



FREE READ

FOLLOW
THAT
Dream

Shelley Munro

Follow That Dream

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Chapter Two

The clipped words vibrated between them, and Rose scowled to emphasize her point. She felt a tide of color race to her face as he gaped. Her heart hammered with both irritation and embarrassment.

The cheek of the man! Asking her out. And to think, she'd actually enjoyed his company, despite his off-putting appearance. After her dreadful morning, she'd started to relax. Why did he have to go and spoil everything by asking her out? She hadn't flirted with him, hadn't indicated her availability--she knew she hadn't. Her dream was too important. Rose wanted her detractors to eat their pessimistic words. She intended to show everyone she wasn't all talk. Most of all, she wanted to prove to herself she could realize her childhood dreams.

And, if she were honest, she wanted to rub her ex's nose in her success.

She sneaked a look at the park bench man to gauge his reaction. He looked... bemused. A typical male. Why, any second now, a stricken little boy look would swim across his face—all in the name of manipulation. Rose grit her teeth and studied the harbor view, concentrating on the colorful sails of the yachts while she fumed. He would sulk or lose his temper. His behavior could go either way. Experience made Rose Alice Tramfield wise to male manipulation. If he asked, she could tell him straight. A display of temper wouldn't impress her one iota. At forty, she was immune to male tantrums. And since her divorce from Tony, she refused to listen to the ravings of any man ever again. They mostly talked about themselves anyway.

Rose jerked the picnic basket open and dropped the dirty plates and cutlery inside.

"Wait." A hand reached out to halt her departure, and she stiffened at the strange surge of excitement the touch of his hand generated. It felt like someone had chucked her in an icy pool except the sensation was one of heat and...

Surely not? This man—he, well, he wasn't exactly someone she'd take home for the family to check out. She stared at the tanned masculine hand that touched her arm, mesmerized by both the sight of his long, tapered fingers and the sensation that rocked her body. Then, belatedly, she leapt to her feet, away from the irritating sensation and away from him.

"Please," he said, the sincere tone of his voice drawing her unwilling attention. He flashed a set of even white teeth that just didn't go with his status of homeless man. "I'm sorry if I offended you, especially after you provided lunch. Please forgive me." He stood abruptly.

Rose inched away as she took in his size. She hadn't realized how big the man was. One look at the car park showed her poor dented Mazda parked alone, not a person in sight. With another uneasy glance at the man, Rose wondered if she should worry, then dismissed the thought as paranoia. After all, she'd spent the last two hours with him and lived to tell the tale.

He smiled, or at least she thought she saw a smile through all the hair surrounding his mouth. The weird surge of energy that had prickled her skin earlier returned, making her edgy and conscious of every inch of her body. Aware of her femininity.

Aware of the way her clothes draped across her skin. She darted a glance toward him, a soft gasp of surprise escaping. *He was the source.* And he was entirely too close! Rose backed up until the bench dug into the back of her legs.

"Apology accepted," she muttered as she dropped her notebook in the top of the basket and slammed the lid. "I have to go." She took two hurried steps toward the car park, part of her wanting to break into an undignified run.

"I enjoyed talking to you, Rose."

The soft male rumble caressed her ragged nerves, and she glanced over her shoulder in confusion. A mistake, she acknowledged. This time, she saw his lips. He wore a soft smile that made her wonder if the eyes behind the dark glasses matched the promise of his sensual mouth. Standing up, he didn't look so shabby and unkempt. He appeared strong and fit and...

Rose shook herself. Time to go. *Past time.* She was sickening for something. Come to think of it—she did have a headache. An early night and a headache tablet would cure this weird tingling malady.

"Goodbye. It was nice to meet you," Rose said firmly in dismissal. Then she squared her shoulders and walked away without looking back.

* * * * *

One Week Later

"The applicants have started to arrive."

Rose paused in her cheese board preparation and glanced at her waitress.

"What do they look like, Susan? Any good ones?" She mentally crossed her fingers and added her toes to the equation—she felt that desperate. There was no way she could ask her existing staff to work more hours or put in longer hours herself.

"There are three."

