

Three Little Words (Fool's Gold, Book 13)

By Susan Mallery

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Seeing Isabel all grown-up hits bodyguard trainer Ford like a sucker punch. Back when heartbreak made him join the military, her sweet letters kept him sane. Now he can't take his eyes—or his lips—off her. The man who gave up on love has a reason to stay in Fool's Gold forever—if three little words can convince Isabel to do the same.

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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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"Death by lace and tulle," Isabel Beebe said as she waved the nozzle of the steamer.

"I'm so sorry," Madeline told her, then winced as she studied the front of the wedding gown.

"Brides-to-be are determined." Isabel lifted up the front layers of the white dress and carefully clipped them to the portable clothesline in the back room of the boutique. With a dress like this—multiple layers of flowing chiffon—she would start on the inside and work her way out.

Isabel focused the steam on the wrinkles. An excited bride had wanted to find out if her potential wedding dress was comfortable to sit in. So she'd sat. For half an hour while on the phone with a girlfriend. Now the sample had to be steamed back into perfection for the next interested customer.

"Should I stop them next time?" Madeline asked.

Isabel shook her head. "Would that we could. But no. Brides are fragile and emotional. As long as they're not tossing paint on the dresses or reaching for scissors, let them sit, twirl and dance away. We are here to serve."

She showed Madeline how to hold the chiffon so the steam flowed through evenly and then explained about the layers and the time to let the dress cool and dry before being put back with the other sample dresses.

"It helps if you think of each wedding gown as a very delicate princess," Isabel said with a grin. "From a family with a lot of inbreeding. At any second, there could be disaster. We're here to keep that from happening."

Madeline had only been working at Paper Moon Wedding Gowns for three weeks, but Isabel already liked her. She showed up early for her shift and was endlessly patient with the brides *and* their mothers.

Isabel passed over the steamer. "Your turn."

She watched until she was sure Madeline knew what she was doing, then returned to the front of the store. She replaced sample shoes, straightened a couple of veils, then gave in to the inevitable and admitted she was stalling. What had to be done had to be done. Putting it off wouldn't change reality. Oh, but how she wanted it to.

After sucking in a breath for strength, she went into the small office, grabbed her purse and stepped into the workroom and smiled at Madeline. "I'll be back in an hour."

"Okay. See you then."

Isabel left the shop and walked purposefully to her car. Fool's Gold was small enough that she generally walked everywhere, but her current destination was just far enough to warrant a car. That and the fact that driving meant a faster and cleaner getaway. If things went badly, she didn't want to have to run like a frightened bunny. Not that she could in her four-inch heels, but still. With a car, there might be a spray of gravel and she could disappear in a cloud of dust, like in the movies.

"Things are not going to go badly," she told herself. "Things are going to go great. I'm visualizing greatness." She nearly closed her eyes, then remembered she was driving. "I'm wearing my tiara of greatness even as I turn."

She went left on Eighth Street, then right, and before she was ready, she found herself driving into the parking lot of CDS.

Cerberus Defense Sector was the new security firm in town. They trained bodyguards and offered classes in self-defense and other manly things. Isabel wasn't clear on the details. She found that she and exercise had a much better relationship if they avoided each other.

She parked next to a wicked-looking muscle car from maybe the 1960s, a large black Jeep tragically painted with flames and a monster Harley. Her Prius looked desperately out of place. Not to mention small.

Now that she wasn't driving, it was safe for her to close her eyes. She did and tried to visualize, but her stomach was churning too much for her to do much more than worry about throwing up.

"This is stupid!" she announced and opened her eyes. "I can do it. I can have a reasonable conversation with an old friend."

Only Ford Hendrix wasn't an old friend and the talk was going to be about how, despite her vow to love him

forever, the ten years she'd spent writing him, not to mention the pictures she'd sent, he had no reason to be afraid of her. Because she thought that he might be. Just a little.

She doubted it was anything he would admit. The man had been a SEAL. She knew that, in addition, he'd been part of a special joint task force that had been even more dangerous. She also knew he'd returned to Fool's Gold nearly three months ago, and in all that time, they'd managed to avoid each other. But that wasn't possible anymore.

"I am not a stalker," she said, then groaned. Bad way to start a conversation. And not one designed to get him to believe her.

"Whatever," she muttered and got out of her car.

She paused to smooth the front of her black dress. It was fitted without being tight and skimmed all the lumpy bits. As much as she loved clothes, a reasonable person might assume she would be obsessed with working out to fit into designer samples. But for Isabel, the call of the cookie was hard to ignore. So she was really good at draping her curves and still looking stylish. Or so she told herself.

She adjusted her sleeves, paused to brush off a bit of dust from her shoes and then prepared to face the lion in his den. Or warrior in his cave. Whichever.

She walked into CDS. No one sat at the reception desk, so she started down the hall toward the sound of music and a weird thumping noise. She saw double doors standing open and stepped through them into the biggest workout room she'd ever seen.

