



Before We Kiss (Fool's Gold, Book 16)

By Susan Mallery



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Editorial Review

Review

The wildly popular and prolific Mallery can always be counted on to tell an engaging story of modern romance." -Booklist on Summer Nights

"Susan Mallery is one of my favorites." -#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

"Mallery infuses her story with eccentricity, gentle humor, and smalltown shenanigans, and readers...will enjoy the connection between Heidi and Rafe." -Publishers Weekly on Summer Days

"An adorable, outspoken heroine and an intense hero...set the sparks flying in Mallery's latest lively, comic, and touching family-centered story." -Library Journal on Only Yours

"Romance novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling." -Booklist

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery has entertained millions of readers with her witty and emotional stories about women. Publishers Weekly calls Susan's prose "luscious and provocative," and Booklist says "Novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling." Susan lives in Seattle with her husband and her tiny but intrepid toy poodle. Visit her at www.SusanMallery.com.

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"Returning to the scene of the crime?" Dellina Hopkins asked as she stared at the dark-haired man standing on her porch. She supposed the polite response to his presence was to invite him in. And she would...in a minute. But first she was going to make him work for it.

Sam Ridge, all six feet of dark-eyed, arrogant handsomeness, narrowed his gaze. "You're not going to make this easy, are you?" he asked.

Dellina smiled. "No. Would you, if you were me?"

He surprised her by flashing a grin. "No, I wouldn't."

"An honest man." She bumped the door open wider with her hip and stepped back to let him in. "It's a miracle."

He moved into the house. Dellina let the screen door slam into place, but left the thick wooden door open. It was summer in Fool's Gold, and plenty warm. The breeze would be nice. Plus—and this was the part she would never admit to Sam—having the door open meant they weren't totally *alone*. Okay, they were alone, but it didn't feel so intimate. And based on what had happened the last time they'd been together in this house, that was a good thing.

Sam paused in the middle of her living room, as if not sure where to go. His head turned slightly and she had a feeling he was glancing down the hall—toward her bedroom. No doubt remembering what had happened some five months ago.

Dellina wanted to say it hadn't been her fault—that everyone was allowed to be stupid on Valentine's Day. Or in her case, on Valentine's Day night. Only she had known exactly what she was doing and it had been as wonderful and disastrous as anyone could have imagined. Now both she and Sam were going to have to deal with the consequences.

He turned to face her, then motioned to the sofa. "We should probably have a seat."

"Will that make things easier for you?" she asked.

"If I say yes, will you sit?"

"Probably."

"Then yes. It makes things easier."

Dellina settled in one of the club chairs while Sam took the sofa.

He moved with controlled power. It was the former professional athlete thing, she thought, watching him sit down. At the risk of sounding like a groupie, she had firsthand knowledge that the man knew how to use his body. Of course, the last time she'd been in his presence, she hadn't been interested in sitting. Or talking. But then neither had he. They'd practically tumbled over each other in their race to her bedroom. He'd—

Dellina pushed the very visceral memories away. Yes, Sam had been delicious in bed. But then things had gone downhill. She needed to remember what was important. He was here about a job. Not his unrequited lust for her. Based on how he'd been avoiding her for the past several months, when it came to her, he was plenty requited.

But he was also in a bit of a pickle.

The old-fashioned phrase made her want to smile. Yup, Sam needed her. Not in a delicious *take me now* kind of way, but for business. She was a party planner and he wanted to plan a really big business event. He was stuck and she was his way out. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, circumstances went her way. So after five months of being able to ignore her and that single night, he'd been forced to face her. Was it so very wrong of her to enjoy the moment? She thought perhaps not.

She rested her hands flat on her thighs and looked at him. "How can I help you?"

His dark gaze settled on her face. "Really? You're not going to admit you know what any of this is about?"

She blinked deliberately, then opened her eyes wide. "When you made your appointment to speak with me, you didn't mention a subject." Of course she knew why he was here, but again, a little emotional torture seemed the right kind of payback.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "All right. We'll play this your way. I'm Sam Ridge. I'm a partner at Score."

She grinned. "I know who you are, Sam. We don't have to pretend that much. Just tell me what you want and we'll move on from there."

He swore under his breath. "You're friends with Taryn. You've done work for her. How long are you going to punish me?"

He was right about Taryn. She and Dellina were friends and had worked together several times. Score, the PR firm in question, had moved to Fool's Gold just after the first of the year. Three of the partners were former NFL players and Taryn was the glue that held the company together.

