



Marry Me at Christmas (Fool's Gold, Book 21)

By Susan Mallery

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Wish upon a Christmas star with New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery's sparkling Fool's Gold romance!

To bridal boutique owner Madeline Krug, organizing a Christmas wedding sounds like a joy—until she finds out she'll be working closely with the gorgeous brother of the bride, movie star Jonny Blaze. How will a small-town girl like her keep from falling for the world's sexiest guy? Especially with mistletoe lurking around every corner!

Jonny came to Fool's Gold looking for normal, not for love. Happily-ever-after only happens in the movies. Still, nothing about this quirky town is quite what he expected, and "ordinary" Madeline is the most extraordinary woman he's ever met. Refreshingly honest, disarmingly sweet. Achingly beautiful.

Planning the perfect wedding leads to candlelit dinners and strolls through snow-covered streets. And Madeline finds Jonny in real life even more captivating than her celebrity crush. But will the action star be brave enough to risk his heart and step into the role of a lifetime?

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Editorial Review

Review

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

"Mallery delivers another engaging romance in magical Fool's Gold."--Kirkus Reviews on Just One Kiss

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

"Mallery infuses her story with eccentricity, gentle humor, and small-town shenanigans..."--Publishers Weekly

"[A] classic blend of lighthearted humor, intense emotional conflict, and a setting so real and appealing readers will want to start scoping out real estate."-Library Journal on Until We Touch

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

"With strong characters, a vivid sense of place and intricate relational dynamics Barefoot Season will hold its own against best-selling women's fiction titles and please fans of mainstream romance as well."-USA TODAY on Barefoot Season

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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"Do THEY KNOW THEY LOOK like pumpkins?"

Madeline Krug appreciated that Rosalind asked the question very softly. One of the first rules of running a successful wedding gown store was to not insult the bride or her wedding party. And while she normally would have mentioned that to her assistant, in this case the question was kind of legitimate.

It wasn't just the very full skirt on the bridesmaids' dresses. A billowing that was oddly, well, pumpkin shaped. It wasn't the colors, which ranged from tangerine to coral to, um, pumpkin. But when those two elements were put together with a pale green crown of leaves and tiny flowers on each of their six heads, the overall effect was just a little...pumpkin.

"The bride told me this is exactly what she wanted," Madeline murmured. "That she's been dreaming about her wedding since she was a little girl and these are the dresses she pictured. She was thrilled we could find them."

Madeline smiled at her assistant. "Every bride has a perfect dress and a vision for what she wants her wedding party to look like. Our job is to find out what that dream is and make it come true."

Rosalind looked doubtful, but nodded, as if taking mental notes.

The fortysomething brunette had been working at Paper Moon for about a month now. With her kids all in middle and high school, she'd wanted to return to the workforce. Madeline needed someone she could depend on and Rosalind came with good references. So far, they were doing well as a team, although Rosalind still found the various bridal idiosyncrasies surprising.

Madeline returned her attention to the wedding party. She double-checked the fit of each dress, confirmed the bride was giddy with happiness, then promised a final pressing before the dresses were picked up the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Because the, um, pumpkin wedding was the Saturday after the holiday.

By three o'clock the bridal party had left. Madeline retreated to her office to finish up some paperwork. After processing invoices, confirming a couple of deliveries and noting when her favorite bridal designer's new summer collection would be available, she leaned back in her chair and allowed herself a rare moment of contentment.

She loved her job. She wasn't saving the world or finding a new source of renewable energy—but in her own small way, she helped people be happy. Brides came in all shapes, sizes and temperaments, but for the most part, she loved each one of them. She loved the look on their faces when they found the right dress. The happy tears were so satisfying.

Sure there was drama, but she could handle a little drama. It kept things interesting. And when the drama was over and the bride emailed her a picture of herself on the big day, well, nothing was sweeter.

She was just plain lucky, she thought. If not in love, then certainly in every other part of her life. Because—

"Hello, Madeline."

Two simple words spoken in a kind voice. That should have been fine. Or even nice. Instead, Madeline stared at the well-dressed woman standing in the doorway of her office and knew that her life was about to change. She couldn't say how or why, but as surely as the sun would rise in the east, when Mayor Marsha Tilson showed up looking slightly expectant, things happened.

"Ma'am," Madeline said, instantly coming to her feet.

Because that was how she'd been raised. You stood when an older person came in the room.

Mayor Marsha had been the mayor of Fool's Gold for longer than Madeline had been alive. She was, in fact, California's longest serving mayor. She was much loved, warm, caring and had a way of knowing things that no one had ever been able to explain. Madeline had always liked her. She found her a little scary, but she liked her.

"Do you have a minute?" the mayor asked, already walking into the small office and taking a seat.

"Of course."

Madeline was a little relieved when Dellina Ridge, Fool's Gold's event planner, followed the mayor into her office and offered a reassuring smile. Dellina was a good friend. If something bad was about to happen, not only would Dellina have warned her but she would have offered moral support and brownies.

"As you know," Mayor Marsha began when they were all seated, "the holidays are a busy time here in town."

