

BARBARA
HANNAY

NEEDED: HER
MR RIGHT

Cherish

Barbara Hannay

Needed: Her Mr Right

Аннотация

Returning from a charity cycle ride through the Himalayas, Simone is determined to finally deal with the dreadful secret she's kept, and move on with her life. Until the diary into which she poured her troubled heart is lost— and found by billionaire journalist Ryan Tanner. Simone's never been able to open up, to get close, and she's immediately suspicious of Ryan. But there's something about him that invites trust. Maybe this beautiful, loving man can help her find the real her. He just might be her Mr. Right in a million...

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Needed: Her Mr. Right

Barbara Hannay



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PROLOGUE

Simone's Diary—Day One:

ARRIVED IN BANGKOK at 10.30 p.m. Very hot and muggy. Tomorrow I enter China and I'm freaking out.

Am stressing about my fitness, wondering if the long bike rides each weekend and the daily slogs in the pool are enough preparation for cycling four hundred and fifty kilometres across the Himalayas. What if I can't keep up with the others?

Everyone at work is convinced I'm crackers. I don't expect them to understand why I need to do this, to push myself out of my comfort zone.

Problem is, tonight, I'm thinking maybe I am crazy. I mean, fundraising for street kids aside, what am I trying to prove?

It'd be nice if I came up with an answer some time in the next twelve days.

1.00 a.m. Couldn't sleep so wandered off in search of a cute little bar for a drink or a snack, got totally lost and was propositioned by a middle-aged tourist.

Arrived back here even more stressed. Still can't sleep. My hotel bed is so hard I might as well lie on the floor—the carpet and underlay are softer than this apology for a mattress.

I'm going to be tired, stressed and unfit for the start tomorrow. Disaster!

CHAPTER ONE

“Journeys end in lovers meeting; every wise man’s son doth know.”

William Shakespeare

JET lagged and dull headed after his long flight from London to Sydney, Ryan Tanner was waiting in the Customs queue when he first saw the girl with the turn- and-stare legs.

He caught sight of her again when he was pushing his luggage trolley through the Arrivals hall.

The slim blonde in a belted pink shift, with long golden-brown legs and strappy high-heeled sandals, was like a glowing hologram moving confidently through the drab tide of travellers dressed in predictable, look-alike business suits or denim jeans.

But Ryan’s interest in her, although keen, was fleeting. Stunning as the girl was, she was a total stranger among thousands of strangers. Ryan had no idea where she’d come from or where she was heading. And his focus now was on getting home.

Home, after a year and a half in London. Home, after eighteen months of dreary British weather.

He’d spent a good part of the flight dreaming of sunshine and his first view of Bondi Beach—aquamarine surf breaking into white froth on yellow sand. But, with his usual lousy luck, it was pouring rain in Sydney today. The view was obscured by grey

clouds.

Now, head down against the sheeting rain, he left the terminal building and felt his mood sink from travel-weary-jaded to downright morose as he steered his unwieldy trolley piled with two suitcases, a bulky snowboard and a laptop.

There was, of course, a long queue at the taxi rank.

Ryan yawned and supposed he should have let someone know he was arriving this morning. But, after a twenty hour flight, he was too tired to bother with conversation, with the inevitable questions about London and the ugly row with his Fleet Street editor.

Besides, he felt scruffy, needed a shower. And a shave wouldn't go astray, he thought, rubbing at the rough stubble on his jaw.

Then he saw the young woman again.

Fresh as a newly picked peach, she was standing ahead of him in the queue.

Wind, whipping across the street and under the awning, exposed enticing glimpses of her divine legs before she got control of her skirt.

He spent a pleasant moment wondering if she was a European tourist or an Australian coming home.

Three businessmen at the front of the queue climbed into the same taxi and Ryan shuffled forward, dragging his luggage trolley with him, pleased that the line was diminishing at a reasonable rate.

He thought about his comfortable, slightly shabby flat in Balmain and hoped that the tenants, who'd rented it while he was away, hadn't treated it too badly.

He stole another quick glance at the girl, not that he made a habit of ogling attractive girls, but this one intrigued him. He tried to pin down the quality that grabbed his attention, apart from her legs.

Perhaps it was an impression of vitality and fitness, the way she stood, shoulders back, head high, suggesting can-do confidence without conceit. Her bulky backpack surprised him. She looked the type who would travel with expensive matching suitcases.

Suddenly, almost as if she'd felt his eyes on her, she turned and looked straight at him, and for electrifying seconds their gazes met and held.

Her eyes were dark—blue or brown, he couldn't be sure—her brows darker than her hair and well defined. And, as she looked at him, he could have sworn that her mild, slightly bored expression changed.

He sensed a tiny stirring of interest from her. A ripple. The briefest flicker at the corner of her mouth. The barest beginnings of a smile.

He decided to smile back and discovered he was already smiling. Had he been grinning like a fool?

And then it happened. A tremulous, gut-punching sense of connection with this girl seized him by the throat, drove air from

his lungs.

But in the next breath her taxi arrived. The driver jumped out and grabbed her pack, grumbling noisily at having to leave the warmth of his cab and splash about in the rain. The girl slipped quickly into the back passenger seat. Ryan caught one final flash of her beautiful bare legs before she shut the door.

The driver, a very glum fellow indeed, dumped her bulky backpack into the taxi's boot. He already had a couple of boxes in there and he spent a bad-tempered few minutes in the rain, shoving and cramming her pack, squeezing it mercilessly into the too small space.

At last the bulky pack was squashed enough to allow him to slam the door but, as he did, something slipped from one of the pack's side pockets and fell into the rain-filled gutter with a plop.

It was a small book.

"Hey, mister, you want this cab or not?"

Ryan turned, surprised to discover that other passengers had left and he'd reached the top of the queue. A taxi driver was scowling at him.

His eyes swivelled back to the book in the gutter. Her book. Small and thick with a brown leather cover of good quality. It looked like a diary or one of those fancy planners many people couldn't live without. And no one else seemed to have seen it fall.

