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BLUE FREEDOM

by Sandra Peut

Placed THIRD in the 2009 Rose & Crown New Novels Competition

EXCERPT

This excerpt contains the first two chapters only, in their original form, exactly as entered for the competition other than slight formatting changes. This excerpt is provided for your own personal perusal. No part of it may be copied, changed or utilised in any way whatsoever.

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Prologue

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

He never should have swum off alone.

What had at first appeared to be a shallow indentation in the coral-encrusted rock had turned out to be a cave. The diver had spent almost twenty minutes exploring the tunnel and its colourful marine life. But when he emerged, the rest of the group was gone.

Checking his diving watch again, he fought against the rising panic. Everything he had learnt in his years of scuba diving flashed through his mind. *Stay calm and breathe normally. Stay in the same place and wait to be rescued. Never swim away from your diving partners.*

He'd been completely stupid. But the inside of the cave was so fascinating, and he'd wanted to take a closer look so he could describe it to his fiancé. With her writer's creative appreciation of all things unique and beautiful, she would love it.

Now, he wondered if he would ever see her again.

He'd still had some oxygen left in his tanks, but had discarded them after he surfaced. There was no sense in trying to tread water or swim with all that weight on his back. And even without it, he had little hope of reaching land, over ten kilometres away.

He would just have to swim. And pray. The alarm had surely been sounded by now. His rescuers had probably already begun the search.

He just hoped they came before the sky grew much darker, or the waves more rough...

Chapter One

Brisbane, Australia

4) The Blame Game

The final, and perhaps most damaging, form of self-sabotage is that of blaming ourselves. “We all recognise we're our own worst critic,” says psychologist Dr Sarah Green. “The problem is that external messages – such as those from media advertising, and even from family and friends – can serve to reinforce our own negative thought patterns.”

The key, according to Dr Green, is deciding to be kinder to yourself. “By making small, positive changes to the way you think and speak, it can be possible to stop negative self-blaming patterns.”

These changes could include:

- *Write some positive affirmations and stick them up where you'll see them each morning (such as on your bathroom mirror).*
- *Learn to accept and give compliments. Instead of saying, “Oh, this old skirt!” simply say, “Thank you.” And complimenting those around you more will help them to also learn the art of encouragement.*

- *Put a positive spin on your thoughts. Change “I’m fat”, to “I’m learning to be healthier”. “I hate my job” can become “This work is a stepping stone to my dream career”.*

Learning to change old habits and eliminate these four areas of self-sabotage can help you move on into the successful and confident future you deserve.

"There! Finally finished!"

Bella Whitman typed the last few words with a flourish, before moving her neck around in slow circles in a vain attempt to work out some of the knots. "Typing gives me cramps," she complained, lifting her arms up to the ceiling in a languorous stretch.

"Well, writing *is* your chosen profession," her housemate, Krista, reminded as she padded past the kitchen table to the refrigerator. "You just have to put up with the occupational hazards that go along with it," she mumbled around a bite of apple.

"You can talk," Bella retorted, leaning back in the chair, her eyes closed. She lifted up the tangled mass of her chestnut curls, allowing the air to cool her neck. "Sticking people with needles every day sounds pretty hazardous to me."

Krista reached over and playfully tugged her friend's hair. "It's called "phlebotomy", for your information. And at least it's a job with a steady income." The end of her reply faded as she walked through to the lounge room. Bella smiled. Krista was no doubt watching her favourite afternoon soap on TV. Like clockwork.

Bella sighed wearily as she began gathering up her papers strewn all across the table's surface. She enjoyed being a freelance writer – loved the freedom, the challenges, the chance to express her creativity. But the constant pressure of deadlines and lack of secure income took their toll. "What I need is a holiday," she murmured, rubbing her blurry eyes.

Her last holiday had been a couple of years ago, right before – Bella tightly squeezed her eyes shut, trying in vain to block out the memories of Andrew. His smile, those chocolate brown eyes, the way he would look at her just before they kissed.

But then he was gone, disappearing so suddenly, leaving Bella alone and crying on a Pacific island's beach. Wondering why the men in her life were always taken from her prematurely – asking the heavens what she'd done to make God so angry.

As Bella started making dinner in an effort to distract her thoughts, she realised she was still asking those same questions even a couple of years on.

Memories swirled about her as she sliced an onion. She couldn't be sure if her tears were from the fumes or her depressing thoughts.

