



ANNIE CLAYDON

A Doctor to Heal
Her Heart



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Mills & Boon Medical

Annie Claydon

A Doctor To Heal Her Heart

«HarperCollins»

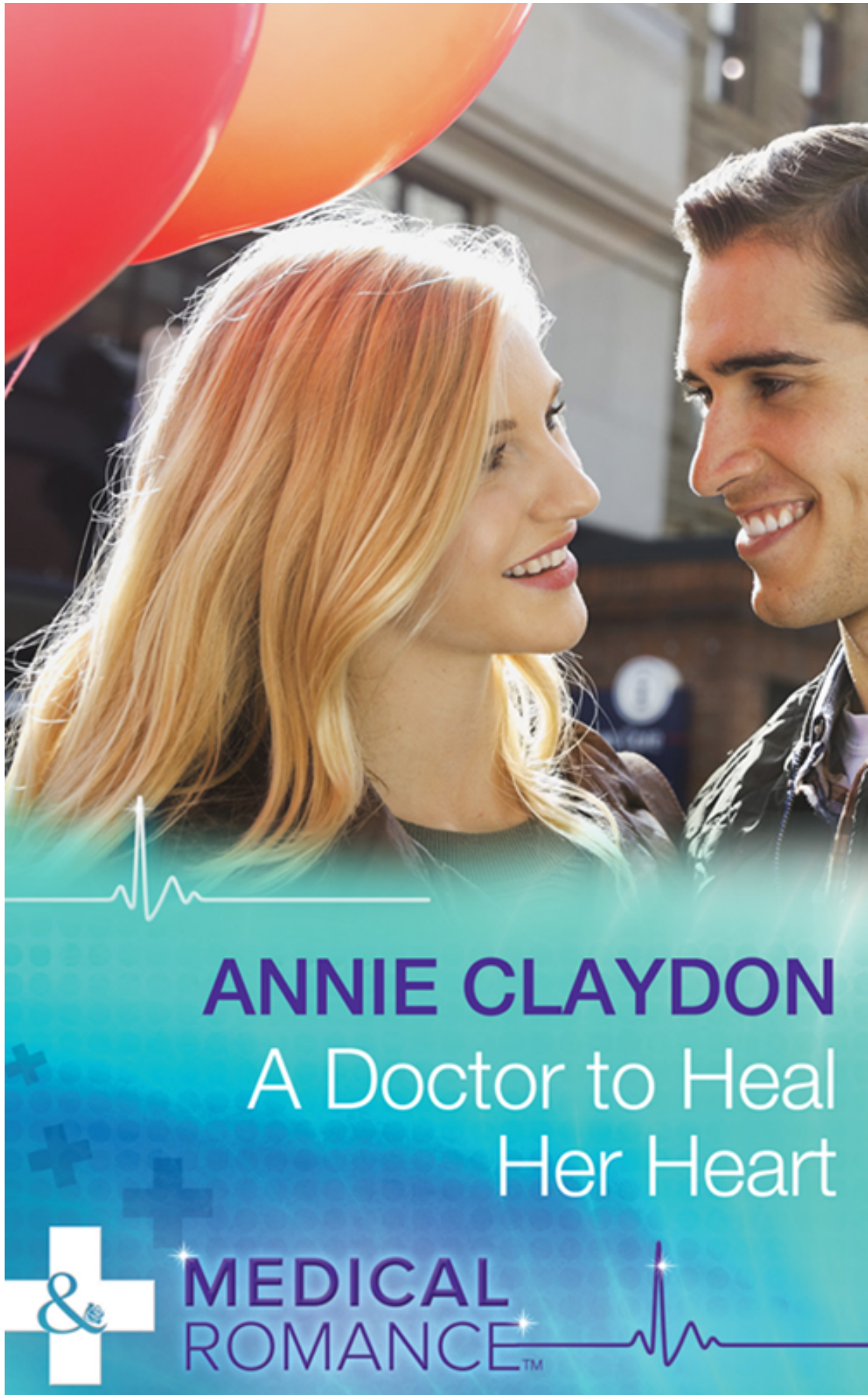
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Euan drew closer, an unspoken question on his lips, and in response to Sam's unspoken answer he slid his fingers along her jaw, burying them in her hair.

When his lips brushed against her cheek Sam forgot all the reasons why this wasn't such a good idea.

He stopped, his mouth barely an inch from hers. 'This is the best part. Waiting ...'

Her whole body felt as if it might melt in his arms. 'Wondering whether you'll kiss me?'

'Wondering what it'll be like when I do.'

She felt his lips curl against hers. 'We could do this for hours ...' Sam could stare into his honest eyes, feel his body against hers, warm and protective, for as long as she liked.

'Nah. I don't have the self-control.'

He kissed her.

He'd lied. The waiting wasn't the best part at all.

Dear Reader

The work-life balance. Which of us gets it right all the time? I'll be the first to admit that sometimes I bite off more than I can chew, and work seems to overtake everything else, but still I aim to keep a balance.

Sam doesn't even try to get it right. She's always worked hard, but now she's working to forget the personal tragedy which shattered everything she'd built. And since the memories won't go away that means she's working pretty much all the time. When she meets Dr Euan Scott work suddenly takes on a whole new meaning for her. But if he's going to help her face her past he'll have to persuade Sam to take some time off.

I hope you enjoy Euan and Sam's story. I'm always delighted to hear from readers and you can email me via my website at www.annieclaydon.com

Annie x

A Doctor to Heal Her Heart

Annie Claydon



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Cursed from an early age with a poor sense of direction and a propensity to read, **ANNIE CLAYDON** spent much of her childhood lost in books. After completing her degree in English Literature she indulged her love of romantic fiction and spent a long, hot summer writing a book of her own. It was duly rejected and life took over. A series of U-turns led in the unlikely direction of a career in computing and information technology, but the lure of the printed page proved too much to bear, and she now has the perfect outlet for the stories which have always run through her head, writing Medical Romance™ for Mills & Boon®. Living in London—a city where getting lost can be a joy—she has no regrets for having taken her time in working her way back to the place that she started from.

[Dedication](#)

For George and Jenny

[Praise for Annie Claydon:](#)

‘Well-written brilliant characters—I have never been disappointed by a book written by Annie Claydon.’

—[Goodreads.com](#) on THE REBEL AND MISS JONES

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

AT HALF PAST six in the morning the beach was deserted, apart from a few joggers and an early-morning dog-walker. After a hot, sticky night, the breeze from the sea was refreshing.

‘You look like something the tide washed in...’

