip curl and she disappears through a doorway. From this angle, I can't see most of the store, hedged in by stands of belts, purses and other accessories. Even these carry exorbitant price tags. It is truly disgusting how greedy retailers can be. Seriously, \$150 for a blingy belt? Made in China, no doubt, by an underpaid employee.

The snooty store clerk returns and dumps three boxes of shoes at my feet. "This is all the sandals we have in size eleven and they don't stretch much." She crosses her arms as if to dare me to try them on.

"Thank you," I reply haughtily. None of the shoes match my dress, but I won't give her the satisfaction. I remove my shoe and bend over to slip on the first sandal. Well, try to slip it on. It doesn't go past my arch.

The doorbell rings, signaling the entrance or exit of another customer. "Mr. Elliot! What a pleasant surprise," a female voice exclaims. "To what do we owe the honor of a visit from headquarters?"

A deep, soft male voice floats over the racks, though I can't quite make out what he is saying. "Display. . . pieces. . . missing" It can't be, I wonder. That voice sounds like Jae. At least I think it sounds like him. What is an adventure tourism guide doing in a women's clothing store? Cross-promoting their clothes with his services, or perhaps looking for females to do 'experimental recreational activities' with? But why does the clerk think he's from headquarters?

I shake my head to clear it. The more important thing is that he is here—and that means I can get his number again.

"Are you going to try them all on?" the clerk asks as I take off the sandal. "I don't think they're going to fit."

Something snaps inside me. I'd been treated rudely before by store clerks, but the combination of the horror of almost knocking my friend under a bus, the fear of facing Wesley again and the fact that Jae is standing just a few feet away reduces me to my basic core. Enough is enough. I will not be beaten down.

Slowly, deliberately, I pick up the next sandal and shove it on my foot, pulling the sling back around the back of my foot. It's a tight squeeze and very uncomfortable. I stand up and walk a few paces away and back, hearing Jae chatting with the other store employee. "I really don't care what you think," I smile and sit down again. "Actually, I'd like to see your entire selection of pumps and flats. Can you remember what the number eleven looks like? And I have several outfits I need to buy, so can you be quick about it?"

My plan is to ditch this girl as soon as she returns to the storeroom and go talk to Jae. In my mind I picture her juggling several boxes of shoes and dropping them all, only to find her customer gone.

Instead of following my carefully planned fantasy, she places her hands on her hips. "Ma'am,"

she says loudly, "We don't carry clothes in your size. We only stock up to size 6 in dresses and trousers. What size do you wear?"

A couple of customers shopping nearby glance in our direction and hurriedly move off. Jae and the other woman lower their voices, as if they are listening. "I can't imagine—" the employee murmurs. Jae says something intelligible.

I'm not about to announce to the world and Jae what double digit size fits me, so I sit there, stunned.

The clerk continues. "And I know our largest blouses are way too small for you, as are all the shoes."

". . . the wrong store, it sounds like. . ." the woman with Jae stifles a giggle. A third clerk walks by carrying a stack of dresses. She smirks and gives my clerk a look as if to say, Glad it's you and not me.

"We carry only real leather footwear which we don't want stretched. So maybe you should go somewhere else to buy your outfits, like Taking Shape or Big City Chick," she sneers, naming the two popular plus size clothing retailers in town.

Jae says something else and the woman replies loudly for the entire store to hear, "Sometimes we do get bigger women who wander in, but what can you do since AmandaE doesn't cater to that demographic?"

The skinny clerk continues. "And I because part of my wages are based on commission, I can't waste any more time with you because I'm not going to make any money, so please just leave the store. You've already made other customers uncomfortable."

By now my face is burning with shame and anger. My only goal is to get out of there quickly and pray Jae doesn't see me. I thrust my feet into my shoes and stand. The wooden chair sticks to me for a few seconds before falling off my hips. The clerk snorts. As I rush through the store, I almost stop dead in my tracks: Tiresa is standing near the door. The look on her face tells me she's heard and seen it all.

And didn't lift a finger to help or defend me.

I brush past the other supposedly uncomfortable customers and burst through the door.

". . .hope she doesn't come back," I hear the woman with Jae say loudly. I know it is for my benefit.

"Don't worry: I won't," I gasp—and run smack into Wesley.

"Not you again," he sneers. He starts to text.

Mika is waiting with the kids at my house when I pull into the driveway. Can this day get any worse? I moan inwardly.

"Mummy!" Abe and Fi shriek and run to give me a hug. After an afternoon of rejection, at least they are happy to see me.

Mika retrieves their luggage from the trunk of his BMW. I reach out to take it but he shakes his head. "No, I've got it," he says in a surprisingly friendly tone and falls in step behind me as I walk to the front door.

