

New York Times Bestselling Author

SUSAN MALLERY

Two OF A KIND

"An adorable, outspoken heroine and an intense hero in need of emotional healing set the sparks flying."

—*Library Journal on Only Yours*

A Fool's Gold Romance



New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery welcomes readers back to Fool's Gold, where a one-time fling could become the real thing....

Felicia Swift never dreamed she'd hear a deep, sexy voice from her past in tiny Fool's Gold, California. The last time Gideon Boylan whispered in her ear was half a world away...on the morning after the hottest night of her life. Her freaky smarts have limited her close friendships, and romance but she came to Fool's Gold looking for ordinary. Gorgeous, brooding Gideon is anything but that.

Black Ops taught Gideon that love could be deadly. Now he pretends to fit in while keeping everyone at arm's length. Felicia wants more than he can give—a home, family, love—but she has a lot to learn about men...and Gideon needs to be the man to teach her.

As these two misfits discover that passion isn't the only thing they have in common, they just might figure out that two of a kind should never be split apart.

Praise for New York Times bestselling author

SUSAN
MALLERY

“There’s a little fun, a little sizzle, and a whole lot of homespun charm.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Summer Nights*

“Mallery infuses her story with eccentricity, gentle humor and small-town shenanigans, and readers will enjoy the connection between Heidi and Rafe.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Summer Days*

“If you want a story that will both tug on your heartstrings and tickle your funny bone, Mallery is the author for you!”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Only His*

“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*

“Mallery...excels at creating varied, well-developed characters and an emotion-packed story gently infused with her trademark wit and humor.”

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Only His

Only Yours

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Finding Perfect

Almost Perfect

Chasing Perfect

Hot on Her Heels

Straight from the Hip

Lip Service

Under Her Skin

Sweet Trouble

Sweet Spot

Sweet Talk

Accidentally Yours

Tempting

Sizzling

Irresistible

Delicious

Falling for Gracie

Someone Like You

Watch for more Fool’s Gold romances, coming soon!

Three Little Words

Christmas on 4th Street

SUSAN
MALLERY

Two
OF A
KIND

 HARLEQUIN® HQN™

To 2012 Fool's Gold Co-Head Cheerleader Judie Bouldry and her girls' great Nana Ellen, who share her love of reading. Judie, you're clever and enthusiastic, and Fool's Gold is lucky to have you!

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CHAPTER ONE

RATIONAL THOUGHT AND a working knowledge of hand-to-hand combat were useless when faced with the villainous power of the American house spider.

Felicia Swift stood immobilized in the corner of the warehouse, aware of the web, of the arachnid watching her, no doubt plotting her downfall. Where there was one female American house spider, there were others, and she knew they were all after her.

The logical part of her brain nearly laughed out loud at her fears. In her head, Felicia understood that spiders did not, in fact, travel in packs or scheme to attack her. But intelligence and logic were no match for a true arachnophobe. She could write papers, prepare flow charts and even do experiments from now until the next appearance of Halley's Comet. She was terrified of spiders and they knew it.

"I'm going to back away slowly," she said in a soft, soothing voice.

Technically, spiders didn't have ears. They could sense vibration, but with her speaking quietly, there wouldn't be much of that. Still, she felt better talking, so she kept up the words as she inched toward the exit, always keeping her gaze locked firmly on the enemy.

Light spilled from the open door. Light meant freedom and spider-free breathing. Light meant—

The light suddenly blacked out. Felicia jumped and turned, prepared to do battle with the giant mother-of-all-spiders. Instead she faced a tall man with shaggy hair and a scar by his eyebrow.

"I heard a scream," he said. "I came to see if there was a problem." He frowned. "Felicia?"

Because the spiders weren't enough, she thought frantically. How was that possible?

Fortes fortuna adiuvat.

She tried to rein in her unwieldy brain. Fortune favors the brave? That was helpful how? She had spiders behind her, the man who took her virginity in front of her, and she was thinking in Latin?

Felicia sucked in a breath and steadied herself. She was a logistics expert. She'd never met a crisis she couldn't organize her way out of, and today would be no exception. She would work from big to small and reward herself by doing the Sunday *New York Times* crossword in less than four minutes.

"Hello, Gideon," she said, bracing herself for her hormonal reaction to this man.

He moved closer, his dark eyes filling with emotion. She had never been all that good at reading other people's feelings, but even she recognized confusion.

As he approached, she was aware of the size of him—the sheer broadness of his shoulders. His T-shirt seemed stretched to the point of ripping across his chest and biceps. He looked lethal but still graceful. The kind of man who was at home in any dangerous part of the world.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

By *here*, she assumed he meant in Fool's Gold and not in the warehouse itself.

She squared her shoulders—a feeble attempt to look larger and more in control. Similar to a cat arching its back and raising its fur. But she doubted Gideon was going to be any more intimidated by her than he would be by a hissing tabby.

"I live in town now."

"I knew that. I meant what are you doing in this warehouse?"

"Oh."

An unexpected response, she thought, suddenly less sure of herself. A result of the spider encounter

Their powers were far-reaching. She'd planned to avoid any contact with Gideon for several months. Here it was less than five weeks into her plan and they'd run into each other.

"I'm working," she said, returning her attention to his question. "How did you know I was in town?"

"Justice told me."

"He did?" Something her business associate hadn't mentioned to her. "When?"

"A few weeks ago." Gideon's mouth curved into a smile. "He told me to stay away from you."

His voice, she thought, trying not to get lost in the memories of what the sound meant to her. While olfactory recollections were thought to be the strongest, a sound or a phrase could also shift a person back to another time. Felicia had no doubt she could easily be transported by Gideon's scent; right now she was most concerned about his voice.

He had one of those low, sexy voices. As ridiculous as it sounded, the combination of tone and cadence reminded her of chocolate. Now his voice was a vibration she was sure the spiders could get behind. She should—

Her chin came up as her brain replayed his statement.

"Justice told you to stay away from me?"

