

**Follow That Dream**

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## Chapter Four

Sean bolted upright, alarmed by the strident clamor that dragged him from a deep sleep. An alarm. He relaxed when he identified the sound coming from a nearby room. Then he checked his watch and grimaced. The alarm was set for an obscenely early hour, considering it was Saturday. The alarm continued, and Sean concluded the owner of the alarm thought the hour early as well. They didn't hurry to shut off the persistent little devil. After a good minute of determined clamor, the clock halted mid-chirp. Then the shower started.

Sean grunted and rolled over. He wondered which room belonged to Rose. That could be her in the shower, he mused, then instantly blocked that line of thought. *Bad call, MacNamara*. Thinking like that, especially about Rose Tramfield, was the path to disaster. Didn't like men. Remember?

He sat up, punched his pillow and settled back down. A vision of Rose drifted through his mind. Damn! It seemed lolling around in bed wouldn't help his mind tread the straight and narrow. Sean struggled from the tangle of sheets. He stretched and rubbed brisk hands through his hair, pausing briefly in surprise. The concept of short hair still surprised him but it was a good feeling. He enjoyed being treated as Mr. Ordinary by the people he met each day. He grinned, yanked on his jeans and tugged on his shirt, not bothering to button it in his hurry to use the bathroom and find a cup of coffee. At the kitchen door, he skidded to a stop.

This must be his lucky day. The early morning riser was Rose.

The wire whisk clanged against the edges of the mixing bowl. Rose put her whole body into mixing up the batter. His eyes narrowed. Yep--her whole curvy body. He leaned against the doorframe, enjoying both the domestic scene and the aroma of fragrant coffee dripping through the filter into the waiting pot.

She looked different. More casual, he decided, with the pair of black leggings and long orange shirt. Then there was the frilly white apron that circled her waist. An eye-opener, that apron. It was the sort of apron that... He smirked. *Mind out of the gutter, MacNamara!*

The cap of unruly curls looked more tousled than usual, as if she'd just climbed from bed and hadn't bothered to use a brush. His body reacted with a surge of need but he tamped it down. Steady, he reminded himself. His nose twitched at the scent of the coffee, and he pushed away from the door.

"Good morning, Rose."

The woman nearly shot out of her skin. She whirled, clutched one hand to her chest and took a deep breath, the color in her face fluctuating like a sunset. Batter dripped from the whisk she held in front of her like a weapon.

Sean put out a hand and touched her on the arm in a soothing manner. She flinched.

"Sorry." He tried a smile. "Didn't mean to startle you. I thought you heard me coming."

"Ah... I was... No." She inched away from his touch, but he noticed her gaze dart down his body. Suddenly, his pulse beat a little quicker and his body hummed to life. *Steady. Down boy.*

Color flooded her face again. She grabbed a paper towel and busied herself wiping up the splotches of batter from the floor then went back to mixing. Sean's mouth twisted in a wry grin. He had to stop reacting with his body and use his mind instead. Rose wasn't interested, merely startled to find a male in her kitchen at eight on a Saturday morning.

"I don't suppose I could have a cup of coffee? I could smell the coffee from all the way upstairs."

"Help yourself," she said. She avoided his gaze, and moved to stand by the stovetop.

Still embarrassed, he decided, studying her tense body. "Do you want me to pour a coffee for you?"

"No, thanks," she said. "I'll finish making the pancakes first."

Sean fetched a mug and poured himself a coffee before settling in at the breakfast bar to watch. "Do you always get up so early? Most people sleep in on a Saturday morning, especially if they've worked late the night before."

A knob of butter sizzled when it hit the hot pan. "Tony is coming to pick up the kids. I wanted to make sure they were ready when he arrives." She shot him a quick glance that skittered away almost immediately.

"Mark and Sara are almost adults," he said, not trying to hide his surprise.

"I was awake, anyway," she said in an abrupt voice. Her back straightened as she drew herself up tall.

"I wasn't criticizing. I--"

The doorbell sounded, followed by a hefty thump. Rose glared in the direction of the door.

"I'll answer it," she muttered, placing the whisk down carefully on the bench. Her soft-soled shoes slapped the tiles as she made her way to the door.

Sean heard the rattle of the security chain then the creak of the door as it opened. A murmur of voices floated down the hall. He sipped his coffee and wondered if he'd be lucky enough to score breakfast. Those pancakes smelled good.

"Are the kids ready?"

