



When We Met (Fool's Gold, Book 15)

By Susan Mallery



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Working with pro-football superstars taught tough-talking PR woman Taryn Crawford one thing—she can go toe-to-toe with any man. But then dark, dangerous former Special Ops Angel targets her for seduction...and challenges her to resist his tempting kisses.

Even in four-inch heels, Taryn never backs down. Unless, somehow, Angel can convince her that surrender might feel even better than victory.

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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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"We both know where this is going."

Taryn Crawford glanced up at the man standing by her table and ignored the rush of anticipation when she saw who he was. He was tall, with broad shoulders and gray eyes. But the most compelling feature—the one she would guess people pretended didn't exist—was the scar on his neck. As if someone had once tried to slit his throat. Taryn idly wondered what had happened to the person who failed.

She supposed there were plenty of women who would be intimidated by the man in front of her. The sheer volume of muscle he had might make someone apprehensive. Not her, of course. When in doubt she put on a power suit and killer heels. If those failed her, she would simply work harder than anyone else. Whatever it took to win. Sure, there was a price, but she was okay with that.

Which was why she was able to stare coolly back and ask, "Do we?"

One corner of his mouth curved slightly in a sort of half smile. "Sure, but if you're more comfortable pretending we don't, I can make that work, too."

"A challenge. Intriguing. You don't expect that to be enough to make me defensive so I start saying more

than I had planned, do you?" She made sure she was plenty relaxed in her chair. She would guess the man was paying as much attention to her body language as her words. Maybe more. She hoped he wouldn't make things easy. She was tired of easy.

"I would hate for you to be disappointed," she murmured.

The smile turned genuine. "I'd hate that, too." He pulled out the chair opposite hers. "May I?" She nodded. He sat.

It was barely after ten on a Tuesday morning. Brew-haha, the local coffee place she'd escaped to for a few minutes of solitude before she returned to the current chaos at her office, was relatively quiet. She'd ordered a latte and had pulled out her tablet to catch up on the latest financial news. Until she'd been interrupted. Nice to know this was going to be a good day.

She studied the man across from her. He was older than the boys, she thought. The three men she worked with—Jack, Sam and Kenny, aka "the boys"—were all in their early to mid-thirties. Her guest was nearer to forty. Just old enough to have the experience to make things intriguing, she thought.

"We've never been introduced," she said.

"You know who I am."

A statement, not a question. "Do I?"

One dark eyebrow rose. "Angel Whittaker. I work at CDS."

Otherwise known as the bodyguard school, she reminded herself. For a small town, Fool's Gold had its share of unusual businesses. "Taryn Crawford."

She waited, but he didn't make a move.

"We're not shaking hands?" she asked, then picked up her latte with both hers. Just to be difficult, because being difficult would make things more fun.

"I figured we'd save the touching for later. I find it's better when that sort of thing happens in private."

Taryn had opened Score, her PR firm, eight years ago. She'd had to deal with unwelcome passes, assumptions she was an idiot, being asked who the boss was, pats on her butt and people presuming that if she worked with three ex-football players, she must have gotten her job by sleeping with them. She was used to staying calm, keeping her opinions to herself and gaining victory through the unanticipated side run.

This time Angel had been the one to put the first points on the board. He was good, she thought, intrigued and only slightly miffed.

"Are you coming on to me, Mr. Whittaker? Because it's still a little early in the morning for that sort of thing."

"You'll know when I'm making my move," he informed her. "Right now I'm simply telling you how things are."

"Which takes us back to your comment that we both know where this is going. I'll admit to being confused. Perhaps you have me mixed up with someone else."

She uncrossed, then recrossed her long legs. She wasn't trying to be provocative, but if Angel got distracted, it was hardly her fault.

For a second she allowed herself to wonder how she would have been different if she'd been able to grow up in a more traditional home. One with the requisite 2.5 children and somewhat normal parents. She certainly wouldn't be as driven. Or as tough. Sometimes she wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

He leaned toward her. "I hadn't taken you for the type to play games."

"We all play games," she told him.

"Fair enough. Then I'll be blunt."

She sipped her coffee, then swallowed. "Please."

"I saw you last fall."

"How nice," she murmured.

When she'd been scouting locations. Moving a company required time and effort. They'd only truly settled in Fool's Gold a couple of months ago. But she had been in town the previous fall, and yes, she'd seen Angel, as well. Found out who he was and had wondered about...possibilities. Not that she was going to admit that to him.