Euan Scott dropped into the faded deckchair that was set out, waiting for him. The temptation to close his eyes was almost irresistible. ‘Yeah, I know. If it’s any consolation, I feel...’

‘Worse?’ Canvas and wood creaked alarmingly as David Watson leaned across from his own deckchair, and swept Euan’s face with an assessing gaze. ‘What happened?’

‘One of the kids from the clinic, Kirsty...’ Euan blinked, trying to drive the picture of Kirsty’s golden hair and blue lips from his mind. ‘She took an overdose yesterday.’

David shook his head. ‘How is she?’

‘Hanging on. Her heart stopped three times and she’s had intercranial bleeding. Her parents are with her.’

‘Dammit. And she was doing so well...’

Euan didn’t want to think about that. He didn’t want to think about how Kirsty might be, either, when she woke. If she woke.

‘Yeah.’ He scrubbed his hand across his face, trying to banish those thoughts. There were other kids who needed him, and he couldn’t afford to fall apart over just one of them. ‘So what’s on the agenda for this week?’

‘First thing is you go home and get some sleep.’

‘What about the Monday morning meeting?’ Euan nodded towards the sea in front of them. ‘The boardroom’s all set up...’

The two directors of the Driftwood Drugs Initiative hardly saw each other during the week, David doing what he did best, raising funds and keeping everything running, and Euan working with their clients. The Monday morning meeting was the only uninterrupted time they got together and it was so sacrosanct that it didn’t even take place in the office. When the weather was bad they were the first customers in the coffee shop by the pier, and when the sun shone they adjourned to the beach.

David shrugged. ‘My side of things is fine. Your side needs some sleep.’ He closed his laptop with an air of finality and slipped it into his bag. ‘Any other business?’

There probably was, but it was dancing somewhere in the haze of fatigue that seemed to have suddenly blown in from the sea and Euan couldn’t pin it down. ‘Not that I can think of.’

‘Right, then. Mel’s on duty today, she’ll deal with anything that comes in, and I’ll see you in the office at lunchtime.’

‘What’s happening at lunchtime?’

‘The software guy’s coming down from London, remember? To demonstrate his program.’

Euan could happily pass on that one in favour of another hour in bed and a very late breakfast. ‘Do you need me? This is your baby.’

‘That’s why I need you there. I’m sold on the idea, it’s you who needs convincing.’

This morning wasn’t exactly the time. But he’d promised David he’d give the software a fair evaluation, and he wouldn’t go back on that. ‘Okay. I’ll be there at twelve.’

‘Half eleven. And wear something suitable.’ David grinned at him.

‘Suit and tie?’

‘You possess such a thing?’

Euan shrugged. 'Maybe. Somewhere.'

David chuckled, rising from his deckchair and folding it. 'In that case, just don't wear shorts. I want to impress this guy that we're a bona fide organisation, and that we'll be a good place for him to launch his software.'

'I can type in shorts. I do it all the time...' Euan broke off, laughing, as David shot him a glare. 'Okay. Half past eleven. Showered, shaved and without the shorts.'

* * *

At ten to twelve Euan sat in the large, bright room that doubled up as David's office and the meeting room. The door had been firmly closed to indicate that they were unavailable, and the window was wide open in an attempt to dissipate some of the midsummer heat.

'Maya's going to bring the coffee...' They'd spent twenty minutes going over their requirements, and now David was fiddling with the chairs that stood around the conference table.

Euan batted a fly that had found its way into the room and it shot upwards, buzzing around the ceiling. 'We're a charity. We throw our money at our work, not our office accommodation.'

David eyed the fly as if it had the capacity to spoil all of his arrangements single-handedly. Footedly. Whatever. Euan reached for the newspaper on the desk beside him, waited for his chance and swatted it. 'Look, you know this isn't really my thing. But I've said I'll back you all the way on it, and I will. If this guy isn't right for us, we're not just going to forget about the computer project, we'll find someone else.'

The phone rang and Euan hooked it from its cradle. 'Yeah, Maya...'

'Sam Lockyear in Reception for you...'

'Thanks. Send him up. I don't suppose you could bring some coffee, could you?' He could do with something to dispel the lingering fuzz in his brain.

A stifled giggle sounded down the phone and Euan wondered what was so funny about coffee. 'I'll bring some with the sandwiches in half an hour.'

David sprang into action. This was what he did best, and Euan knew he'd have little to do in the next couple of hours other than to think of a couple of questions to ask and try to look interested in the answers. David would steer the meeting effortlessly from the moment he met their guest at the top of the stairs to the final handshake.

'Sam, meet Euan, my co-director here.' If David felt as wrong-footed as Euan suddenly did, he gave no sign of it.

'Pleased to meet you.' The woman smiled and held out her hand. A small, perfectly manicured hand, which, when he grasped it in a momentary handshake, turned out to feel as soft as it looked. A subtle waft of scent, which couldn't be anything other than expensive, assaulted his senses and the room began to spin.

Her suit was unmistakably designer, although Euan wasn't really up on these things. She would have fitted in effortlessly in any business gathering, from a top-level meeting to corporate entertainment. But fitting in was clearly not what she wanted. No one wore that shade of red unless they wanted to stand out from the crowd.

She sat down quickly, as if she took it for granted that the men would wait for her to take a seat before they did and didn't want to keep them standing. Another practised smile, and then she slid a laptop from her bag, along with two small tablets.

'Thanks for coming.' David was about to go into the standard spiel about what Driftwood did, and Euan stared at the ceiling. It was that or look straight at her, and that was strangely unsettling.

'It's good to be here. I've been reading about your work with a lot of interest.'

'Yes?' David was well versed with this kind of interview, and he called her bluff.

'The Driftwood Drugs Initiative.' She paused. 'Any particular reason for the name?'

‘When we started out pretty much everything we had was scavenged from somewhere. We all used to joke about it, and the name stuck.’ Euan wondered whether she was really interested or just trying to change the subject.

She nodded, smiling. ‘I see you’ve grown since then. You’re operating from two locations now, this office deals with admin and public awareness, and there’s a separate clinic, where you work directly with your clients. You’re practical in your approach, providing both medical and social support for drug abusers and for their families. Your community-based approach has had a lot of praise from both drugs agencies and local healthcare providers—’

David cut her short with a chuckle. ‘I doubt you got all of that from our website.’

‘No, I didn’t. Your website could do with an overhaul. You have good information on there but it’s not organised to make it easy to find. I imagine that’s not helping the public awareness side of your operation.’

She was well informed, astute and honest. And beautiful. Like a siren on the shore, calling to lost sailors... Euan put the thought out of his head, telling himself that he was neither lost nor was he a sailor.