Gideon raised one powerful shoulder. "He suggested it was a good idea. After what happened."

Outraged, she planted her hands on her hips, then thought hitting Justice was a far better idea. Only he wasn't there.

"What happened between you and me isn't his business," she said firmly.

"You're his family."

"That doesn't give him the right to get in the middle of my personal life."

"I didn't see you trying to find me," Gideon pointed out. "I figured you were comfortable with his...intervention."

"Of course not," she began, only to realize she *had* been avoiding Gideon, but not for the reasons he thought. "It's complicated."

"I'm seeing that," he told her. "So you're okay?"

"Of course. Our sexual encounter was over four years ago." She had no idea if he'd guessed she'd been a virgin or not and didn't see any reason to mention it now. "Our night together was...satisfying. An understatement, she thought, remembering how Gideon had made her feel. "I'm sorry Justice and Ford broke down the hotel room door the following morning."

Gideon's expression changed to one of amusement. It was a look Felicia was used to seeing, and she knew it meant she'd somehow missed an obvious social cue or taken a joking comment literally.

She held in a sigh. She was smart. Scary smart, as she'd often been told. She'd grown up around scientists and graduate students. Ask her about the origins of the universe and she could give a fact-based lecture on the subject without having to prepare. But interpersonal interactions were harder. She was so damned awkward, she thought glumly. She said the wrong thing or sounded like a space alien with bad programming, when all she wanted was to be just like everyone else.

"I meant are you okay *now*," he said. "You screamed. That's why I came in."

She pressed her lips together. For possibly the thousandth time in her life she thought how she would gladly exchange thirty IQ points for just a small increase in social awareness.

"I'm fine," she said, offering what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Couldn't be better. Thank you for coming to my rescue—however unnecessary that was."

He took a step toward her. "I'm always happy to help out a beautiful woman."

Flirting, she thought, automatically monitoring his pupil dilation to see if it was real or simply politeness. When a man was sexually interested, his pupils dilated. But it was too dark in the

warehouse for her to be sure.

“What made you scream?” he asked.

She drew in a breath. “I saw a spider.”

One eyebrow rose.

“It was large and aggressive,” she added.

“A spider?”

“Yes. I have issues with them.”

“Apparently.”

“I’m not stupid. I know it’s not rational.”

Gideon chuckled. “You’re many things, Felicia, but we’re all aware that stupid isn’t one of them.”

Before she could figure out what to say to that, Gideon turned and walked away. She was so caught up in the way his jeans fit his butt that she couldn’t think of anything to say, and then he was gone and she was alone with little more than her mouth hanging open, a herd of American house spiders and their plans for her.

* * *

GIDEON BOYLAN KNEW the danger of flashbacks. They could come on suddenly and disoriented him. They were vivid, engaging all his senses, and when they were gone, a man had no way of knowing what was real and what was imagined. After being held captive for two years, he’d been ready to give in to madness. At least it would have been an escape.

His rescue had come just in time, although too late for the men who had been with him. But even being out of the hands of tormentors hadn’t given him any sense of freedom. The memories were just as painful as the imprisonment had been.

Focus, he told himself as he loaded the CD and checked his playlist for the next three hours. He had put his past behind him. Some days he even believed it. Seeing Felicia earlier had been a kick in the gut, but he would take a flashback of a beautiful woman in his bed every time. Still, he’d had to take a five-mile run and then meditate for nearly an hour before he’d felt calm enough to head to the radio station.

“We’re doing it the old-fashioned way tonight,” he said into the microphone. “Just like we always do.”

Beyond the control room, the station was dark, the way he liked it. He didn’t mind the dark. If it was dark, he was safe. They’d never come for him in the dark. They’d always turned the lights on first.

“It’s eleven o’clock in Fool’s Gold and this is Gideon. I’m going to dedicate tonight’s first song to the lovely lady I ran into today. You know who you are.”

He pushed the button and “Wild Thing” by the Troggs started.

Gideon smiled to himself. He had no way of knowing if Felicia was listening or not, but he liked the idea of playing a song for her.

A red light flashed on the wall. He glanced at it, aware someone was ringing the front bell. After hours, the signal flashed back in the control room. An interesting time for visitors. He walked to the front of the radio station and unlocked the door. Ford Hendrix stood in front of the door, a beer in each hand.

Gideon grinned and waved his friend in. “I heard you were in town.”

“Yeah, back two days and I’m already regretting the decision.”

Gideon took the offered beer. “Welcome home the conquering hero?”

“Something like that.”

Gideon had known Ford for years. Although Ford was a SEAL, they'd served together on a joint task force, and later, when Gideon had been left in his Taliban prison to rot, Ford had been one of those who had risked his life to get him out.

“Come on back. I have to put on the next song.”

They walked down the long corridor. “I can't believe you own this place,” Ford said, following him into the control room. “It's a radio station.”

“Huh. That explains all the music.”

Ford took the seat opposite Gideon's. Gideon put on his headphones and flipped a switch.

“This is my night for dedications,” he said. “I apologize for going digital for a second, but it's the only way to cue up quickly. Here we go. Welcome home, Ford.”

The opening of “Born to be Wild” began.

“You really are a bastard,” Ford said conversationally.

“I find myself an amusing companion.”

Ford was about Gideon's size. Strong and, on the surface, easygoing. But Gideon knew that anyone who had been to the places they'd been and done what they'd done traveled with ghosts.

“What brings you out so late at night?” he asked.

Ford grimaced. “I woke up and found my mom hovering over me in my room. Fortunately I recognized her before I reacted. I need to get out of there.”

“So find an apartment.”

“Believe me, I'm looking first thing in the morning. She begged me to wait, and I figured moving back home couldn't be too hard. You know, connect with family.”

Gideon had made the attempt once. It hadn't gone well.

“My brothers are okay,” Ford continued. “But my mom and my sisters are staying way too close.”

“They're glad you're home. You were gone a long time.”

Gideon didn't know all the details, but he'd heard Ford had left Fool's Gold when he was twenty and hadn't been back much in the past fourteen years.

