



Wild Thing

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## Chapter One

"Mum, have you done the wild thing with Sean?"

Rose spun around and gaped at her teenage daughter in shock. Hot flags of color flew to her cheeks, and her mouth worked but no sound came out. A grin spread across Sara's face, and it was this unrepentant smirk that finally jolted Rose to speech.

"Sara!" she snapped, still experiencing the ripple of shockwaves at her daughter's far from innocent question. Sure, she encouraged her two children to discuss anything with her, but this was different. Sean was out of bounds.

"Well? Have you?"

"That's enough young lady!" Rose glared, the fierce look cold enough to freeze at ten paces. "My friendship with Sean is none of your business."

Sara knocked aside her mother's objections without pause. "Of course it is. If Sean's going to be my stepfather I have every right to know."

Rose tried another glower, this time with her hands on her hips. "Sean is ten years younger than me. The ink is barely dry on my divorce papers, and there is no way on earth I'm giving up my chance to train at the cooking school in France. I am not forfeiting my freedom on a whim." She paused to suck in much needed oxygen. "As much as I love you and Mark, I'm going to France. You're both old enough to cope without me. If there is an emergency your father can deal with it." *For a change*, thought Rose emphatically. Nothing was going to stop her this time; not a man, and certainly not an unplanned pregnancy. Never let people say Rose Tramfield didn't learn from her mistakes.

"Mark and I wouldn't mind if you married again. You know, there's an article in the latest Cleo magazine about younger men. It says—"

Rose butted in before Sara started on quotes from her confounded magazines. From bitter experience Rose knew she'd end up flustered. Her daughter was sixteen going on sixty and mouthy with it.

"Have you listened to a single word I've said?" Rose asked giving a long-suffering groan.

"Rose. Rose!"

Rose blinked, the insistent repetition of her name tearing her from the past and dropping her smack-dab in the present. She looked up into twinkling, whiskey brown eyes and smiled slowly. "Sorry, Sean. I was miles away."

He shook his head and tugged her closer, fitting her against his broad chest so she could feel the steady beat of his heart. His low voice became a rumble vibrating through her body. "Lady, you're so good at deflating my ego."

Rose grinned, knowing he wouldn't notice in the dim light on the dance floor. While she was determined to follow her own destiny, Sara was right about one thing. In teen-speak, he was a mega babe. But at forty Rose was able to see everything more clearly, without a rose-tinted glow shrouding clear sight. The relationship with Sean worried her. They had fun together, both enjoying a sense of the ridiculous, but experience garnered from her ex-husband made Rose slow to trust.

Masculine hands squeezed her lightly, and an amused chuckle surrounded her. "You're not daydreaming again, are you?"

The Shania Twain ballad ended. Rose eased away from his body, smiling at her blond companion. At thirty Sean was young, a male in his prime. Handsome. Sexy. His career appeared successful, whatever it was he did. At the thought, Rose frowned. She still wasn't quite sure of his occupation, and Sean was a little vague. Suddenly, it became important she know.

"Where do you work, Sean?" She hitched the thin strap of her small clutch purse up on her shoulder.

The next song, a raunchy little rock number, belted through the exclusive nightclub, obliterating the end of her sentence. Sean shrugged and gestured at the DJ. By common consent, they moved away from the dance floor and headed to the cozy and intimate bar upstairs. They claimed a vacant table then Sean collected drinks from the bar. On his return, he sat close to Rose on the bench seat, even though there was no need to crowd her since most of the patrons were on the dance floor.

"Now I can hear you," he said with a grin. "Were you daydreaming about me?"

Rose hesitated and decided she might as well tell him. Sara was likely to interrogate him in the same way. Forewarned was forearmed in Rose's book. "Sara wanted to know our intentions," she said bluntly.

Sean's eyebrows lifted, but his mouth curved into a lazy grin. Mesmerized, Rose stared. Nerves danced low in her belly, and she reached for her glass, taking a hefty sip of her wine. Her daughter had read her right. She did want Sean, despite her qualms.

"What did you tell her?"