‘You have a point.’ David glanced at Euan and he nodded dutifully. ‘We’re thinking of doing something with it, aren’t we?’

‘Yeah.’ Euan hadn’t been aware that he was thinking any such thing, but this was David’s department. His was primarily medical care, and he was still to be convinced that a computer program had anything to offer in that context.

‘Perhaps we should start by looking at the program.’ Sam Lockyear had effortlessly taken control of the meeting now. ‘I’m sure you’ll have some questions for me.’

‘Yes...’ David reached for his notes.

‘I hope that the software will answer some of those. I think it speaks for itself.’ She leaned forward, proffering the tablets with a smile.

‘That’s what we’re hoping.’ It was impossible not to be drawn in by her smile and suddenly, almost against his will, Euan wanted her attention. When he got it, it jolted him into a new level of wakefulness. The kind where every nerve tingled at the slightest touch.

‘Then we’re off to a good start.’ Her grey eyes held just the right amount of quiet humour, trapping his gaze for an endless moment, before she turned her attention to her laptop. He almost sighed with relief when she pressed a couple of keys and the tablet in front of him flashed into life.

Neat. David had dragged him along to a few of these software demos, and they usually involved a data projector and a lot of pointing at the wall. She had this down to a fine art. He ran his finger tentatively across the screen and tapped. Another screen flashed up in front of him.

She gifted him with a look of gentle reproach. Euan wondered how she would look with her hair spilling around her shoulders, instead of tied up in a dark gleaming knot at the back of her head.

‘You can play with it in a moment. Let me take you through the basics first.’

‘Right. Sorry.’ He was grinning like an idiot and Euan composed his face into a look of stern assessment. He and David had a business decision to make, and however mesmerising Sam Lockyear was the software was the only thing that mattered.

The software was just as impressive as she was. She’d paid attention to the list of requirements that David had sent and had set the program up to demonstrate how it could meet their needs. By the time Maya brought in the sandwiches and a pot of coffee, David was clearly already sold.

‘I’d like to see the reporting module.’ David received a plate from Maya and left it undisturbed in front of him. ‘It’s essential for us to be able to report back to our funders on the various projects we have under way. Many of them have specific questions concerning targets and outcomes, and whether or not we receive ongoing funding depends on our answers.’

‘Ah.’ She leaned forward slightly, a look of unreserved happiness on her face, as if she had a real treat up her sleeve somewhere. Maya put a cup of coffee and a plate in front of her, and she flashed her a smile. ‘Thanks...Maya.’

‘You’re welcome.’ Maya pushed the plate of sandwiches towards her, clearly deciding that Sam deserved preferential treatment and that Euan and David could fend for themselves, then slid from the room.

‘Mmm. These look nice.’ Her hand hovered over the sandwiches and she selected a few, pushing the plate back towards David. The tricky balance between eating a sandwich, drinking coffee and typing was accomplished effortlessly, and she demonstrated how questions and keywords could be entered onto the system and individual reports generated for each funding body.

‘Good. Very good.’ David was obviously impressed. ‘Euan, have you any questions?’ He was already glancing at the agenda in front of him, clearly expecting the answer to be no.

‘Yeah. I do have a couple...’

* * *

In meetings like this it was necessary to know what you were up against, and Sam had already made her decision about the directors of the Driftwood Drugs Initiative. David Watson was the organiser, the one who kept things running. Dr Euan Scott was the wildcard. Unpredictable, not yet convinced, and clearly capable of coming up with a few tricky questions and off-the-wall suggestions.

She focussed on his face, making herself look at him. ‘Fire away, then.’

He leaned back in his seat, his brow furrowed in thought. Euan Scott was one of a kind. Handsome certainly. But even if she hadn’t researched his career before coming here and been duly impressed by his qualifications and achievements, she would have known there was a lot more to him than surfer-blond hair and a tan. Behind his caramel-coloured eyes there was a cauldron of thought and emotion, none of which she could quite interpret.

Sam applied a mental slap to the back of her own head, trying to steady herself. Don’t let him draw you in. It’s going well, don’t blow it now.

‘The program’s not being used by anyone else yet?’

His first stab, and he’d instantly found her Achilles’ heel. ‘No, not yet. I’m looking for someone who’ll take that challenge on.’ Sam paused, wondering whether that had been the right thing to say. Of course it was. The curl of his lips told her that this guy just loved a challenge.

‘And you think that’s us?’

She leant forward slightly, narrowing her eyes. Six years ago, when she and Sally had first ventured out together to sell their software, Sam had been awkward and terrified. Sal had taught her all the little tricks and techniques, when to hold back and when to be candid, and the two of them had been a great team. But even Sal’s wisdom couldn’t help her now. Imagining Euan Scott naked was not going to calm her down.

‘This is the deal. New software, particularly third-sector software, isn’t easy to get off the ground. Not many people want to stick their necks out and be the first to use a program that has no demonstrable track record, however good it is. I need an organisation that’s forward looking enough to try something new, and in return I’m willing to work with you to make sure that the software meets your needs.’

‘Bit of a catch-22 situation, really.’ He ran his hand through his short-cropped hair, although whether it was to smooth it or create further disarray she wasn’t sure.

‘No more than the one you’re already in. I’ve done some research and you fit the profile for the kind of organisation I want as clients. You’re small, innovative and successful, and you’re looking to expand. A good software system will help facilitate that, but I’m guessing you don’t have a lot of spare cash to spend on it.’ She took a breath. Her profile stipulated a drugs charity as well, but they didn’t need to know that.

He nodded, a slow smile spreading across his face. 'I imagine there'll be some surprises along the way.'

'I'm hoping we'll be able to learn from each other. That always involves an element of surprise, doesn't it?' She gave a small shrug to indicate that the question was a rhetorical one, even though she wasn't very confident about the notion. Sam would bet good money that Euan Scott had plenty of surprises up his sleeve and generally, in software terms, surprise was not a good word.

'Why are you doing this?'

The question came straight out of the blue and smacked her between the eyes. 'You mean why do I produce software?'

'No, it's clear that you're very good at that. I want to know why you're so committed to what's essentially a free piece of software. Why you're devoting so much time to something that's not going to bring you any financial rewards.'

She had a well-rehearsed answer for that. 'As you'll have seen from my personal CV, I was the director and co-owner of a very successful software company. Two years ago, when I sold up, I had the choice of going somewhere sunny and sipping cocktails or doing something that I love and giving a little back at the same time.'

'You don't like cocktails? Or sunshine?' He looked almost affronted at the thought.

'I like them both, actually. When I'm on holiday.'