"Just a sec." Ryan waved violently to catch her driver's attention. "Hey, you've dropped something!"

But it was too late.

The driver was already slipping behind the wheel. His door slammed and, with an impatient, throaty roar, his cab shot out from the kerb, ducked across two lanes and streaked off, leaving the girl's book lying in the rain.

"Listen, mate, you either get in this cab or step aside. You can't hold up the bloody queue in this weather."

But Ryan stared after the other cab and at the book, lying in the gutter. If it wasn't rescued quickly it would be ruined.

And why should he care?

Why should he, Ryan Tanner, a seen-it-all, done-it-all, travel-weary journalist, jeopardise his precious place in a taxi queue while he dived into pouring rain to retrieve an unknown stranger's sodden book from the gutter?

He hadn't the foggiest clue. It didn't make any sense.

But, then again, he'd always been a curious type and he'd looked into the girl's beautiful eyes...

So perhaps it made perfect sense.

Whatever...In the next unthinking, reckless split-second he grabbed his suitcase out of the driver's hands, hurled it into the taxi's boot and yelled, "We've got to follow that cab in the far lane!"

The driver's jaw gaped. "You're joking."

"Never more serious, mate." Ryan dashed for the gutter, shouting over his shoulder, "Get the other case and stow my snowboard in the back."

As he scooped up the book, he was aware of a moment's

indecision behind him before the driver gave a strangely excited cry and leapt forward.

The snowboard was shoved into the back of the cab and the two men jerked their front doors open and leapt in, Ryan clutching his laptop. And the wet book.

The driver's dark eyes were flashing with high excitement as he depressed the accelerator. He turned and grinned at Ryan. "I've been waiting twenty years for a chase!"

Ahead of them, the girl's cab was still in sight—just. It had stopped at a junction, but any second now the lights would change.

As the lights turned green, Simone wriggled her shoulders and deliberately relaxed into the luxurious hug of soft leather upholstery. She closed her eyes and tried to shrug off the sense that nothing about her homecoming felt right.

Perhaps that was what happened when you came down from the top of the world. Literally.

Three days ago, she'd been madly celebrating the achievement of a lifetime. She'd never before experienced anything like that heady feeling of supreme accomplishment—or the wonderful sense of camaraderie she'd shared with her fellow cyclists.

The trip had produced all kinds of unexpected extras...best of all the especially close bond she'd formed with her new friends, Belle and Claire...the deep sense of connection that they'd all felt up there in the mountains, far away from their everyday worlds...the trust they'd developed.

And then, near the end of the journey...the dark secrets they'd unburdened.

The pact the three women had made.

The promise.

Oh, cringe. Simone shut her eyes quickly. Oh, help.

Every time she thought about the terrible secret she'd revealed to Belle and Claire that night, she felt a shaft of hot, terrifying panic.

It was so hard to believe that she'd actually told them. She'd said it out loud—revealed the one thing she never talked about.

Never. To anyone.

At the time it had felt amazingly good to get it off her chest at last. A blessed relief. After all, Belle and Claire had both spilled secrets too. And they hadn't reeled back in horror at her story. She'd been lulled into thinking that perhaps it wasn't so shocking after all.

And she'd felt so happy, so strong in her brave decision to visit her grandfather at last, to break her promise to her mother and to tell him what she should have confessed years ago. To ask for his forgiveness.

But everything had seemed different when she'd been up there, in the rarefied atmosphere of the Himalayas. Her vision had been clearer, choices had appeared straightforward. It had seemed perfectly OK for three women from totally different worlds—an Aussie, a Yank and a Brit—to make life-changing decisions beneath the benevolent gaze of Jade Dragon Snow

Mountain.

Now, coming home, Simone wasn't so sure. Sharing her secret had changed everything, complicated everything.

Before, no one else in the world knew, and she could almost convince herself that the events on that terrible night her stepfather died had never really occurred.

Now, she was frightened. She wished Belle and Claire weren't so far away. She needed their reassurance that her life wasn't going to collapse because they knew.

They'd agreed to stay in touch, to share regular emails and to help each other through the weeks ahead. Simone hoped that would be enough. She felt so...so...anxious. And something else. What was it? Not depressed exactly. Deflated? Yeah...definitely. She felt flat. Very flat.

They'd lost sight of the girl's taxi.

Despite Ryan's driver's most valiant attempts, there was simply too much traffic, too much rain and too many taxis zipping back and forth. They'd had to admit defeat.

Now, as his taxi dashed through Sydney's rain-lashed streets, heading for his flat in Balmain, the diary sat on the seat beside Ryan. The thick leather cover had saved it from a soaking and a few shakes and a wipe on his jeans had rendered it almost as good as new.

But so far Ryan hadn't been able to identify the book's owner. Funny how much that bothered him.

His fingers drummed on the leather cover as he stared ahead

at the frantic motion of the windscreen wipers. Under other circumstances he might have tracked back to the terminal and handed the diary in to the airport's lost property office.

But he was dog-tired, it was lousy weather and they had already been halfway across Sydney before they'd given up the chase and before he'd realised that the pretty blonde had not filled in the personal information page inside the book's front cover.

Of course he hadn't rescued her book simply to discover her name, address and telephone number. It was more a sense of fair play that had sent him diving into the gutter. But now he was left in something of a quandary. He had no idea who she was. And he realised, too late, that was the way she wanted it.

Why else would she keep a diary without including any personal contact details?

This diary, with its closely written pages, was nothing like the small, dog-eared notepad filled with scribbled contacts, appointments, story leads and notes that Ryan kept in his inner coat pocket.

He'd thumbed through a few pages and read enough to realise that this was a very personal record, meant for her eyes only—a mixture of internal musings as well as a detailed account of a recent bike ride through the Himalayas.

Himalayas? Wow, no wonder she looked fit.

She'd begun writing in neat black ink, but she must have lost the pen halfway through the trip and the rest of the pages were

written in a mixture of red ballpoint and blunt pencil.

