

Too Good to be True

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Clary Sage

An essential oil with a warm, nutty scent, it has euphoric properties which promote a sense of wellbeing

When Carey Browne stepped out onto West 34th Street she stopped in surprise. Not that she should have been surprised, she said to Ben, who was standing beside her holding at least half-a-dozen Macy's bags thanks to her indulgence in a sudden frenzy of last-minute shopping; last night's report from the Weather Channel had shown a shocking weather system heading in from the Midwest and they'd said there was a likelihood of snow on the East Coast. It was just that – despite the bitingly cold morning air which had caused their breath to hang in little puffs in front of them when they left the hotel – there hadn't been any signs of snow as they walked into the store over an hour earlier. Now it was falling in a slow-motion frenzy of heavy white flakes and was at least an inch thick on the sidewalk.

'Sorry,' said Ben, who'd told her that the Weather Channel wasn't always accurate and that January snowstorms often blew themselves out. 'I wanted to be optimistic.'

She linked her arm through his and snuggled closer to his fur-lined leather jacket. 'It doesn't matter,' she told him. But she frowned because if the snow continued falling at this rate their flight was sure to be delayed. She did some mental calculations and hoped that even if they were delayed she'd still manage to get back to Dublin in time for her shift the following day. If the worst came to the worst she could always phone, let them know she'd be late and get someone to cover for her. But she didn't want to phone Ireland because, if she did, she'd have to tell them everything that had happened in the last few days and she wasn't ready to do that yet. She'd hardly got her head around it herself. Besides, she wanted to tell them face to face.

'We'd better leave ourselves a little extra time to get to the airport,' she told Ben as they walked down the street, carrier bags bumping against their legs. 'I've never been here in a snowstorm before but whenever it snows at Dublin there's always problems with people getting delayed.'

'I do my best to be optimistic because you always look on the worst side.' He grinned at her. 'I bet you anything we get away on time.'

'You think?' There was amusement and challenge in her voice.

'Absolutely.'

'How much?'

‘Five dollars,’ he told her. ‘It’s all the cash that I’ve left since you cleaned me out in the store.’

She looked at him penitently but her brown eyes twinkled. ‘I couldn’t help it. The discounts were so utterly brilliant that those clothes just begged to be bought.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘But to max out both your credit cards and all of your cash . . .’

‘Give me a break!’ she cried. ‘I didn’t do it all today.’

He laughed. ‘I know, I know. New York, Las Vegas, New York – what’s a girl to do. And,’ he added, ‘there were some unexpected expenses.’

She flung her arms round him and kissed him on the lips. ‘I loved the unexpected expenses,’ she murmured. ‘And I love, love, love you.’

‘I love you too,’ he said.

‘Sure?’ she whispered.

‘Sure I’m sure.’

‘Certain?’

‘I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.’ He brushed melting snowflakes from the mass of nut-brown corkscrew curls that framed her face and from the pair of tiny, dark-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. ‘You’re a wonderful woman, and you’ll certainly be the best dressed woman in town when we get home if today’s spree is anything to go by – what’s not to love?’

‘I don’t want you to think that we’ve made a terrible mistake,’ she told him. ‘And I’m sorry about the shopping. Really I am.’

He grinned. ‘I don’t think that *I’ve* made a terrible

mistake – at least I managed to keep my credit card number to myself.’

‘You think?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Cos if you really loved me you’d definitely give me your credit card number.’ She smiled teasingly at him.

‘I’m hoping our love transcends mere money,’ he told her sternly. ‘All the same, I’d better take you away from the temptation of the stores. Besides, we should get a move on if you want to pack and leave earlier than we planned.’

He put his arm round her waist and they hurried back towards Penn Station and their hotel. A whirlpool of people and their luggage took up most of the lobby, getting bigger all the time as more and more of them hurried in from the snow-filled streets, brushing the huge white flakes from their shoulders and stamping their feet with the cold.

Carey looked at the throng. ‘Our car had better turn up,’ she remarked. ‘We haven’t a hope in hell of getting a cab with that lot lurking round.’

‘You’re being pessimistic again,’ said Ben cheerfully. ‘You don’t have to worry – I’ve got it under control.’

‘My hero.’ She looked at him in mock-adoration.

‘What I haven’t got under control is the packing,’ he informed her. ‘Everything has to be crammed into the cases and it seems to me that we have finite space but infinite purchases to put in it.’