Ford took a long swallow of his beer. “My mom's already asking if I've thought of settling down.” He shuddered.

“Not ready for a wife and the pitter-patter of little feet?”

“No, although I wouldn't mind getting laid.” Ford glanced at him. “You're in trouble, by the way.”

“I always am.”

His friend laughed. “Felicia went after Justice this afternoon. She said he had no right to tell you to stay away from her. When she gets mad, it's quite the show. Talk about a woman who can handle the big words.”

“You know her?”

“Not well. The first time I met her was in Thailand.”

When both Justice and Ford had interrupted Gideon's night with Felicia. Or rather the following morning. A polite way of saying they'd busted down the door and Justice had insisted on taking Felicia with him. Gideon had tried to go after her, but Ford had held him back.

Gideon hadn't seen her again until today. When she'd been fighting marauding spiders.

“She was pissed at Justice?” he asked.

Ford shook his head. “Leave me out of this. We're not in high school, and I'm not passing notes in study hall or asking her if she likes you. You'll have to do it yourself.”

Gideon was tempted. That night had been memorable. She was an intriguing combination of

determined, sexy and geeky. But he knew he wasn't her type—he wasn't anyone's. To the untrained eye he looked as if he'd healed, but he knew what was underneath. He wasn't a good relationship risk. Of course, if Felicia was looking for something less serious and more naked, he was all in.

Ford finished his beer. "Mind if I bunk in an empty office?"

"There's a futon in the break room."

"Thanks."

Gideon didn't bother mentioning it wasn't that comfortable. For a guy like Ford, a ratty futon was just as good as a four-star hotel bed. In their line of work, you learned to make do.

Ford dropped the bottle into the blue recycling bin, then headed down the hall. Gideon put in a CD then searched until he found the right track.

"You Keep Me Hanging On" began to play.

* * *

FELICIA HURRIED TOWARD Brew-haha. She was late, which never happened. She liked her life to be organized and calm. Structured. Which meant she always knew where she was going to be and what she was going to be doing. Being late was not part of her plan.

But ever since she'd seen Gideon the day before, she'd been out of sorts. The man confused her. Now she thought as she walked by the park, her *reaction* to him confused her.

She was used to being around physically powerful men. She'd worked with soldiers for years. But Gideon was different. The result of their sexual history, she thought. Percentage-wise, a single night was such a small part of a person's life, yet it could have lasting impact. A trauma of any kind could stay with a person forever. But her time with Gideon had been wonderful, not traumatic. The memories of that night along with their meeting yesterday kept swirling in her head. As a woman who liked her brain as tidy as she liked her life, she was unprepared for being so unsettled.

She paused to wait for the light so she could cross the street. As she stood, she saw a young mother with two small boys. They were maybe two and four, the youngest still a little unsteady as he ran across the grass. He came to a stop, turned and saw his mother and brother, then smiled broadly.

Felicia stared greedily, absorbing the pure joy of the moment, the unselfconsciousness of the happy toddler. This was why she'd come to Fool's Gold, she reminded herself. To be somewhere normal. To try to be like everyone else. To maybe even fall in love and have a family. To belong.

For someone who had grown up as a whiz kid on a university college campus, normal sounded like heaven. She wanted what other people took for granted.

The light changed, and she crossed quickly, aware of her lateness. Mayor Marsha hadn't said why she wanted to meet and Felicia hadn't asked. She'd assumed her skills were needed on a project of some kind. Maybe setting up an inventory system for the city.

She walked through the open door into the coffeehouse. Brew-haha had opened a couple of months before. Hardwood floors gleamed as sunlight spilled through the big windows. There were plenty of tables, a nice selection of pastries and delicious caffeine in all forms.

Patience, the owner and one of Felicia's friends, smiled. "You're late," she said cheerfully. "I'm excited to know you have flaws. There's hope for the rest of us."

Felicia groaned as her friend pointed to a table toward the back. Sure enough, Mayor Marsha Tilson and Pia Moreno were already seated there.

"I'll bring you a latte," Patience added, already reaching for a large mug.

"Thanks."

Felicia made her way through the tables toward the other women. Mayor Marsha, California's longest-serving mayor, was a well-dressed woman in her early seventies. She favored suits and, during business hours, wore her white hair up in a classic bun. She was, Felicia thought wistfully, the perfect combination of competent and motherly.

Pia, a willowy brunette with curly hair and a ready smile, jumped to her feet as Felicia approached. "You made it. Thanks for coming. It's summer with what feels like a festival every fifteen minutes. I'm happy to be out of my office, even for a business meeting."

She gave Felicia a quick hug. Felicia responded in kind, despite her surprise. She'd only met Pia a couple of times and didn't think they were all that close. Still, the physical contact was pleasant and implied a connection.

Patience brought over the latte and a plate of cookies. "We're sampling today," she said with a grin. "From the bakery. They're too fabulous." She pushed the plate into the center of the table with her left hand. Her diamond ring flashed.

Mayor Marsha touched Patience's ring finger. "What a beautiful setting," she said. "Justice did a very nice job choosing the ring."

Patience sighed and studied her engagement ring. "I know. I keep staring at it when I should be working. But I can't help myself."

She returned to the front of the store. Pia watched her go.

"Young love," she said with a sigh.

"You're still young and very much in love," the mayor reminded her.

"I am still in love," Pia said and laughed. "Most days I don't feel so young. But I'll agree with you on the ring. It's impressive."

Mayor Marsha turned to Felicia and raised her eyebrows. "Not a big diamond fan?"

"I don't get the appeal," she admitted. "They sparkle, but they're simply pressurized rocks."

"Expensive rocks," Pia teased.

"Because we assign them significance. They have little intrinsic value, except for their hardness. In some industrial settings..." She paused, aware she was not only talking too much, she was heading into a subject everyone else would find boring. "Fossils are interesting," she murmured. "Their formation seems more serendipitous."