"I haven't completely decided how long you should be punished," she admitted, wondering if batting her eyes again would be too over-the-top.

He sighed heavily. "Fine. We'll do this your way. Now that we've moved our business here, my partners and I want to have a big party for our clients. We've booked a hotel, but that's as far as the planning has gotten."

"A party," she breathed, and pressed her hand to her chest. "That sounds really nice."

In truth, being a neurosurgeon or the person who used to land the space shuttle probably made the top-ten list of jobs designed to give a person an ulcer. Sam would guess whoever was in charge of the ball dropping in Times Square on New Year's Eve probably had a few sleepless nights. But he would add that being a kicker for an NFL team had its moments of stress. When he'd been with the L.A. Stallions, he'd been responsible for twenty-six wins, including three during play-off games and one Super Bowl victory. He knew what it was like to have everyone watching him, both in person and on TV, and have his job performance critiqued endlessly.

He'd always known the outcome the instant his foot connected with the ball and he was famous for turning away and letting the sounds from the crowd tell him if he was right. He was used to pressure. He'd lived it and breathed it. But he'd never faced down anyone like Dellina Hopkins before, and the worst part about it was, she was right to give him a hard time.

Sam shook his head. "Okay," he said. "I give. I was wrong."

Her brown eyes twinkled. "Wrong about what?"

"That night. Leaving the way I did. It was just..." He motioned toward the hallway. "Those dresses and that list. All of it. I'm not looking to get married."

"Neither am I."

"You're the one with a room full of wedding gowns."

Her full lips pressed together. Sam tried not to notice, but her mouth was one of the first things that had caught his attention, back on Valentine's Day.

He'd been staying at Ronan's Lodge for a few weeks, until escrow closed on his new place. He'd gone down to the bar for a drink only to realize it was Valentine's Day and the place was crawling with couples. As he'd recently sworn off women—again—he'd started to turn around to go back to his room.

But before he could safely escape, he'd spotted Dellina. She'd been with friends. They were laughing and talking. No one had noticed him. She'd been pretty enough, but then she'd smiled and it was like getting kicked in the gut—and he was a man who knew the power of a good kick. He'd sent over a tray of drinks for the table, they'd invited him to join them and an hour later he and Dellina had been having dinner together.

Later, when he'd kissed her, he'd discovered her mouth had been as exciting and intriguing as he'd hoped. She'd invited him home, he'd said yes and the rest had been incredible. Until he'd gotten up in the night and found himself in a nightmare.

He'd spent the past five months avoiding her. Tough to do in a town the size of Fool's Gold. The situation had been complicated by the fact that he'd enjoyed her company and had really wanted to see her again.

Now that his company needed her services, he'd been forced to suck it up. So here he was. Being tortured for sport. Kenny and Jack would point out there was no other reason to torment anyone.

Dellina rose. She was about five-five, with all the expected curves. When he saw her around—because *wanting* to avoid her and being able to do it were two different things—she was usually in dresses or suits. Today she had on jeans and a frilly sleeveless thing that shouldn't have been sexy and yet was. Looking at her bare arms made him remember the rest of her bare, which was what had led to the problem between them in the first place.

Damn, he should never have gotten out of bed today. Or moved to Fool's Gold. Or joined Score for that matter. Or been born.

"Stand up," she said.

He did.

She walked up to him and held out her hand. "We're starting over. I'm Dellina Hopkins. I own a party planning business."

He didn't know which tack she was taking now, but figured he didn't have a lot of choice in the matter. Time was ticking and he was desperate.

"Sam Ridge. My company is a PR firm."

They shook hands. The second her fingers closed around his he felt heat. His gaze immediately settled on her full lips and he remembered he hadn't had nearly enough time with them. Or any of her. It was just once she'd gotten naked, he hadn't been sure which part of her to enjoy first. Then the nightmare had started.

She withdrew her hand and dropped it to her side.

"Well, Sam, like many small businesses, mine is based in my home. This house I rent has three bedrooms. I sleep in one and I work out of one and that leaves a spare bedroom. Follow me, please."

She led the way down the hall. He hesitated. He had a good idea where they were going and it was not a place any man would want to revisit. What it came down to was how much he needed her. And he needed her a lot.

She paused outside a closed bedroom door. *The* closed bedroom door.