She made another face at him and followed him to the bank of elevators. He pressed the button for the

thirty-sixth floor and she leaned against his shoulder as it moved upwards.

‘I still can’t believe it,’ she murmured. She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. ‘I believed it when we were in Vegas and when it was all happening, but now, getting ready to go home, it doesn’t seem real.’

‘It’s real all right,’ said Ben. ‘Don’t for one minute think you can get out of it.’

‘I don’t.’ She turned to him and kissed him again. ‘I don’t want to get out of it.’

The elevator stopped on the twenty-first floor but the couple who were waiting decided not to interrupt the pair who were already occupying it. Carey and Ben were too engrossed in their kiss to notice them anyway.

‘Have you ever done it in an elevator?’ he asked as the doors closed again.

‘Nope.’

‘Would you like to?’

She giggled. ‘Of course I would. But I rather have the feeling we’ll be at the thirty-sixth floor before we can really get down to it. Don’t you think?’

‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘Though I can be very quick, you know.’

‘I don’t know whether that’s a good thing or not!’ Her chuckle was warm and happy as she nuzzled against his neck.

The elevator stopped and the chime told them that they were at their floor.

‘Oh well.’ Carey straightened her jacket. ‘Another time perhaps.’

'On the plane,' suggested Ben. 'That Mile-High Club thing. Have you ever done that?'

'What kind of sex-life d'you think I've had?' she demanded. 'I went to a convent school, for heaven's sake.'

'Convent girls.' He sighed. 'Always looking so demure in those uniforms. But we all knew what little vixens you were really.'

She shoved him in the small of the back then followed him down the narrow corridor to their room. Ben opened the door and both of them groaned as they looked at their already full luggage.

'We'll never manage to pack this lot in as well,' she wailed as she peered into the Macy's bags. 'Why didn't you stop me?'

'I tried. I tried. But you were like a woman possessed.'

'Rubbish,' she said robustly and stretched out across the bed.

'Don't do that,' said Ben.

'What?'

'Disport yourself like that,' he told her. 'You're taking my mind off the task in hand.'

'Sorry,' she said, though her tone belied her words. 'I suppose I shouldn't take your mind off the task because if we do miss the damned plane I'll be fired when we eventually get home.'

'We won't miss it. It'll leave on time and you won't be fired,' said Ben. 'Anyway, you told me that there's always someone to cover for you.'

‘There is,’ she told him. ‘But I don’t want to let them down. It’s a team, you know?’

‘I know.’ He kissed her on the nose. ‘It’s nice to know that underneath that ditzy exterior is a responsible adult.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Well . . .’ Ben laughed and then groaned as she caught him by the waistband of his jeans. ‘Even still, we probably don’t have time to—’

‘Of course we do,’ she interrupted him. ‘I’m on a roll right now. I don’t want it to end.’

‘It won’t,’ he promised her. ‘You know it’s only just beginning.’

The driver of the limousine which Ben had booked to take them to the airport was making better time than they’d expected. But the snowfall was now even heavier and deep white drifts had piled up at the side of the roads. The driver left the freeway and took a route through the suburbs which, he told them, would get them there faster though Ben looked sceptical.

‘I’m not sure I want to get there faster,’ murmured Carey. ‘This is probably the first and last time I’ll ever travel in a limo. The least I can do is enjoy the experience.’ She stretched out across the rear seat and put her feet on Ben’s lap. ‘Thank you for surprising me with this. I thought it was just going to be an ordinary car.’ She smiled at him. ‘And I know that we should probably be doing all sorts of sexy things back here, but you have me utterly worn out. What would be nice would be a little

foot massage. I'm wrecked from all the walking around this morning.'

Ben eased her tan leather boots from her feet and began to rub her soles.

'I just might keep you.' She sighed with pleasure. 'I really might.'

They arrived at the airport with plenty of time to spare. Ben tipped the limo driver lavishly and then followed Carey to check in. According to the clerk, flights were still departing on schedule.

'Haven't heard of any delays yet,' he said cheerfully as he handed them their boarding cards.

'You see?' said Ben. 'No need for all that pessimism earlier. I think that secretly you want to stay a little longer. That's why you're hoping the weather will get worse.'

'Sod off,' she said amiably. 'It's still a five-dollar bet.'

They had coffee and doughnuts then strolled to the gate where a knot of people were already waiting. They sat side by side, Carey skimming through a copy of *Vanity Fair* while Ben read *USA Today*. They both looked up when a small squadron of stewards and stewardesses walked through the gate.