The finger crossing had failed. Rose sighed as she added a finishing garnish of parsley and a radish flower and handed the platter to Susan. She didn't care if the applicants were male or female. All she wanted was a person capable of doing the job. One who turned up on time and intended to stay at least until she left for Paris. Julie's problem after that, Rose acknowledged, with a wry twist of lips.

Unfortunately, pickings were slim during the months leading up to Christmas.

"Susan, after you've delivered the cheese to table three, can you show the applicants to the booths near my office? Tell them I'll be ready in about ten minutes. Oh, and get them to fill out an application form for me. There's a pile in the top drawer in my desk."

Susan nodded. "Okay."

"Thanks." Rose wondered what the applicants looked like. The suspense proved too much. The minute Susan left, she peeked through the door to check out her prospective kitchen hands slash dishwashers. *Fudge.* Too slow. They were already following Susan to the back dining area, and all she caught was a glimpse of denim blue. She turned back to work, plating up an antipasto for the next order.

Chef grimaced a facsimile of a smile in her direction. "Susan didn't say much."

And she had an opinion about everything, Rose ended Chef's sentence silently. Rose shrugged and toted up the bill for table seven without comment. She delivered it with a smile and a few laughing words for her guests then hurried back to the kitchen to help Chef finish the clean up for the lunch session.

The bare bones of the situation. She had to employ one of these applicants and hang onto them until the holiday season ended. Somehow. They were booked solid with pre-Christmas functions.

Susan sashayed into the kitchen and grinned at both Rose and Chef. "Another applicant has arrived. And he's a real babe!" Susan crowed her eyes alight with anticipation.

Oh-oh. Rose aimed a smile at the university student who worked for her part-time. "Guess I'd better cross his name off the list. He'd be too much of a distraction. If this is your reaction, I'd hate to see Bridget's." She was only half-joking, having learned from experience that disaster lurked in romance between staff members, especially when the flame went out as it invariably did. Applicant number four had a black mark against his name before she even eyeballed him.

"Oh, boss! Live a little, will you?" Susan handed her the four application forms.

Rose's mouth set in annoyance, and her thoughts wandered to Mark and his rocket of an announcement. *Live a little.* She was trying to, but everyone around her seemed determined to conspire against her dreams of living a little. A grandmother at forty. She shuddered, memories of Mark's announcement still packing a punch. "I'll interview the applicants in the same order they arrived," she said. "Which is number one?"

"This one." Susan arranged the application forms in order of arrival. "Have fun, Rose," she said, one eye closing in a playful wink. "Boy, are you in for a treat."

The babe, Rose surmised. *Another black mark.* "I'll be in my office, if you need me," she said to Chef. "Susan, send the first one through, please."

In her office, Rose rearranged the papers littering her desk. A thump sounded on her door, and she glanced down at the top application form to check the man's name. "Come in." She watched the man shuffle through the door.

"George?" Rose asked with one brow arched. "George Washington?"

"Yep, that's me."

Rose bit her lip to stem the urgent need to laugh. "Right. Have a seat, George."

The stooped, gray-haired man shuffled farther into her office and dropped into the seat Rose indicated. Once seated, he leaned back and grinned. A glint of gold sparkled from one front tooth. "My Mama liked the way the names went together. Said they sounded just right, you know? Like they fit."

This time suppressing the smile proved more difficult. "Um, yes," Rose said. "Tell me a bit about yourself, Mr. Washington. Do you have experience as a kitchen hand?"

"Call me Washy, Miss. All my friends do. I used to be in the Navy. Retired now but I worked in the galley. Traveled the world, I have. Sailed the Pacific, the Atlantic, been across the Tasman more times than I can recall. Originally from Sydney but haven't lived there for years now. I—"

“That’s a lot of travel.” Rose fought down the feeling of envy and inserted a quick question while he took a breath. “Where did you work last? Do you have references?”

“The Goat Tavern in Kensington High Street. That’s London, Miss. Did the dishes there.” He pulled several crumpled sheets from his shirt pocket and handed them to Rose, continuing his running commentary on his work history.

Rose rubbed her temple as she skimmed his references. They looked okay, but she knew Washy and Chef would develop a personality conflict. Washy would drive Chef mad in one short session with his chatter.

