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## **EMBRACING CHANGE**

by Debbie Roome

*Winner of the 2009 Rose & Crown New Novels Competition*

### EXCERPT

This excerpt contains the first chapter only, in its 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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## Chapter One

*I often wondered how it would feel to leave Africa. To leave the old and familiar; the heavy-blossomed bougainvilleas and streets washed mauve with jacarandas. Would I miss the roosters crowing at 4 a.m. and the jarring thump of mini-bus taxis as they cruise the streets? And what about the heat? Those searing days where the air hung thick and people gathered in dehydrated clusters. More than that, I wondered if I would find courage to leave my family and friends. To break away from all I had ever known.*

From the journal of Sarah Johnson, Saturday, 1<sup>st</sup> March

They huddled together at the airport; Sarah, her parents, Luke's parents; a nucleus of pain in a swirling mass of humanity. This would have been a painful day anyway, but she never imagined it would be this hard. Small talk dwindled and they stood round her, guarding her, protecting her, but it was time to say goodbye. Time for her to fulfill her promise to Luke. His mother pulled her close and whispered final words in her ear. "Keep him safe, Sarah. Take him where he wanted to go."

It was almost a relief to leave their embrace, to walk towards security as their eyes followed her, tears streaming down all their faces. The staff had seen it before, this grief at parting. They appeared unmoved and disinterested as they processed her bags. Would they care, she wondered, if they knew what was in her carry-on bag? Would they care if they knew her story, the reason why her heart was breaking?

A short while later, she stared at herself in the restroom mirror. Splashing cold water on her face didn't help - her eyes were still swollen and blotchy, her cheeks pale and thin.

Even her hair looked sad, hanging in dark flat sheets over her shoulders. "I'm doing it for you, Luke." she whispered to her reflection. "I must be strong."

She spent the next half hour wandering through the stores in International Departures. They were a concentration of Africa, a mass of carvings, feathers, colour and curios. She hadn't thought of this aspect of Africa. Would she miss the street vendors and their vibrant wares? Would life in New Zealand be bland by comparison? *I'll buy something to take with me*, she decided. *A special memento*. It was a welcome distraction as she browsed through several stores, examining chess sets, holding up fabric paintings and admiring stone carvings. *What about a picture frame? An African one to put Luke's picture in*, she thought. *Maybe a carved one or perhaps a wire one with intricate beadwork*. She finally settled on a dark wood frame with inlaid giraffes in a lighter wood. *I'll put my favourite picture of Luke in it. The one of him leaning against a tree, smiling*.

The plane was massive compared to the small domestic aircraft she was accustomed to. *Like a hotel with wings*, she thought as she peered into its depths. "Good evening, welcome aboard." A flight attendant glanced at her boarding pass. "You're in 43C, near the back on the right hand side. She struggled down the narrow aisle, hugging her hand luggage in front of her. *Be careful*, she wanted to say. *Don't knock my bag*. She stowed it carefully in an overhead locker before huddling into her seat. People were still pouring onto the aircraft and yet she had never felt so alone, so vulnerable.

*Concentrate. Think about what's happening around you. You knew this wasn't going to be easy*. After another ten minutes, most of the passengers were on board and the cabin crew made a few preliminary announcements. Their Australian accent was quite different to hers but similar to Kiwi's so she'd been told. She liked the harshly melodic tones and wondered briefly how she sounded to them. Strange, stilted? What would it be like in New Zealand? How would it feel to live in a country of strangers who talked differently? Would she be the odd one out? Would she be welcome there?

A flush of panic rushed through her body as doors were closed and crosschecked. There was no turning back now, no last minute escape. A few tears escaped, and she dabbed them away while listening to the announcements. "Welcome aboard Qantas flight QF064 to Sydney. Our flying time tonight will be approximately twelve hours. Conditions over Johannesburg are calm and we anticipate a smooth take off."

She watched numbly as the crew demonstrated safety procedures. *Am I really doing this?* she thought. *Leaving behind everything I've ever known? Surrounded by all these*

*strangers?* She pressed her head onto her chest, dizzy and afraid. Then she thought of Luke. Of the promise she made. She had to do this for him.

The pilot lined up behind several other planes, waiting his turn to thunder down the runway. It was dark now with just a rim of fire where the sun had melted into the horizon. Sarah gazed at the terminal building in the far distance. She'd told her family to go home but wondered if they were still there. If they were watching from the observation deck. She wished they were in the plane with her, surrounding her with love and comfort as they had, only hours earlier.

"Cabin crew, prepare for takeoff." The last crew-members took their seats and the aircraft rolled into position, engines roaring, metal straining and vibrating until the plane surged into motion. She gripped the armrests as they hurtled down the tarmac, on and on until eventually the plane lumbered into the air, heavy and sluggish, as it banked to the right.

The lights of Johannesburg twinkled below them; gold and silver pinpricks, headlights on highways, people headed home to family, warmth, and comfort. Sarah felt like someone had ripped her heart out and left it down there. She tried to make out familiar streets but it was too dark, her mind too confused. Her gaze lingered long after the lights had disappeared. Each second, each minute, carrying her further from home, away from the place where she belonged.

Dinner was served soon after takeoff and she picked at chicken casserole and vegetables and toyed with blueberry cheesecake and cream. Her appetite was gone and she felt sick with anxiety. An empty seat separated her from a young Indian girl, about her age, seated by the window. She was striking to look at with swirls of long black hair pinned up on her head. They smiled and acknowledged each other, exchanging names and nothing further.

