

Follow That Dream

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Chapter Six

She strode ahead, trying to outrun her thoughts.

"Rose! Wait up."

Unwillingly, she slowed and stopped to stare over the landscape, toward the city of Auckland.

Sean halted beside her and let out a slow appreciative whistle. "Nice view."

Rose noted his breathing remained steady after climbing the rise while she still gasped for breath. "Mmmm," she managed. Frissons of awareness danced up and down her spine. She risked a sideways glance at Sean and found his brown eyes trained on her. Not the beautiful skyline of Auckland, but her.

"Here come Chef and Susan," she muttered. She fell in behind Susan and concentrated on the crunching sound her feet made on the scoria path. She marched with a measured step, aware of the man who walked behind. Unconsciously her hips swayed, and she became conscious of her jeans clinging to her backside. A fine coating of moisture coated her skin, and a muted groan of despair emerged, the process of walking pure torture.

Friends? No, she didn't think so. *Go on--admit the truth to yourself at least.* She wanted more than friendship from Sean. An affair? Rose expelled a heavy sigh. Heck, emotions churned and tangled so much inside, she had no idea what she wanted.

Susan laughed at something Chef said, then turned to look back at Rose. "Are you all right back there? We're nearly at the boardwalk. The walking is easier once we reach the boardwalk."

"I'm fine," Rose chirped, giving a toothy smile. Her smile died the instant Susan turned away. Rats, she wasn't so old she couldn't walk to the top of Rangitoto.

The path widened, and Sean moved up to fall in step beside Rose. "Rose and I are fine," he called. He grinned at her, and Rose barely controlled the urgent need to moisten her lips. She hastened her pace, stumbling on an exposed tree root. Sean grabbed her before she hit the ground. The touch of his hand felt like the shock from an electric fence and made her twice as jumpy.

"Thanks." Rose bit her lip and admitted to herself she was everything but fine. And it was this man's fault! She edged away, eyeing him warily.

They passed the safari train parked in the middle of the track, and a minute later, Rose spotted the end of the path and the start of the boardwalk. As promised, the going proved easier, and the boardwalk was wide enough to accommodate two people walking side by side. She glanced at a strategically placed signpost. According to the sign, they would arrive at the top in a matter of minutes.

"Great view," Sean said as they all paused to appreciate the panorama. "Is that the Hauraki Gulf out that way?"

"Yes," Chef said. "We're lucky it's so clear. Some days there's a bit of haze."

Clustered groups of people pointed cameras at both the spectacular view and each other to record the day. Noisy shouts punctuated by laughter filled the air.

"I think we should find a quieter spot to eat our lunch," declared Susan.

Rose noted Sean's uneasy appraisal of the crowds and wondered why. A camera clicked, and he winced. Rose smiled inwardly. Maybe he didn't photograph well either. "I know a spot," she said.

"Lead the way," Sean replied, and the others nodded in agreement.

Rose skirted the scattered groups of chattering people. They walked for five minutes, and soon the noise and chatter faded to a silence broken only by the crunch of their own footsteps, the hum of insects and the occasional squawk of a bird flying overhead. Rose turned down a small sidetrack, walked a short way and halted in the shade of a leafy bush.

"Most people don't come this far," she said. "They tend to stick to the other side, near the boardwalk."

"How did you know about this spot? Have you been here before?" Sean tugged off his sunglasses, placed them in his pocket, then dropped to the ground and stretched out.

Rose sucked in a breath, acutely conscious of his athletic physique sprawled on the ground before her. She swallowed and averted her eyes, concentrating on Susan and Chef instead. "The kids and I came over on a school trip years ago. Each parent had charge of six children. I found this place when a couple of the more hyperactive kids in my group discovered the path. Believe me--the visit was bedlam."

Susan and Chef laughed. "Rather you than me." Susan plonked down on a grassy spot beside Sean. "Come on, MacNamara. Stop staring at Rose and break out the food. I'm starving."

"I like staring at Rose."

Rose reached for the daypack, pretending she didn't hear. Inside, she tingled as though his gaze touched her in a physical way. She unzipped the pack, pulled out several packs of sandwiches and handed them around. Sean accepted his with a grin of thanks that made Rose think he knew how much he rattled her.