The other two women glanced at each other, then back at her. Their expressions were polite, but Felicia recognized the signs. They were both thinking she was a freak. Sadly, they were right about that.

Moments like this one were the main reasons she worried about having the family she wanted so desperately. What if she couldn't have children? Not biologically. There was no reason to assume she couldn't procreate as well as the next woman. But was she emotionally sound enough? Could she learn what she didn't know? She trusted her brain implicitly but was less sure about her instincts, and maybe her heart.

She'd grown up never fitting in—a reality she would never want to foist on any child she might have.

"Amber is tree sap, isn't it?" Pia asked. "Wasn't that the basis of that movie? The dinosaur one?"

"*Jurassic Park*," the mayor said.

"Right. Raoul loves that movie. He and Peter watch it together. I won't let the twins anywhere near the room, though. They wouldn't be able to sleep for weeks after seeing T.rex eating that man."

Felicia started to point out all the scientific inconsistencies in the movie, then pressed her lips together. She believed that many life lessons could be found in clichés, and right now the phrase "less

is more” came to mind.

Mayor Marsha took a sip of her coffee. “Felicia, I’m sure you’re wondering why we wanted to meet with you today.”

Pia shook her head. “Right. The meeting.” She smiled. “I’m pregnant.”

“Congratulations.”

The expected response, Felicia thought, not sure why the other woman was sharing the information. But then they’d hugged, so perhaps Pia thought they were closer than Felicia did. She wasn’t always good at judging things like that.

Pia laughed. “Thanks. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong. Ask poor Patience. I had a complete breakdown in front of her not that long ago. I’ve been forgetful and disorganized. Then I found out I’m pregnant. It was good to have a physical cause for my craziness and not have to worry about going insane.”

She cupped her hands around her mug of tea. “I already have three kids. Peter and the twins. I love my work, but with a fourth baby on the way, I can’t possibly stay on top of everything that’s happening. I’ve been wrestling with the fact that I can’t be in charge of the festivals anymore.”

Felicia nodded politely. She doubted they were going to ask for her recommendation on who should take Pia’s place. They would know that better than she would. Unless they wanted her to help with the search. She could easily come up with a list of criteria and—

Mayor Marsha smiled at her over her mug. “We were thinking of you.”

Felicia opened her mouth, then closed it. Words genuinely failed her—a very uncommon experience. “For the job?”

“Yes. You have an unusual skill set. Your time with the military has given you experience at dealing with a bureaucracy. While I like to think we’re more nimble than most city governments, the truth is we still move very slowly and there’s a form for everything. Logistics are your gift, and the festivals are all about logistics. You’ll bring a fresh set of eyes to what we’ve been doing.”

Mayor Marsha paused to smile at Pia. “Not that you haven’t been brilliant.”

Pia laughed. “Don’t worry about hurting my feelings. Felicia can be better than me. If she is, I won’t have to feel guilty.”

“I don’t understand,” Felicia whispered. “You want me to be in charge of the festivals?”

“Yes,” the mayor said firmly.

“But they’re important to the town. I know you have other industries, but I would guess that tourism is your main source of income. The university and the hospital would be the largest employers, but the visitors are the real money.”

“You’re right,” Pia said. “Don’t get me started on how much per person, because I can tell you within a couple of dollars.”

Felicia thought about mentioning she was the sort of person who enjoyed math, then told herself it wasn’t pertinent to the subject at hand.

“Why would you trust me with the festivals?” she asked, knowing it was the only question that mattered.

“Because you’ll make sure they’re done right,” Mayor Marsha told her. “You’ll stand up for what you believe in. But mostly because you’ll care as much as we do.”

“You can’t know that,” Felicia told her.

The mayor smiled. “Of course I can, dear.”

CHAPTER TWO

FELICIA DROVE UP the mountain. She'd left town a couple miles back and was now on a two-lane road with a gentle grade and wide shoulders. She took the curves slowly, not wanting to find herself grill-to-nose with any wildlife out foraging in the warm summer night. Overhead the sky was a mass of stars with the moon only partially visible through a canopy of leaves.

It was after two in the morning. She'd gone to bed at her usual time, but had been unable to sleep. She'd been restless much of the day. Actually since her meeting, she thought. She still couldn't wrap her mind around what the mayor and Pia had suggested. That *she* run the festivals.

Her usual response to a difficult problem was to brainstorm solutions. Only this wasn't that kind of problem. This was about people and tradition and an intangible she couldn't identify. She was both excited by the opportunity and frightened. She had never shied away from responsibility before, but this was different, and she didn't know what to do.

The result of which was her drive up the mountain.

She turned down a small, paved road that was marked as private. A quarter mile later, she saw the house set back in the trees. Gideon's house.

She hadn't known who else to talk to. She had started to make friends in town, women who tried to understand her and appreciate the effort she made to bond. Funny, charming women who all had a connection with the town. And that was the problem. The town. She needed an outside opinion.

Normally she would have gone to Justice, but he had recently gotten engaged to Patience. Felicia wasn't clear on all the dynamics that went into falling in love, but she was pretty sure keeping secrets broke a major rule. Which meant Justice would tell Patience what Felicia said, bringing her back to needing an outside opinion.

She parked in the wide, circular driveway and got out of her car. There was a long front porch and big windows that would allow in plenty of light. She would guess that light and sky would be important to a man like Gideon.

She walked to the porch and sat on the steps to wait. His shift ended at two, so she would expect him to arrive shortly. He didn't strike her as the type to stop in a bar on the way home. Not that she could say how she knew that about him.

The little information she had on Gideon was sketchy at best. Their time together four years ago had been more physical than conversational. She knew that he was former military, that he'd been assigned to covert ops and that his work had taken him places no man should have to go. She knew that he and his team had been taken prisoner for nearly two years. That had happened before they'd met.