Rose swallowed, aware of his interested gaze. Her head told her it was the look of a man intent on seduction; her heart cried he was a man in love. She blushed at her fanciful thoughts. "I told her to mind her own business."

"And did she buy the no comment spiel?"

She shook her head. After a month, Sean knew her daughter and her quirks well. Rose had lived with her for sixteen years and was still coming to grips with Sara's special qualities. She heaved a resigned sigh. "No."

Sean gazed at her intently. "So what did you try?"

"I gave her three reasons why a relationship between the two of us was a bad idea."

"Oh?"

"Excuse me."

Sean sent a frustrated look toward the young woman who interrupted while Rose took another fortifying sip of her white wine. Her hand trembled, and she hastily set her glass back on the table.

"My friends and I thought we recognized you from somewhere..." the woman trailed off and sent Sean a bright smile.

"I don't think so," he said with a trace of impatience.

"Oh, but—"

"I'm here on holiday."

"But—"

Sean stood abruptly and turned to Rose. "Are you ready to go?"

"I haven't finished my..." Rose trailed off, taking in his stony expression and rigid stance. "Sure," she said.

"Let's go then."

Rose offered the stunned woman standing by their table an apologetic smile. In the short time she'd known Sean, she'd never seen him lose his temper like that. Maybe he was tired. He had helped his aunts at their bed and breakfast this week, working long hours out in the garden.

They walked out to the street in silence. The cool spring air carried the scent of the flowering bulbs from the tubs standing by the entrance of the club. Sean hailed a passing cab, opened the rear door and slid into the back seat after her. He leaned forward to speak to the driver. "Seventeen Takutai Street, Parnell, please."

The car slid smoothly away from the sidewalk. Sean draped an arm around her shoulders, dropping a quick kiss on her forehead. Rose melted, and her insides quivered as she savored the clean citrus scent she had come to associate with Sean. Calvin Klein aftershave was becoming her favorite.

In Sean's company she laughed, had fun and she...loved. A small frown crossed her face. Sean had never made any secret of his attraction to her, although he hadn't pushed either. At first she had allocated him the '*friends*' slot and for a while he had fit neatly—a round peg in a round hole. But the last two weeks...

"Don't think we've finished our conversation, Rose, just because we were interrupted."

Rose's heart thumped. He wanted to talk?

Sean laughed, and there wasn't much amusement in the sound. Oh, heck, Rose thought. *He's going to say he doesn't want to see me anymore. He's going to dump me.* On the heels of this catastrophic idea came a strange sense of relief. No more complications. No more worrying about how he'd view her forty-year-old body if her wildest dreams did come true. She would go ahead with her plans to travel overseas, supremely confident in the premise she was finally fulfilling her life long dream. The dream she'd held since she was her daughter's age. The freedom to travel and to train to the highest levels in Parisian cookery.

The freedom to follow her dream. It was all she had ever wanted, and she'd never made a secret of her aspirations.

The Corporate cab pulled up outside Rose's house. She waited while Sean paid the fare. As the cab sped off down the street, Sean turned to her.

"We can talk inside," he said.

Rose wondered at his serious mien and decided her first thoughts were correct. The pressure he exerted on her arm when he propelled her toward the front door was unexpected but did back up her supposition. She steeled herself for the coming discussion and hoped she would comport herself with dignity.

Rose fumbled inside her purse for her keys, fished them out and after dropping them once, gave up and silently handed them to Sean. Minutes later they were inside, the door closing behind them with a dull thud.

"Would you like a drink?" Rose asked, a trace of nervousness in her voice. She glanced up to meet his eyes and froze.

"No thanks." Sean exerted power with his gaze. "Rose, come here."

For the life of her Rose couldn't read his expression.

"That's all right," he murmured, and this time he appeared amused. "I'm willing to come to you. Or meet you halfway," he added.

Rose swallowed to ease the sudden knot in her throat. His words didn't make sense. Sean prowled toward her, and the sensation of a hunter stalking her came to mind. Before she could act, he was at her side.