"Rose is brilliant with children," he commented. "She'll have a baby to deal with soon."

Her own packet of sandwiches fell from nerveless fingers. Rose snatched it back up and fumbled with the plastic wrapping. The knowledge that Sean observed her so closely, at home with her children disturbed what little inner peace she had left. No wonder edginess shook her all the time.

"You'll be a grandmother, Rose." Susan picked up a sandwich and waved it in the air. "Doesn't that make you feel old?"

"Yes," Rose snapped, unimpressed at Susan's verbalization. "But I won't be here, remember? I'll be in Paris." She bit into her sandwich and nearly choked. Hot chili sauce. A film of tears blurred her sight as she prodded the roof of her mouth with her tongue. That would teach her. She dropped the sandwich, her mouth on fire, and busied herself opening the wine.

"So, Sean," Susan said, eyes gleaming. "Were you a good child or were you an unholy terror like the kids Rose had to supervise?"

Rose's ears pricked up. Sean didn't talk much about himself. Whenever they were together, they spoke of work, her children or of his aunts' bed and breakfast.

"I was a normal boy," Sean said. "Nothing interesting to tell."

"What about your teenage years?"

"Ah, the teenage years." Sean laughed with real amusement. "I spent my time learning to play the guitar." He paused to bite into a sandwich.

Mesmerized, Rose watched his mouth while he ate, his tanned throat as he swallowed.

"Good sandwiches," he said. "I like the hot mustard."

He would, Rose thought, in exasperation. She handed around the glasses of wine and sipped an orange juice herself. Hopefully, the feeling in her mouth would return some time soon.

"Were you any good with the guitar?" Chef asked.

"Passable. Not as good as some, better than others."

"Is that modesty we hear?" Susan teased and tapped him playfully on the arm.

"Okay, I'll tell the truth. I played well."

Humor lit Susan's face. "I just love a man who knows his own worth."

Rose looked away, unable to watch Susan's flirtation with Sean. She poured herself a glass of wine and told herself she had no right to feel possessive about him.

"My friend and I started a band. I played guitar and my friend played the drums."

"I bet your parents enjoyed that," Susan commented.

Sean grinned. "If you want to hear about my band you'll have to stop interrupting. Chef, don't you have any control?"

"Nope. Not a bit," Chef admitted, with a cheerful wink at Susan.

"So sorry!" Susan snapped a salute. "It won't happen again, sir."

Sean grinned. "Do you want to hear or not?"

Susan reached across Sean for the cheese and crackers. *If she moved any closer she'd be sitting on top of him*, Rose thought acidly. Didn't Chef mind?

"Talk, MacNamara," Susan said. "Or do we need to torture you to get at the truth?"

Sean coughed, almost choking on the sandwich he'd bitten into. Another cough rattled his throat, and he gratefully accepted the glass of juice Rose handed him. "Sandwich went down the wrong way," he muttered when he could speak again. "I was telling you about our band. There were five of us. At first we practiced at Steve's house. I think we proved a bit much for both Steve's mom and the neighbors because we were told to find alternative premises."

Rose had to grin at the disclosure. She recalled a similar situation with Mark and imagined that Sean had edited the conversation. In her experience, mothers with ringing ears were seldom polite or softly spoken.

"Picture the scene—five intense teenage boys with no talent but loads of enthusiasm." His mouth curled in a wry smile. "Equate enthusiasm with noise. Lots of noise. In the space of a week we were kicked out of four different houses. When it got to the stage we didn't have anywhere left to practice our band broke up."

Rose placed her wine glass in a safe place and lay back, using her sweatshirt as a pillow. She listened to the conversation in a half drowsy state.

"So that was the end of the famous band?" Susan asked.

"That and the fact it was summer. We were at the stage where we wanted to impress the girls, and you can't do that from inside a dirty, dusty garage, especially since the girls refused to enter."

"Girls, huh?" Susan teased.

"Yeah."

Rose could imagine the scene all too well. The girls had probably flocked to Sean. She frowned. They still flocked. The woman who finally caught him would need eyes in the back of her head. Face it, she didn't need hassles like that in her life. Not after Tony.