Sounded as if the visitors were heading for the kitchen. Sean took another sip of coffee. He tried to imagine Rose's ex. He already knew the man was a fool for ditching Rose, but couldn't contain the surge of curiosity.

"You're early," Rose stated. "Would you like coffee while you wait?"

"Do you want coffee, sweetheart?"

Sean frowned and angled his body towards the door.

Rose appeared, followed by a younger woman and a man. "Take a seat," she said, waving a hand toward the wooden table and chairs at the far end of the kitchen. Her expression told Sean her polite words were at odds with those in her mind.

The man sauntered over to the table, one arm tucked solicitously around the petite brunette. Sean tore his gaze from Rose and studied the new arrivals. He guessed the girl would be around Mark's age, maybe a little younger. His gaze moved on to the ex-husband. The man stood around six foot and had dark hair. Sean supposed women would find him attractive. He looked a bit like that guy who played the character Magnum, in the old TV show his parents enjoyed.

Rose's ex pulled out a seat for the girl, then once she'd sat, tugged out another chair, and moved it up close before sitting. He murmured something before he turned his attention to Rose.

"Crystal takes her coffee black," he stated. "And you know how I like my coffee."

Sean didn't like Rose's ex. Smug being one of the many words that came to mind. Annoyance simmered through him on Rose's behalf. It couldn't be easy entertaining an ex and his latest girlfriend.

Rose poured coffee and took it over to the couple, her face now expressionless. Sean thought she did well, acting with dignity. He knew he wouldn't like an ex shoving the latest conquest at him, but he supposed, given the circumstances, Rose really didn't care what Tony did since they were divorced.

"Mark and Sara shouldn't be long." She walked over to the stove and pulled the pan off the heat. "Would you like more coffee, Sean?"

"Thanks."

Rose's ex straightened from his casual sprawl, his head swiveling like a predator scenting prey. "Who's he?"

The impassive face remained intact as Rose handed Sean a refill. She turned slowly to face her ex. "Tony, this is Sean. Sean, my ex-husband, Tony."

Sean stood, intending to shake hands.

"What's he doing here?" Tony snapped.

Tony looked Sean up and down, and Sean stiffened. His hand dropped to his side. The man really was an idiot.

"Well?"

"What do you think he's doing here?" Rose asked in a soft voice. She crossed the kitchen to stand next to Sean. One arm slid around his waist, and she stood on tiptoe to plant warm lips smack-dab on top of his. For a brief second, Sean froze. Heck, who wouldn't freeze with Rose's soft curves pressed flush with his body. Soft lips moved tentatively over his, fuelling the hunger that had grown in rapid leaps and bounds from the first moment he'd seen her in the park. He smothered a groan. She sure didn't kiss as if she preferred females, he thought hazily, struggling with the need to snatch her up in his arms, to explore her mouth fully, and then start on her body. Oh yeah, the curvy body that fit his like they were made for each other.

A faint noise in the background reminded him of their audience. He raised his mouth and gazed deep into her eyes. Determined, pleading eyes, he noted. He winked and couldn't resist whispering a kiss across those soft pink lips again.

Her blue eyes narrowed.

Sean pulled her hand from his shoulder and held it between his own hands. "Your hands are cold, honey," he drawled.

This time the blue eyes glared.

Sean saw Tony Tramfield pick up his jaw. "Rose?"

"What?"

Rose's ex frowned. "You mean... you... you two?" Tony Tramfield appeared to have sudden problems in expressing himself.

"That's right." Sean flashed a reassuring grin at Rose, hoping she'd relax before she gave the game away.

"But you're younger than Rose."

*He could talk.* "Not by much," Sean replied, directing a meaningful gaze at Crystal. The other man looked away, and Sean felt he'd made his point.

Footsteps sounded overhead, the door flew open and Sara burst into the kitchen. Her arrival broke the uncomfortable silence. "Dad! You're early," she said, reaching down to give him a hug. She turned, and Sean saw she hardly missed a beat on seeing her mother wrapped in his arms. "So," she said to him, "what are you and Mum doing today?"

Rose tensed on hearing Sara's arrival. Both body and mind were numbed by the gross act of stupidity she'd just committed. Good grief! What on earth had possessed her to kiss the man?

Well, on the bright side, now she knew what he tasted like. She didn't have to fantasize any more. She knew he tasted spicy, exotic. Delicious. Her gaze drifted from his chest to settle on his lips.

"Thinking about a repeat performance, Rosie Sunshine?" he murmured. "I didn't think you liked men."

