



Annie O'Neil



MILLS & BOON
MEDICAL

Suzie hadn't felt this nervous in years. Correction. Not since Stuart MacLeod's email pinged into her inbox asking if she 'wouldn't mind showing him around the village' as he was considering a hospital consultant job in nearby Oxford.

Mind?

Why should she mind if the unrequited love of her life moved into her teeny tiny village where he could slowly watch her heart break?

Bourton-on-the-Water was a no-brainer. He'd fall in love with that, easy. Today, with the sun turning the slow-flowing river into a glitter of diamonds, the soft light bouncing off the warm, butterstone cafes and shops lining the streets, opulent cascades of flowers perfuming the footpaths...it was more than picture postcard perfect. It was...*heaven*. It was her home. She scrunched her face up. Stuart was a playboy, adrenaline-loving city mouse to her very single, long-walks-along-the-river country mouse. Maybe he'd hate it.

She pulled the little brown ball of fur up into her arms. The most perfect puppy ever. Abandoned! It was a shocker. She'd been adopted at the same age and since a family of her own was but a distant dream...the least she could do was give this little guy his own forever home. 'We won't let the tall, dark, handsome, doctor man break our hearts, will we Sherlock? Even if he is the most perfect-werfect-handsome-wandsomest.' The puppy gave her a sober look with bright blue eyes that were a lot like a certain Scottish doctor's then licked her nose.

'Is that the standard greeting in these parts?'

The rich, Highland brogue swirled around her spine like warm caramel. *Salted* caramel, because it came with a tang. Stuart wasn't in love with her.

But he was every bit as gorgeous as she remembered him.

‘Well, Stuart MacLeod, as I live and breathe!’ Why was she talking like Scarlett O’Hara? And why was her heart pounding so fast? In her throat?

No prizes for that one! The six-foot, tousle-haired, twinkly-eyed, answer was leaning in for a – oh...*oh!*...ohhhh.... – a kiss on the cheek. He smelt just as good as he did the first day they’d met. Her knees wobbled as his lips, then his cheek skimmed against her own and then.... *No*. Yes? Was he.... *lingering?* Stuart’s lips just missed hers as he pulled back and squinted down the High Street as if waiting for it to disappoint him. Just her imagination.

She pinned on the smile she’d been practicing all morning. The tour guide smile. The I-know-you’re-only-here-out-of-politeness smile. The smile disguising the fact she loved him. Even if it was her own private fairy tale.

‘Nice little town you have here.’

‘Village, actually.’ She launched into her oft-repeated history of the place – its Stone Age roots, the miniature village within a village, its status as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. When she finished, he grinned at her.

‘You married yet?’

And there it was. The question he’d asked once a year, every year since they’d met at a university disco ten years ago.

‘No.’

He nodded, squinted down at her, his full lower lip jutting out a bit as if her answer – always the same one – warranted some consideration.

Was the big brother in him asking? He had three kid sisters back in Scotland, she knew he'd helped raise. Or was this the time she'd finally given the right answer? She waited for the annual follow-up question.

'Anyone in the picture?'

'Yes, actually!' She threw him a saucy smile she hadn't realised she had in her arsenal and scooped up her puppy. 'Meet Sherlock.'

Stuart gave the dog's head a scrub with one of those big surgeon's hands of his. 'So this is my competition, eh?' Then he winked.

Suzie's insides turned into a travelling funfair.

'Right!' Stuart abruptly held out the crook of his. 'Show me around the place. Prove to me it's worth putting down stakes here.'

Gulp!

'No pressure, then.' She scanned the far side of the High Street. 'How about starting our tour at the world's best bakery?'

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One croissant, two chocolate tarts, a stroll down one side of the High Street and a saunter up the other - via a ridiculously delicious pub lunch - and Stuart had all the answers about living in Bourton-on-the-Water he needed except for one.

The village had utterly won him over. Suzie seemed to know just about everyone. They all adored her back making it clear why she loved the Cotswold hideaway so much. He'd never called a place home after his parents had died. Once he'd seen his sisters into uni, his

sole focus had been his career. The job offer at the neurosurgical unit in Oxford felt like a lifeline. A chance to prove he could put down roots. But only if the woman wading into the shin deep river with the world's rascaliest puppy wanted him here.

Suzie pushed a swatch of curly black hair out of her eyes and threw him a smile.

'C'mon! The water's perfect!'

'It's not the sort of thing one does in the Thames.'

'Toto? You're not in Kansas anymore!'

Minus the poppies, the village was about as close to Oz as a man could get – if Oz really was the place where dreams came true.

'What?' She grimaced at his expression. 'You look weird.' She tilted her head to the side, the sun catching the smattering of freckles that bridged her button nose. 'Are you alright?'

Suzie was perfect. Smart. Funny. Passionate. Mad about animals. Her community. The minute he'd laid eyes on her all those years ago, he'd known he would marry her one day. But the man he'd been then hadn't been ready. Hadn't been up to making the woman he saw before him happy. He'd laid his demons to rest now and it was time to put his heart on a platter and offer it to her.

'Never better.' He toed off his shoes, yanked off his socks, gave up halfway through and plunged into the river and pulled her into his arms.

One thing and one thing only would tell him if she felt the same. He dipped his head down and kissed her.

Later, when they came up for air, and had drawn a bit of a crowd on the stone bridge, Stuart had just one more question.

‘Suzie Langden?’

‘Erm...yes, Stuart MacLeod?’

‘How bout you start answering ‘yes’ to the “anyone in the picture” question?’

She grinned and flushed. ‘You mean...apart from Sherlock?’

He took her hands into his and popped kisses on her knuckles. ‘I definitely mean apart from Sherlock.’

‘I take it the village appeals?’

‘Oh, it appeals alright,’ He pulled her hips in close to his. ‘On all sorts of levels.’

Sherlock barked.

‘Do you think that’s his woof of approval?’

Suzie looked down at the puppy, happily bouncing in the low river current. ‘I think he’s more than happy.’

‘And you?’

‘Definitely,’ she nodded, going up on tiptoe to drop a soft kiss on his lips. ‘Finally. My picture perfect life feels perfect.’

They fell back into the river, kissing, hugging, laughing as Sherlock bounced about them.

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