Ryan flicked the book's pages once more and they fell open in the middle, where she'd wedged post-cards—a Buddhist temple, towering snow capped mountains, Chinese villagers in traditional dress, a breathtaking view down a gorge. He checked the back of each postcard to see if any had been addressed, but they were blank.

Frustrated, he closed the book again.

And decided he wouldn't read it.

OK, so he was a journalist and journalists were noted for sticking their noses into other people's business. He'd been doing exactly that in the UK for the past eighteen months—until his recent, rather notorious departure.

Now, he'd come home to regroup, to think about new directions. The last thing he needed was a scavenger hunt, digging through an innocent young woman's personal journal for pay dirt.

Besides, he'd stood in that taxi queue and looked into her eyes.

And somehow that made a difference.

Anyway...a cycling holiday in China was hardly breaking news.

That settled, he slipped the diary into his pocket and turned his attention to familiar Sydney landmarks. He was almost home.

For Simone, the single best thing about coming home was her lovely modern apartment in Newtown.

She'd invested in this soon after she'd landed her plum job as

executive editor of City Girl magazine. Spacious and open-plan, great for parties and handy for the City Girl offices, it suited her lifestyle perfectly.

She loved everything about it, from the lively purple feature wall in the living room and the mezzanine level that housed her home office and bedroom, to the funky retro-style stools lined up at the kitchen counter—a favourite gathering spot for her friends.

Today, however, as she set her key in the lock, she didn't feel quite the sense of welcome that she'd hoped for. Ever since she'd farewelled Belle and Claire at Hong Kong airport, a vague sense of unease seemed to have taken root inside her.

Silly. She wasn't going to sink into gloom. All she needed was to kick off the designer sandals she'd splurged on in Hong Kong—gorgeous, but still a tad uncomfortable—and she would make a nice hot cup of tea and reread some of the affirmations she'd written in her diary when she'd felt so fantastic up in the mountains.

Barefoot, she padded across the timber floor to her backpack and she looked down at it, rubbing at her forehead as she tried to remember where she'd packed the diary. It was in one of the outside pockets.

She rolled the pack a little, patting the pockets, to feel their contents. Toiletries in this one. Her camera in this other, a small bottle of French perfume from the duty free and—

No!

A jolt ripped through her as she felt the unmistakable flatness

of an empty pocket. Her heart began to race. There shouldn't be any empty pockets in her pack. She'd crammed her possessions into every available space.

This pocket was where she kept—

Frantically, she checked the other pockets, hoping against hope to find a familiar rectangular shape.

It wasn't there.

"Oh, no!" Her cry was almost a wail. "I don't believe it!"

She'd put her diary in this pocket. And it was gone. Stooping closer, she saw that the zip was broken. Her heart jerked erratically as she traced it with her fingers and found an irregular gap in the metal teeth. Fighting a growing sense of panic, she tried to remember when it could have happened. She could distinctly remember seeing the reassuring book-shaped bulge of her diary in this pocket when she'd gone through Customs.

Groaning, she thought of everything she'd written—her faithful descriptions of every point of the journey through China, the scenery, the cycling, the aches and pains, triumphs and fears...

The secrets!

Oh, cringe. What if someone read them?

She hadn't merely written the outpourings of her own heart, she'd included the secrets that Belle and Claire had shared too. And she'd written down details of the private pact they'd made.

She covered her face with her hands. Panic threatened.

Fighting it, she forced herself to remember everything she'd

done at the airport, retraced her steps in her mind...getting through Security, pushing her pack on a trolley through the Arrivals hall, waiting outside, locking eyes with the hot guy in the taxi queue. The tall, smiling guy with the stubble and the amazing dark brown eyes that—

Oh, give it a miss, Simone. As if he's relevant!

She gave an impatient cry of self-recrimination.

She couldn't lose her diary. She just couldn't! Apart from the dire possibility that she was scattering her new friends' secrets to the four winds, she was writing an article for City Girl about the trip and she needed the notes she'd made.

Thank heavens she'd emailed a fairly comprehensive coverage of her journey through from Hong Kong to her office yesterday, which meant she'd still be able to write the article, even without her diary. It was the personal stuff in there that sent her stomach churning.

And now some stranger might—

She jumped to her feet as she remembered the awful thump when the taxi driver had dumped the pack into the boot of the car. The whole vehicle had rocked with the force of it. Maybe it had fallen out into the boot.

Perhaps her driver had already turned it in to the taxi company's lost property. She could phone them, ask all their drivers to check their vehicles...offer a reward.

Excited by fresh hope, she rushed to her telephone.

Ryan piled his suitcases, snowboard and laptop in the middle

of his living room and looked about him. It felt strange to come home to his flat after so long away.

Professional cleaners had been in and left the place super-tidy and smelling of artificial room freshener and disinfectant. Devoid of character.

Sad truth was, his home didn't really feel like home without a fine layer of dust over the furniture and a scattering of newspapers, books and at least three dirty coffee mugs.

He yawned again—a jet lag induced yawn so huge he almost cracked his jaw.

He needed a coffee.

Damn. With a groan, he realised that his cupboards were bare. The tenants hadn't left anything—even the sugar bowl was empty.

To add to his annoyance, his mobile phone rang.

Ryan almost ignored it but, a split-second before it rang out, he relented and answered.

“Hello?”

“So you're home son.”

“Hi, Dad.” Ryan's stomach sank. An interrogation from JD the minute he arrived home was the last thing he needed. “I've just walked in the door.”

“So, what are your plans now? Now that the London venture's fallen through.”

Fallen through? The old man had such a sweet turn of phrase—and an incredible capacity for ignoring the facts. As if JD

didn't know that it was his insensitive interference from the other side of the world that had forced Ryan's resignation.

"Uh—I haven't made any definite plans yet, Dad. I'm going to take a little time out. To regroup."

"Regroup? What kind of rubbish is that? You need a plan, Ryan. A business plan. That's your problem, you know."

You're my problem, Ryan almost snapped. His father couldn't leave him alone. But if he told JD that, he'd leave himself wide open for a tirade.

He got one anyway.