"Rose, I... Oh, hell." He reached for her, gathering her in his arms and holding her tight. After a long moment, he pulled back to glance down at her, his eyes glowing, molten pools. Giving her every opportunity to avoid his kiss if she wanted, he lowered his head to brush his lips against hers. One of his hands cupped her breast, holding the heavy weight in his palm. A ripple of pleasure speared straight to her core, moistening sensitive folds. A slight pinch made her gasp against his lips.

Rose found herself equally curious and terrified, yet definitely ready for greater intimacy. Their first real venture into more than a kiss. She'd coolly promised herself it wouldn't happen. The age difference for one thing. Sean was not, could not, be part of her future.

There was too much at stake.

Yet she found herself clinging to him, offering herself and trembling at the mere thought of taking their friendship one step farther.

"Rose." Sean skimmed a light kiss over her brow and hot waves of excitement swept into her belly. The next kiss landed on top of her nose, and her entire body ached, wanting more. Rose licked her lips and an answering smile tugged at his. Slowly, masterfully, he settled his lips on hers, teasing and learning the shape and texture of her mouth while his fingers continued to tease her nipple. Shivers of pleasure made her ache for him to fill her, to strip her naked and

rock their bodies together. Her pulse raced, and she reminded herself to breathe. Both of his hands moved up to cup her head, one tangling in her hair and urging her closer. His erection brushed her lower stomach, and the last of her reservations faded away. She felt his tongue sweep across her lips in exploration and opened her mouth to him, full of sweet anticipation.

"Mum!"

Rose jumped in fright, and Sean drew in his breath with a hiss before turning to face Sara.

"You lied," Sara said indignantly.

Silence hung heavy in the air. Embarrassed, Rose tried to edge away from Sean but he wouldn't release her. "I believe your mother told you our relationship was none of your business." His voice was taut, and Sara's mouth dropped open in astonishment.

"Sara, at sixteen you're old enough to understand. There's no need to interrogate Rose. Believe me, if we ever have any important news to impart you and Mark will be the first to hear. Before the newspapers," he added.

An arrested look appeared on her daughter's face. "You're—"

"Good night, Sara," Sean interrupted in a ruthless manner.

Sara surprised Rose. Instead of arguing as she normally did, she offered Sean a shy yet enlightened smile, which left her mother baffled. "Okay. Good night, Sean. Night, Mum."

"Well," said Rose, still experiencing surprise.

Sean grinned and winked. "Now where were we?"

"You were kissing me."

"Could we go to the bedroom? I don't want any more interruptions."

Excitement pinged through her lower stomach, heat making her aware of Sean at her side and the way her dress draped across her heavy breasts.

Sean held out his hand, and she took it, his warm fingers tightening around hers as she led him up the stairs to her bedroom. Sean closed the door behind them, not giving her a chance to second guess her decision to take their relationship to the next level.

"Rose," he murmured, pressing his lips to the wildly beating pulse at her jaw line. His mouth moved down her throat, gently scoring her flesh, tasting, tormenting. "Take off your dress."

For an instant, Rose hesitated, worried about her forty-year-old body.

"Stop thinking so hard. I want you." Sean took her hand and placed it on his groin. "There's your proof. I want you. I ache for you, sweetheart."

His erection twitched against her hand, and she caved, needing him too. Rose leaned into him, nibbled his ear lobe and licked the shell of his ear.

Their clothes melted away. Lips tasted. Hands caressed and explored. They sank to the bed together, Sean stroking her breasts.

"Beautiful." His eyes gleamed in the darkness, his hands and mouth worshiping her body, making her feel beautiful. She shuddered with helpless pleasure.

Rose parted her legs at his husky command. The drag of his fingers across her clit brought a gasp. He touched and petted her until she squirmed with need and desire. The foil wrapping of a condom packet was a welcome sound, the swollen hardness of his cock pushing into her even better. Rose gripped his shoulders, explored every part of his body she could reach. She moved her hips and arched against him. Each thrust drove her higher, pleasure soaring through her body. Sean whispered naughty words in her ear, his husky voice bringing a rush of excitement, a quick punch of heat. There was a tightening sensation deep in her womb, and the raw need exploded, her sex clenching around Sean's shaft in rhythmic pulses. Her soft moan echoed in the bedroom.