His heavy-lidded eyes were probing, looking for the real answer. There was no judgement there, no expectation. He gave you the feeling that he could accept and understand pretty much anything, as long as it was the truth.

'I...' She took a breath. 'I'm doing what I do best in an effort to help a cause that I feel very strongly about. I have...personal reasons.'

His gaze held hers for a moment and then released her. A strange, almost dizzy feeling that she was about to slide from her chair onto the floor, and then he nodded. 'Yeah. I can understand that.'

* * *

David had seen her off the premises with a promise to call with their decision. When he walked back into his office he was shaking his head, smiling.

'Well, that was a turn-up for the books.'

'I thought you said that Sam Lockyear was a man.' She was all woman. From the crown of her immaculately coiffed head to... Euan decided he'd already given far too much head room to the thought of her perfectly manicured toes.

'I thought she was. Easy enough mistake to make, I suppose, with the name, but you've seen her emails. None of the women I know write emails like that.'

Euan saw David's point. Concise, almost to the point of being brusque, and devoid of anything that might be construed as a pleasantry, Sam's emails had given no hint of the delights that meeting her in person had brought. 'So what do you think?'

David snorted with laughter, flopping down into his chair. 'Don't pass the buck. What do you think? It's you she's going to be shadowing for two weeks, not me.'

'I don't think she's given us much choice. The program's great, and the offer she's made is too good to pass up. I'm not sure how she's going to fit in at the clinic, but we can deal with that one when we come to it.'

David nodded thoughtfully. 'What do you suppose the "personal reasons" are?'

'Does it matter?' Euan had been wondering about that too.

'You tell me.'

Euan's own personal reasons were a matter of record. In any other line of work his ex-wife's addiction, and the marriage that had been smashed by drugs, would have been no one's business but his own. But he demanded honesty from those around him, and could give no less himself.

‘She’s not directly involved with our work, she’s just going to be observing. All we need to know is that the software’s going to work for us.’

‘You’re beginning to sound convinced about this.’

‘I’m open to changing my view. As always.’ Euan rose from his chair, checked his wallet and found it empty. ‘Will you call her? I’ve got to go to the bank and get some cash. And pick up something else to eat.’

‘So your best advice is to go with the flow, eh? Feel our way...’

Perhaps not anything as tactile as that. ‘If she’s willing to spend two weeks with us to find out more about what we do, I’ll do my best to...accommodate her.’

Euan batted at the ball of crumpled paper David had tossed at his head, smirking as it dropped neatly into the bin. He’d deal with the mysteries of jemmying the more intangible aspects of his work into computerised classifications when he came to it. Two small sandwiches for lunch wasn’t enough and he was still hungry.

* * *

It appeared that Sam Lockyear wasn’t going to be relegated to the bottom of his list of priorities without a struggle. Although the bank was in the other direction, a brisk walk along the promenade wasn’t much of a detour, and it was Euan’s preferred route, particularly when his head was still full of the dim echoes of last night.

If he hadn’t stopped to lean against the thick stone wall between pavement and beach for a few moments and stare out to sea, he wouldn’t have seen her. A hundred yards further along the seafront she would have been lost in the crowd if it hadn’t been for the bright flash of her red jacket, draped over the back of her chair. She sat at a table at one of the open-air cafés that sprang up at the edge of the beach in summer, bare legs stretched out in the sun, her silky blouse open at the neck and shivering against her shoulders in the breeze.

Euan wondered whether she wanted some company, and decided that he didn’t. Which didn’t mean he couldn’t watch her for a few more moments. Her head jerked suddenly and she reached for her bag, checking the display on her phone before answering it.

It was probably David. Euan wondered what his partner’s reaction would have been if he could have seen the way she absently pulled the clips from her hair as she talked, shaking her head slightly to let the breeze style it around her shoulders in a mass of shining, dark strands.

She was looking at her phone now, as if she was checking back on the conversation she’d just had. Then, laying it on the table beside her, she punched the air in a motion that shouted of both joy and accomplishment.

Euan found himself smiling as he watched her jump to her feet, clearly apologising to a waiter, who she’d almost caught with her flailing arm. A laughing exchange and she accepted a coffee cup from him then pointed to the menu.

It was impossible not to wait and watch her sit down, hug herself and take a few sips from her cup. When the waiter returned, Euan smiled. An ice-cream sundae, which looked as if she’d ordered all the trimmings with it, and which she received with obvious joy and tucked into straight away.

Maybe she’d fit in at the clinic a little better than he’d thought. He turned away from the sea, heading for the bank by the more direct route, turning that thought over gently in his mind.

CHAPTER TWO

HIS SECOND IMPRESSION of Sam was just as baffling as the first. Euan had hardly recognised her when she banged on the door of the Driftwood Initiative’s offices at eight-thirty the following Saturday morning. The weak sunshine was diluted by clouds, but in what looked like overkill her eyes were shaded by both sunglasses and the peak of a cap. If she’d turned up at the clinic looking like that, he might have wondered what they concealed.

She nodded a hello, took the hat off and stuffed it into the pocket of her cargo pants. Without high heels, her face clean of make-up and her hair caught in a plait that snaked over her shoulder

and tangled with the strap of her courier bag, she seemed younger, more fragile. Her green leather jacket wasn't too battered, but it wasn't too new either, and scuffed on one shoulder, as if she'd been in the habit of leaning in doorways.

'I hope I'm not too early.'

The remark might have been construed as condescending, given that she'd travelled down from London this morning and Euan lived ten minutes' walk away. There was nothing in her face that betrayed anything other than a straightforward question, but Euan still couldn't see her eyes.

'No.' He indicated the mug in his hand. 'Just in time for coffee.'

'Good.' She picked up the soft travelling bag at her feet and he stood back from the door, locking it shut behind her.

'Let me take that.' He gestured towards her bag and she hesitated, giving it to him with an air of slight suspicion, as if she thought he was about to run off with it.

'Would you like to see the bedsit upstairs? It's not very big...' Euan decided to concentrate on the practicalities first.

'That's fine. All I need is a bed and a bathroom.' She seemed different as well as looking different. The assured businesswoman had disappeared completely, as if she'd sloughed that identity off along with the red suit.

He motioned her up the stairs, careful not to touch her as he squeezed past her in the small space outside David's office and opened the door to the narrow, dark staircase that led to the loft apartment. The smell of disinfectant drifted down the stairs, and then the subtler scent of freshly washed linen.

'This is great.' She glanced into the cubbyhole that boasted two easy chairs and a small coffee table and made her way straight through to the slightly larger area, which contained a bed and the smallest wardrobe known to man. Euan dumped her bag onto the bed and she sat down next to it, bouncing up and down slightly. 'Good mattress. That's all I need.'