"It's high time you did something about your lifestyle, Ryan. You're still drifting aimlessly. No focus. No goal. You're past thirty, son, and still a hack journalist."

For crying out loud.

"You know you should be in management by now. Running budgets, hiring and firing."

Ryan held the receiver away from his ear as his father rattled on.

"I've had an idea that might suit you," JD said. "It's time you used the money in the trust fund your mother left you. Use it to buy up a little country newspaper. You would get one for a song. Get it up and running and then knock off the other papers in the region. Build quite a good business."

Ryan groaned softly. "Thanks for the suggestion, but I've no intention of burying myself in some sleepy country town."

"But for—"

“Dad, I’m taking a short break and then I’m going to concentrate on specialist writing. Features. Human interest. I’ll look up some of my old contacts at The Sydney Chronicle.”

“Surely you’re not going to crawl back to the rag where you started?”

“I can and I shall. I’m very happy with my life.” Ryan’s voice rose several decibels. “OK?”

He disconnected, felt drained. In recent years, hanging up in mid-conversation had been the only way to avoid an almighty argument with his father.

I’m very happy with my life.

It was almost true.

And that was more than JD could claim. His father might be an Australian success story, but he was into his third marriage and was still obsessed with wiping out his business opponents. Ryan couldn’t imagine ever finding pleasure from that.

JD owned a string of iron ore and gold mines and several cattle stations, a mansion in Perth, an apartment overlooking Sydney Harbour, an island in the Great Barrier Reef and a villa on the Côte d’Azur, but his billions had never bought him the kind of contentment that Ryan longed for.

Nevertheless, in his father’s eyes Ryan would always be a failure. Christopher, the elder son, was the Good Son, the golden child. He’d followed in JD’s footsteps, had acquired a Ph.D. in mining engineering, a beautiful trophy wife and two fine sons.

Ryan was the black sheep.

Most of the time he didn't let it bother him. And yet...

He felt strangely alone.

Like a congenital defect, loneliness had dogged him since childhood, since he'd first known he would never bask in the warmth of his father's approval.

And right now he was tired. Physically and emotionally. But he knew from experience that it was best after a long international flight to grit it out until night time before hitting the hay.

He really needed coffee.

With not a coffee bean in sight, he opted for Plan B. He would head for Stratos's café. He could spend the afternoon there, surrounded by Sydneysiders, drinking endless cups of coffee.

Picking up his coat, he felt the weight of the girl's book in the pocket.

He felt the grain of the leather cover beneath his fingers and then, as he took the diary out and set it on the bookcase, he thought about its owner. Remembered her tentative smile, her lovely eyes.

He should do something about getting this back to her. But the conversation with his father had destroyed his sense of gallantry.

Maybe tomorrow. Right now, he needed coffee.

CHAPTER TWO

SIMONE couldn't sleep for worrying about her diary, couldn't believe she'd lost it. She'd called the cab company but there was no report anywhere of it being handed in. She was terribly afraid that the diary had disappeared for ever.

But where was it? Had someone found it? Would they bother to read it? Would they ever link it to her?

The cab company had asked her to leave her name and a contact number, but she'd been too afraid to reveal her identity. What if her story was leaked to the press?

The possibilities tossed around and around in her head like debris swirling down a drainpipe and finally she gave up trying to sleep. Slipping out of bed, she padded in bare feet through the dark flat to her study, blinked at the brightness as her computer screen came to life and read Belle and Claire's emails for the zillionth time.

Belle had written:

Oh, Simone! What a shame about your diary. I know how hard you worked on it—will you be able to put together your article without it? If you need any details, I've got the stuff I wrote for my reports that you can have. As for anyone connecting us with it, I wouldn't worry too much. It's most likely in some airport waste compactor by now.

That was a comforting thought. If only she could believe it.

Claire had been equally sympathetic and reassuring:

Don't beat yourself up about this. It's disappointing and frustrating, but I can't imagine it will cause any problems for any of us.

Simone closed down her email programme, hoping the girls were right. It wouldn't be so bad if she hadn't included so many personal ramblings in her diary. She hadn't meant to get deep and meaningful. Her intention had been simply to record the cycling challenge, but for years now she'd kept her inner self so tightly under wraps that once she was out of the country and had started to write, all kinds of thoughts, hopes and fears had tumbled on to the page.

So many dreams and dreads, memories and secrets...

Up there in the Himalayas, close beneath the stars, she'd looked at the vast dome of sky and hadn't been able to stop thinking about her parents. Both dead. She'd never known her father—he'd died before she was born, fighting in Vietnam. Her mother had died when she was seventeen.

She'd thought a great deal about her grandfather, who was very much alive, although she hadn't seen him in over a decade.

Belle and Claire had been going through something similar, she'd discovered later, which was why they'd eventually made their pact and why Simone had pledged to go to Jonathan Daintree, her grandfather, to tell him what she should have told him years ago.

But now, back in Sydney and sitting alone in the dark, her

courage seemed to have abandoned her totally.

In the eerie darkness, her eyes sought the familiar shape of an old cardboard box on the bookshelf beside her. It held all the Christmas and birthday cards her grandfather had sent her. Each card had come with a generous cheque and she'd written polite notes to thank him, but on both sides their correspondence had been guarded and coldly polite for some time now.

And it was her fault.

After her mother's death, she'd distanced herself from the old man. At first there had been occasional fleeting meetings in cafés when Jonathan had come to town. A kiss on the cheek...

A handful of words...

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Grandfather."

"You know you're always welcome at Murrawinni."

"Yes, but I'm so busy."

She'd had to force the distance between them. It was awful and she knew she'd broken his heart, but if she'd remained close with Jonathan he would have asked too many questions. Questions about her stepfather, Harold Pearson's, death, about her mother Angela's involvement. Questions Simone could never answer.

Her mother had begged her never to tell anyone.

But could her mother have guessed the unbearable burden that ban had imposed?

Living with such a terrible secret had not only soured her relationship with her grandfather; her refusal to talk about it was

at the root of her string of broken relationships with men. For Simone, the whole getting-to-know-you dating scene was fraught with tension.