"Susan, look at that!" Chef grabbed both binoculars and camera and shot to his feet.

Rose struggled to sit and blinked against the glare as she tried to see what the excitement was about.

"I'm sure that's a Cook's Petrel!"

Rose watched Susan climb to her feet and saunter after Chef. A spirited conversation ensued, then Chef grabbed Susan and kissed her. Thoroughly. A gasp escaped Rose as she wondered what Sean made of the kiss. Susan certainly wasn't putting up any fight.

"I don't think you were meant to see that," Sean said with amusement. "What with your relationship rules and all."

Rose turned to gape at him. "Don't you mind?"

"Why should I? Susan is like a younger sister."

"But I thought--"

"You thought wrong," Sean said. "It's you I'm interested in. I thought I'd made that clear."

"Oh." There it was, his interest stated concisely. A sense of panic rippled through her, and she experienced a desperate need to escape his presence. Except running wasn't an option right now. "What about your girlfriend?"

"I lied." At her indignant look, he hastened to add, "I wanted the job. Bad. Tell the truth. You would have done the same."

Rose gave a soft groan as one by one he demolished every one of her objections to pursuing a relationship with him. She lay back down.

"Do you mind if I move a bit closer?"

Mind? Yes, she minded! Her eyes snapped open to see an innocent look etched on his handsome face.

"The ground's rocky over here."

Rose cast a doubtful look at the ground he indicated. She thought it looked similar to the bit she was sprawled out on. "It's the same--"

Sean moved quickly, before she could verbalize her doubts. He settled his large frame right next to her then stretched out again with his hands under his head. He closed his eyes and sighed. Rose decided it was safe enough to close her eyes again but full relaxation proved impossible. She sought distraction in chatter.

“Uh... so the girls won you over.”

“Yeah. We all voted to disband after the first week and a half. Steve kept up his drumming though. He still plays in a band.”

“Would I have heard of him?”

He hesitated, and a note of caution crept into his voice. “What sort of music do you like?”

“Easy listening. Mostly country.”

Sean snickered and rolled to his side—close enough that Rose felt uneasy again. “You won’t have heard of him. He plays in a heavy metal band.”

Susan and Chef interrupted them. “We’re going to head back now so we have time to explore the lava caves. Do you two want to come?” Chef asked.

“What’s the time?” Rose asked. The idea of another energetic walk didn’t hold much appeal.

“Half one.”

“You go, Sean. The caves are worth seeing. I’m going to laze around here. I can meet you back at the ferry.” *There! Very clever*, Rose, she congratulated herself.

“No, I’ll stay here,” Sean said. “I don’t feel like moving. I’ll walk back to the ferry with Rose.”

Great. Contrary man. He intended to stay and toy with her, making her even edgier than she was now. She sat up and searched through her bag for a water bottle.

“Okay, we’ll see you later.” Chef paused and turned back. “Susan and I intend to take our time so don’t panic if we’re not on the same ferry.”

“Right,” Rose said. “I’ll see you both at work tomorrow if I don’t see you before.” She waved them off and watched them head down the slope. Her eyes narrowed and focused on their clasped hands. Some detective she’d make. She settled back down but took care to widen the gap between her and Sean.

“Do you still play the guitar?”

“Yeah. I brought it on holiday with me. I enjoy playing. Music relaxes me.”

Rose yawned and closed her eyes against the glare. She woke with a jolt, bolting upright and glancing at her watch in panic. Two o’clock, she thought in relief. Plenty of time to make the ferry.

Sean’s rhythmic breathing told her he still slept. She burrowed through the contents of her pack, and pulled out a chocolate bar. The temptation to look at Sean almost overwhelmed her, but she refused to succumb. Looking at the view was safer.

Much safer.

She ripped off the wrapper and took a bite of chocolate and peanuts while studying the sparkling blue-green waters of the Gulf.

Out on the Gulf she could see small fizz boats anchored, and it looked as though most of the occupants were fishing. A yacht sailed past, the colorful sails and spinnaker propelling the boat rapidly across the water.

