

Follow That Dream

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Chapter Three

Sean hoisted a huge pot into the sink and scoured the bottom before turning to load it in the dishwasher. He straightened and winced at the flash of discomfort through the small of his back. The low sink, he acknowledged, and far too much gardening yesterday. His lips curved to a wry grin. Not that he'd had much choice about the gardening. His aunts, even if he did love them for treating him like a normal person--talk about slave labor.

"More dishes coming through."

"Many customers left?" he asked as he turned to take the pile of plates from Susan.

Susan smiled, her smile edging up into flirtation. Sean kept his expression neutral. After all, he didn't want to draw the boss's wrath or tangle with Chef whom he suspected had his eye on this particular waitress.

Susan blushed and looked away. "Two tables. One has just ordered desserts and the other are on coffee now. Won't be long." She bustled out to attend to her last customers, while Sean scraped off the plates.

The door from the dining area flew open, and Rose hurried through, her hair ruffled from the wind. Sean registered the faint pink in her cheeks, and his heartbeat kicked into overdrive. The more he saw of his lady boss, the more he admired and wanted her. Rather like a child wanting a toy he couldn't have, he decided, a rueful grin tugging at his lips. Too bad she didn't date men. He applied his frustration to a stubborn spot on another large unwieldy pot instead.

"Mum!"

A young male shot through the door, towing a young woman behind him. Rose's son? The pregnant one? Curious, Sean watched their interaction. He observed Rose's reaction foremost. She gave Mark a quick hug and smiled at the dark-haired girl. Over Mark's shoulder, Sean caught the flicker of regret that slid over her face before she fixed a smile to her lips.

"Hi, Mark. Tanya," she said. "How did it go?"

"It didn't. They kicked us out." Mark bristled with anger, and Sean reckoned it wouldn't take much more for smoke to steam from his ears. "You should have heard them."

Sean stilled, hearing the pain in the boy's words.

"Mrs. Tramfield--"

"Tanya, it's Rose, remember?"

Mark broke in, "Mum, they told Tan to abort the baby. Our baby. Tan refused, and then her father told us to get out. Just like that."

The girl's shoulders shook, and Sean heard soft crying.

"Come here, Tan." Mark's voice caught, and he swallowed. "Everything will work out."

Mark sounded as though he too was close to tears. Sean became aware of a surging anger against the unknown father. He glanced at Rose and noted the way she bit her bottom lip. Mark was right. How could the man do this to his daughter? Okay, so

maybe having a baby this young wasn't in their best interests but it was a done deal. Ignoring the problem wouldn't make the baby disappear.

"Here, Mark." The rattle of keys sounded. "Take my car and go home. Tanya looks like she needs a good night's sleep."

"Thanks, Mum, but how will you get home?"

Sean thought she hesitated, but the gentle smile on her face never faltered. "I'll grab a taxi." She pressed the keys on Mark. "We'll sort something out for you and Tanya. Her parents will come around. They need time. The idea of a baby is a big shock to them."

Mark and Tanya left without further argument, and Rose went through to the office, Sean presumed to take care of paperwork. He continued with the few dishes left, hand washing them while he waited for the dishwasher cycle to finish.

"All done," Susan said, coming into the kitchen bearing a few dirty coffee cups. She offered him a tentative smile. "Do you want a hand to finish up?"

Sean smiled, wanting to keep the exchange friendly but casual. "Thanks, but I'm good. Don't you need to go home to study for your finals?" Maybe if he acted like a big brother she'd get the message.

"Yeah, tell me about it," she muttered. "All work and no play makes Susan a very dull girl."

"With qualifications," Sean inserted.

Susan's mouth turned up. "Yeah, yeah, smarty. I'm going."

Chef stepped forward. "I'll walk you home." He turned to Sean. "Rose is saving every cent she can for her trip. She won't call a taxi. She'll probably walk home to save the fare."

"I'll take care of it," Sean said, nodding at the masculine warning in Chef's eyes. The pair left, leaving him alone in the bistro with Rose. As though he'd conjured her up, she appeared seconds later.

"Nearly done?"

"A final wipe down of the counters, and I'm finished."

Rose nodded and paused. The pause drew his attention. "Sean, I've been meaning to tell you. You... you're doing a great job. Thank you."

Satisfaction flooded through him. "I'm enjoying the work. It's different from what I normally do." The minute the words left his mouth he wished he could call them back. The fewer questions asked, the fewer lies he'd need to tell.

"What are you used to?" she asked, rubbing at her temples as though her head ached.