Her smile seemed genuine enough, but it had done the last time they'd met. 'Is this okay for the clinic?' She spread her arms, looking down at her costume. That was what it seemed like, a consummate actress wearing a costume for a part. 'David told me not to dress up, so I came as I am.'

'This is how you are?' The question seemed a bit forward, but it slipped out before Euan had a chance to stop it.

'Yes.' She grinned, finally taking off the sunglasses. Her grey eyes were the same, at any rate. Thoughtful and clear, almost luminous, the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen on a woman. 'I'm a code-hacker at heart.'

Her smile was still infectious too, and before he knew what he was doing Euan had smiled back. 'And this is what a code-hacker looks like?'

She shrugged. 'Well, the stereotype has a couple of days' worth of stubble on his chin and wears T-shirts with nerdy computer jokes printed on the front. That's not a good look for me.'

Euan sighed. She was like a Russian doll. Every time you thought you'd got to the real Sam, there was another underneath, exquisitely painted and quite different. Bringing a woman that he couldn't fathom, who had admitted to nameless personal reasons, into the delicately balanced community of the clinic suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea.

'I'll...' He'd intended to take her with him this morning, but instinct had just changed his plans. He needed to think, and he didn't seem to be able to do that with any clarity when Sam was around. Perhaps because she smelled so nice. 'I've got to get going in half an hour, I've a surgery at the clinic this morning.'

'Saturday morning?'

'The weekends are often our busiest times. People who are working can only make evenings and weekends.'

If he was looking for surprise in her face, he was disappointed. So many people reckoned that substance abusers automatically slept on other people's floors, wore dirty clothes and had no

prospect of a job. There was that element, of course, but Euan numbered a stockbroker and a couple of company directors among his clients as well.

‘Yes, I suppose so.’ She slipped out of her jacket, revealing a purple printed top made from some kind of gauzy material, which begged to be touched. ‘When can I join you?’

The little quirk of her mouth betrayed that she’d noticed that he’d sidelined her. He supposed he ought to feel guilty, after she’d got up early and come all the way here, but his clients came first. ‘Why don’t we meet up for lunch? David will be here in half an hour, and he’ll take you through the clinic procedures and tell you about the new residential centre we’re planning to open soon.’

She brightened, seeming to have put the rejection behind her, now that there was an alternative to occupy her. ‘That’s a good idea. Yes...it’ll be good to have an overview before I see how it all works in practice.’ A glimpse of the woman in the red suit. She looked at her watch. ‘Say...twelve-thirty? Is that convenient?’

* * *

His footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Sam heard the street door slam. She flopped down onto the bed, looking around her. The apartment was small, scrupulously clean and already warm from the sun. Sam wondered whether the dormer window above her head would open to afford some ventilation, and decided that her first task was to find something to climb up on so she could find out.

Here she was, then. She’d promised Sal that she would do this, and here was the first real step towards making it a reality. Two years’ work and a load of false leads from people who’d pretended to be interested in her software just so they could say they’d explored all the options.

‘We’ll be on top of the heap by Christmas...’ The old joke made her smile and set a tear worrying at the side of her eye, all at the same time. Whatever the time of year, and however unlikely the prospect, Sally had always marked their triumphs with tubs of ice cream and that toast to the future. One Christmas they’d actually found themselves on the top of the heap. At least Sal had lived to see that.

Sam shook her head. It didn’t matter how alone she felt in this empty building, or that the familiar pain of rejection seemed to twist deeper when it came from Euan Scott. He could be as handsome as he liked and as difficult as he pleased. She had a goal to achieve, and no one was going to get in her way.

* * *

The quiet, deliberate nature of the morning’s work with David had settled her. He had offered to walk her down to the clinic, in much the same way as one offered to walk you into a lion’s cage, and Sam had smilingly refused, zipping her purse and her keys into her jacket and pocketing her phone. If Euan thought she couldn’t blend in, then she’d show him that melting into walls was her speciality.

The clinic was at the end of a row of small shops and offices in one of the streets that led from the shabbier end of the promenade. It didn’t advertise itself, and once inside the main door there was another set of doors straight ahead, almost as if you needed to pass through an airlock to get into the place. Sam noticed the discreetly placed surveillance cameras, and wondered who was watching her.

Whoever it was, they buzzed her in and she found herself in a large, bright area that boasted comfortable chairs, a reception desk and a mural that appeared to have been made from the fruits of a beachcombing expedition. Euan was on the far side of the room, deep in conversation with a young man in overalls, and didn’t look her way.

‘You must be Sam. I’m Liz. Welcome.’

The woman who greeted her was of medium height, medium age and had an extraordinary smile. She wore jeans and a flowery apron, carried a mole wrench and seemed preoccupied with whatever was going on through the doorway behind the reception desk.

‘Thank you. I’ve come to see Euan, but he looks pretty busy.’

‘He usually is...’ Sam followed Liz’s gaze over to the two men. Euan’s body language was relaxed but he was listening intently. ‘That’s my son he’s talking to. Jamie’s supposed to be mending the leak in the kitchen sink.’

‘But you’ve been left holding the spanner...?’

Liz laughed. ‘Exactly. Jamie’s got a bee in his bonnet and he needs to talk to Euan about it. Meanwhile, I’m holding back the flood.’

Euan was talking now. Animated, concentrated, he had a long-limbed grace about him, the look of someone who was comfortable in his own skin. Just watching him made the tiny hairs at the back of Sam’s neck shiver to attention.

‘What do you normally do here? Apart from plumbing?’ She dragged her wandering thoughts away from Euan.

‘I’m a volunteer. I spend two days a week on the reception desk and doing odd jobs. Whatever it takes.’

‘And Jamie...?’

‘Jamie’s the reason I’m here.’ Liz waggled her finger in her son’s direction. ‘This place saved his life.’

Sam couldn’t help but look back towards the two men. She’d read the statistics, pored over the reports, but this was different. Jamie was standing right there, and Euan had managed somehow to change the course of his life, where she had failed so conspicuously with Sally.

Questions flooded her mind, most of which she didn’t dare put into words. Sam reminded herself that she wasn’t here to get help, she was here to give it.

‘Do you mind if I ask you something?’

‘Isn’t that what you’re here for? David said you’d have plenty of questions.’

‘This isn’t really one of them. I was just wondering how Jamie is doing now.’

Liz laughed, her face lighting up. ‘He’s fine. Has his ups and downs, like everyone, but he’s on the right track. He’s working at his uncle’s building firm, and he’s gone back to college to get his qualifications.’

‘Good. I’m really glad to hear it.’