Well, that took all of five minutes, she thought. *Now what?* Rose knew she shouldn’t but the dangerous, forbidden beckoned. She chewed on her bottom lip, hesitated, then her breath whooshed out, and her gaze stole toward Sean. She thought his whiskey-

brown eyes were his best feature but even with them closed, she found other characteristics to admire. There was his well-shaped mouth and chiseled chin, hidden beneath a layer of stubble at present. The sun glinted in his short blond hair making it shine with the richness of gold.

She wondered why he was so determined in his pursuit when there were so many other beautiful women, nearer his own age. Ten years might not mean much to him but she felt immeasurably older. Besides, Tony hadn't wanted her; he'd wanted a younger, more beautiful girl. Why would Sean want to deal with all the physical and emotional baggage attached to a forty-year-old divorcee?

Plus, there was Mark and Sara to consider.

A man of Sean's age had every right to expect a family of his own. Rose had children. More children were out of the question. Not impossible but highly improbable. Face facts, she told herself. She had neither the time nor the energy for anything but fulfilling her dream. Her trip to Paris remained the most important thing in her life. Why mess things up with a man when she was so close to her goal?

The point exactly. Even if the man made her motor purr, as Sara and her best friend so delicately put the situation the other day, she had to step away and focus on the things that were important.

Rose retraced her visual foray in a kind of a mental farewell and came to a confused halt. Two brown eyes twinkled up at her. Two wide-awake, fully alert brown eyes.

Caught in the act.

"Gonna kiss me awake?" he asked, his voice husky.

His words sparked a desire to meet the dare, but she balked at following through. "You're already awake."

"Come on. Get with the spirit of the fairy tale."

"Which fairy tale?" She inched away.

His gaze zeroed in on her lips. "Sleeping Beauty, for starters."

Rose wanted to kiss him. Desperately. Despite all the silent lectures. "I don't think so."

"I dare you."

She ached to meet his dare, and he knew it. She wet her lips and edged closer, her pulse thundering in her ears.

"Just a kiss," he whispered. "I promise not to bite."

She moved a little closer, then it was too late for retreat. His hand snaked behind her head as if he feared she'd change her mind, and she tumbled on top of his chest.

Blue eyes warred with brown. "This is not a good idea," she said weakly.

"Probably not," he murmured, "but it'll be fun, Rosie Sunshine." A pirate's grin spread across his face, and a tremor of pure want shot through her body. "Don't you ever want to live dangerously?"

Rose swallowed. She wanted to tell him the most danger she liked was crossing the main street of Parnell on a busy day or watching a scary movie by herself. That was danger. Kissing Sean, for a third time, rated as outright stupidity.

But one kiss couldn't hurt, a little voice whispered in her head. *Surely?* Rose closed the remaining space between them until their lips touched.

A chaste touch.

Rose felt firm lips touch hers, then... nothing.

A kiss between friends. A kiss that would send Sleeping Beauty off to slumber for another hundred years.

The kiss left her inexplicably dissatisfied.

Sean's eyelids flickered open. He watched her face, his expression bearing a look of what she could have sworn was challenge.

"Well, that was fun," he said in a dry tone.

Unaccountably, she felt annoyed, and the look she shot him was cool.

He smirked, and Rose lost the plot, the whole travesty of the kiss fuelling her anger. She darted close again, nipped at his bottom lip, and felt his entire body tense in surprise. Then without further thought, she plunged her hands into his hair, enjoying the silky texture, so different from her own untidy mop.

Sean opened his mouth to speak, but Rose decided she wanted confusion. *His*. In no mood for listening, she muffled his words with her own mouth, the experience of being the aggressor new and heady stuff. A sense of urgency drove her actions, the idea of fleeting time propelled her to greedily soak up each touch, every sensation while the kiss lasted.

Her tongue flicked out, sweeping the outside of his mouth. He tasted of orange juice and wine, sweet but tart. Large masculine hands rested on her shoulders, then the pressure changed to a more possessive hold, drawing her much closer until their bodies aligned. Hard muscles cushioned her softer curves, making her want more.

Their clothes were a barrier to further exploration, and frustration backed up inside Rose. She wanted to touch his chest, she wanted to taste his skin and scrape her teeth across his flat nipples. Rose deepened the kiss. A low moan caught at the back of her throat. As good as this was, she craved more. Her breasts ached insistently while moisture pooled between her legs. She needed his hands on her bare flesh...