Each time she went out with a new boyfriend, she always hoped that this would be The One. She would give anything to fall completely, obsessively, permanently in love with one wonderful man, but the burden of her secret always held her back.

In the Himalayas, she had come to the alarming decision that Angela had been wrong to silence her. The guilty secret had blighted her life and the pain of separation from her grandfather was too great. She owed him the truth.

And now she had to find the courage to tell him everything. And she had to do it fast, because—oh, help—because the person who found the diary might let her secrets out and her grandfather would, most definitely, never forgive her then.

Simone felt her eyes sting, couldn't bring herself to look at the other larger box that held letters from her mother. Just looking at it brought a rush of painful memories and a wave of guilt and fear. She bit down hard on her lip to stop herself from crying, turned on her desk lamp and began to type a bravely hopeful reply to Belle and Claire.

Next morning, stomach churning, she dialed Murrawinni's number before she lost her nerve. Her grandfather's housekeeper, Connie Price, answered.

"I beg your pardon?" she said. "Who did you say is calling?"
"Simone. Simone Gray, Jonathan's granddaughter."

“Simone?” Connie’s voice quavered with surprised disbelief. “Lord have mercy, child. This is going to be quite a shock for him. It’s been so long.”

Simone’s stomach lurched. “Is my grandfather well? I don’t want to upset him or make him ill.”

“I don’t think there’s any fear of that, Simone. He’s well enough. Fit as a fiddle, in fact. Keeps us all on our toes. Just a moment and I’ll fetch him.”

Connie took more than a moment and Simone’s heart accelerated to a gallop while she waited. Would her grandfather be angry? Would he refuse to speak to her? Would he hammer her with a thousand questions?

“Simone?” It was Connie’s voice again.

“Yes?”

“I—I’m sorry, my dear. Jonathan—” Connie paused and cleared her throat. “I’m afraid he can be a little stubborn these days.”

“What does that mean? Are you saying that he doesn’t want to speak to me?” Simone’s voice broke pitifully. She screwed her face tight, fighting tears. “I was hoping to ask if I could come out to Murrawinni to—to visit him. Th-there’s something I need—”

She broke off, couldn’t get the words out.

“I’m sure he’ll come round, dear. It’s just that your call has been quite a shock. It’s been such a long time.”

“Yes.” The word came out as a despairing squeak. “Perhaps Grandfather will ring me l-later, if—if he changes his mind.”

Simone gave Connie her number and hung up, felt an overwhelming sense of defeat. She'd already lost her diary. What else could go wrong?

By the end of a few days of self-imposed vacation, the printer's ink in Ryan's veins drove him back to The Sydney Chronicle newsroom. He was greeted with flattering enthusiasm and predictable curiosity about the row that had ended his time in London.

"What was that about?" asked Jock Guinness, the chief-of-staff and Ryan's former mentor. "Brash young Aussie clashes with ultra-conservative British establishment?"

"More like—Aussie black sheep spits the dummy when intrusive, cashed-up father tries to jump his boy up the British promotion queue."

Jock's jaw gaped. "Your dad did that?"

Ryan's lip curled. "Who else?"

Everyone in the newsroom expected Ryan to resume his old post. The chief-of-staff announced openly that a desk could be cleared for him in ten minutes flat. But Ryan shook his head. He wasn't looking for another spot as a general news gatherer. He'd had a gutful of being sent out on tame stories pulled off the daily job sheet.

Jock accepted this with grudging good grace. "You'll do well as a freelancer," he admitted. "You were one of the few people in this place who always had a string of good stories on the back burner."

Ryan was chatting to Meg James, one of the journalists, when he saw the girl from the airport.

He stared at her picture, smiling up at him from the pages of a glossy magazine—a full-page colour photo of her, sitting cross-legged on a grassy slope with a spectacular rocky gorge behind her and snow-capped mountains in the distance. Felt again that gut-punching sensation.

He had rung the airport's lost property office, but no one had reported a missing diary. And now, here was the girl. She was wearing slim-fitting bike shorts, revealing her legs in all their shapely, golden-tanned loveliness.

He remembered the way she'd caught his attention at the airport—as if she were in glowing Technicolor and the rest of the scene was in black and white. Remembered the uncanny moment of connection when he'd locked gazes with her. Thought of the crowded handwritten pages of her diary, still sitting on his bookshelf. It was the weirdest feeling, almost as if he knew her and he'd let her down somehow.

With admirable restraint, he refrained from snatching up the magazine. Instead, he pointed to the open pages with an excessively casual hook of his right thumb. “Do you mind if I borrow this?”

Meg James shot him a curious smile. “Be my guest. But since when have you been a fan of City Girl?”

“I'd just like to check out this story. About the bike ride in the Himalayas.”

“Oh, sure, it’s a great travel piece.” Meg glanced at the picture and rolled her eyes. “Simone puts the rest of us to shame.”

Simone. He repeated her name softly, savouring it, letting it settle inside him. It was a sensuous name—just a little exotic—a good fit for her.

“Simone Gray,” he said, reading her byline.

“Yep. Don’t you know her? She’s the Big Chief at City Girl. Executive editor.”

“No kidding?” A pulse began to throb in his jaw and fine pinpricks erupted over his arms. “Tell me more about her.”

Meg sighed. “I get pea-green just thinking about Simone Gray. She’s smart, successful, has the job I’ve always lusted after. And every time I see her, she seems to have a different guy in tow and they’re all madly in love with her, of course. And then, to cap it off, instead of just writing a cheque for her favourite charity, she put herself through a huge ordeal, training hard, getting sweaty and blistered and making the rest of us feel like lazy layabouts.”

Ryan set the magazine down abruptly and Meg frowned at him.

“Changed your mind about reading it?”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll get what I want firsthand.”

Meg treated him to a very weird look, but he was already halfway out of the office.

Simone had given her PA the day off because it was her elderly mother’s birthday, so when the phone rang for the twentieth or

maybe fortieth time that morning, her response was automatic. “Good morning. Simone Gray speaking. How can I help you?”