Rose sucked in a deep breath, feeling as though someone had dropped a bucket of icy water over her head. What was he talking about? His finger traced a lazy pattern on her upper arm, and she caught back a sigh of pure wanton need. Fool! Get with the program. She worked to disguise her annoyance with her pitiful self and glanced at Tony. She noted the tight jaw, the furrows in his forehead with a sliver of glee. Even though her gesture rated as childish, maybe, just maybe, the cost of the performance had been worthwhile. She noted cracks appearing in the suave mask Tony liked to project.

"Sara." Rose heard the rasp in her voice and cringed but carried on gamely. "See if Mark is ready yet."

"Okay," Sara said, skipping from the room, whistling.

Rose cast around for a safe topic of conversation, started to speak then felt Sean's hand at her nape. The words disappeared into mist.

"Warmer now?" he asked, his busy hands stirring nerve endings the length of her body. Heat from his other hand branded her hip. Warmer? If she'd heated up any more she'd spontaneously combust. She really should move out of Sean's reach.

"Rose," Tony said with a trace of impatience. "Before the kids come down, I'd like a word. In private."

Tony wanted his say. How strange. Rose took a deep breath and figuratively leapt off the cliff that loomed ahead. "You can say whatever you want in front of Sean. We have no secrets." *Great going, Rose. Shovel more coal on the fire.*

"I don't think you should have your men friends sleep over when the kids are here," Tony stated.

Rose did a double take. He what?

"Sara didn't turn a hair when she saw the two of you. What sort of message are you sending when you flaunt your boyfriends in front of the kids? Half naked boyfriends," he added, his tone pompous as his gaze raked Sean's chest.

Fury lanced through her. After all his sneaking around—the lying and cheating. "What I do in my own home is none of your business. You gave up the right to tell me what to do when you started fooling around with other women." She snuck a look at Sean, wondering what he made of all this.

A giggle sounded from Crystal and broke the building tension. "I think he's cute," she said. Guileless blue eyes touched on Sean's chest and lower. "Great muscle tone."

They all turned to stare at Crystal with differing reactions.

Rose heard Sean's soft chuckle and glared at the younger woman.

"Who asked your opinion?" Tony growled.

*Exactly!* thought Rose.

Mark, Tanya, and Sara joined them in the kitchen, bringing a halt to the conversation. The painful silence stretched, and Rose opened her mouth to say something. Anything.

Mark beat her to it. "Dad, you remember Tanya."

Her ex-husband smiled, all charm. Rose bit back a snort of derision and made a production of checking the time. They would leave soon. She hoped.

"Dad, I'm sorry but we can't come with you today. Tanya isn't feeling well."

Rose saw Tony's frown and steeled herself for the pending explosion. "Your grandparents are looking forward to seeing you both. They'll be disappointed if you don't go."

"I'm sorry, Dad, but..."

The look Mark shot in her direction cried for help, but Rose ignored him, feeling more concerned for Tanya. The girl looked green. Rose walked over to the pantry and reached for a canister of crackers. She handed a couple to Tanya. "Eat them slowly," she murmured. "They'll help settle your stomach."

Tony pushed his coffee mug away and stood. "Mark, our visit is arranged. We should leave now to avoid the traffic."

"But you don't understand," Mark said, an edge of desperation in his voice. "Tanya is pregnant. We're having a baby."

"What?" Tony looked blank.

Mark swallowed. "A baby."

"A baby?" Tony gasped, sinking back to his seat.

"Oh, Tony!" Crystal clapped her hands together. "Isn't that great? You're going to be a grandfather!"

The facade of charm dropped by the wayside, and Tony leveled a withering glare at Crystal before concentrating an attack on Rose. *"This is your fault."* The tick in Tony's right eye, a sure indication of raw fury, sprang to life.

Rose moved away from Sean and met Tony's accusing eyes without a flinch. "My fault? I thought we agreed it took two people to make a baby." Her dig at past history slid right past him.

"Of course it's your fault. You should supervise my children more closely instead of fooling around with a... a toy boy."

"Toy boy!" Rose spluttered. Her hands gripped the edge of the breakfast bar, and she wished it were Tony's neck. *"Sean is a friend."*

"Ah, Dad," Sara cut in hurriedly. "Perhaps we should leave now. We don't want to be late. Gran will worry."