"I watched you," he continued.

"Should I be concerned you're a stalker?"

"Not when you were watching me right back."

He'd noticed? Damn. She'd tried to be subtle. She thought about lying but decided to simply stay silent. After a second, he continued.

"So we've finished sizing each other up," he said. "Now it's time to move on to the next phase of the game."

"There are phases?" Which was an actual question. No point in mentioning the game. She knew what they were doing. Still, it was entertaining to pretend she didn't. "Several."

"Do you provide instructions or a scorecard?" His cool gray eyes stayed focused on her face. "You don't play that way."

"Be careful with your assumptions."

"I'm not assuming."

He had an appealing voice. Low with a hint of... Not the Deep South, she thought. But there was a cadence.

Virginia? West Virginia?

She put down her mug. "If I buy in to your assertion-which I'm not admitting I do."

"Of course not."

She ignored the words and the amusement tugging at his lips. "Where do you see this going?"

He leaned back in his chair. "This is a mating game, Taryn. Or didn't you know?"

Ah, his first mistake. She kept her eyes locked with his and didn't let her triumph show. "You want to marry me?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Not *that* kind of mating."

"If you're not precise, it's difficult to be sure. So you want to sleep with me."

"Yes, but it's about more than that."

She let her gaze drift down his chest, then moved to his arms. Despite the cool late-April temperatures, he wore a T-shirt and no jacket. She could see a tattoo of a rose, along with several scars on his arms. His hands were strong and equally battered.

She returned her attention to the scar on his neck and decided to ask the obvious. "What happened to the other guy?"

He touched the side of his throat, then shrugged. "He had a very bad day."

Taryn lived in the world of business. She could talk finance and sales projections, but her real gift was designing public relationship campaigns that were innovative and successful. At Score the work was divided among the four partners. Kenny and Jack were the rainmakers. They found prospective clients and reeled them in. Sam handled the money. But Taryn was the creative engine that steered the ship.

She was used to executives, graphic artists, bankers and everything in between. In her sphere, she was a power player and no one crossed her. But Angel was from a different sphere altogether. His clout didn't come from a boardroom or the right suit. He carried it in his body. It was part of who he was.

She knew a few odds and ends about him. People she respected and trusted liked him. But the details? They were still a mystery. One she would like to solve.

"What makes you think I'm the least bit interested?" she asked.

"You're still here."

A good point. She didn't want another executive- he would be too much like her. As for sports heroes, she worked with three and they exhausted her. Angel was different. Right now different sounded like exactly what she needed.

"Effort will be required," she told him.

"Ditto."

She laughed at the unexpected statement.

"You didn't think I'd be easy, did you?" he asked.

"Apparently not."

He stood. "Don't worry. I'm good at planning the right op for the right mission and then seeing it through." He crossed to the door, then turned back to her. "And I'm good at waiting."

He walked out, leaving her with her rapidly cooling coffee and an article on consumer confidence that had just gotten a whole lot less interesting than her encounter with an intriguing man named Angel.

Smug felt good, Angel thought as he crossed the street and headed for City Hall. He'd been waiting for the right moment to talk to Taryn, and when he'd seen her having coffee by herself, he'd decided to act. She was as intriguing as he'd hoped-intelligent, confident and sexy as hell. A combination he would have trouble resisting under the best of circumstances. But in this town, with her always *around*... He'd wanted to make his move the first day.

Waiting had been better, he told himself as he jogged up the stairs to the front of the government building. Now he could put his plan into action. The one that led them down a road of temptation, with an ultimate objective that should satisfy them both.

He took more stairs to the second floor and followed the signs to the mayor's office.

Mayor Marsha Tilson was California's longest-serving mayor. She served the town well and seemed to know everyone's secrets. Angel had yet to figure out where she got her information, but from what he'd seen, she had a network that would put most governments to shame.

He entered her office exactly fifteen seconds before the time of his appointment.

Her assistant, an older woman in a black blazer, looked up at him with red and puffy eyes. Angel immediately sensed bubbling emotion and glanced around the room to discover all available exits.

The woman, a full-figured brunette, sniffed. "You must be Mr. Whittaker. Go right in. She's expecting you."

Angel did as instructed, hoping to find a calmer atmosphere in the mayor's office. His cautious optimism was rewarded. Mayor Marsha looked as she always did-perfectly put together. She wore a light green suit and pearls and had her white hair neatly swirled up in a bun. She smiled and stood when she saw him.

"Mr. Whittaker. You made it."