“Morning, Simone. My name’s Ryan Tanner. I’m a fellow journalist and I’ve rung to congratulate you on the article in this month’s City Girl. I really enjoyed your story about China. Nice work.”

Simone frowned. Her article was workmanlike and professional, possibly inspiring for some readers, but not exactly the kind of writing that would attract attention from fellow journalists—especially a male with a beautifully modulated, deeply sexy voice.

He’d said his name was Tanner...Ryan Tanner...

She didn’t think she’d met him, but couldn’t be sure. The only Tanners she could think of offhand were billionaires who owned vast tracts of mining land in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. No one in that family would want to work as a journalist.

“Thank you, Mr Tanner. It’s kind of you to take the trouble to call me.”

“No trouble.”

She waited a beat.

“But there is something else, Simone...”

He paused again and in the silence she decided there was something undeniably sexy about the way he said her name—warming it with his voice, touching a chord deep inside her.

It occurred to her that if this guy was as smooth as his voice

suggested, he might be going to ask her on a date. He wouldn't be the first man to make contact after seeing her photo in a magazine. Her mind raced ahead, planning a quick exit strategy.

Ryan Tanner's deep voice rumbled silkily down the phone line. "I have something of yours that I'd like to return."

"Something of mine?"

"You lost a book at the airport last week."

A blast of fear exploded in her chest.

Crash.

The phone receiver slipped from her hand, clattered on to her desk.

"Simone?"

Her vital organs collided. She'd convinced herself that her precious diary had been dumped by a sullen taxi driver, or had been swept up and pulped by one of those noisy street sweeping machines. Last week, she'd rung the taxi company countless times with no luck and had decided it was safe enough to publish the Himalayan article. Had decided that even if someone had found the diary, the chances of that person reading *City Girl* and putting two and two together were negligible.

But now, only one day after *City Girl* had hit the news-stands, her worst fears were realised.

And of all people to have found the diary and make the connection, it had to be another journalist!

Her hand shook as she picked up the receiver again and held it to her ear.

“Ms Gray, are you there?”

She didn’t answer.

“Ms Gray, are you OK?”

Ryan Tanner sounded concerned, but she didn’t trust him.

Her mind raced in crazy panicking circles. His faux admiration of her article was a front, of course. The only reason he’d rung was to let her know he had the diary.

The sickening question was: what else did this guy know about her? And how did he plan to use it? Her stomach heaved and sweat trickled down her back as she imagined her diary entries and her innermost secret fears splashed across some grubby tabloid newspaper. Ridiculously, she even pictured her story flashed on a television news bulletin. Nausea rose from the pit of her stomach.

She had to get a grip, had to think like an editor, not a panicking victim. It was time to think in terms of crisis management.

As calmly as she could, she said, “Tell me one thing, Mr Tanner. We’re not on air, are we?”

“Of course not. There’s no need to panic. I only work with print media.”

A huff of relief escaped her. “OK...RyanTanner...I’m trying to remember if I’ve seen your byline.”

“Used to be with The Sydney Chronicle, but I’ve been in London for the last year and a half.”

“And you believe you have something that belongs to me?”

“You must know what I’m talking about, Simone. Your diary.”

Thinking fast now, she realised she had to play for time, needed space to think, to work out a suitable response.

“Mr Tanner—uh—Ryan, I have people queuing up in the office here. I’ll have to call you back. Say in fifteen minutes?”

“OK, no problem.” He gave her his number.

“This is your private number?”

“Mine and only mine.”

Dropping the receiver, she sank back into her chair, cowered with shock for a second or two, then jumped to her feet and began to pace the office, her mind racing at a hundred miles an hour. What could she do? How on earth was she going to handle this nightmare?

There was only one answer: very carefully.

She wished she knew how her diary had ended up in Ryan Tanner’s hands. Had someone sold it to him? How many people had read it?

Fighting panic, she tried to unscramble her thoughts. She had committed the sordid details of her secret to paper and she’d exposed Belle and Claire too. And she’d recorded the pact she’d made with Belle and Claire—their commitments to find important people from their past, to right past wrongs.

How could she have been so thoughtless? So careless?

Oh, help.

Oh, hell!

Keep calm, girl.

Yes, she had to stay calm. If she kept her head, she might be able to find a way to deflect Ryan Tanner, to wriggle out of this. But she had to handle things very carefully, had to get him answering her questions, not the other way round.

She waited twenty-seven minutes, twenty-seven nerve-racking, nail-biting, agonising minutes before she rang him back.

“Hello, Mr Tanner.”

Her heart thumped so loudly it filled her ears and she could hardly hear his reply.

“Simone, thanks for calling back.”

“I’m rather busy, so I can’t speak for long, but I do appreciate your willingness to return my lost property.” Cringe. She sounded way too prim and uptight. She tried again, more casually. “Perhaps you could drop the book off at our front desk? Any time that’s convenient would be fine.”

“Well...Simone.”

She did her best to ignore the totally annoying coiling sensation deep inside her when he said her name, warming it with his dark midnight voice.

“There are a couple of things I’d like to speak to you about.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Tanner. I’m not interested in talking to you. Certainly not before I verify that this book is mine.”

“It’s yours, Simone.”

She clenched the receiver so tightly it should have snapped in two.

Ryan Tanner could be planning anything—even blackmail.

“How—” Her voice came out squeaky and scared. She paused, tried again. “How did the diary come into your possession?”

“Rainy day. Sydney Airport. Lovely girl waiting for a taxi. A backpack with a side pocket. Any of that ring a bell?”

Simone stifled a cry. This guy had been there? He’d been watching her at the airport?

Her frantic fingers twisted the phone cord. Was he stalking her?

She thought of the hot-looking guy she’d caught checking her out. Surely he wasn’t Tanner? He hadn’t looked like a stalker.

“So...so what are you saying, Mr Tanner—Ryan? You want to meet?”

“Why not? What about lunch?”

She needed more time, needed to find out as much as she could about this guy. “I—I’m busy today. How about tomorrow? Can we meet somewhere tomorrow?”