Rose interrupted Washy mid-spiel. “Thank you, Mr. Washington. These look fine. I have a few applicants to interview this afternoon. I’ll ring you tomorrow and let you know if you have the job.”

“Right you are, Miss.” He shuffled out.

The second applicant had pink and green hair, sculpted in peaks and valleys that should have defied gravity. Rose had difficulty keeping her mind on the interview as she contemplated the strength of gel her second applicant would need to maintain the fashionable look in a steamy-hot kitchen.

Hallelujah! Rose thought as she glimpsed her third applicant. Someone normal. Young enough to fit in with the rest of her team. Rose read through his references. Polite and well spoken, with good references. Who could ask for more? She felt the urge to hug him on the spot. Exuberant, she showed him out and promised to ring him the next morning.

Susan sent in the last applicant. Number four... Rose blinked. Tall, blond, bronzed – he paused in the doorway and smiled. The grin hiked her pulse rate and sent her stomach swooping. Their gazes caught and held. The world stopped spinning. Her heart stalled, missing a beat before taking off with the speed of a Formula One racecar. *Good grief, woman.* Rose ripped her gaze away and worked at controlling her sudden attack of nerves.

“Good afternoon,” he said in a husky voice that strummed across her nerve endings.

Her gaze shot to his again, but she saw nothing but the friendly smile. And glowing brown eyes she’d like to drown in... Rose stiffened, biased against him even though she knew she shouldn’t judge by appearances.

“Take a seat,” she said, her tone clipped. *Get a grip,* she warned herself. *You aren’t being fair.* She sat and looked down at the application to hide her reaction. This would never do. If he caused this surge in her pulse, think of the havoc he’d unleash on her female staff.

Rose glanced at him, screening her disapproval with lowered lashes. He lounged, comfortable with the silence and her covert observation. Ruthlessly short blond hair highlighted his well-shaped head while brown eyes sparkled with intelligence. The strong chiseled planes of his face saved him from looking too pretty. His nose was straight, maybe a little on the large side, if she wanted to be picky. His mouth wreathed in a polite smile and highlighted a set of distracting dimples.

The smile widened, and Rose's perusal of his charms ground to an abrupt halt. For once, she agreed with Susan. She gave herself a quick lecture. Best she get on with this interview instead of mooning like a teenage girl in the throes of a crush.

"Tell me about yourself." Rose felt proud of her firm tone of voice. At least to external appearances, she sounded in control. Inside, to her astonishment, nerves jangled with the desperate need to run and hide, as if this man endangered her life. Or her dream, a little voice whispered inside her head.

"My name is Sean MacNamara. I'm twenty nine, nearly thirty..."

The accent struck a chord, reminding her of the man in the park. Not another American, she thought, pushing aside her guilt at the way she had behaved in the park. What was this? An epidemic? Rose glanced at his application. "Do you have a visa to work in New Zealand?"

"I have a New Zealand passport," he said. "My father was born here."

Another one. It was an outbreak. Rose nodded and fired a couple more questions about work experience. As he replied in a deep smoky voice, she couldn't help but stare at his mouth and let her thoughts wonder, what if?

Aware of a sudden silence, Rose jerked her head up and saw, to her chagrin, he'd caught her in the act. Her face flamed, turning hot enough to fry eggs. She directed her gaze at the application form on her desk instead. Rose had no doubts the man was qualified – in more ways than she wanted to know, she thought darkly.

"Thank you, Mr. MacNamara. I'll contact you tomorrow to let you know if your application is successful."

"Thank you." He flashed a quick smile, stood, and closed the door after him.

The jeans looked just as good from the rear. The ache in her lungs reminded her to breathe. "Wow," she muttered, feeling dazed by the memory seared in her mind. Talk about temptation on two legs. The man had a body to match his memorable face. No wonder she'd experienced the moment of pure panic. Marriage to Tony had taught her a valuable lesson about good-looking men. They believed the world owed them. They weren't to be trusted. She breathed a sigh of relief. The panicked sensation was her internal alarm sounding a warning against drop-dead gorgeous men. Nothing more.

Susan burst through the door. "Have you decided?"