Damn. "This and that," he said, keeping the answer vague. "Odd jobs. Garden work." He didn't want to admit he was a musician. Not to Rose or any of his fellow workers. The minute Rose discovered his real identity she'd start treating him differently, look at him as if he'd sprouted horns. He'd seen it before, experienced it first hand. Of course, he could be mistaken about Rose. She might be one of the women who saw fame as an aphrodisiac. He frowned at the thought and searched for a change of subject. Either way, he didn't want to find out. He liked the relaxed way his fellow

employees joked with him. He enjoyed playing big brother to the waitresses, and he loved the idea of getting to know Rose on her own turf. The thought of losing this slice of normality by saying the wrong thing made his gut burn. "Do you have a headache?" he asked finally.

"A real doozy," she admitted. "How did you know?"

"The way you're rubbing your head is a give away, and I overheard your conversation with your son. That can't have helped the stress levels."

Rose sighed. "Yeah."

Sean gave the counter in front of him a last swipe with a dishcloth. "How about if I walk you home? The fresh air may help your headache."

"No. I—"

"How were you going to get home?"

"I...a cab."

Sean's intent scrutiny sent guilty color flying to her cheeks. Chef had been right. She intended to walk home alone in the dark. He ushered her to the door. "Don't argue. I promise the fresh air will do you good. I'll walk you home."

"But you'll have to backtrack to Falconers," she protested.

"I don't mind."

"But--"

Sean played his trump card. "You don't want Chef to find out, do you?"

The horror on her face made him grin, but she came back fighting. Her blue eyes narrowed. "What is it with you men?" she demanded, planting her hands on her hips and managing to distract Sean into the bargain. "Why do you have to act like you know best? Well?"

"Ah, you don't want me to get in trouble with Chef."

"Anyone would think I'm the kid around here," she muttered, "instead of being forty and the oldest. I'm the boss, for goodness sake."

"I know you're forty," Sean sympathized. "Must be tough."

"How do you know I'm...?" She scowled and shrugged into her coat. "Chef again, I suppose."

"Come on," he said, hurriedly tugging on his own jacket. He would have to keep a firm hold on that unruly tongue of his or Rose would remember their first meeting. Without his dark wig and with his trademark long blond locks chopped, he looked different. In public, he wore a cap and dark glasses where practical, and he always chose clothes to make him blend in. The hidden identity made him feel as if he had a second chance to impress Rose.

A chance he had no intention of messing up. Slow and steady — that was the way to worm his way into her affections. Make that friendship, he amended quickly, with a sidelong glance at her. He stood aside to let her pass, not making the mistake of touching her.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Up the hill. I live on Takutai Road."

After locking the doors, they turned to walk up Parnell Road, heading toward the cathedral at the top of the hill. Sean knew it was late, after one, but cars and taxis still hurtled down the brightly lit street. Two couples hurried past, their heads down in an effort to keep out the cool breeze that blew over the brow of the hill.

Sean turned up the collar of his jacket to cover his neck. "Looks like it could rain. How long will it take to walk to your house?"

Rose came to an abrupt halt. "I'm perfectly capable of walking home by myself. You'll get caught in the rain."

Sean took her by the arm and drew her close. "Not if you stop arguing. Walk faster." The faint scent of her perfume teased at his senses. Not the heavy, almost cloying perfume Ginger wore, but something lighter with the faint scent of vanilla spice that he discovered he liked much better.

"I don't like pushy men," Rose said.

"I'm looking out for my own interests." Sean crossed his fingers behind his back and hoped his nose remained the same size. "Chef is not a man to mess with."

In reply, she stalked ahead, but Sean soon caught up with his much longer strides. They turned into St. Stephens Street and crossed the road after waiting for a taxi to drive past.

"How are the bookings for tomorrow?" Sean asked, wanting to hear her soft voice.

"Not too bad. This is Takutai Road. My house is about halfway along."

The hint for him to head home came across loud and clear, but Sean kept in step as she turned down a tree-lined road then into a right of way, mid-way down the long sloping road.

She stopped at a white garden gate. "Thank you, Sean. It was good of you to walk me home. I'll be fine from here."

This time there was no mistaking the demand to leave, and he bit back a grin. "No problem."

"See you--" Rose halted mid-sentence when a jagged fork of lightning lit the night sky. A boom of thunder followed almost straight away, and the echo resounded for seconds after. Huge drops of rain splattered to the ground. Rose flinched at the next flash of lightning and bit her lip. Sean immediately wanted to soothe it with his tongue. Her fierce frown made him haul his thoughts to a halt.

"You can't walk home in this. Ah... would you like a cup of coffee while you wait for the rain to ease?"