‘Thank you. It’s good to be able to say it...’ Liz broke off as the buzzer for the door sounded. She checked the screen behind the reception desk and released the lock. A small group of people entered, who Liz seemed to know, followed by a middle-aged couple who were looking around as if they were new here.

‘I’m sorry, I won’t be a moment. I think they’re here to see Euan. Why don’t you go and sit in the garden?’

‘I’ll sit here, if that’s okay.’ Sam gestured towards one of the chairs in the corner of the reception area.

‘Yes, of course.’ Liz walked over to the couple and started to talk to them, showing them to seats.

Euan was still talking, but he seemed to sense her gaze, as if it was something corporeal that had sauntered over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked round and for a delicious moment it was as though he and she were the only two people in the room. Then reality broke in.

He acknowledged the couple who had just arrived with the smile that Sam felt should, by rights, have been for her. ‘I’ll only be five minutes...’ Turning back to Jamie, he guided him through an open doorway to finish their conversation in private.

* * *

Euan had heard the door buzz, and knew that it must be Sam, but Jamie had caught him on the way to the door, and Liz had appeared from the kitchen to let her in. He caught a glimpse of her, just enough to want more, and then Jamie claimed his attention.

‘So what’s up?’

‘I went to see Kirsty the other day.’ Jamie was staring past him at a point somewhere behind his left shoulder. That was always a bad sign. ‘Took Mum with me, so her parents wouldn’t think I was a bad influence.’

‘And did they?’ Euan tried to catch Jamie’s eye, but failed.

‘Nope. Her mother cried and her dad shook my hand.’ Jamie’s shoulders squared a little.

‘So how does it feel to be a good influence?’

Jamie dismissed the idea with a shrug, his mind obviously on something else. ‘I just keep thinking. Kirsty’s always been careful...’

‘There’s no safe way to take cocaine, Jamie.’

‘Yeah, yeah. I know. All the same, there must be something different on the streets.’

There was. Euan had already heard some talk, and the results of the police tests on the remains of the white powder found on Kirsty had confirmed it. Cocaine that had a higher level of purity than usual was very bad news. Euan decided not to go into the details with Jamie.

‘I still know some people. I could ask around, find out what’s going on...’

‘You think that’s a good idea?’ Euan asked with concern.

‘I have to do something. Kirsty’s not going to be the same again, is she?’

‘Don’t write her off. She’s already made much better progress than I could have hoped, and she’s still in recovery. If you really want to do something for her, she needs all the friends she can get at the moment.’

‘And when it happens again I’ll just go and make friends with that person, shall I? My social life’s going to expand no end...’ Anger was radiating from Jamie’s tense frame.

‘The drug agencies and the police are working on it, mate. What you need to do is to concentrate on helping Kirsty and on helping yourself. Let them do their jobs.’

‘And if they don’t...’ Jamie’s fists clenched. ‘I can’t just sit around, doing nothing.’ A glimpse of the angry youth who had come so close to ruining his life.

‘There are no answers, Jamie. Life’s a problem. It’s supposed to hurt, and to make you angry and to keep you up nights, staring at the ceiling.’

Jamie puffed out a sigh. ‘And the trick is to stay clean for today.’

‘You said it.’

Something seemed to whisper across the back of his neck. The breeze as the entrance door opened, perhaps. When Euan looked round, he fell into the dizzying depths of Sam’s luminous, thoughtful eyes.

Dragging his gaze away to steady himself, he saw the middle-aged couple talking to Liz. If they were who he thought they were, they were an hour late, but they’d come a long way to see him. Even if he doubted that he could be of any help in finding their daughter, he had to at least try. He acknowledged the couple and drew Jamie to one side, away from the people who were straggling through the door for this afternoon’s group session.

‘Call me, Jamie.’

‘I don’t need to. It’s Kirsty we’re talking about here, not me.’

‘You sure about that?’

Jamie stared at him and then shrugged. ‘Kirsty’s a friend, and I didn’t see this coming. What kind of a person does that make me?’

It was a question that Euan had struggled with for years. He’d been too blind, too busy to see his own wife’s addiction. He knew all about the corrosive quality of that kind of guilt and Jamie deserved better than that.

‘It makes you human. You’ve been a good friend to Kirsty, but you can’t take responsibility for what she does. You’re not to blame for what happened to her.’

Jamie's small, wordless nod was enough to tell Euan that he was thinking about it and that he shouldn't press the point further. 'I'm going to the hospital later. I'll call you and let you know how she's doing.'

'Thanks. Are you going to be okay?' He searched Jamie's face for any sign that he was thinking of doing something stupid.

'Yeah. Go and sort someone else out. I'm fine.'

'We'll talk later, then.' He waited for Jamie's nod and then let him go.

* * *

He found Sam in the kitchen, making tea, while Liz watched the entrance door and chatted to Mr and Mrs Pearson. When she turned her face towards him, it was full of expectation.

'Want a cup of tea?' There was a clear, unspoken addendum to that, he realised. Are you ready to give me some of the time you promised?

'Sam, I'm sorry, but there are some people here to see me and it's important...'

She nodded gravely. 'Okay. I'll wait. Do you want the tea?'

It seemed churlish to take the tea and then desert her again. But on the other hand he could do with it. 'Um...if there's a spare cup in the pot.'

'There's enough to go around.' She opened the cupboard above her head and reached for another cup.

'Thanks, Sam. I'll be as quick as I can. Why don't you go and sit in the garden?' The clinic's garden was a place to relax. She shouldn't be having to help out, much less make the tea.

'That's okay. I may as well make myself useful.' She wouldn't meet his gaze, looking past him as Ian, the leader of this afternoon's group session, appeared in the doorway.

'Euan, can you see Pete? He's got some nasty cuts and bruises, looks as if he's been in a fight.'

'What, again? When was that, last night?'

'Yep. And he still doesn't trust the hospital enough to go there...'

'Okay, I'll be up in a minute.' Euan was uncomfortably aware that Sam was listening intently to the conversation.

'Does your group usually have tea?' She flashed a smile at Ian, leaving Euan out in the cold.

'Yes—that would be great, thanks.' Ian obviously thought that she was one of the new volunteers.

'Sam, there's no need—'

She cut him off in mid-sentence, concentrating on Ian. 'How many cups?'

'Six, thanks. Is there any ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet?' Ian turned to Euan.

'No, we're out.'

'That's okay. I'll pop to the chemist and get some.' Sam was obviously going out of her way to be helpful. Euan reckoned she was probably making a point as well. There was nothing for it at the moment but to let her get on with it and hope that Liz would rein her in if she started to do anything inappropriate.