'Hand over the money,' said Ben.

'It has to depart on time,' Carey told him. 'The crew arriving means nothing.'

'That means within fifteen minutes of the time on our ticket, doesn't it?'

She laughed. 'Oh, OK.'

'I'm in the money,' he said, looking at his watch.

Five minutes later they announced the flight. Carey

asked the stewardess who was collecting the boarding cards if it was really possible they'd make an on-time departure.

'Of course,' said the woman confidently.

Carey shrugged and followed Ben along the airbridge. Her teeth worried at her lower lip. She really didn't want to miss her shift the following day. The original flight time had scheduled them to arrive at Dublin Airport at six o'clock in the morning. Plenty of time, she'd thought, for her to get home, grab some extra sleep and arrive at the air traffic control centre, where she worked as a controller, by two o'clock. She knew that she could sleep during the flight but it wasn't the same thing. She followed Ben down the aisle and decided that if they were badly delayed she'd get the captain to let Dublin know. He wouldn't mind.

They found their seats on the aircraft and stowed their cabin bag in the overhead bin (plus a stuffed Macy's carrier, the contents of which would simply not fit in the rest of the luggage). Then they settled into their seats and Ben peered out of the window.

A Delta plane had just touched down and was rolling along the runway.

'You see?' said Ben smugly. 'Bet he's on time, no problem.'

Carey shrugged. 'They'll have to de-ice us,' she said. 'That'll take twenty minutes.'

'De-icing time doesn't count,' said Ben. 'Once we've moved from the stand, that counts.'

Carey pursed her lips. 'OK, OK,' she said. 'But only

because you blew all your money on that limo.' She made a face at him. 'I loved it, I really did.'

He smiled but then looked at her seriously. 'And I love you.'

'I know,' she whispered. 'I love you too.'

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain.'

They both sat up straight.

'Bad news, I'm afraid. The weather is getting worse, and we have to allow additional time for some aircraft to land before we obtain clearance for departure. We're third in the queue for de-icing at the moment so it looks like we'll be on the stand for a little while longer. Apologies for the delay, we'll keep it as brief as we can.'

Carey turned to Ben triumphantly. 'My five dollars,' she demanded.

'Bloody hell,' he said. 'Are you always going to be right at the last minute?'

'Always,' she said positively.

'Great.' Ben sighed as he handed her the five-dollar bill. 'I'm just beginning to wonder what I've let myself in for.'

An hour later the captain made the announcement that Carey had both anticipated and feared. Due to the heavy snow, the airport had closed. They expected flights to resume again in two to three hours.

'Three hours!' Ben looked at Carey in horror. 'I really don't want to hang around an airport for three more hours.'

'You won't be hanging around the airport,' she told him. 'They won't let us off the plane.'

'You're joking.'

She shook her head. 'Once we're boarded we can't get off again.'

'What about deep vein thrombosis?' demanded Ben. 'I can't sit folded into this seat for an extra three hours.'

Carey grinned. 'That's what you get for being six feet tall,' she told him. 'And you won't get deep vein thrombosis simply by sitting around. I didn't realise you were a hypochondriac!'

'I'm not,' he retorted indignantly. 'Just cramped.'

'I know,' she said. 'I sympathise, I sympathise, I really do. I don't want to sit here either.'

He looked at her. 'What are you going to do about work?' he asked her.

She shrugged. 'Wait and see. I thought of asking them to let Dublin know I'd be late but if we really do depart in three hours I'll still have time.'

'You'll be exhausted,' he told her.

'I'll be fine.'

'Don't you have to be at the peak of physical condition all the time?' he asked. 'After all, people's lives depend on you.'

'Oh shut up.' She grinned at him. 'I'm always in peak physical condition.'

'That's true.' He nodded. 'You've proved it over the last few days. Besides, I thought that from the first moment I saw you.'

'No, you didn't,' she said. 'You thought I was going to throw up.'

'That wasn't the first moment I saw you,' he told her.

'The first moment was in the departure lounge at Dublin. You were reading the newspaper and you looked fantastic. You have a great profile. I only thought you were going to throw up during the flight.'

'I'm still not sure that wasn't an excuse for putting your arm round me,' she said. 'I was never going to throw up.'

'You looked a bit green,' he said. 'Honestly.'

Her eyes sparkled. 'I'm glad I didn't have to go to the bother of being sick to make you put your arm round me.'

'Don't tell me you were faking it?'