When he nodded acceptance, Rose yanked the gate open, then stood aside for him to walk through. Once inside her section, she let the gate go with unnecessary force, finding great satisfaction in the childish gesture. *Go figure*, Rose thought in a huff. Why did she have to make the offer? Why couldn't the rain have held off for another ten minutes? Then she could have gone straight to bed. Now she'd have to make polite chitchat. *With him*. Her teeth ground together as she unlocked the door and gestured him to step out of the rain. No doubt about it—she was a fool.

Lights blazed in the hall and kitchen. *Good*. At least Mark or Sara were still up to act as a buffer between her double-crossing hormones and the object of her lust. "Come

through to the kitchen," she said. Too bad if his sensibilities were offended by being asked to slum it in the kitchen. "Have a seat."

While Sean settled at the breakfast bar, Rose turned to fill up the jug then reached for the canister of coffee beans. She wondered how the kitchen looked through his eyes. A little shabby with the scarred, well-worn furniture? Or a working kitchen with the shelves of cookbooks and the copper pots and utensils hanging from the ceiling? She straightened her shoulders and told herself she didn't care. She felt comfortable here; she and the children congregated here to talk over the events of the day. Her whole world revolved around this kitchen—it was here the seeds of her dream had sprung to life, germinating into a grand plan.

Rose measured the coffee beans and set the coffee grinder in motion. Stupid. Did it matter what he thought? A younger man and casual employee who would leave The Gables soon on his way to better things. She grabbed two coffee mugs from the cupboard.

"Mum?"

"In here, Sara."

Her daughter wandered into the kitchen, her mouth wide open in an inelegant yawn. Sara wore an old T-shirt of Mark's that covered her to the top of her thighs. From the corner of her eye, Rose noticed Sean's look of male appreciation. A sense of pique rippled through her. "I've got company," she warned.

"Hi, Mum." Sara gave no sign she heard. She blinked sleepily, then turned to the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of milk. She tilted the carton up to her mouth.

Horrified, Rose snuck a glance at Sean. His lips twitched, and instantly Rose's cheeks heated. "Sara Jane Tramfield," she snapped, mortified with her daughter's behavior. He'd think she'd raised savages.

Sean chuckled. Her daughter whirled about at the distinctly masculine sound. The carton froze mid-air then slid from her fingers, dropping to the floor with a loud liquid splat.

"Mum! You didn't tell me we had a visitor," Sara wailed, and she disappeared from the kitchen faster than a whirling dervish.

"What about this mess?" Rose shouted after her daughter. "Sara?" She turned to face Sean, and instantly longed to snap out a cutting remark to wipe the grin from his face. Instead, she censored her words. "I apologize for Sara's behavior. I know it's no excuse, but our visitors are usually women and you took her by surprise."

"No apology necessary," he said, a strange look flitting across his face. "We were all young once."

Young? What was he talking about? Despite what her hormones insisted on telling her, he wasn't much older than her two children. She shot him an aggrieved look. "She'd better be coming back to clean up this mess."

"No sense crying over spilt milk."

After a taut silence in which Rose gaped at him in disbelief, he grinned. His grin reached the fringes of a smirk, and Rose's hand itched to slap the look from his face. Instead, she unclenched her fists and surveyed the puddle on the floor. Great. All she

needed, at this time of the night—a comedian. She sighed, feeling out of step with the rest of the world. “I’d better get the mop.”

“Stay there,” he said. “I’ll get the mop, if you tell me where to find it.”

Rose blinked in amazement. Okay, so he washed dishes at the restaurant, but this was her home. Tony wouldn’t have been seen dead picking up a newspaper, let alone volunteering to mop up a spill.

“Rose?” One blond brow rose, and his smile turned quizzical.

“Ah... the mop and bucket are in the laundry. Right through the door over there.”

He strolled out to the laundry leaving Rose staring after him. Her gaze fastened on long, muscular legs and other masculine attributes that were lovingly showcased by the faded denim. A soft sigh escaped. *Wow*. Then, without warning, the conservative forty-year-old inside her started a lecture. *Stop right there. He’s way too young. You’re acting like a sex-starved divorcee.*

“Mum!” The loud hiss came from the direction of the stairs, followed by an unsubtle and obviously forced cough.

“Come in, Sara.”

Sara peered around the door, sending her a conspiratorial grin along with a thumbs up sign. Rose read her daughter’s mind with the ease of familiarity. *Major hunk material*. Rose gave a shrug of resignation. No matter how many times she told Sara she wasn’t interested in men...her daughter, ever the matchmaker.

Sara entered cautiously. “Am I interrupting?”

If only Sara knew. Not only was she interrupting, she was a lifesaver. “Not at all. Ah, Sean. You haven’t met my daughter. Sara, Sean is my new kitchen hand. He walked me home tonight.”