She was vaguely aware of Sean's climax, the pleasure still rippling through her body. Rose gripped his shoulders, cuddled close and inhaled his aftershave and hot male scent. She smiled up at him. "Are we going to do that again?"

Sean chuckled. "As soon as I catch my breath, sweetheart."

"Good." It was more than good. The perfect spring fling. Rose couldn't think of a better way to spend the time before she left for France.

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"Rose! Guess what?"

"What?" Rose asked absently, her attention on final lunch preparations.

"Robbie Mac is in our restaurant! The reporters are interviewing him."

The other waitress hurried in with an order. "Did you see Robbie Mac?" she asked, her brown eyes sparkling with excitement.

Rose sent them a blank look. "Who?"

"Robbie Mac! Surely you've heard of him? The pop star! You know—tall, blond, big, brown go-to-bed eyes." She sighed dreamily.

Rose shrugged. Pop music. That explained her ignorance. Give her good country music any day. She peeked through the kitchen door but couldn't see anyone remotely fitting the girls' description. "Where is he?"

Two heads peeked out beside her.

"The reporters were interviewing him. He must have left."

"Oh, well," Rose said. "I've never heard of the man, so I didn't miss much. Have you taken all the orders?"

"Yes."

Rose nodded. "Good. I'll be sitting in the back alcove with Sean if either of you need help." She left the kitchen and surveyed the tables. All appeared in order and the diners appeared relaxed and jovial. She let out a relieved sigh and headed to the back of the restaurant where Sean waited.

"Hi." Rose hadn't seen him since the previous night and, with little experience in the dating ritual, she was at a loss and battling with shyness.

"Hi, sweetheart. I've missed you." He clasped both her hands and tugged her closer to press a slow, seductive kiss on her startled lips. When the kiss ended, Rose's breathing sounded ragged.

"I wanted to tell you something last night." He paused to grin at her. "But I was distracted." His grin faded. "Rose, we haven't known each other for long but...I...I love you. Will you marry me?"

Her spirits plummeted. Deep down, she had known it would come to the point where she would have to choose. Sean or her dream. "I don't know, Sean," she said slowly. "As you say, we haven't known each other for long, and there is the age difference."

He recovered his aplomb rapidly. "For God's sake, Rose. To hear you, you'd think there was twenty years between us, not a mere ten. You don't look a day older than I do." He pulled a small burgundy ring box from his jacket pocket and snapped it open before handing it to her. "I love you, Rose. Please say you'll marry me."

"But I don't even know what you do for a living. I..."

"My God! It's true. Robbie Mac in the flesh!"

Two men, one bearing a camera stood by their booth. Sean muttered an expletive under his breath.

Rose glanced from the men back to Sean. The sense of betrayal was like a knife in her back. "You're Robbie Mac, pop star?" she asked while her eyes accused.

His face blanked of emotion. "I was about to tell you."

"So, Robbie. Who's the new babe? Our readers will want to know."

Sean's gaze speared to the smirking reporter and open-mouthed photographer. The reporter's grin faded under Sean's relentless glare.

Rose shot to her feet. "The answer is no!" She slammed the ring box on the table in front of him and stalked off without a backward glance. In her office, Rose concentrated on breathing. It

was the only way she could hold back the tears prickling behind her eyelids. All this time Sean had laughed behind her back. Used her, and poor, gullible Rose had fallen for his act, thinking he reciprocated her feelings.

"Rose?" A tap sounded on the door before it opened.

"Go away, Sean or whatever your name is. I don't want to talk to you. You've had your fun. Leave me alone."

"This was never a joke, Rose. My aunts suggested I take a break, so I stayed on in New Zealand after my last concert to think over my future."

Something in his voice made her look up. The expression on his face was not one of sly amusement as expected. His throat moved in a swallow, and she realized he was upset too.

"I'm listening," she said, folding her arms against her chest.