She'd never discovered any details on his captivity, mostly because the information had been classified beyond her pay grade. Technically she could have gotten into the file, but Felicia was less concerned about if she could do something than if she should. What she did know was that Gideon had been involved in the kind of missions that were so exciting in movies but deadly in real life. The kind that if the operative got caught—no one was coming after him. Because of that, Gideon had spent twenty-two months in the hands of the Taliban. She assumed he'd been tortured and abused until death had seemed like the best possible outcome. Then he'd been rescued. The other men with him hadn't

made it out.

Headlights appeared through the bushes. She watched Gideon's truck pull up behind her car. He turned off the engine, then got out and walked toward her.

He was tall, with broad shoulders. In the starlight there were no details—just the silhouette of the man. A shiver raced through her. Not apprehension, she thought. Anticipation. Her body remembered what Gideon had done, how he'd touched her with a combination of tenderness and desperation. His hunger had chased away any nerves.

While she'd studied the subject of sexual intimacy, knowing in her head and experiencing in person were two different things. Reading about the states of arousal had been nothing like experiencing them. Intellectual knowledge of why a tongue stroke on a nipple might feel good hadn't prepared her for the wet heat of his mouth on her breast. And knowing the progression of an orgasm hadn't come close to actually feeling the shuddering release that had claimed her.

"You're unexpected," he said, pausing at the foot of the stairs.

In the starlight, she couldn't read his expression. She couldn't see if he was remembering, too. "I need to talk to someone," she admitted. "You came to mind."

His eyebrows rose. "Okay. That's a new one. I haven't seen you in four years and you thought of me?"

"Technically you saw me in the warehouse."

One corner of his mouth twitched. "Yes, and it was meaningful for me, too." The almost-smile faded. "What do you want to talk about?"

"It's work related, but if you don't want to have a conversation, I can leave."

He studied her for a few seconds. "Come on in. I'm too wired to sleep after I work. I usually do Tai Chi to relax, but having a conversation works, too."

He walked past her. She rose and followed him inside.

The house was big and open, with plenty of wood and high ceilings. Gideon flipped on lights as he moved through a great room with a fireplace at one end. There were floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out onto the darkness. While she couldn't make out details of the view, she had a sense of vastness beyond.

"Is the house on the edge of a canyon?" she asked.

"Side of a mountain."

He went into the kitchen. There were plenty of cabinets, lots of granite countertops and stainless appliances. He pulled two beers out of the refrigerator and handed her one.

"I thought you were avoiding me," he said.

"I was, but now that we've spoken there didn't seem to be any need to continue."

"Huh."

His dark gaze was steady but unreadable. She had no idea what he was thinking. His voice was appealing, but that was more about physiology than any interest in her. Gideon had one of those low, rumbling voices that sounded so good on the radio. He could make a detergent sound sexy if he put any effort into it.

He flipped off the kitchen lights. She blinked in the sudden darkness, then heard more than saw him walk across the room and open a sliding glass door. Moonlight illuminated the shadow of him disappearing onto what would be the back deck of the house. She followed.

There were a few lounge chairs and a couple of small tables. Forest stretched out beyond the railing. The trees angled down—Gideon hadn't been kidding about the house being on the side of a mountain.

She settled in a chair close to his, with one of the tables between them. She rested her head against

the cushions and stared up at the star-filled sky. The half-moon had nearly cleared the mountain, illuminating the quiet forest and still mountain.

The air was cool, but not cold. In the distance she heard the faint hoot of an owl. An occasional leaf rustled.

“I can see why you like it here,” she said, reaching for her beer. “It’s restful. You’re close enough to town to get to the station but far enough away to not have to deal with too many unexpected visitors.” She smiled. “Excluding me, of course.”

“I like it.”

“Do you get snowed in during the winter?”

“I didn’t last year. We hardly had any snow. But it’s going to happen.” He shrugged. “I’m prepared.”

He would be, she thought, because of his military training. She’d noticed that she and Justice often came at a problem from different angles but with the same objective. And speaking of her friend...

“I couldn’t talk to Justice about this,” she said.

Gideon raised his eyebrows. “All right.”

“I thought you’d want to know why. Because he and I are like family.” She turned on the lounge chair, angling herself toward him.

He was in silhouette again. A powerful man momentarily tamed. Her gaze drifted to his hands. She was tall, but with Gideon she’d felt delicate. For a few hours in his bed, she hadn’t been frighteningly brilliant or freakishly organized. She’d been a woman—just like everyone else.

“So what’s the problem?”

For a second she thought he was referring to her study of his hands, and the resulting memories. “It’s the town.”

“You don’t like it here?”

“I like it very much.” She drew in a breath. “The mayor has asked me to take over running the festivals. Pia Moreno had been doing it for several years, but she already has three kids and is pregnant with a fourth. It’s too much for her.”

Gideon shrugged. “You’d be perfect for the job.”

“On the surface. The logistics would be easy enough, but that’s not the point. It’s the significance.”

“Of the festivals?”

She nodded. “They are the heartbeat of the town. Time is measured by the festivals. When I go out with my friends, they often talk about festivals from the past, or what’s coming up. Why is Mayor Marsha willing to trust them to me?”

“Because she thinks you’ll do a good job.”

“Of course I’ll do the work. It’s more than that.”

“You’re scared.”

Felicia drew in a breath. “I wouldn’t say scared.”

He took a drink of his beer. “You can pick some big word if you want, but you mean scared. You don’t want to let them down and you’re afraid you’re going to.”

“I thought *I* was the most direct person in any conversation,” she murmured.

* * *

GIDEON LEANED BACK in his chair and closed his eyes. It was safer than looking at Felicia, especially in moonlight. With her big green eyes and flame-red hair, she was a classic beauty. How would she

describe herself? Ethereal, maybe. He smiled.

“This isn’t funny,” she told him.

“It kind of is.” But not for the reason she thought. His situation was more ironic.

He’d built his house and designed his life so that he chose if and when he interacted with anyone. Last night Ford had been his surprise guest. Tonight it was Felicia. The difference was he’d been comfortable around his friend. Not so much with the woman sitting only a few feet away.