“Why wait? Couldn’t you make time today?”

She sighed. Perhaps it would be better to meet him; otherwise he might track her to her home. Best to get this over, to be rid of him.

Her throat was dry and she swallowed. “All right. Where do you want to meet?”

“How about the Jade Dragon restaurant in Chinatown? Unless you’re tired of Chinese?”

“I’ll be there at one.”

CHAPTER THREE

RYAN felt unusually on edge as he headed for Chinatown.

Had Simone Gray cast a spell on him?

How else could he explain why he'd invited her to lunch rather than taking the simple option of sticking her diary in the post or dropping it off at City Girl's front desk?

How else could he explain his need to see her, to check again exactly why she'd stood out from the thousands of travellers at the airport?

In the photo in City Girl, her pretty eyes were sparkling, her mouth curved with laughter. He'd been entranced. Seeing a picture of her was like hearing a teasing scrap of enchanting music. He wanted to hear the whole song.

Under other circumstances, he might have gone out of his way to impress her at this meeting. Flashiest restaurant in town. Top wines. Waiter primed to fuss over her.

But she was already in panic mode and Ryan suspected that kind of carry-on would only make her more suspicious. Besides, it wasn't really his style.

As he passed through the traditional paifang gate into Sydney's busy, bustling Chinatown, he caught the tempting aromas of lemon grass, ginger and chilli rising from woks and he felt strangely nervous about this meeting—almost first date nervous.

Crazy, given his age and his track record with women, and the

fact that, as far as she was concerned, this was so not a date.

He reached the Jade Dragon, stepped out of the sunlight into its darkened interior and took a moment for his eyes to adjust.

Simone was already there, seated at a small table on the far side, facing the entrance. A red lantern cast a rosy glow over her, illuminating the shock of recognition in her eyes.

She remembered. Remembered that fleeting moment last week when they'd locked gazes at the airport.

A tiny rocket of hope launched inside him, but it was quickly doused, as her surprised disbelief changed to clear disappointment, then displeasure.

Not the best of beginnings.

Nevertheless, he smiled as he made his way to her, kept smiling as he held out his hand.

"Hello, Simone."

She ignored his attempt to be friendly, simply looked up at him with wary eyes and a tight, no-nonsense mouth. He took the seat opposite her.

Forgot to breathe.

Close up, she was even lovelier than he'd remembered—in spite of her aloofness. Her face, framed by waves of soft, wheat-gold hair, was classically oval and beautifully symmetrical. And there was a breath-robbing quality about her perfect skin, the delicacy of her nose and mouth, the vividness of her eyes—deeply blue and darkly lashed.

She was simply dressed, but the very simplicity of her pale

blue dress and the fine gold chain about her neck served as a perfect foil for her beauty. The dress showed off her golden tan to perfection. It took every ounce of self-restraint to refrain from telling her straight out that she was, quite possibly, the loveliest woman he'd ever met.

How crazy would that be? The frost and wariness in her eyes were enough to assure Ryan that Simone Gray wouldn't give a flying fig.

Angling for a safe opening, he asked, "Have you ever eaten here before?"

"No." She didn't return his smile. "But I've checked out the menu and it looks OK."

"So you're ready to order?"

She nodded.

He beckoned to a waiter and Simone ordered fish in black bean sauce. Ryan chose Mongolian lamb. They both skipped the wine list and ordered jasmine tea.

In a matter of moments the waiter was gone and they were alone again.

Across the table their gazes met and Ryan caught the tiniest flare of interest in her eyes, but it was so quickly doused, like a hastily snuffed candle, that he decided he'd imagined it.

He cleared his throat. "I genuinely meant what I said about your travel piece in City Girl. I really liked it. I've been on the Nepalese side of the Himalayas, but not in China, and I think you definitely captured the atmosphere of the region. It's a fine

piece of writing—conveyed a great sense of immediacy, of being there with you.”

Her right eyebrow lifted. “Mr Tanner—”

“Simone.” He offered her his most charming smile. “I’m sure you can force yourself to call me Ryan.”

She blinked, then managed a stiff quarter-smile. “Ryan, we both know I’m not here for a literary critique.” Sitting back, with her slim hands folded in front of her, she studied him grimly. “And I’m sure you’ll agree that my story might have had a greater sense of immediacy, not to mention accuracy, if I’d been able to consult my diary.”

He shrugged. “You made it rather difficult for me to return it. There were absolutely no contact details.”

She dismissed this with an impatient wave of her hand. “I didn’t expect to lose it. I’m always exceptionally careful.”

“I’m sure you are.”

She shot him a narrow look as if she suspected he was teasing her.

“Unfortunately,” he added, “your taxi driver wasn’t so careful.”

Simone’s eyes widened.

“The diary fell out while he was cramming your backpack into the boot.”

“I thought something like that must have happened. I rang the cab company, but no one handed it in.”

Ryan sighed. “I rang the airport lost property, but no one had

listed any contact details for a lost diary.”

Tense silence fell as she sat watching him, challenging him with her deep, blue, disapproving eyes. “You did bring it, didn’t you?”

No point in playing games. Ryan took the book out of his coat pocket and set it on the table.

Her mouth tightened as she stared at it. “I suppose you’ve read every word.”

“As a matter of fact, I haven’t.”

She shot him a sharp, doubtful look, bristling with disbelief, and then, with an impatient cry, she reached for the book. Almost instinctively Ryan’s hand closed over hers. Why? He couldn’t quite explain.

Simone gasped and Ryan felt a fine tremor pass through her, through him. She dropped her gaze and he saw the thick half-moons of her lashes and the faint golden-brown dusting of colour on her eyelids, the pink gloss on her lips.

“Why don’t you believe me, Simone?”

She wouldn’t look at him.

He persisted. “If our roles were reversed, would you have read my diary?”

For a split second she looked up, her blue eyes momentarily bewildered, shining with a suspect sheen. Her pink mouth tightened. “Why do you want to know that? Do you keep a diary?”

“No,” he admitted. “But that’s not the point.”