'No.' She shook her head. 'I had awful indigestion. But that was all it was.'

'Or an ulcer,' he added.

'Even if I had an ulcer, it would've been worth it,' she told him. 'I don't know what else I could have done to get you to notice me.'

'You didn't need to do anything,' he said. 'I was always going to put my arm round you. Sooner or later.'

She smiled. It was hard to believe that it was less than a week since he'd first put his arm round her. It was already hard to imagine what her life had been like without him.

She hadn't originally intended to go to New York at all. She hadn't even been thinking of time off. But she was due some leave and Gina, her closest friend in the Irish Aviation Authority and with whom she shared a house in Swords, had suggested that Carey see if there were

any available seats on a flight to the States because then she could come to the party Ellie Campion was giving in Manhattan. Ellie had been a stewardess for fifteen years but she'd recently met and become engaged to a Wall Street investment banker and was dying to show him off. The Wall Street banker wanted to show Ellie off too and, not having had a social function in his apartment for some time, he was keen to pull out all the stops. So he'd told her to ask as many people as she could.

Carey didn't know many stewardesses, since staff in the Aviation Authority didn't often get to meet people in the airlines themselves, but Ellie and Gina had gone to school together and they occasionally went out with Carey in a threesome – or even a foursome when Finola Hartigan, an air traffic controller like Carey, also came along. Carey hadn't been to New York in seven months even though it was one of her top three shopping destinations. But she hadn't planned anything special for her time off either and the idea of going to NYC for some fun was suddenly very appealing. She'd always known, she told Gina, that Ellie Campion would land someone rich and handsome some day. Ellie was the adman's dream of an air hostess – tall and thin, with honey-gold hair, sapphire-blue eyes and bee-stung lips. Now that she'd landed her banker she was giving up her job and moving to the States to live in his extravagant and phenomenally expensive Upper East Side apartment. And although her wedding would be in Dublin, Ellie wanted everyone to come to the States first. To brag, Gina had told Carey, but they agreed, reluctantly, that Ellie had something

worth boasting about. After all, some stewardesses might be content with marrying pop stars or B-list celebrities and getting their names in *Hello!* magazine but Ellie was classier than that. Bill Stannick was worth millions and nobody even knew about it. Much better, Carey said, to be wealthy and not have anyone know about it. Gina had nodded and sighed and looked at the engagement ring on the finger of her left hand. Her fiancé Steve was a really nice guy and she was madly in love with him, but it would've been nice if he had even a tenth of Bill Stannick's money!

Due to the timing of her shifts Carey hadn't been able to fly out with the other girls but she was quite happy to travel on her own. And, even though air travel wasn't everyone's favourite method of transport any more, she still loved it. It was, and always had been, a part of her life.

She'd noticed Ben while they were waiting at the gate. He was the sort of guy you couldn't help noticing – tall, athletic, with a lightly tanned face and fair hair which was in need of a trim. The slightly too-long hair softened his angular features and emphasised his dark-blue eyes. Carey looked away from him before he caught her staring. Anyway, she told herself as she checked her bag to ensure she had some dollars and her credit cards, she wasn't interested in tall, athletic men who were exuding sex-appeal. She wasn't interested in men at all right now. She was taking one of her regular breaks from them, especially ones who were too attractive for everyone else's good.

Much to her surprise (because she normally got the seat next to the overweight man whose girth expanded onto passengers sitting beside him) she found herself sitting next to him on the plane. She didn't usually talk to her fellow travellers but he smiled at her and said hello and offered to put her bag in the overhead bin for her. She thanked him as he squeezed it into the cramped space and smiled when he made a comment about how little room they gave you and how, one day, he'd be able to justify splurging money on the first-class seats. Although not yet, he said regretfully.

'Are you travelling for business or pleasure?' she asked as she fastened her seat belt. 'If it's business you should get your company to pay up the next time, no matter how ridiculously expensive it is.'

'I nearly did once,' he told her. 'I worked for an internet company for a couple of months and we splashed money round like crazy, but the week before I was due to go to LA – very definitely business class, stretch limos laid on at the other end and everything – the outfit that was going to buy us went bust.'

'Not good,' she agreed. 'What happened?'

He smiled ruefully. 'Our own company went down in a blaze of glory three months later.'

'So what do you do now?' she asked.

'I run a healthfood store,' he said.

'You look far too healthy to run a healthfood store,' she said in surprise. 'Usually people who are into tofu and vitamin supplements look as if a puff of wind would knock them over.'