Tony lurched to his feet. "Mark, I'll give your excuses to your grandparents." He glared at Rose. *"You have not heard the end of this."*

The kitchen cleared in seconds flat. Tony, Crystal and Sara left, and Mark and Tanya fled upstairs leaving Rose alone with Sean. The need to vent her anger in a good old-fashioned, foot-stomping tantrum almost overwhelmed her. She bit down on her bottom lip and gathered up the empty coffee mugs instead, clinking them together in a careless manner.

"I've never been called a toy boy before." Sean stretched lazily and grinned. "Did you see the look on your ex's face when Crystal informed him he was going to be a grandfather?"

Rose tore her gaze from Sean's bare chest and dumped the mugs in the sink. "I fail to see the humor," she snapped. "Tony acts like a thwarted child when things don't go his way. He's going to make my life very difficult."

"But I thought he left you."

She managed a strangled laugh. "Tony leave me? You must be joking. His life was nice and cozy. A series of affairs with the women he worked with and the little wife waiting patiently in the wings. Why would he want out?"

"You divorced him?"

Rose shrugged irritably. "I'd had enough. It was either that or murder. The law frowns on murder." She turned back to the sink. Unshed tears stung at the back of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. No matter how much her failed marriage hurt.

Back when she was eighteen, with youth's enthusiasm still intact, she'd thought her marriage would last forever. The failure didn't sit comfortably, which was why this time Rose was determined to fulfill her dream. She wanted to prove she could do something right.

She intended to control her destiny this time.

Much, much safer that way.

She walked to the stovetop and turned on a front element, seeking comfort in the everyday actions of cooking. She picked up the jug of pancake mix. "Are you interested in breakfast?"

"Please."

Rose swallowed and turned to face Sean. "I want to apologize. I should have guessed Tony would jump to conclusions when he saw you here. My actions didn't help." She hesitated then plunged on. "His behavior is all my fault. I knew he would react like this, but for once I thought it would be nice to..." She trailed off, giving an uneasy shrug.

Sean flashed an impish grin. "You thought it would be nice to give your ex a taste of his own behavior."

"Yes," she admitted. Her actions, summarized verbally, sounded childish. Petty. She hung her head. This was not one of her better moments.

She supposed she was lucky. At least Sean wasn't screaming with laughter or worse, threatening to sue her for sexual harassment. She poured a round of batter into the hot pan.

Sean leaned back against the kitchen counter and watched, a smile playing on his lips. "Actually, I'm kind of relieved."

Her head shot up. "Relieved? Why?"

"Because since I first saw you, I've wanted to get to know you better but you treat all men as though they're worse than manure. I decided you liked women."

It took a while for her to get his drift. When she did, her jaw dropped. "Like women?" She dropped her spatula and stared at him in consternation. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I... you... never mind," he muttered. "I know the truth now. I'm happy to be a friend any time."

"But that's what I'm trying to tell you," she said with clear irritation. "We can't be friends. Not in the way you mean." Rose paced the length of the kitchen then spun around to return. "Believe me, I'm flattered, but people will think the worst. They'll take one look at you and see a young man in his prime. Then they'll look at me and see an older woman. A *divorcee*. And do you know what they'll be thinking? I'll tell you what! *Look at that desperate woman trying to regain her lost youth*. I don't want that! I like my life the way it is. I have my children, a job I like, and in six months time I'm going overseas to fulfill a lifelong dream. *I don't need a man to be happy*."

"What about love, Rose?" he asked, undaunted by her tirade. "Do you intend to live your life alone? Isn't that letting your ex win?"

Belatedly, Rose realized smoke curled from the hot pan. Using a towel, she yanked the pan from the heat.

"You giving out free advice to the lovelorn and lost?" she muttered with more than a hint of sarcasm. "Okay, Doctor MacNamara, here's one for you. What side of the fence does cyber sex fall on? Is it adultery?" Suddenly, she felt every one of her forty years. She turned her attention to the singed pancake as she fought for control. "Sean, I think you should leave."

Rose tensed when she heard the soft rustle of clothing behind her. She whirled. The hands on her shoulders sent a jolt of panic through her whole body but it was the understanding in the whiskey-brown eyes that nearly did her in. She stared back at him, frightened to breathe, for fear she would break down and howl.

“Okay, Rose. I’ll go, but remember this. Whether you like it or not – I am a friend.”  
He brushed a kiss across her mouth and left before she could say a word.

The moment she heard the door slam, she slumped in defeat. And for the first time since her divorce, tears poured down her face.

For the life of her, she couldn’t understand why.

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