It wasn’t that he was *uncomfortable*, it was that he was aware. Of the soft sound of her breathing. Of the way her hair tumbled over her shoulders. Of how she occasionally looked at him like she was remembering them naked together.

Wanting stirred. It had been dormant so long that the physical act of blood rushing to his groin was painful. Thinking pure thoughts didn’t help, mostly because he didn’t have any where she was concerned. Of course now he was left with a hard-on and nowhere to put it, so to speak.

He glanced at Felicia and wondered what she would say if he told her he wanted her. Any other woman would be flustered or embarrassed. A few might start taking off their clothes as a way to say yes. But what about Felicia?

He figured there was a fifty-fifty chance she would discuss the biological process of arousal and an erection in such scientific terms that the blood would retreat in self-defense, thereby solving the problem. On the other hand, she could do what she’d done when they’d met in Thailand—look him directly in the eye and ask if he wanted to have sex with her.

“You were the most beautiful woman in that bar,” he told her. “I was surprised when you came over to talk to me.”

“You seemed nice.”

“No one’s said that about me in a long time.”

She smiled. “I was still in the military at the time and working with guys in Special Forces. I was comfortable being around dangerous men. I can’t explain why I picked you, though. I found you appealing, of course. I suppose I also had a chemical reaction. Perhaps to your pheromones. Attraction isn’t an exact science.”

She ducked her head, then looked back on him. “It was my first time.”

“Picking up a guy? You did good. I was immediately intrigued.”

“I was wearing a very low-cut sundress. Most men are attracted to breasts. Plus I’d run in place for a few minutes before going into the bar. The scent of female sweat is also sexually attractive to men.”

“I feel used.”

She laughed. “No, you don’t.”

“You’re right.” They’d had a great night. “I wanted to see you again, but I couldn’t find you.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I got sent back to the States. I’m sure Justice had something to do with it.” She paused. “I didn’t mean I’d never picked up a man in a bar before, Gideon. I meant you were my first time. I was a virgin.”

Gideon stared at her, his beer halfway to his mouth. He returned it to the table. Memories of that night flashed through his head. Of Felicia exploring his body as if she couldn’t get enough. Her eager cries of “more” and “harder.” She’d been so clear on what she wanted that he’d assumed... No guy could have ever guessed...

“Shit.”

“Don’t be upset,” she told him. “Please. I didn’t say anything that night because I was afraid you’d turn me down. Or that it would make things difficult. That you’d be too careful or tentative.”

“How old were you?” he asked.

“Twenty-four.” She sighed. “Which was part of the problem. No one would sleep with me. I was tired of not knowing. Of being different. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with being a virgin. I suppose in a perfect world I would have waited until I fell in love. Only, how was that supposed to happen?”

She sat up and faced him. “I grew up on a university campus. They had very polite words to describe my situation, but at the heart of it, I was a lab experiment. I joined the Army and was quickly moved into logistics for Special Forces. Guys everywhere, right? Except I was so socially awkward, I think I scared them. Or they saw me as a sister, like Justice. I kept waiting to meet someone. For that first kiss, that first time. But it wasn’t happening.”

She twisted her fingers together. “I went to the bar for three nights before I saw you. Once I did, I decided you were the one.”

He didn’t know what he was supposed to do with all that information.

“Are you angry?” she asked.

“Confused. You had me fooled. You seemed to know what you were doing.”

She smiled. “I’m very good at research.”

“Still, I should have noticed.”

“You had an incredibly beautiful woman in your bed. You were distracted.”

She was laughing as she spoke, as if making a joke, yet the words were completely true.

“It had been a while for me,” he admitted. “You were my first after I was held captive.”

Her humor faded. “I didn’t know that.”

“You and I didn’t talk much. Once I realized what you wanted, I wasn’t about to say no. I’d spent two years in that hole in the ground, then another year and a half in Bali.”

“There are very lovely women in Bali.”

“That may be true, but my teacher insisted celibacy was the road to healing.”

“Hence the trip to Thailand?”

“I wouldn’t have said ‘hence,’ but it was part of the reason I wanted to take a break.” He managed to take a drink of his beer. “I wasn’t expecting to find you.”

“You didn’t. I found you.”

A point he would happily concede. “Things didn’t end the way I wanted.”

“For me, either.”

He and Felicia had been lounging in bed when two guys had literally broken down the door. Gideon hadn’t known Justice at the time, but he’d recognized Ford. His buddy had shrugged in apology but hadn’t stayed to talk.

“I should have reacted faster,” Gideon said.

“It’s good that you didn’t. Then you and Justice would have gotten into a fight and someone would have gotten hurt.”

He liked to think it would have been the other guy but figured he would have taken the brunt of the attack. At that point he’d been out of the game for several years. He’d been in good shape but not honed like Justice. He doubted Ford would have taken sides, although he probably would have prevented them from killing each other. A cold comfort, he thought.

“Now you and I are here,” he said.

“Not a coincidence. You and Justice both know Ford. Justice met him when he was a teenager and lived here for a while.”

Gideon had heard the story. Justice had been in the witness protection program, which had relocated him to Fool’s Gold. A perfect place to hide, Gideon thought. No one would think to look for him in

such an idyllic town.

~~All these years later, Justice had returned, fallen in love with Patience, a girl he'd cared about in high school. Talk about a sappy story. Yet it was a situation that Gideon found himself envying. Justice had found peace—something Gideon knew would always elude him. On the surface he looked like everyone else, but he knew what was inside. He knew that he couldn't risk caring. Love made a man weak and ultimately killed him. Gideon couldn't afford to take the risk.~~

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "Ford talked to you about Fool's Gold and you came to check out."

He had, and he'd liked what he'd seen. The touristy town was big enough to have what he needed and small enough that he could exist on the fringes of belonging. He could be a part of things and yet separate.

"Are you going to take the job?" he asked.

"I want to." Her voice had a quality of longing.

"You should. You'll do well. It's mostly logistics and you excel at getting things done."

"You can't know that," she said.