As I fumble with the keys to unlock the door, Mika says, "Kids, I need to talk to your mom, so stay outside and play awhile, okay?"

"Aw, I want to play with my video game," Abe complains.

Mika points his finger at him. "Stay in the yard."

I don't want to talk to Mika or let him see my messy house, but he waltzes through the door and straight to the kids' room to deposit their luggage there. I set my purse on the kitchen counter and wait for him to return.

"How you been, Bella?" Mika says smoothly as he emerges from the hallway and looks around. "I've said it before, but I can pay you alimony so you can live somewhere nicer. The kids deserve better than a box to live in."

"Mika," I hiss, "I'm in no mood for a lecture on how badly I'm doing as a parent and provider, so just skip to what you want to say and get out."

Mika held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, easy there, I'm not here to lecture or argue."

"Then what are you here for? I doubt there's anything here which will catch or keep your interest," I snap.

"Bella," he said crooned in the tone he uses when he wants something but is trying to hide the fact. "Cut me some slack, please? I know you hate me and I don't blame you. What I did was selfish. But for the sake of our children—our children—I do want to remain friends. Is that possible, because it means a lot to me."

"Excuse me while I barf," I turn away and grab the kettle. I want a cup of tea to help settle my nerves, though I'm not going to offer him one. "It meant a lot to me to keep you in my bed but that didn't happen, so why should you get what you want? Oh, that's right, because you always get what you want."

Mika looks stunned but makes an effort to compose himself. "I understand."

"Like hell you do," I fight to keep from shouting. Here is his opportunity to apologize and he doesn't. The nerve.

He folds his hands as if in supplication or trying to find the right words to say. But nothing he says will be right, I decide. "So what did you come here for?" I ask, wanting to get the ordeal over with. I slam the kettle on the burner and turn on the gas.

Mika slowly approaches. "I came here because of all the fuss that's being mad about the engagement party. Bella," he places a hand over his heart, "I am mortified that your family expects you to be there. When I learned that, all I could think was how selfish they were being. I know you and I knew you wouldn't want to come and I've tried to talk Tiresa and Mama Rose out of it, but they won't listen. Then I overheard Tiresa when she said she'd buy you a dress for the engagement party."

He stops one pace in front of me; I'm back up against the stove. I can smell his cologne—Obsession. He wore it back when we first dated. His unshaven scruff now boasts a few grey hairs, which only makes him sexier. Yes, Mika definitely got better looking with age. Then he smiles and I hope he can't hear my heart beat faster. We hadn't been this close in years. He must have realized that, too, because as I looked up, something hot and sensual shimmered within the green depths of his eyes. An unwelcome tingle spreads through my body.

"I knew you'd laugh at the offer." He shakes his head. "Sometimes Tiresa can be so vain, so arrogant. She's not like you." He places a hand on my shoulder. "She doesn't yet know where true beauty comes from."

"Oh, please," I scowl and bat his hand away. "I don't need a sugar-coated reminder that I'm fat and ugly."

Mika's face fell. "Bella, that's not what I meant and you know it. Have I ever said or even inferred that?"

I laugh. "I got the message loud and clear the day you said you were leaving me for my sister. Now are you going to tell me the real reason you're here?"

Mika put his hands together again. "I just. . . I miss you, Bella. When the kids are with me, I feel like half a parent. You're missing from our lives. You're missing from my life."

"Whose fault is that?" I spit and turn my back on him, wishing the kettle would hurry up and boil.

He moves closer. I can feel his body heat. "You're missing from my work. I haven't given a decent speech in years. Everyone at the firm hates it when I stand up to give a speech at a dinner. They all pull out their iPhones and start texting and playing games." He chuckles at the memory.

It becomes harder to think, his body's warmth burning me. This is not supposed to happen. He should not be able to arouse this kind of sexual response to him anymore.

I shake my head. "So that's what this is really all about? You need me to write a speech for you? Here's a news flash, Mika: you fired me from that job. Ask Tiresa to put words in your mouth to make you look good. I'm sure she's good for something, though I haven't figured out what."

Unbelievably, he begins to massage my shoulders. "I don't need a speech. Forget the speeches. I came here to tell you to ignore Tiresa. She has no business telling you what to wear." He bends down and speaks softly in my ear, raising the hairs on my neck. "And I do miss you."

"Right," I say dryly, but I also close my eyes, savoring the sensation, the remembrance of how it used to be. My mind takes a nosedive into oblivion. He continues massaging and kisses behind my ear, my neck, my shoulders. "Mmm, Bella. You're such a woman."

"Stop it, Mika," I say without compulsion.

Mika grabs my shoulders, turns me around and kisses my neck. "No," I push him away but he clutches me. "Mika, I mean it. You've got some nerve."