"Oh, Dad. Look at those people." A giggle followed, and the voice of a young boy joined the conversation.

"Yuck. They're kissing."

Rose ripped her mouth from Sean's and rolled off him in one quick move. Sean grabbed his cap and pulled it low over his face before sitting up. He fished out his sunglasses and pushed them on to hide the glare.

"Sorry," a man muttered.

Rose's cheeks burned. Where had they come from? They hadn't entered from the main track. Embarrassment almost crippled her, and she found she couldn't look at Sean. Instead, she righted her clothing.

A woman entered the fray. "Don't apologize, Adam. It's disgusting, that's what it is. This is a public footpath." The woman pursed her lips and looked as if she'd stepped in something nasty. "They should be arrested, carrying on that way in public."

"Why were you letting that girl kiss you, Mister?"

A splutter escaped Sean. "I felt like a kiss," he murmured.

"I'd let him kiss me," stated the teenage girl. She looked Sean up and down. "Yeah, he can kiss me anytime."

"Melissa!" the children's mother cried in horror.

From the corner of her eye, Rose noted the grin that spread across Sean's face. Her own mouth thinned.

"It's disgusting, I tell you. Come along, children. Adam!" The woman's forward play button seemed stuck since she kept repeating herself.

"We didn't ask you to watch." Rose wasn't sure which emotion to focus on—embarrassment at being caught, annoyance at Sean for tempting her, irritation at the stupid girl's attempts at flirtation, or defiance against the woman who carried on as if they'd committed the crime of the century.

"This is a public walkway," the woman shot back, in triumph. "People like you should confine their activities to the correct place. It's disgusting."

"Lynn, come on."

The woman shook off her husband's hand. "Disgusting, I say."

"Come on," Rose muttered.

"Not the place, not in front of children."

Rose's irritation boiled over into fury, part of her anger directed at herself. "It was a kiss! One lousy kiss. With an attitude like that how did *you* manage to have two children? Did you find them in a cabbage patch?"

The woman spluttered and bristled with indignation. "I am going to report you to the Island authorities!"

Rose seethed. Over a stupid kiss? "Who? The Department of Conservation? I think you'll find they're more interested in the breeding habits of native birds."

She heard a small choking noise. So did the others. Five heads turned from the compelling discussion to investigate. A snicker escaped Sean this time, and Rose noted the visible part of his face had turned red from trying to hold back his amusement. Finally, he exploded with a hoot of laughter and clutched his sides, unable to contain his hilarity any longer.

"Really! Adam. Children. We're going." The woman gestured to the children and her husband. The three formed a single file and stepped past Rose and Sean with the woman falling in behind. The woman held her head so high Rose thought she might trip over her own feet if she wasn't careful.

The woman paused then turned back to Rose, a smug look on her round face. "You're going to miss the last ferry," she declared, and with a pleased nod, she fell in behind the troops and marched them off.

Rose looked at her watch and saw with horror that it still read two o'clock. "What's the time?" she demanded, giving her wristwatch a determined thump and a shake for good measure. She held it to her ear. It couldn't be that late. Susan and Chef had only left a short time ago. Hadn't they?

"I don't know. I forgot to put my watch back on after my shower this morning." He glanced out over the water. "Is that the ferry over there?"

Rose leapt to her feet and glared at the boat chugging away from the island. She whirled and leveled a glare at Sean. *This was his fault.* If she hadn't become so engrossed with him, she would have noticed it was getting late. She wouldn't be in this predicament.

"Do you believe that woman?" Sean laughed. "The look on her face when you asked how she managed to have children."

Rose's eyes narrowed. She rammed the leftover food in her pack and yanked the protesting zip. "Don't you understand?" she demanded, turning on Sean. "We're stuck here until tomorrow morning."

His brows rose. "We can book into a room somewhere."

"There's no accommodation on Rangitoto. Nothing!" The angry retort seemed to echo for long moments afterward. Rose swallowed the lump in her throat. "Mark and Sara will worry." Her breath came raggedly in impotent fury. *"This is your fault."*

Please come back to download chapter seven next month.

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