The ceiling had to be thirty feet high. Ropes hung from beams at one end of the room. There were all kinds of scary-looking exercise machines, boxing bags and other weights and equipment she couldn't name. In the center of the room a petite woman with long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail was fighting a much larger man. Fighting him and maybe even winning.

They both wore protective headgear and had tape around their hands. It took her a second to recognize her friend Consuelo Ly as the woman.

Isabel watched as Consuelo swung out her leg. The guy moved, but not quick enough. Her heel caught him behind the knee and down he went. Isabel winced, but then the guy was up faster than she would have thought possible and he had the woman in a headlock. Consuelo flailed around, trying to kick him or punch him. Her elbow connected with his midsection. He grunted but didn't let go.

"You two know what you're doing, right?" Isabel asked. "Is someone going to get hurt? Should I call nine-one-one?"

The man turned toward her. Consuelo didn't. One second he was standing, then next he was flat on his back and she had her foot pressed against his throat.

"Sucker," the woman said and pulled off her protective headgear. She glared at her victim. "Are you that stupid on a mission?"

"Not usually."

She held out her hand. The guy took it and she pulled him to his feet. Consuelo turned to Isabel. "Thanks. I owe you."

"I didn't mean to be a distraction," Isabel said. "You're so small and he's so..."

The man removed his headgear and turned to her. Isabel felt her mouth go dry, which was a much better reaction than the sudden flipping going on in her stomach. She had a feeling she'd gone either pale or red and kind of hoped for the former. It would be less embarrassing.

The man—all six feet of muscles in a T-shirt and sweatpants—was just as handsome as she remembered. His eyes were just as dark, his hair as thick. Fourteen years away had no doubt changed Ford Hendrix on the inside, but on the outside, he was better than ever.

She still remembered him standing in her parents' living room, confronting her sister. Isabel had been told to stay in her room, but she'd crept out to listen. She remembered crouching in the hall, crying as the man she'd loved as much as her fourteen-year-old heart could allow had asked why Maeve had cheated on him and if she really loved Leonard.

Maeve had cried, too, and apologized, but said it was all true. That she was ending things with Ford, that she should have ended them weeks before. As their wedding was in less than ten days, Isabel couldn't help agreeing. There'd been more fighting—mostly yelling on his part—then he'd stalked out.

Isabel had run after him, begging him not to go. He'd ignored her, had kept on walking. Two days later, he'd joined the navy and left Fool's Gold. She'd declared her love in an endless stream of letters but had never come face-to-face with him again until this second.

As an aside, he hadn't answered her letters. Not a single one.

"Hello, Ford," she said.

"Isabel."

Consuelo glanced between the two of them. "Okay," she said at last. "I'm sensing tension. I'm outta here."

Isabel shook her head slightly to try to clear her brain. "No tension. I'm tension free. I'm practically a noodle." She pressed her lips together. Was it possible for that statement to sound *more* stupid? A noodle?

Consuelo gave her a look that clearly stated she thought Isabel should investigate a local mental health clinic, grabbed two towels from a stack by the mats, tossed one to Ford and walked out.

Ford wiped his face, then draped the towel over one shoulder. "What brings you here?"

An excellent question. "I thought we should talk. What with our new living arrangements."

A single dark eyebrow rose. "Living arrangements?"

"Yes. As of last week, you're renting the apartment over my parents' garage. I haven't seen you coming and going and I thought maybe it was because you were avoiding me."

She drew in a breath. "I'm back in Fool's Gold for a few months to manage my parents' store while they're traveling. They want to sell Paper Moon and I'm helping update the inventory and maybe the interior. As I'm only here temporarily and they're on their world tour, it made sense for me to stay in the house. So I guess I'm house-sitting, too."

Because house-sitting sounded better than being twenty-eight years old and moving back into her parents' house.

"They told me they'd rented out the apartment above the garage but didn't say to whom. I just found out it was to you, which is nice because you're not a serial killer and I don't want to live next to one."

The other eyebrow rose as his expression changed from mild interest to confusion. Probably time for her to get to the point.

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm not fourteen anymore. I'm not that crazy kid who swore she was in love with you. I've moved on and you don't have to be afraid of me."

His eyebrows relaxed and one corner of his mouth turned up. "I wasn't afraid."

His voice was confident, his half smile sexy, and he looked better than any guy ever had in the history of the universe. She was sure of it. Because even as she stood there, nerves all over her body were whispering about the *man* so tantalizingly close. As a rule, she wasn't one who believed in instant attraction. She had always thought that sexual interest required a meeting of the minds before there was any body-to-body contact. In this case, she might very well be wrong.

"That's good," she said slowly. "I don't want you to think I'm a stalker. I'm not. I'm totally over you."

"Damn."

She stared at him. "Excuse me?"

The half smile turned into a grin. "I was the only guy in my unit to have a stalker. It made me famous."

She felt instant heat on her cheeks and knew she was blushing. "No," she breathed. "You didn't tell people about my letters."

The smile faded. "No, I didn't."

Thank God! "But you got them?"

"Yeah. I got them."