With a sigh, she put down the knife decisively. "I need a change," Bella announced to the kitchen walls. "They say a change is as good as a holiday – don't they?"

"Are you talking to yourself again?" Krista's head popped around the edge of the door. "Writers," she mumbled to herself, shaking her blonde head in mock frustration.

Bella ignored the comment, choosing to focus on the diced onions now frying in a pan.

"I just saw a new magazine advertised on the TV," Krista casually mentioned, sneaking a carrot slice from the cutting board. "It's called *Healthy Lifestyle*, and it's published right here in Brisbane."

Bella lifted her head and looked at her friend. "A new magazine? That might help." Work had always been a source of welcome reprieve.

"Help what? And haven't you conquered enough magazines already?" Krista asked, chomping on the carrot. "Never satisfied ... it must be a writer thing," she flung over her shoulder, returning to the TV.

Bella smiled to herself as she emptied some tuna into the pan. She would make some enquiries tomorrow.

Two days later

A sharp rap on the open office door interrupted Ethan Gray's busy focus. He sighed impatiently, lifting his eyes from his weekly planner to glare at the unwanted intruder. "Make it snappy!" he barked.

The usually bubbly office assistant visibly shrank before the editor's obvious irritation. "Um, we've had to reschedule October's planning meeting to this morning. Nine-thirty." She hesitated. "Is that okay with you?"

Ethan checked his planner, noting his 9:30 am appointment with a freelancer – Bella Whitman. "That shouldn't be a problem," he replied without looking up. "There's nothing here that can't be put off."

The woman turned with a relieved smile, and started to walk out through the doorway. "Susan," Ethan called, halting her in her tracks. The editor's voice was like granite, hard and brittle. "I expect to be given more than fifteen minute's notice of any future schedule changes. Understand?"

Susan stammered her assent before hurrying from the room. She almost tripped on her ridiculously high heels in her haste. Ethan smirked as he observed her discomfort. Women!

They were only good for one thing. "Or maybe two..." he muttered to himself.

Chapter Two

With a screeching of brakes and a sharp jolt, the train pulled into Central Station. Pneumatic doors wheezed open as Bella hurriedly grabbed her shoulder bag, water bottle and coat. Although the blazing sun promised a warm spring day, she never could trust those air-conditioned office buildings.

The rush of commuters streaming from the train caught Bella up in its midst, carrying her out onto the platform and up the escalators to the street level.

She waited with the crowd for the traffic lights to change. It was a gorgeous day. The cloudless sky, as yet untinged by city smog, reminded her of the cornflowers in her grandmother's garden. A slight breeze played with wisps of her hair that had strayed from the high chignon. With a sigh of annoyance at her unruly curls, Bella attempted to tuck the errant hair behind her ears as she crossed the street. She was beginning to feel anything but professional, and the interview was less than an hour away.

Bella continued down Edward Street, which fell steeply towards the city. A few minutes and three trips later – *I hate these high heels!* – she found herself at a small café and tumbled into the nearest seat.

She caught her breath while waiting for the waiter to bring her order of a skinny cappuccino and blueberry muffin. There was just under an hour until her interview with Ethan

Gray, editor-in-chief of *Healthy Lifestyle*. Strangely, her stomach felt twisted in knots just thinking about it. Bella was normally confident and self-assured – or, at least, she managed to convince others that she was.

Perhaps it was because she desperately wanted to make a good impression and obtain some new avenues of work. Life seemed so...so *unfulfilling* at the moment, and she didn't quite know why. Actually, she had a fair idea, but Bella had always shied away from being too brutally honest with herself.

It had to have something to do with Andrew, she thought, stirring sugar into the frothing cup the waiter had set before her minutes earlier. She'd never felt the same since he had left, had been stuck in limbo. A prisoner of her past.

Bella steeled herself against the painful images flashing through her mind. Of kissing Andrew at the pier, making dinner plans for that evening after he would return. "I'll be back in four hours," he'd reassured her. "I'm sure you'll be able to find something to amuse yourself with." His brown eyes twinkled.

"I don't know," Bella pretended to pout. "There's hardly anything to do here – only swimming, or going to the gym, maybe a massage in the day spa." She grinned, giving him a cheeky pat on the bottom as he turned to go. "I'll miss you," she called after him.

Andrew looked back at her with his dark eyes, blew her a kiss.