He shrugged. "I asked Ford about you. That's pretty much all he would tell me."

"Oh. That makes sense." She twisted a strand of hair around her finger. "I'm not worried about the operation part of the job. It's everything else. I'm not good with emotions. I'm too in my head." She ducked her head. "I wish I was more like you. In the moment. You don't seem like you need to think everything through. That's nice."

He wasn't allowing himself to be in the moment right now, he thought grimly. If he did, he would already have her naked and moaning. He would have explored every inch of her body before settling with his mouth between her legs.

Blood surged at the image. He wanted to hear her breathing hitch as she got closer. He wanted to feel her tensing before she shattered, her mind nothing more than a hazy mess of pleasure.

"Gideon?"

He forced himself back to the present. "I could teach you some breathing techniques that might help."

She laughed.

The sweet, happy sound filled the silence of the night. It was the kind of sound that could save a man, he realized. Or bring him to his knees.

The need grew and, with it, the understanding that he couldn't take the risk.

"It's late," he told her.

"I'm aware of the time. The movement of the stars and the moon are a clear..." Her humor faded. "Oh, you're asking me to leave."

"You have a long drive back."

She stood. "It's three-point-seven miles, but that's not the point. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep you so long. Thanks for talking to me. It helped."

He felt as if he'd kicked a kitten. "Felicia, don't read too much into this." He rose. "Look. Like you said, it's complicated."

She looked into his eyes. "People say that when they don't want to tell the truth."

The truth? Tension had returned and, with it, his arousal. Restlessness made him want to move, but he knew the value of staying still.

She put her hand on his shoulder, then moved her fingers to his biceps. "You're very powerful. More muscled than Justice. His body type is leaner, and he has to work harder to bulk up. Your

physiology allows you to add muscle more quickly. It's...interesting."

~~As was the warmth of her skin, he thought, watching her green eyes darken slightly as her features sharpened and her gaze intensified. The air seemed charged as energy flowed between them. He didn't know exactly what she was thinking, but he was starting to have a good idea.~~

"Don't look at me like that," he commanded.

The corners of her mouth turned up. "I'm trying to flirt. Sorry. It's harder than it looks. I guess it's all the nuances."

She swayed toward him. "Our previous encounter was very satisfying. There have been two other men, and it wasn't the same. I suppose it's one of those intangibles that can't be measured. With you I felt more comfortable. We laughed and talked in addition to making love. I remember that we ordered champagne and you—"

He knew exactly what he'd done with a mouthful of champagne. He remembered everything about their night together.

Unable to stop himself, he put his hands on her waist and drew her to him. She went willingly, her head already slightly raised so he barely had to bend to kiss her.

* * *

YES, FELICIA THOUGHT, as Gideon's mouth pressed against hers. She let her eyes sink closed as she lost herself in the feel of his lips against hers.

The kiss was gentler than she remembered. As if he were retracing steps. She let herself feel the heat radiating out from a central point low in her belly and get lost in the image of fire dancing across her skin.

She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned against him. He moved his hands from her waist to her back, then slid them up and down. She wanted to stretch and purr, she thought, her brain cataloging the various sensations of his kiss, his fingers, the heat where they touched, chest to chest. She wrapped her arms around his neck and parted her lips. He stiffened and drew back a little.

While she wasn't usually one for insights, she was acutely aware that he had yet to decide. That the kiss had been more reaction than plan and he was still in a place where he could say no. She didn't know *why* he would refuse, but understood he still could.

She opened her eyes to look at him. His jaw was tight, his gaze filled with indecision.

"You don't know what you're asking," he said, his voice nearly a growl.

She smiled. "I know exactly what I'm asking."

Four years ago she had pursued Gideon, she thought. Had picked him from all the other men in the bar that night. As she had said, there was something about him. His strength, of course. Nearly any female would respond well to a powerful man. That was merely biology. But there had been something else. An elusive sense of rightness, although if she did some research, she could probably figure out what it was.

Now the need to be with him was as strong, and for a similar reason, she realized. She was unsettled. Confused. There had been so many changes in her life, and the job offer had provided a tipping point of sorts. She needed to feel anchored and safe. How strange she would seek that in Gideon's arms.

She didn't have many gut instincts—another hazard of living in her head. But she had learned to trust them when they occurred, and right now her gut was telling her that she wanted to have sex with this man. Hot, hungry sex.

“I want this,” she murmured, still working through the questions.

She studied him, his broad shoulders, the slight tremor in his hands. Her gaze drifted down and she saw his erection straining against his jeans.

Anticipation joined satisfaction. There was no time to get her sweat glands working to tip the scales, so to speak. She would have to be more direct.

She quickly pulled off her T-shirt and dropped it onto the lounge chair beside her. Then she undid her bra and let it fall on top of her shirt.

Gideon’s jaw tightened, but otherwise, he didn’t move. She reached for his hands, took them in her and placed them on her bare breasts.

Perhaps from instinct or perhaps because he couldn’t resist, he cupped her breasts and rubbed his thumbs against her nipples. She hadn’t felt them tighten, but when she glanced down she saw the tips were puckered.

He moved his thumbs again, and the gentle pressure sent pleasure moving all through her. His skin was more tanned against her paleness. His hands large. He moved back and forth against her until she felt her eyelids start to sink closed so she could get lost in how he made her feel.

She drew in a breath. “I’m enjoying everything you’re doing and—”

“Shut up.”

Her eyes popped open, and she saw him smiling.

“Too much conversation?”

“Yes. This is when it’s best to be quiet.”

Relief made her nearly as weak as his hands on her breasts.

“So we’re going to have sex?”

His answer was to haul her against him and thrust his tongue in her mouth. She met him stroke for stroke, wanting every sensation possible, wanting, no, needing, to be intimate with this man. Vulnerable.

As soon as the thought occurred, she felt herself starting to analyze what it meant. She did her best to turn off her analytical brain and focus instead on the feel of his soft T-shirt under her fingers, of his broad shoulders.