"Number three," Rose declared.

Susan's face fell. "Oh, but –"

"Number three."

"Oh, well." Susan sighed loudly. "Number four probably has a girlfriend anyway."

* * * * *

He'll have to go, Rose thought in dismay. The pile of dishes had grown to mountainous proportions, and if her new employee moved those pots any slower, the bacterial growth would smother them all.

"How are you going there, Glen? Nearly done?"

Her new kitchen hand nodded and turned back to the sink. Soapsuds splashed over the edge of the sink in huge crashing waves. Rose cringed as she gave the floor a

cursory inspection. The terracotta tiles surrounding the dishwashers, both mechanical and human varieties, looked as if a tidal wave had hit. Food debris floated on the rising tide.

He had to go.

Susan bustled in with a pile of dirty dishes. "This is the last of them," she said.

Glen spun about, his eyes widening. "More dishes?" he squawked.

"Only a few." Susan stopped by the bench to unload but halted, stymied by lack of counter space. Rose hurriedly created a gap.

Glen scowled and turned back to the sink with much muttering. He placed his pot brush on the counter and peeled off the bright yellow gloves, dropping them in the sink one at a time. They sank under the water with a faint gurgle. "You never said this job would be so hard," he stated, his voice testy as he glared at Rose anew.

Rose stared, open-mouthed.

"I quit." He stomped from the kitchen without another word.

"Something I said?" Susan quipped, giving a nervous giggle.

"Help me clean up? Please?" Rose pleaded.

An hour later, the kitchen gleamed. Susan stretched, holding both hands in the small of her back as she bent backward. "You are hiring another dishwasher." The words emerged as a statement of fact.

Rose sighed and mentally considered the other three candidates who had applied for the job. Mr. Chatterbox, Mr. Pink and Green, and Mr. Hunk. None of them ideal but what choice did she have? "Come to my office, Susan, and we'll choose our victim."

In her office, Rose retrieved the three application forms from her battered filing cabinet. She cleared the top of her desk and placed them face down, shuffling the papers around until she didn't know which was which.

"Okay, Susan," she said. "You choose."

"Me?"

Rose nodded.

"But what if I choose Mr. Chatterbox?" Susan wailed.

"I thought I chose the best applicant and look what happened. No, this way is as good as any. Besides, if your choice is bad, I get to blame you." Rose fixed her employee with a stern stare. "Stop dithering. Pick one."

"I have to tell you, I don't like this. Not one little bit," Susan muttered, but she took a deep breath, narrowed her eyes and pointed to the application form on the left hand side.

The hairs at the back of Rose's neck stood to attention. A faint tremor shook her hand as she reached for the sheet of paper. She turned it over and read the name.

Susan stood on tiptoe and peered over her shoulder. "Yes! There is a God!"

Rose stared at the name until the words turned fuzzy. *Mr. Hunk*. So why wasn't she surprised? A lump bounced around her stomach at such a dizzy speed that nausea claimed her. Great! Fate just loved messing with her life, but she could hardly backpedal and tell Susan to pick another. Not now. "Ah, I'll ring him and let him know the good news."

"The Babe," Susan crowed.

Rose felt impelled to prick Susan's bubble of excitement. "That's Mr. Babe to you, and it might be too late. He may have a job already."

"Ring him now," Susan ordered. "What is his name, anyway?"

Rose didn't have to check. The man's name – heck – the man's very image remained imprinted on her brain after her X-rated dream of the night before. With her sights set firmly on cooking and travel, her lifelong dream usually occupied every minute of her life, both waking and asleep. It was his fault exhaustion dogged her today. Last night Sean MacNamara had intruded – all bronzed six foot of him – and she couldn't shake the vision, no matter how sternly she lectured herself.

"His name is Sean MacNamara," she told Susan in a resigned tone. How on earth was she going to control her female staff let alone her own rampaging hormones?

* * * * *

As requested, Sean arrived ten minutes early for his first day of work. While he waited for Rose, he studied his surroundings. The restaurant housed seating for around fifty, counting the private booths toward the back where he had waited for his interview. A tiled floor, big windows that let in lots of light, and dozens of leafy green plants made the restaurant both appealing and attractive. Tucked away in the corner, with a view of the cobbled pavement outside, was a small bar area. The place looked like a tidy little money earner. He checked his watch and wondered what Rose wanted.