And that was the last time she saw him.

The loud cry of a hungry toddler at the next table rudely jerked Bella out from beneath the dark clouds of past memories. A glance at her watch sent her into a mad panic. Nine twenty-five! She drained the last of her now lukewarm coffee, stuffed the untouched muffin into her bag, and raced down the footpath towards the imposing office building that housed *Healthy Lifestyle*.

Too late, Bella realised she had left without paying for her snack! Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment as she determined to return and pay her bill. But not now... it would have to wait until after the interview.

It was 9:35 am by the time she stepped out of the elevator at the 10th floor suite of offices. She felt hot and frazzled, not at all like the organised, professional image she had hoped to project.

"Excuse me," Bella approached a bored-looking receptionist behind a marble-topped counter. The woman, identified as Susan by her gold name badge, seemed perfectly suited to the opulent surroundings. Her blonde hair was swept up in a classic french roll, and her tailored suit cried out "expensive".

Susan looked up from beneath long eyelashes, examining Bella as though she was an unwelcome insect.

Bella rushed on, "I have a 9:30 appointment with the editor, Mr Gray. I'm a little late."

"Miss Perfect" gave her a decidedly blank stare.

"Um ... it should be written down somewhere." Bella self-consciously smoothed her hair down with one hand. "I confirmed the appointment just yesterday. My name's Bella Whitman ... if that helps," her voice trailed off.

She doubted if nothing short of her being a celebrity or Pulitzer Prize winner would get her past this woman.

The receptionist was flipping through the pages of a day planner. A light suddenly went on in the made-up eyes, and her whole manner instantly changed.

"Of course, Ms Whitman," she purred. "You are booked in to see Mr Gray this morning." Bella let out a breath she didn't even know she was holding.

"However," the woman paused for effect, her gold pen pointed at Bella from her manicured fingers, "Mr Gray has had to attend a rescheduled meeting this morning, and won't be available until after lunch. I suggest you make a new appointment."

Her tone softened slightly at Bella's disappointed expression. "He *is* a very busy man, you understand."

Bella was more than disappointed. She was frustrated, even a little angry. This was the last thing she needed right now.

And she wasn't going to give up this easily. "Could I make a new appointment for later today?" she asked, attempting to keep the tense edge from her tone.

The receptionist's voice was almost sympathetic. "I suppose you could wait here if you have the time. Mr Gray sometimes has a few minutes to spare between meetings, and he usually walks through here to his office."

Bella gave her a sceptical smile.

"Maybe – just maybe – you might be able to catch him this morning." Her small attempt at being helpful seemed to leave Susan feeling exhausted, and she merely nodded at Bella's thanks.

With a sigh, Bella settled down onto the purple leather couch opposite the counter, glad that she had brought some articles to work on. She wasn't too hopeful about her chances, but maybe she could grab the editor at lunch. The man had to eat sometime, didn't he?

Ethan Gray looked at his watch for the fifth time, barely suppressing his growing irritation. While planning meetings were vital in running a publication, the other editorial staff completely lacked focus. They would much prefer to discuss wishy-washy topics like the quality of the graphics, than real issues such as the summer holiday feature.

He had managed to keep them vaguely on track, addressing eighty per cent of the matters on the meeting agenda. But as soon as he noticed Gemma, the fashion editor, filling in assistant editor Chloe on her upcoming wedding plans, he lost all patience.

"Okay, everybody!" Ethan barked. A little too harshly, perhaps, but they needed to show some respect. "That's it for today," he continued over the rustle of papers being gathered together. "We'll have a follow-up meeting on Friday. Check your e-mail for the time."

"One-thirty," Ethan fumed as he strode from the room, oblivious to the annoyed glances shared between his co-workers. "You would think they had nothing else to do but chat all day!"

He dumped his organiser and notes on his desk, and nodded to Susan on the way out. "I'm out on lunch. Back in an hour."

"Mr Gray!" she called after him, pausing at his audible sigh of frustration. "Uh...there's someone here to see you. Miss Whitman – your nine-thirty appointment."

Ethan's lips started to form a negative reply, when he noticed the attractive woman seated on the reception couch. Wisps of chestnut curls framed her oval face, and her blue eyes looked up at him expectantly.

"Ethan Gray," he smiled, cranking up the charm as he extended his hand. "How would you like to come out for lunch?"

END OF EXCERPT