He deepened the kiss, then broke free and stepped back. In a matter of seconds, he’d pulled off his shirt and flung it away. His boots and socks followed. As he reached for the belt on his jeans, she undid her own and pushed them, along with her bikini panties, to the deck.

Before she could even admire his nakedness, he was moving past her to one of the lounge chairs. He raised a bar in back, then released it. The chair collapsed into a flat position.

“How clever,” she began, only to find herself being half guided, half carried to the chair. She was placed on the end, in a seated position, then Gideon dropped to his knees.

He buried his hands in her hair and kissed her. His tongue stroked against her lips before dipping inside. She kissed him back, even as she moved her fingers up and down his arms and his back.

He dropped his hands to her breasts. As he began to trail kisses down her neck, he urged her to lie back.

She did as he requested, her body on the cushion, her knees bent, her feet on the wood floor of the deck. As his fingers teased her sensitive nipples, his mouth moved lower and lower, the ultimate destination quite obvious.

He’d done that to her before, she remembered. The other two men hadn’t, but Gideon had given her her first orgasm with his tongue. She shivered slightly as he kissed his way down her belly, pausing to lightly circle the inside of her belly button.

She moved her arms so she could use her fingers to part herself for him. He'd taught her that, as well, she thought, her breathing already increasing.

Her insides clenched as he got closer and closer. She was so swollen. Her clitoris would be completely engorged with blood and extremely sensitive.

He shifted his hands so his palms were flat on her breasts. He massaged her, distracting her for a second. She felt the warmth of his breath, then he flicked the tip of his tongue against her. Just once. She gasped as a jolt of involuntary movement caused her to jump. He chuckled, then did it again.

This time she was prepared and felt herself sinking into sensation. He explored all of her, easing his tongue all the way inside her before returning it to her clit. Once there, he settled into a steady, slow rhythm of back and forth and around, his hands keeping pace on her breasts.

The predictable movements allowed her to focus on what she was feeling instead of anticipating what should happen next. As more and more muscles tensed, as her nerve endings fired more quickly she felt her brain starting to shut down. There was only the sensation. She, who lived in a world of thoughts and ideas, was reduced to simply feeling. It was glorious.

Back and forth, around and around, with each stroke of his tongue, her body began the steady climb to release. She pulsed her hips, an unconscious signal that she wanted more. She was aware of her breathing getting faster and faster. Of small moans.

He moved one of his hands, sliding it down her body before inserting a finger deep inside her and curving up. Scientists argued about the reality of the G-spot, she thought hazily, trying to part her legs more, to press down. Right now she was convinced it existed, and when he rubbed it like that she was

Her orgasm caught her unawares. One second she was tense and ready and the next she was flying. She rode the waves of pleasure, calling out, gasping and begging, screaming maybe. She wasn't sure. She shook and shuddered. One finger became two, and she pushed down, wanting him to fill her.

His tongue stayed steady, allowing her release to go on and on until there was nothing left. This was what it felt like to be boneless, she thought, barely able to open her eyes.

He straightened.

She half raised herself on her elbows and glanced at his large erection. She smiled as she reached for him, guiding him inside her.

He was large enough to stretch her as he pushed in. She wrapped her legs around his hips, reached her hands to his. He grabbed hers. Their fingers laced together. She tried to keep her eyes open, to watch him as he pumped in faster and faster, but she was unable to stay focused. Not with the need growing inside her. Not when she was drawing closer to the edge once again, straining and straining until they came together.

CHAPTER THREE

FELICIA ARRIVED FOR her morning meeting right on time. As she parked by the warehouse that was the new offices for CDS, she found herself unable to stop smiling.

She'd spent the night with Gideon. They'd slept in a tangle of arms and legs in his big bed, then awakened before dawn to make love again. She'd left around five and had driven back to her place to shower and prepare for her day.

Although it was simple biology, what she'd done sounded so illicit. She liked that. Usually she was the boring one. The predictable friend who was always around and rarely had plans. She didn't have sex with men she hadn't seen in years—certainly not outside. At night.

She had a job offer and the aftereffects of the hormone bath that went with a satisfying sexual experience. Right now life was very, very good. Still grinning foolishly, she collected her backpack and walked into the building.

What had once been one big open space had been partitioned into offices, classrooms, locker room and a large workout facility. The plumbing was taking the longest. In addition to the usual toilets and sinks, there were also showers, lockers and a dressing area. Segregated by gender. Angel had foolishly suggested they make the women's locker room smaller, but Felicia had stared him down. Justice and Ford hadn't bothered coming to his defense. Probably because they knew better.

Justice was already there, his large presence seeming to fill the room. He sat at a battered desk he'd picked up at a garage sale a few weeks ago. Their "real" office furniture was on order.

"Hey," he said as she entered, not bothering to look up from his laptop. "Did you file the permits for the shooting range?"

"Yes." Her tone indicated she really meant "Of course," but why state the obvious? "I took them directly to the city officials myself. They'll be processed by the fifteenth."

There was a professional mission statement in the articles of incorporation, but at its heart, CDS was a bodyguard school. It would provide advanced training for those in the industry as well as refresher courses. Ford would be working with corporations who wanted a unique team-building facility, while Angel would be in charge of the actual training. Justice was going to run the place.

In addition, CDS would provide classes for the community. Self-defense mainly with a few gun safety lectures and some hands-on training.

Felicia had been offered any job she wanted with the company, but knew she needed something different. She was ready to be as close to normal as she could get. She wanted to be part of a community, to fall in love, get married and have kids. A common dream, she thought, but one that seemed especially difficult for her to accomplish.

The job Mayor Marsha had offered was a big step in that direction. If only Felicia was brave enough to accept it.

She pulled her own laptop from her backpack and walked over to the desk. She pulled up a second chair and sat opposite Justice. Once the machine booted, she logged on to the internet and began typing.

"The equipment Ford and Angel ordered for the obstacle course will be delivered by the end of the week. The cherry picker is coming next Monday to help with installation of the suspension bridge."

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