"To sort out formalities," the little lady had said on the phone. Sean grinned, guessing she probably wanted to lay down the law. A picture of Rose surfaced in his mind, and the familiar lick of desire raced through his body. He'd thought about her a lot since their first meeting in the park and still couldn't believe she preferred women. He shook his head. A crying shame, that, and a cruel joke to taunt him.

After Rose had stalked to her car and driven off, he'd decided if he couldn't be her lover then he'd have settled for friend. He'd enjoyed their time together and would have liked to repeat the experience.

At that stage, he'd thought he would never see her again. Then he'd come across the advertisement in the paper for staff at a local bistro. He didn't need the money; hell, he had stacks of the stuff, but he hated to laze around doing nothing. Before he hit the big time, he'd excelled in this type of work. Sean had shown the ad to one of his aunts.

"Oh, The Gables. Young Rose Tramfield manages The Gables," Elizabeth had said. "If you wanted a part time job you couldn't go wrong applying there."

The name had made Sean's ears prick up.

"No, indeed," seconded Victoria, his other aunt.

Sean remembered his nonchalant reaction although he'd paid close attention to his aunts' reply. His heart had pounded at the discovery. He could see her again. In that moment, he decided to apply for the job.

"If you worked there you could still help us out," Victoria said.

And that, as they said, had been that.

Rose hadn't recognized him. It had been a first for him, and he confessed to a certain amount of pique. Sure, the perfected disguise helped avoid recognition, especially since he'd ruthlessly clipped his trademark locks, but he'd have thought his voice would sound familiar.

"Ah, Sean. Thank you for coming in early."

Sean spun about to face her. "No problem," he said, as he reiterated to his unruly body that Rose lived in the group labeled *friends*.

"Two things," she said, direct and to the point. "I wanted to remind you that the job is on a two-week trial basis."

"That's fine." His eyes drifted to her mouth and the tiny mole just above her top lip. Unwillingly, he dragged his attention from her luscious lips and tried to concentrate on what she was telling him.

"The other matter is more serious. I employ three young, impressionable waitresses." She paused and met his gaze with a candor that made him want to smile.

The little lady at her imperious best.

When she was sure she had his complete attention, she continued. "Romantic relationships between staff members are strictly prohibited. Without exception. My waitresses are all long-term employees. If any problems occur, you'll lose your job, not them. Do I make myself clear?"

Whew, someone appeared a trifle cranky this morning. Sean suppressed his amusement, wanting to keep this job in the worst possible way. One small smirk and she'd toss him out the door. "Yes, that's clear. I have a steady girlfriend. Your rules won't present any problems."

Rose nodded. "Good. If you follow me, I'll give you a quick tour of the kitchen area and leave you with Chef. He'll give you further instructions." She strode off leaving him shell-shocked.

He trailed behind, frowning. A girlfriend. Now where had that little gem come from? The closest thing to a girlfriend in his life was Ginger. They only managed to get together when her modeling assignments coincided with his concerts, and they were in the same city at the same time. The press made a big deal out of their friendship. Sean and Ginger knew the truth. There was no spark between them. But they were friends. Sean rubbed his chin. The idea of a girlfriend had mollified Rose, so perhaps he'd let his hurried words stand. The facade of safety all around.

Rose pushed through a set of double doors into the kitchen, and Sean hurried to catch up. He found his gaze leaping unbidden to the feminine sway of hips and rounded buttocks beneath the black trousers she wore. His lips pursed in a silent whistle of pure male admiration. Why did the one woman he was interested in have to be out of bounds?

Rose introduced Chef and disappeared while Sean plunged into his new job. By evening, he felt like an old hand. He grinned as he flicked the switch on the dishwasher. It wasn't difficult to imagine the newspaper headlines if the media discovered his whereabouts. They would have a field day. His grin faded to firm determination. He'd

have to make sure the press didn't find out because the resulting publicity would spell an end to his fledgling friendship with Rose.

Please come back to download chapter three next month.

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