"Angel, please." He crossed the room and shook hands with her, then settled in the seat across from hers.

Her office was large with several windows. Behind her desk were the flags of the United States and the state of California, along with a large seal he would guess represented the city of Fool's Gold.

"Your assistant's upset," he said.

"Marjorie's worked with me for years. But her twin daughters have settled in Portland, Oregon. They're both pregnant. Marjorie's husband retired, so they're going to move closer to family. While she's excited about being nearer to her daughters and future grandchildren, she's sad about leaving all of us here."

More than he wanted to know, he thought, keeping his expression polite.

Mayor Marsha smiled. "Now I'll have to find someone new. Hiring staff is relatively easy, but an assistant is a different matter. There has to be chemistry and trust. One can't let just anyone know the town's secrets." The smile widened. "Not why you came to see me today." She leaned forward and picked up a file from the stack on her large desk.

"All right, Angel, let's see what we have here." She slipped on reading glasses. "You're interested in a project that will involve you with the community."

Angel had been to some of the most dangerous parts of the world in various capacities. He'd taken his sniper training into the private sector and now designed curricula for people training to be professional bodyguards. Not much surprised him. But he would swear he hadn't told anyone his reason for making his appointment with Mayor Marsha, which begged the question: How did the old lady know?

She glanced at him over her glasses. "Did I have that correct?"

He decided he had little choice but to simply nod and say, "Yes, ma'am."

The smile returned. "Good. You have a unique background and an unusual skill set. I've given the matter a lot of thought and I think you'd be a perfect Grove Keeper."

Grove what? "Ma'am?"

"Are you familiar with the history of the town?" she asked, then closed the folder. "This is California, so there was the expected exploration by the Spanish in the 1700s, but long before that, Fool's Gold was settled by the Maa-zib Tribe."

Angel had heard something about that. "A branch of Mayans," he murmured. "Matriarchal."

"Yes." The smile returned. "I would guess you'd respect a group of women who only want to use a man for sex."

Angel wasn't sure if he should flinch or pat the old lady on the back. Instead he cleared his throat. "All right," he said slowly. "Interesting."

"It is. We have long celebrated our Maa-zib culture, and that includes a youth group. Future Warriors of the Maa-zib. Young people start with a two-month introduction to what it's like to be in the FWM. That's followed by four years of membership. We have Acorns, Sprouts, Saplings, Sky-Reachers and Mighty Oaks. Each group or troop is known as a grove, and the person in charge is a Grove Keeper."

She put down her glasses. "We have a grove in need of a keeper, and I think they need you."

Kids, he thought with surprise. He liked kids. His goal had been to get involved with Fool's Gold because he'd decided to stay here and he'd been raised to give back to the community. He'd thought maybe he could

volunteer on some advisory committee or teach a continuing ed class-although his skill set didn't exactly fit in the regular world. Still...kids.

He hesitated only a second, then realized it had been long enough since he'd lost Marcus. The pain was still there-would always be a part of him, like a scar, or his heart-but it had become manageable. He thought by now he would be able to work with teenaged boys without wanting to argue with the heavens about how unfair it had all been.

"Sure," he said easily. "I can run a grove."

Amusement twinkled in Mayor Marsha's blue eyes. "I'm glad to hear it. I think you'll find the experience fulfilling on several levels. I'll make sure you get your material in the next few days. Then you can meet with the Grove Council."

He grinned. "Seriously? There's a Grove Council?"

She laughed. "Of course. These are Future Warriors of the Maa-zib. What else would there be?"

She rose and he did, as well. "Thank you, Angel. Usually I have to go out and convince new residents to pitch in. I appreciate that you came to me." She studied him. "I assume your interest in giving back is the result of your background. You grew up in a coal mining town, didn't you? West Virginia?"

While the information wasn't secret, it wasn't something he shared very often. "You're a spooky woman," he told her. "You know that, right?"

The smile broadened. "Not many people have the courage to say it to my face, but I do hope that's what they're saying behind my back."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ilene Venne:

Now a day individuals who Living in the era where everything reachable by match the internet and the resources within it can be true or not need people to be aware of each details they get. How individuals to be smart in obtaining any information nowadays? Of course the reply is reading a book. Examining a book can help folks out of this uncertainty Information specially this When We Met (Fool's Gold, Book 15) book since this book offers you rich info and knowledge. Of course the info in this book hundred per-cent guarantees there is no doubt in it you know.

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Rod Reese:

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