"You know you want this, Bella," and he sucks my neck hard. It's been so long since he—anyone—has touched me that I can't make him stop. I don't want him to stop.

"The kids. . ." I protest.

"They'll stay outside. Come on, you want this, don't you? When's the last time?" His hand wanders down my body.

It flitters through my foggy mind that his words aren't much different from Wesley's, and yet instead of feeling angry and insulted, I'm yielding to him.

"Come on, Bella, you know I can give you what you need," Mika groans. He pulls up the hem of my dress and plunges his hand into my panties, rubbing gently. I gasp and yield to his touch, leaning toward him as strong sexual need overwhelms me. I can't think, can't remember why this is a bad idea. Then he grabs my hand and pulls me to my bedroom.

I wonder if this is how it started between him and Tiresa, the persistence, the questions. And suddenly I realize that now I am in Tiresa's place. I'm the sister Mika's cheating with and she's the one being betrayed.

After a day of being insulted and laughed at by friend, acquaintance and stranger, and of being betrayed by Tiresa again by her inaction, an iron enters my soul. It's my turn to come out on top. It's my turn to be the winner. It's time to take charge of my life.

I shut the bedroom door behind us.

Revenge is sweet.

Bella lays on the bed in post-coital exhaustion while Mika strolls through her living room, tucking in his shirt. He accidentally bumps her computer desk and the monitor wakes out of sleep mode. "It's the easiest thing in the world to use our EXCLUSIVE match-making system. Start today and date tomorrow!" says the banner across the top of the screen. Mika bends down for a closer look. "Profile - ShyNSweet

Name: Isabella White

Age: 30

Height: 5'6"

Weight: 54kg

Occupation: Housekeeping Manager and Recreation

Director

Mika chuckles. "Online dating, huh?" he says. "ShyNSweet, 54 kilos—yeah, right." He heads out the door, says goodbye to Abe and Fi and gives them one last hug. He's late to meet Tiresa for drinks before dinner with his partners at the firm.

But it's not Tiresa's ire at him being late that he thinks about, or the fact that he just screwed his ex-wife, whose body revolts him. It's knowing she is looking for another man which bothers him.

Bella had been great for his career when it started out. She had a way with words which helped him win elections with speeches, get jobs with impressive resumes and query letters, and answer correspondence with clients and opponent lawyers, besides cooking, doing laundry and being all that a housewife should be: a servant so her husband so he could do the real work.

But Bella changed as she gained more and more weight, while he grew more successful and ambitious. Nothing wrong with that, but he couldn't be nailed down with a dumpy wife. He couldn't believe it when she announced she was pregnant again. Hadn't they discussed not having anymore kids? Kids were a time and financial burden which he didn't want.

That's when Tiresa came back into the picture. She was everything a successful lawyer with political ambitions deserved: gorgeous, successful in her own career, rich, socially savvy, and kid-free. What choice was there but to upgrade to the older, better sister?

He pulls up to the restaurant. Tiresa's car waits accusingly near the door.

If the upgrade is better, he wonders, then why did he just cheat on his fiancé with the older model? Was there still something between Bella and him?

And why does it bother him so much that she might find a man to be happy with?

Tiresa sits at the bar by herself, waiting for Mika to arrive at 7 p.m. for a drink before dinner with a few of his attorney colleagues. She can't stand his business associates, a pretentious group of men who act like they own the world, use ridiculously verbose vocabulary to sound smarter than they are, and view her, a beautiful woman, as an accessory to a successful career. Disgusting.

She finishes her appletini and signals the bartender for another. She checks her watch again—Mika is late. Three weeks until the engagement party and she still didn't have him trained to show up on time. He will be late to the party to the wedding and probably to his own funeral.

She felt like dying herself this afternoon when Bella ran out of the store. She hadn't time to duck behind a clothes rack to avoid her when she came barreling through the store after that clerk told her off. Tiresa wasn't a praying person, but she prayed fervently then that Bella wouldn't talk to her. Now that would have been embarrassing. What was Bella thinking, shopping at AmandaE? The clerk was right to put her in her place and run her out of there.

They used to shop all the time when they were in college. Of course, they usually shopped at second-hand shops and turned each outing into a treasure hunt. You never knew what you would find in a shop full of cast-offs. Tiresa smiled at the memory of how she could always find just the right vintage top and an accessory like a scarf, vest or costume jewelry and look like she just walked out of Sax 5th Avenue. She might have been a poor college student, but she sure never dressed like it.

She considered a career in fashion and got lots of practice as Bella's personal stylist. Bella had the knack for picking out exactly the wrong thing to wear—anywhere. The first time Tiresa saw Bella's wardrobe, which was when they moved into their dorm room, she shrieked in horror. "Floral print with a lace collar?" Tiresa howled, grabbing the dress off the hangar and tossing it in a garbage bag.