'Bring the ibuprofen to me. All medicines have to be accounted for.'

Finally she looked at him. For all of two seconds. 'Okay. That's good to know.' Then she turned, opening the cupboards in search of more cups.

He'd done what he had to do then retreated back into the quiet of his empty surgery. Sometimes it was the looks on the faces of the families that were the most heart-rending. Mr and Mrs Pearson had given him their contact details, thanked him and left. They were probably sitting in their car right now, trying to find the words to comfort each other.

Euan picked up the phone, staring at the picture on the desk in front of him. He could at least make a few calls on their behalf, in the hope that someone had seen their daughter, Ellie. Maybe she'd even make it through the doors here, but somehow he doubted it.

He spent a fruitless fifteen minutes on the phone, and then made a note to circulate Ellie's details among the case workers and volunteers at the clinic. It was unlikely that any of them had seen her, but he'd promised the Pearsons that the Driftwood Clinic didn't give up on anyone.

His own words came back to smack him squarely on the jaw. Wasn't that exactly what he'd done with Sam this morning? A quiet knock interrupted his self-reproach, and Liz popped her head around the door.

'I'm on my way down now,' he said.

'It's okay. Sam's in the garden with Jamie. I gave them both lunch.'

At least someone had thought that she was probably hungry. 'Liz, you're a star. Thanks.'

'That's okay. You had to speak to those poor people.' Liz's face was strained with the knowledge that she could so easily have been in their shoes a few years ago. 'Can you give them twenty minutes before you come, though? Sam's just showing Jamie how to set up a blog for himself.'

Euan stood, craning his neck towards the window. They were sitting on a bench at the end of the garden in the shade of a massive tree, both focussed completely on their task. When she laughed, gesturing to make her point, he almost found himself envying Jamie. Which was stupid, because Jamie had only done what Euan had neglected to do, made her feel welcome and taken a bit of interest in what she did.

'So Jamie's decided to do it? That's good.' He smiled at Liz. 'Why don't you join them? I'll go downstairs and keep an eye on Reception.'

'No, that's okay. They don't need me to help. I don't even understand what a blog is.' Liz glanced in their direction with a hint of regret and then turned away resolutely.

Euan nodded, giving her a smile. Liz and Jamie had come a long way together, and Liz was only just learning to trust Jamie again. 'I'll bring you a cup of tea, then. Some of that ginger and honey stuff you like?'

* * *

Sam had seen Euan sitting on the steps that led out into the garden, and decided to stay put when Jamie left. If she didn't pester him, just showed that she could fit in and be of some use, perhaps that would begin to erode whatever objection he obviously had to her being here.

She purposely didn't watch as he strolled across the grass towards her. Didn't look up from the screen when she felt the bench she was sitting on take his weight. 'That was nice of you,' he commented.

At last. Something. 'It's easy to do when you know how. Didn't take long.'

'So it wasn't nice at all, then.'

She looked up and he was grinning. His smile sliced through all her resolutions to appear unconcerned about whether he noticed her or not.

'Do you have time to talk to me now?'

'That's what I wanted to say...' The flash of uncertainty in his light brown eyes only made him more difficult to resist.

'If you don't, that's okay. Just being here is telling me a lot about how the clinic operates...' She broke off as he held his right hand out. 'What?'

'Can we start again?' he asked.

She reached out tentatively.

'Don't look so suspicious. I'm trying to apologise.'

'So that's what this is. I generally find that "I'm sorry" works pretty well.' Sam's fingers were almost touching his. Not quite. Not yet.

'Fair enough. I'm sorry. You've made time for us, and I'll make more time for you from now on.'

Why did that sound like he was propositioning her? The tips of her fingers were trembling. 'You've got your doubts about this project, haven't you?'

‘It’s important to us. David needs some of the weight lifted from his shoulders...’ He gave a rueful grin. ‘Yeah, I do. But I’m listening now, and I’m open to being convinced.’

That was enough for now. She grasped his hand and gave it a little shake, trying not to notice the way his fingers almost caressed hers.

‘Hi. I’m Euan.’

‘Sam. Good to meet you, Euan.’

CHAPTER THREE

SHE COULDN’T ACCUSE Euan of doing anything by half-measures. Watching him give his undivided attention to others had been frustrating and Sam was unable to deny that she’d been a little jealous. Now that she finally had that attention, it was making her knees wobble.

His quiet enthusiasm, as he showed her around the clinic, seemed to seep through her skin, warming her. The comfortable counselling rooms and the tranquil garden. The community room, where a small group was talking over coffee. People were coming and going all the time, and he had a smile to spare for everyone.

He saved his surgery, which doubled up as his office, for last. Now that they were away from the community areas he seemed more animated, propping himself against the side of his desk to talk, while Sam scribbled notes. ‘We’re in transition at the moment. When the new residential centre is up and running it’ll take some of the pressure off the clinics here, and allow us to extend our outreach services.’

‘When’s that going to be?’

‘In the new year.’

‘And you’ll extend your services how...?’

‘We’re planning to set up clinics and groups especially for users of party drugs. Amyl nitrates, ketamine hydrochloride, MDMA, methamphetamine... And we’re getting an increasing number of people coming in with steroid abuse problems, so we’re looking for someone who has experience of working with those kinds of body image issues.’

‘Will you be doing different things here than at the residential centre?’

‘Yeah. This place is ideal for clinics and groups, because it’s central and easy to get to. The residential centre’s out of town, so it’s good for weekend conferences and long-stay patients.’

‘And people will pay for the residential centre?’

‘If they can afford it, they make a donation. We don’t turn anyone away on the basis of money, and everyone’s treated the same whether they pay or not.’

‘It all seems so...’ Sam couldn’t really think of the right word. She’d expected the place to have more rawness about it. ‘So calm here.’

Euan chuckled. ‘Today’s a good day. We try to keep the atmosphere here relaxed, but it’s not always like this. Getting the better of an addiction is a long, tough process.’

‘But you guide people through that. Bring them back.’ She wanted to hear that Euan could single-handedly move mountains. Save the world. Someone needed to, because she couldn’t.

He was suddenly sombre, sitting down opposite her in one of the chairs reserved for his patients.

‘We can’t bring them all back. The clinic has a great success rate, but we can’t work miracles. Some of our clients will stop taking drugs altogether, some modify their habit and...some we lose.’

Her throat was suddenly dry. ‘But surely... Once someone wants to give up drugs, and they get help...’

‘That’s a great start. But addiction’s a powerful thing. Wanting to give up and getting the appropriate help is the first, all-important step on a very long road. Many of our clients have been through rehab more than once.’