"So my friend Isabel owns a store in town called Paper Moon," Dellina told him. "She sells wedding gowns. Last fall she decided to expand the business to include other kinds of clothing. She leased the space next door and started remodeling. As you can imagine, it was a big project. Because of the construction, she lost some of her storage space. Now, the average wedding gown is a pretty special item. So when one stores them, one can't simply leave them anywhere. They need to be safe and temperature controlled."

The pieces were starting to fall into place. Sam remembered getting up after making love with Dellina. He'd still been shell-shocked by the heat they'd generated and very much looking forward to a second act. Only on the way back from the bathroom, he'd made a wrong turn. Instead of walking back into her bedroom, he'd found himself staring at what looked like rows and rows of wedding gowns.

Worse, on the wall had been a dryerase board with a header that read Ten Ways to Get Him to Propose.

He had, understandably, freaked. He'd found his way back to her room, pulled on his clothes and fled. From then until now, he hadn't spoken a word to Dellina. He'd avoided her, he'd avoided anything to do with her and he'd never allowed himself to think about that night. Because if he did, he would find himself wanting her again. And with his luck with women, it was important to stay with those who were completely sane.

Which it appeared Dellina just might be.

She opened the door. He instinctively stiffened and saw they were still there. Racks holding covered white gowns. Like plastic aliens, hanging and shrouded, waiting to be returned to the mother ship.

"Isabel pays me to store her dresses," Dellina said. "I would do it for free, but she insists on a small monthly payment. These are not my dresses."

"Okay." He tried to adjust his collar only to realize that his shirt wasn't buttoned all the way and any pressure he felt was the result of being an idiot.

He cleared his throat. "So, ah, that clears up the problem with the wedding dresses. What about that?"

He pointed to the dryerase board. It still stated Ten Ways to Get Him to Propose, but there weren't any suggestions by the numbers.

Dellina sighed and sagged back against the wall. "It's Fayrene."

He raised his eyebrows.

"My younger sister," she clarified. "Fayrene met Ryan last spring. They fell in love, but she didn't want to get married because she wanted to focus on her career. Ryan was fine with that and they agreed to wait four years."

"So what's the problem?"

"She's changed her mind and wants him to propose now."

He waited, knowing there had to be more.

"Ryan isn't getting the message." Dellina rubbed her temples. "Probably because she hasn't told him. Fayrene doesn't want to *tell* Ryan she's changed her mind. That wouldn't be romantic. She wants him to guess on his own."

"That's not going to happen," Sam told her. "If Ryan loves Fayrene, he's going to respect her wishes no matter how much he wants to get married sooner. This isn't a winning strategy."

"Thanks for your insight. I happen to agree with everything you've said, but unless you want to take that up with Fayrene, you're telling the wrong person. My point is, the list isn't about me."

Dellina faced him. "Look, Sam, I know you have no reason to believe me, but I don't bring home guys I just met. Ever. Last Valentine's Day was the first time I'd done anything like that."

She kept talking but he stopped listening long enough to revel in the fact that she'd picked him for her first one-night stand. Okay, it wasn't up there with curing a disease, but still, nice to know. He returned his attention to her.

"...and when you took off, I couldn't figure out what had happened. Then I remembered this room and I knew you'd freaked."

"Understandably," he added.

"Yes. It is a bit off-putting. But you could have asked me what was going on."

He thought about the other women who had been in his life. His family. If Dellina knew about all that, she wouldn't be expecting a rational response. But she didn't know any of it and he preferred it that way.

"You're right," he told her. "I should have asked. I reacted. It was late and we'd had sex and this room scared the hell out of me."

She smiled. "You run fast."

"I've had training."

Her smile widened, drawing his attention to her mouth. "You've done a good job avoiding me. Fool's Gold isn't that big."

"I noticed. You're in a lot of places. You didn't make it easy."

"I didn't want to," she admitted.

"Then you must have been happy to find out about the party."

Her expression turned impish. "A little."

Because getting the party together had fallen onto him. Normally he would have simply hired someone.

But the only party planner in town was Dellina. So he'd put off dealing with her as long as he could.

"Now that you've had your fun at my expense," he told her, "there's still a problem to solve."

"Right. Score is putting on a party for its best clients. Three days of fun and frolic."

"Frolic? Did you really just say that?"

She pushed off the wall and walked across the hall. "You know I did. Come on. Let's go talk about how much extra you're going to have to pay me to pull this all together in four weeks."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Ponce:

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