Sean walked up to Sara, holding out a hand in greeting. “Hi, Sara. Are you going to join us for coffee?”

Rose rolled her eyes as she caught Sara’s furtive glances between her and Sean. She reached for another mug and poured a coffee for her daughter, making the decision for her while Sean mopped up the puddle of milk.

“You should be doing that, young lady,” Rose said. “You made the mess.”

Sean flashed a grin that made Rose’s insides clench. “Too late, all done. I’ll go and rinse the mop, then I’m ready for coffee.” With a cheerful whistle, he disappeared.

Rose couldn’t help staring after him. Yep, the way the pair of faded blue jeans cupped his butt was nothing short of criminal. Another sigh escaped along with the shake of her head. Suddenly, a pair of hands gripped her shoulders and Rose whirled in fright.

“Steady, Mum. It’s me—Mark. Who was that?”

Rose placed a hand over her stuttering heart. “Don’t do that,” she snapped. “My forty-year-old heart can’t handle shocks like that at this time of the night.”

“Sorry.” Mark grinned. “For a moment there I forgot how ancient you are. Is there enough coffee for me?”

Rose nodded and reached for a fourth cup.

“That was Sean,” Sara said. “He walked Mum home.”

“He works for me at the restaurant. He was there tonight when you came in.” Rose heard the defensive note in her voice and snapped her mouth shut. She had offered him coffee—that was all. Nothing to get upset about. The grin exchanged by her children told Rose they had noticed her reaction and reached their own conclusions.

“You know, he looks familiar.” Mark frowned in concentration. “I can’t remember where I’ve seen him.”

Sean appeared at the doorway. “I look familiar? You could have seen me around Parnell during the last couple of weeks. My aunts own Falconers. I’m staying with them.”

“The petrol station. That’s where I saw you,” Mark said. “When I filled the car with petrol last week.”

“How do you take your coffee, Sean?” Rose wondered at the flash of apprehension that faded from his face with Mark’s words, then shrugged.

“Black, please.”

Rose handed him the coffee. Their hands touched during the transfer of the mug, and Rose couldn’t let go quick enough. She sucked in a rapid breath, the brief contact sending a zap of electricity jolting up her arm. She covered her confusion with words. “You realize that none of us will sleep, drinking coffee this late at night.”

Sara checked her watch. “Officially, Mum, it’s morning. Two in the morning, and it’s still pouring outside.” A sly grin curved her mouth. “Why doesn’t Sean stay the night?”

“Oh, no. I don’t think so!” Rose shot back.

“Why not?” Mark asked in surprise. “You can hardly send him out in that heavy rain.”

Three sets of eyes pinned her in place. She felt the color bloom in her cheeks, even as she prayed she wouldn’t blush. Now what did she do? Mark was right—she could hardly send Sean out on a night like this, but the thought of having him under her roof, in a room a few doors away from her, gave birth to all sorts of ideas. *Like inviting him to share her room.* The heat in her face traveled down her neck. She willed herself to stand still. *She would not fidget.*

“The spare room is made up,” her daughter assured Sean. “It won’t be a problem, will it, Mum?”

In the spotlight again. “Ah, no. Of course not. You’re welcome to stay. Ah... Victoria and Elizabeth won’t worry, will they?”

“Mum.” Sara rolled her eyes in a manner that enforced the message. “Sean’s not a kid. I’m sure he doesn’t have to report in. How old are you, anyway?”

“Sara,” Rose protested, her hands fisting at her sides. Sometimes, she wanted to throttle her children. Right now being one of those times.

Sean laughed, a deep sound full of warmth and richness, his brown eyes twinkling in merriment. “I’m thirty,” he confessed.

“Old enough to stay out over night,” Mark agreed.

“Exactly.” Sara paused, a thoughtful look on her face. The quick glance her daughter shot toward Sean set alarm bells ringing within Rose. *She wouldn’t*, Rose thought, appalled.

“You know, I read--”

A croak escaped Rose. *She would!* Those confounded magazines. “Sean, the spare room is all yours! Mark will show you where it is. I’ve had a long day so I’ll say goodnight.” Rose plonked her cup in the sink and scuttled off, barely acknowledging the chorus of goodnights.

Upstairs in her bedroom, Rose went about the business of getting ready for bed on auto pilot while her mind busily focused on the man downstairs. *Man.*

The operative word.

The thirty year old with the great body.

“Far too young for me,” Rose muttered.

Only ten years, a little voice in her head dared to challenge.

“Far too young,” Rose reiterated.

All cats are gray in the dark, the little voice said.

“Oh, my God.” Rose groaned and covered her face with her hands. “My overseas trip. My dream! What am I thinking?”

Please come back to download chapter four next month.

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