‘How do you deal with that?’ Sam could hear an edge of desperation in her voice. For the last two years she’d thought that if only Sally had said something about her drug-taking, everything would

have been okay. It hadn't been much of a comfort, but it had been something to hold onto in a world of ever-shifting pain, and now Euan was snatching it away.

He leaned forward, his gaze searching her face as if he was trying to fathom out what she was really asking of him. 'Sometimes I don't. There are times when not being able to deal with something might be the most appropriate reaction.'

Sam would have to think about the implications of that statement. Later. 'But you're still here.'

'Yep. So are you.'

Touché. Sam had her own reasons for that, and clearly Euan did too. She picked up her pencil and tried to think of a less demanding question.

'What time does the clinic stay open until?'

'Eleven o'clock. But my shift ends in ten minutes. I'm on call, but only for emergencies.' His lips twitched into a smile. 'Do you like Chinese?'

That sounded like a trick question. 'It depends...'

'In that case, you'll like the place I've booked for dinner.' He grinned at her discomfiture. 'A working dinner.'

'Oh, so you're going to make me sing for my supper, are you?' Almost against her will she smiled back at him.

'Were you thinking of clocking off yet?'

No, she wasn't. Working too many hours was a way to keep from thinking too much. And if she fell into bed exhausted every night, that just meant that she slept a bit better. She did have to eat, though.

'Am I okay to go as I am?' Sam looked at her cargo pants and sneakers.

'You want to show me up?' He placed a hand on his chest, laughing. 'Although you can if you want. This place doesn't have a dress code.'

It would be impossible to show Euan up. He could ruffle his hair all he liked, wear whatever leapt out of his wardrobe at him, and still look good. His broad shoulders and the show-me-more ripple of muscle under his casual shirt attested to the fact that he'd already put in all the work he needed to on his appearance.

'I left my tiara at home. I'll show you up next time.'

He grinned. 'I'll look forward to it.'

* * *

When he ushered her out of the building he seemed to take a deep breath, sloughing off the cares of the day. They strolled down to the seafront together, walking along the promenade for half a mile, until Euan turned inland towards the centre of town.

'Do you always go via the seafront?' Sam was still getting her bearings, but she had an inkling that they probably could have cut ten minutes from their walk by taking a more direct route.

'Usually.' He grinned. 'No point in living by the sea if you don't grab as much ozone as you can.'

Sam jerked her thumb back towards the sea. 'That's the English Channel out there. I didn't know there was any ozone...'

He chuckled. 'Probably not. I like the beach, though.' He made a sharp left, and opened the door of a glass-fronted restaurant, motioning her through.

Inside, there was already a hum of activity. Euan was clearly a regular, and the waitress who came to their table greeted him by name and handed Sam a menu, chatting to Euan while she scrutinised it.

Perhaps he brought his girlfriends here. No one seemed much interested in her, and Sam imagined he probably turned up with a different woman on a fairly regular basis. If he had a regular partner, she would have attracted more attention, and Euan was the kind of man who was unlikely to go short of female company...

'Decided yet?'

Sam jumped and focussed her eyes back on the menu. ‘Um... What’s the Kung Po chicken like?’
‘Good. Very good,’ the waitress replied.

‘I’ll have that, then. With some rice and...’ The waitress nodded, scribbling her order down in Chinese characters on her pad.

‘Something to drink?’

‘Water, please. Sparkling.’ Sam never drank when she was working, and although tonight fell into a grey area somewhere between work and socialising, she needed to be careful around Euan. His job involved getting people to talk about how they felt, and he was obviously good at it. It would be horrifyingly easy to tell him her darkest secrets before she’d even realised it, and she wasn’t here for that.

He didn’t seem to make such distinctions, though. His work was intimately personal to him, bound up with feeling and hope and dreams. Even his discourse on health and safety procedures seemed more intimate than it should have been. Leaning across the table so that they could hear each other in the ever-increasing din of the restaurant, lost in the compelling magic of his eyes, it almost felt like a tryst.

‘So tell me something about yourself.’ They were waiting for their coffee now.

‘Not much to tell, really.’ She grinned at him. ‘I was born. I went to school, then university...’

‘Computer sciences?’

She nodded. ‘When we were at university together, my best friend and I had an idea. After we graduated, we thought we’d lose nothing by seeing if we could make something of it. We started off working from Sally’s parents’ spare bedroom.’

Even best friend didn’t cover it. The two girls had been seven years old when Sally had asked Sam back to her house one day, after Sam’s mother had become unavoidably detained by a bottle and some bad company and it had slipped her mind that she even had a daughter. With the benefit of hindsight, Sam could see that Sal’s mother had only needed to take one look at her to divine the situation, but she’d said nothing. Just laid an extra place at the table and made sure that Sam got home safely that night. After that, Sal’s family had become hers. And the two girls had been inseparable, like the closest of sisters.

‘And you made quite a go of it.’ Euan was nodding her on, and Sam realised that she’d fallen silent.

‘Yeah. Sal was the creative one, she had the ideas, and I did the programming. We made a good team.’

‘But you sold up?’ The look in his eyes told Sam that he wasn’t falling for the sugar and spice version of the story.

‘Yeah. Things change.’

He didn’t ask. Maybe he was thinking about it, and maybe he realised that she wouldn’t answer if he did ask. He paused, as if to allow her to reconsider her decision, but she couldn’t.

A tone sounded and he pulled his phone out of his pocket, giving her a mouthed apology before answering it. ‘Yeah, Mel. What’s up?’ His face darkened as the relief doctor at the clinic spoke at the other end of the line.

‘Okay. Yeah, that’s all right. Leave it with me.’ He cut the line, shoving his phone back into his pocket. ‘I’m sorry, Sam.’

‘That’s okay. We have to go?’

‘I have to go.’ He stood, pulling some notes from his wallet and beckoning to the waitress. ‘You have coffee. Call this number...’ he put a card from a cab company in front of her ‘...and tell them to put the fare back to the flat on the Driftwood account.’

‘I’m coming with you.’ Where the hell had that come from?

‘This is not part of your job...’

‘It’s what you’re all about, though, isn’t it? Give me a chance to at least see that.’ Sam was overstepping the mark, and she knew it. But here, at last, was the whole point of the infrastructure, the policies and the software. She’d found her way down to the heart of what made Euan tick.

He paused, clearly grudging even the two seconds that it took to think about it.

‘Give me a chance, Euan. I won’t get in the way, and I’ll do as you say. I promise.’

‘Okay.’ He pushed the notes into the waitress’s hand and she took them, clearly used to Euan leaving abruptly. ‘We need to hurry.’

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