For the first time she smiled, but her smile was cool and intensely sceptical. “I think the point is that you’re trying to sidetrack me with hypothetical arguments.”

Sighing, he let go of her hand. It was very clear that it didn’t matter what he said; she would never believe him, had no intention of trusting him. Crazy how much that bothered him.

Simone pulled the diary across the table towards her, flipped through its pages, casting frantic glances here and there, and then snapped it shut. Looked worried.

Their meals arrived and she put the diary in her handbag and busied herself pouring green tea into tiny white cups for both of them. The food looked delicious, smelled divine.

Hoping to defuse the tension, Ryan picked up his chopsticks and clicked them together. “I guess you’re an expert at using these now.”

Ignoring him, Simone stabbed her sticks nervously into her fish. “I think I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Take it easy, Simone. I’m not here to drag a story out of you.” She shot him a doubtful, dark-lashed glance. “Don’t, for one moment, imagine you can charm it out of me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of anything so low.”

“Then why are you here? Why couldn’t you have simply dropped the diary off at my office?”

“I wanted to meet you.”

She lifted a sceptical eyebrow.

Ryan shrugged and offered the fail-safe smile that worked on

every female he'd ever known, from old ladies to three-year-olds.
"This food smells great. Let's enjoy it."

"I can't eat." She looked suddenly pale and pushed her bowl to one side. "Let's not play games. Give it to me straight. You did read my diary and now you're after more details. You're going to print my story, aren't you?"

So there was a story.

Ryan couldn't help being intrigued. But he tried to reassure her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

With a huff of impatience, Simone stood, collected her handbag.

Ryan jumped to his feet. She couldn't leave now. The food smelled sensational.

She motioned for him to sit. "Enjoy your lunch. It's on me."

"That's not necessary. You're overreacting. Surely we can talk about this, Simone."

But she'd already turned and, with her back very straight, she marched across the restaurant to the front desk, handed the cashier her credit card.

Stunned, Ryan was slow to follow her, was only halfway through the maze of tables when she turned again and sent him a look.

Other diners were watching them and Simone's look was defiant, hard and sharp enough to cut Ryan in two.

Another step and he'd create a public spectacle. Damn. He'd really stuffed this, and chasing after her now would serve no

purpose.

Lifting his hand in a curt half-salute, he flashed a final smile, turned and walked casually back to his table.

He lunched alone, without enjoyment, knowing all the time that Ms Gray had made a right royal fool of him.

But what it pointed to, of course, was the inescapable fact that there was something in her diary that was more dangerous and more distressing than he'd realised.

She was frightened of him.

Simone was still shaking when she got back to the office.

Closing her door, she collapsed into her chair with the diary clutched to her chest. She felt ill—and annoyed with herself for getting frightened and running away like that. But she'd been rattled from the moment Ryan Tanner had arrived at the restaurant and she'd realised he was the same guy she'd seen in the taxi queue at the airport!

She'd felt shocked and foolish. Last week she'd thought he was smiling at her, and she'd actually smiled back. In reality, Tanner was more likely to have been smirking than smiling. And she'd been silly enough to think he was hot-looking.

What an idiot she was!

Since when had she been taken in by a hot body, a suntan and soulful brown eyes? She let out a long, exhausted sigh. At least she had the diary now. And Ryan Tanner hadn't followed her.

It was a hollow victory.

Tanner might not have come after her, but that didn't mean

he wouldn't publish her story—or Belle's and Claire's stories for that matter.

Oh, cringe.

With an angry little cry, she reached down and opened the bottom drawer of her desk, dropped the diary into it and then locked it, slipped the key into a pocket inside her handbag.

Then she swivelled in her chair to face her desktop computer. She had to send emails to Belle and Claire. To confess what had happened and to warn them.

Would they ever forgive her?

Next morning brought no relief for Simone. She stared at her computer screen and felt so on edge her teeth almost severed her lower lip. She'd spent a restless, sleepless night, racked with dread. She scanned this morning's newspapers and could find no sign of a story about her, but she knew it wouldn't be long before Ryan Tanner published everything.

How would she ever survive? What would her friends and colleagues think of her? Her grandfather?

She would try ringing Murrawinni again to warn her grandfather, but just thinking about his reaction roused a frantic mass of butterflies in her stomach.

And, to make matters worse, she had to worry about Belle and Claire too. Overnight, emails had arrived from them and, although both girls had been remarkably cool and very understanding, not blaming her at all for losing her diary, she knew they were worried.

Claire had written:

I can't say I'm happy to know my dirty laundry will soon be hanging out to dry on the public line, but I certainly don't blame you, Simone.

It's not your fault that jerk has decided to make a name for himself at our expense. Don't beat yourself up over it. If anyone deserves a good thrashing, it would be Ryan Tanner.

In the meantime, I can't keep waiting for Ethan to return my phone calls. I think a little trip is in order.

Belle had been equally sympathetic.

But, although her friends were kind and supportive, Simone knew they were upset. There was no way they wouldn't be. They were both high profile women, sure to attract huge media attention if their stories were leaked to their local press. The girls would be mortified! Belle's career as a breakfast show host would be ruined. Claire's famous family would be outraged.

And, perhaps even more importantly, if the beans about their Himalayan pacts were spilled, their missions would be in jeopardy. She mustn't allow that to happen. Belle really, really needed to track down her sister, Daisy, and Claire desperately wanted to find Ethan, her ex-husband.

Simone couldn't let the loss of her diary ruin their plans. She mustn't; she wouldn't.

She typed two words—Ryan Tanner—into her favourite Internet search engine and pages of links flashed on to her screen. She knew that some of the links would be false leads, but there

were sure to be one or two that related to the Ryan Tanner she'd met. With luck, she would find something she could follow up... something she could use to her advantage...to keep him quiet.

She had to find a way to stop Tanner.

He deserved this.

Didn't he?

Fifteen minutes later, she grinned at her computer screen, delighted with what she'd discovered. While it was true that Ryan Tanner was a journalist who'd worked for The Sydney Chronicle and a couple of London papers, it was what he had not told her that excited her now.

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