"What are you doing with my dress?" Bella cried, making a grab for it.

"You're never going to wear it again so we're donating it to the trash," Tiresa blocked her way.

"What's wrong with my dress?" Bella demanded.

Tiresa rolled her eyes and continued to rummage through Bella's side of the closet. "Nothing, if it's 1988 and you plan to tease your fringe ten inches above your head. Bella, where do you shop? This is terrible, horrible, ugh!" She tossed three more garments into the trash bag.

Tiresa gladly took her sister shopping that very day, not even bothering to finish unpacking their stuff. Three second-hand shops later, Bella was styling and smiling and Tiresa was no longer ashamed to be seen walking next to her.

Then, unbelievably, Bella and Mika started dating. Dating. Tiresa was never so stunned in all her life. She helped Bella pick out something to wear for her first date with Mika, then after that, Tiresa lost interest in helping her look good. If Bella could catch a man like Mika, then why should she need her help for something as superfluous as dressing?

Tiresa stirs her drink, a cherry speared on the stick, wondering again how she lost Mika to her fat little sister. Bella had always been slightly chubby, but when her weight soared after the wedding and giving birth to Abe and Fi, Tiresa was secretly pleased. Served her right for stealing Mika from her. Tiresa was the beautiful one, the willing one, but Mika was so ambitious back then and Bella's talent for writing sucked him in. She wrote every speech he gave in college and law school and beyond. Mika could say he wanted a light-hearted speech and tada! Bella churned out a chuckling crowd-pleaser. Or maybe he needed a serious one focused on fund-raising for some worthy cause and wham! Bella's words had the audience in tears.

Tiresa looks at her engagement ring, turning it this way and that to make the light reflect off the dozens of diamonds around the four carat one in the center. How galling to be picked over in favor of intellect and talent. But that's over with now, she tells herself. I've got Mika; I won in the end. I'm successful and still beautiful. What does Bella have? Two kids, a divorce and a limited income.

Finally Mika arrives, sees her across the room and nods. "Hey babe, sorry I'm late" he says, brushing her cheek with the briefest of kisses.

Tiresa looks at her watch again to show her annoyance. "Twenty minutes? Making me wait twenty minutes? Really, Mika, you could have called. How long does it take to drop off the kids?"

Mika sits. "I'll have a scotch and soda," he says to the bartender. He straightens his jacket and turns to her. "I said I was sorry. What more do you want? Let's not argue and just relax and have a nice evening."

Tiresa rolls her eyes. "There's no such thing as a nice evening with your partners. Are their wives coming? I detest that Morris woman. She never shuts up about her soccer-playing kids. Like anyone cares about that sort of thing."

Mika shrugs. "Well then, talk about the wedding. All women like to talk weddings. That way you dominate the conversation."

Tiresa gives him a dark look. "That's very sexist of you to say."

"What?" Mika asks innocently.

"All women like to talk weddings'. Jeez, Mika, give me more credit than that. I'm not 'all women'. I've worked hard to make myself more than that. I hope you want to marry me for more than my looks."

Mika pats her hand and plants a lingering kiss on her lips. "Of course I'm marrying you for more than your looks, sweetheart."

Tiresa plays her fingers between his. "Then why do you want to marry me?" she asks teasingly, fishing for a compliment.

Mika is distracted by the arrival of his drink. He gulps it down and then kisses her again. "Well, you're smoking hot in bed for one, and—" In a flash Tiresa punches his chest. "Ow!" he yelps. "I'm serious."

"So am I," says Tiresa. "So if I wasn't pretty or good in bed, would you marry me?"

"Baby," Mika crooned while adjusting the time on his watch, "do you have to ask? I just love you. Period. Do you need any other reason? Want me to draw up a legal defense of why I want to spend the rest of my life with the woman I love?"

"Yes, and I'm sure you said the same thing to Bella. If you can dump one sister for the other, how do I know you won't dump me and go back to her? Or find someone else?"

Now it was Mika's turn to roll his eyes. "You always have to make everything so damn complicated. What brought this up? No, no don't tell me, I don't want to know. I'm not going to dump you for her or anyone else. And I'd rather not go to dinner with this conversation hanging over us so can we please forget about it? Come on, it's time to go."

He gulps down the last of his drink and pulls out his wallet. Tiresa gathers her purse and stands. They walk out of the bar, Mika's hand on the small of her back. The gesture used to make her feel special, like she meant something special to him, like she belonged to him. They are a handsome couple and the entire room stares as they pass by. Obviously they are happy, successful and wealthy—the beautiful people normally seen in celebrity magazines and on the society page of the newspaper.

Now it took every ounce of strength in her to not shrug him off.

Mika always adjusts his watch when he's lying.