"For the last couple of years I haven't enjoyed the constant touring and performing. It's hard work and stressful. Then there's the people I meet. I never know if they want me for myself or because of my fame and money. That's why when I met you, I wanted to be myself. Sean MacNamara, not my alter ego, Robbie Mac. I didn't tell you who I was because I was terrified. I didn't want to wake up one morning and find you were like all the others."

She let out an indignant snort. "Thanks very much," she snapped and turned to leave.

He reached out to halt her. "Sorry. I'm not explaining very well. I know you're not like all the others. That's the point. I asked you to marry me because I love you. The way you smile, the way you're there for your children. Your determination to follow your dreams. I envy you, Rose."

"Me?" she asked, faltering in astonishment. He had it all. Fame, money. Everything.

"Yeah. You have the guts to forge ahead with your dreams. The freedom to do what you want while I was tied to my fame and career."

She stilled. "Was?"

He smiled at her, dimples forming at the corner of his mouth. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. Spending time with you has helped me make up my mind about my future."

"And?"

"When do you leave for Paris?"

"In two months."

"Can I come with you?"

Rose gasped. "But you're famous. You could have any woman you wanted."

Sean grasped her chin gently and raised her head so she met his gaze. "I don't want any woman. I want you."

"But your career."

"I've decided to give up performing and concentrate on writing songs. That's the part I enjoy most, and the beauty is I can write anywhere. Even in France."

"It's all too sudden," she protested.

Sean hesitated noticeably, and Rose winced. She wanted to make his final decision easy for him. He could agree with her and walk away now, without looking back. She studied his expression, but to her dismay, his jaw tightened in determination.

"I told the reporters we were engaged. The story will appear in the papers tomorrow."

Rose drew in a shocked breath, and her face drained of color. Talk about stubborn. She stared at him and tried to work out why he was trying to hurt her so publicly. What had she ever done to deserve this? Sean seized her hand and seconds later the sapphire and diamond ring sparkled on her finger. She shook her head from side to side in denial.

"Rose, listen. We don't have to marry straight away. We can go to France, and I'll work while you take your cooking classes. When you have time off we can see the sights together."

She stared at the ring, weighing heavily on her finger. Sean made it all sound so easy. Tempting.

He reached for her hand. "I'm offering you freedom of choice."

"Try before I buy?" Rose snapped, her eyes flashing with a hint of temper. "Or do I have that wrong? You're the one giving me a trial?"

His smile died. "Compromise, Rose. I'm offering a compromise. So we both get what we want." His voice held steady, but the faint tremor of the hand holding hers gave Rose her answer. He looked up, catching and holding her gaze, his honesty and sincerity blazing. "I love you, Rose. My love for you won't change. Six months, hell twenty years in the future. I'll still say the same thing. In fact, I'll take great pleasure in being the very first person to say I told you so."

Rose sucked in her breath. She wanted to believe. Wasn't freedom all about taking risks? Honesty propelled the acknowledgment to herself that she loved Sean. She hesitated then inhaled again. "I've heard Paris is beautiful in the spring, perfect for lovers."

A slow grin spread across his face, showing her a flash of a dimple before he grasped her in his arms, and she was aware of only her burning love for this special man.

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Ten months later at their wedding breakfast, the cake was a work of art. Emblazoned with showy red icing against a pale backdrop of white, the words, "*I told you so.*"

No one understood the joke, but the reporters had a field day speculating.

## Biography

Shelley lives in New Zealand, with her husband and a small, bossy dog named Scotty.

Typical New Zealanders, Shelley and her husband left home for their big OE soon after they married (translation of New Zealand-speak: big overseas experience). A year long adventure lengthened to six years of roaming the world. Enduring memories include being almost sat on by a mountain gorilla in Rwanda, lazing on white sandy beaches in India, whale watching in Alaska, searching for leprechauns in Ireland, and dealing with ghosts in an English pub.

While travel is still a big attraction, these days Shelley is most likely found in front of her computer following another love—that of writing stories of romance and adventure. Other interests include watching rugby and rugby league (strictly for research purposes \*grin\*), being walked by the dog, and curling up with a good book.

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