And? And? Had he read them? Liked them? Considered them the least bit meaningful?

She waited, but he didn't say anything.

"Okay, then," she murmured. "So we're clear. You're, um, safe around me and you're not avoiding me or anything."

"Yes."

"Yes, you're not avoiding me?"

"Yes."

Was it her or was he difficult to talk to? "I'm glad we got that cleared up. The apartment is okay? I checked it before you moved in. Not that I knew who you were, which was weird. Although now that I think about it, I wonder if my parents didn't tell me on purpose. Because of...before."

"You mean your promise to love me forever? The promise you broke?" He said the last part with a smirk.

"It wasn't a real promise," she protested.

"It was to me."

She saw the amusement in his dark eyes. "Oh, please. You barely knew who I was. You were desperately in love with my sister and she—"

Isabel slapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

He shrugged. "It was a long time ago." He moved toward her. "I got over Maeve a lot faster than I should have. She might not have handled it all that great, but she made the right decision for both of us."

"You're not still in love with her?"

"Nope." He hesitated, as if he were going to say more, then grabbed the towel and pulled it off his shoulder. "Anything else? I need to shower."

Want help?

She was reasonably confident she didn't ask the question out loud, but that didn't make the inquiry any less sincere. She would bet Ford looked great in a shower. All wet and soapy. And, um, well, naked. Which was really strange, because she couldn't remember the last time she'd speculated about a man's body. She just wasn't that interested in the whole naked-sex thing. She preferred quiet conversation to passion, and cuddling to groping. Of course, that went a long way toward explaining what had gone wrong between her and her ex.

"Interesting journey," Ford said.

"Excuse me?"

"You went from imagining me naked to some other place."

Her mouth dropped open. "I didn't imagine you...that way. What are you saying? I'd never do that." Heat burned hot and bright on her cheeks. "That would be rude."

The sexy smile returned. "So's lying. Don't sweat it. I'll take the compliment in the spirit you meant it." He raised one shoulder. "It's the danger. Knowing I'm a dark, dangerous guy makes me irresistible."

The Ford she remembered had been funny and charming and flirty, but he'd been a kid from a small town. Untested. Unchallenged.

The man in front of her had been honed by war. He was still charming, but he was also right about his appeal. There was something indefinable that made her both want to follow him into the shower and take off running.

She managed to swallow. "You're saying women want you?"

"All the time."

"How that must annoy you."

"I'm used to it. Mostly I consider taking care of them my patriotic duty."

She felt her mouth drop open. "Your duty?"

"Patriotic duty. It would be un-American to leave a woman in need."

Her gaze narrowed. So much for having to worry that Ford was uncomfortable around her. Or that her letters had bothered him. No doubt he'd considered them his God-given right.

"Just so we're clear," she said. "I'm over you."

"You mentioned that. You're not going to love me forever. It's disappointing."

"You'll survive."

"I don't know. I'm surprisingly sensitive."

"Oh, please. Like I believe that."

He winced. "You're mocking a hero?"

"With every fiber of my being."

"Better not let my mother hear that. She's still trying to convince me to let the town hold a parade in my honor. She wouldn't like knowing you're not appreciative of my personal sacrifice."

"This would be the same mother who took a booth at the Fourth of July festival so she could find you a wife?"

For the first time since she'd walked into the gym, Isabel saw a flicker of discomfort in Ford's steady gaze.

"That would be the one," he murmured. "Thanks for reminding me."

"She was taking applications."

"Yeah, she mentioned that." He shifted and turned his head, as if searching for an exit.

Now it was her turn to smile. "Not so big and bad when it comes to your mother, are you?"

He swore under his breath. "Yeah, well, so sue me. I can't help it. She's my mom. Can you stand up to yours?"

"No," she admitted. "But mine is half a world away, so I can pretend to be tough."

"So could I, when I was on another continent. Now I'm back."

She almost felt sorry for him. Almost. "I'll make you a deal," she said impulsively. "You stop talking about how you seduce women in the name of being a good soldier, and I won't bring up your mother."

"Done."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Valerie Israel:

Three Little Words (Fool's Gold, Book 13) can be one of your beginning books that are good idea. Many of us recommend that straight away because this guide has good vocabulary which could increase your knowledge in vocab, easy to understand, bit entertaining but delivering the information. The article author giving his/her effort to place every word into joy arrangement in writing Three Little Words (Fool's Gold, Book 13) however doesn't forget the main place, giving the reader the hottest as well as based confirm resource info that maybe you can be certainly one of it. This great information could drawn you into completely new stage of crucial considering.

Juanita Jones:

The book untitled Three Little Words (Fool's Gold, Book 13) contain a lot of information on that. The writer explains your ex idea with easy method. The language is very clear and understandable all the people, so do not really worry, you can easy to read this. The book was authored by famous author. The author will take you in the new period of time of literary works. It is possible to read this book because you can read on your smart phone, or program, so you can read the book inside anywhere and anytime. In a situation you wish to purchase the e-book, you can available their official web-site and also order it. Have a nice examine.

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