"Shiraz."

"Sarah." She was grateful for the easy silence that sat between them. Any type of personal conversation would release fresh tears.

The crew dimmed the lights after dinner and she experimented with the entertainment system, scrolling through programs and movies until she settled on *Mamma Mia*. Luke adored ABBA's music although it had been popular a couple of decades before either of them were born. She knew he would have loved this movie. It was a welcome escape from reality and for a while, she could smile and even managed a laugh. From *Mamma Mia*, she moved onto an episode of *House* and was engrossed in complicated medical procedures when the seat belt light came on.

“We’re expecting some turbulence and request you fasten your seat belt as a precaution.” All over the plane, bodies stretched out, rearranged themselves and clipped their belts into place. The plane lurched suddenly, dropping what felt like miles through the air. Then the bouncing and bumping started. A baby howled from the depths of economy class and she huddled miserably in her seat. Sarah had never liked turbulence and this was the worst she’d experienced. Would she even make it to New Zealand?

“We apologise for the rough ride.” A confident voice reassured the passengers. “The pilot has requested permission to fly at a higher altitude which will lift us out of the bad weather.” A sigh rippled round the cabin and she realised they had all been afraid. She finally fell into a muddled doze, uncomfortable in her seat and aware of the occasional bumps and bounces. She woke at 1 a.m., then again at 1:37 a.m. and 2:12 a.m.

Shiraz woke her at 2:59 a.m. “You were dreaming.”

She struggled upright, tears soaking her shirt. The same nightmare had plagued her for months. Her mother would often come and hold her in the middle of the night; rock her until the terrible fear subsided and her trembling ceased. The dream always ended the same way if she didn’t awake first: Luke lying on the side of the road, life seeping from him in a dark stain.

“I love you, Sarah.” he whispered. “I don’t think I’ll make it. Take me to New Zealand with you ... don’t give up our plans ... ”

Shiraz moved into the seat next to Sarah and handed her a tissue. “Are you alright? Is there anything I can do for you?”

A flight attendant paused at Sarah’s side just then, her eyes sympathetic. “Can I bring you anything? A pain tablet, some juice, a snack?”

Their concern brought fresh tears to Sarah’s eyes. “A tablet and some juice would be good. I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

It didn’t take long to organise and the attendant crouched down for a few minutes as Sarah swallowed the pill and thanked them both. “I feel so foolish. Sitting here, crying in front of two complete strangers. It’s not the type of thing I normally do. It’s just that I feel so overwhelmed. So afraid of the future and so alone.” She couldn’t tell them the whole truth but she shared this small part of it.

Shiraz placed a comforting hand on her arm. “Are you moving to Australia?”

“No, New Zealand.”

The flight attendant smiled. “We get many immigrants travelling with us and I’ve seen the pain they go through. Most of them leave loved ones behind and find it really difficult. The great thing is that a year or so later, I see some of them again as they travel back to South Africa for a holiday. The majority of them settle in really well and don’t regret their decision.”

Shiraz continued the conversation as a bell pinged softly, summoning the flight attendant to another part of the plane. “My uncle and his family moved to Sydney two years ago. It took them a few months to settle but they love it now.” She smiled gently. “You’ll be alright. I know you will.”

To her surprise, Sarah managed to drift off to sleep again, the tablet having quieted the pounding in her head. This time she slept for two hours before the cabin crew roused them for breakfast.

Kingsford Smith Airport in Sydney was Sarah’s first glimpse of a country outside of Africa. Although tired and emotionally drained, the terror of the night had subsided and she used the hour stopover to explore, absorbing the Australian accents and unfamiliar sights. The strangest thing was seeing white people doing menial jobs done by blacks in South Africa. *How different*, she thought as a middle-aged white woman walked past with a trolley of cleaning materials. *I see I’ll have to adapt to a whole new way of life.*

By the time the boarding call came for her connecting flight, Sarah was eager to see the country she had studied so carefully and learned so much about. The anticipation took the edge off her tiredness and she settled into the soft embrace of leather. Outside, the Tasman Sea appeared to be a shiny blue cloth, interwoven with sequins and sparkles of silver. It looked so small on the map, but the reality was massive, a vast expanse that rolled endlessly from Australia to New Zealand, from one shore to another. It was a welcome distraction, this unexpected beauty. She knew the pain was still there, lurking deep within, but this was an adventure. She’d taken the first step to living their dream. “Oh, Luke,” she murmured. “How you would have loved this.”

An announcement from the pilot disturbed her thoughts. “If you’re sitting on the left side of the plane, you’ll see New Zealand in the far distance.” She pressed her face up against the window and caught a glimpse of her new home, watching intently as the grey shadow started to take form. Greenery appeared and then a fringe of yellow beaches. The sea lightened in colour and took on varying shades of turquoise, emerald and sapphire. This was a

different world to the one she knew. A different kind of beauty and she was captivated. Her eyes moistened twenty minutes later as they crossed the Southern Alps; immense formations of gray rock, powdered in places with drifts of snow. This was where Luke had told her to bring him. She thought of the days ahead, the journey into the mountains. She thought of fulfilling his last wish; of taking his ashes and scattering them into mountain breezes. Of sprinkling them into raging waterfalls and majestic, braided rivers. Of making Luke a part of the land he yearned to come to. For the first time in months, a glimmer of hope shone into her heart. *Thank you, Luke. Thank you for making sure I would come here; that I would give New Zealand a chance.*”