Madeline nodded. Fool's Gold loved to celebrate in every way possible. From mid-November until after the first of the year, there was always something going on. Lucky for her, it was an especially slow time at Paper Moon, which meant she got to enjoy everything going on around her.

The rhythm of a bridal shop was different from regular retail. Come January second, when a lot of stores slowed down, she would be juggling newly engaged brides-to-be. Many a proposal would be made on either Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve. But that wasn't why the mayor was here.

Mayor Marsha glanced at Dellina, who scooted to the front of her chair and gave another smile.

"It's me," Dellina admitted, sounding a little rueful. "I'm totally scrambling. The Hendrix family is planning a huge party on New Year's Eve, there are a dozen holiday events and three weddings, and I'm up to my eyebrows in invitations and details. I can't take on one more thing."

Madeline still wasn't sure where this was all going. "If you need me to help with something, I'm happy to," she said slowly. Of course she would be there for her friend. But why wouldn't Dellina have come to her directly? They'd known each other all their lives. Why involve the mayor?

Dellina shifted slightly. "Yes, well, it's more than my usual panicked call to come stuff goodie bags. It's a wedding."

Madeline looked between the two of them. "I don't understand," she admitted.

"There's going to be a wedding the Saturday after Christmas," the mayor said happily. "You know how I love a wedding. This will be a small affair. Right now the guest list is at forty. I suspect it will grow a little, but shouldn't be more than fifty or fifty-five people. There's no location issue—everything will be at the bride's brother's house. The catering is taken care of."

"Ana Raquel is handling that," Dellina added. "She had a cancellation and can fit in the wedding. So it's just the basic details. Dress, invitations, decorations. I know it's a lot to ask..." Her friend shook her head. "I'm sorry. We haven't asked yet, have we?"

Mayor Marsha patted Dellina's hand. "I'll do the asking, dear. Madeline, your town needs you to plan a wedding. Are you up for it?"

"I don't know," Madeline admitted. "I've never done anything like that before. I work with brides and we talk details, but to take a wedding from start to finish, even a small one, would be challenging."

Which was as close to saying no as she was going to get, she thought as the mayor continued to look at her with that steady, supportive *You'll do what I say because I have powers and you've never once refused me anything* look that was both famous and inescapable.

"I have a master list and I'd be happy to help," Dellina added. "I'm sorry to put you in this position."

"Don't apologize," Mayor Marsha said firmly. "I'm to blame. When I spoke with Dellina earlier today and she said she wasn't available, we brainstormed who we could ask. You're the one we both thought of."

Madeline got the subtext of the message. Dellina had been as trapped as she was now. When Mayor Marsha wanted something done, she was unstoppable. Which meant saying no wasn't an option.

Planning a wedding in seven weeks, over the holidays, when she'd never done much more than be a bridesmaid and sell wedding dresses? Were they crazy?

"Sure," she said easily. "I'm in." She frowned as she realized she didn't know anyone who had recently gotten engaged, or even who was planning a holiday wedding. "Oh, who's getting married?"

"Ginger Blaze."

The name meant nothing. "She's not local. Is her fiancé..."

Madeline felt her heart stop. Physically stop. There had been steady beating, then nothing. That was followed by a distinct popping sound in her ears along with panic. Cold, slimy, I-can't-breathe panic.

"Blaze," she whispered. Quite the trick what with her heart stopped and her lungs not working. "Blaze as in *Jonny Blaze*?"

Mayor Marsha nodded. "Ginger is his younger sister. I believe she lives in San Francisco. She's in a PhD program. Something with biology or genetics. Mr. Blaze wasn't clear. However, he asked me to help him find someone to plan the wedding with him. That's when I approached Dellina. You know the rest, my dear."

Jonny Blaze? The tall, handsome action-movie star who had recently moved to a ranch outside of town? The man who had a body like a god and a smile that reduced perfectly intelligent, articulate women to puddles? Jonny Blaze, who was, unbeknownst to him, of course, her movie-star boyfriend?

No. She couldn't. She had a mad crush on him. Every time she'd seen him in town, she'd stared like an idiot. She'd babbled and he hadn't been closer than twenty-five feet. She couldn't imagine being next to him, let alone working with him.

I can't. There. She'd said it. Or at least thought it. Which was practically the same thing. She couldn't.

"From what I can tell, Mr. Blaze is a very nice man," the mayor was saying. "He wants to fit in. Be a part of the community. As you know, we take the well-being of our citizens very seriously. Mr. Blaze needs a refuge from the trappings of his career and we can provide that. The quiet, everyday kind of life he craves."

"The wedding is going to be close friends and family," Dellina added. "It's small and intimate. I swear, if I had an extra second, I'd take it on."

"You're already doing too much," Madeline said, pleased she could speak. "I know you. You're running in forty-five directions."

If it were anyone else, she thought frantically. But it wasn't and saying no had never been an option.

She drew in a breath and told herself she was strong. She was mature. At the very least, she could keep from

squealing in his presence.

"I'm happy to help," she said.

"Excellent." Mayor Marsha nodded. "You're meeting with him in an hour."

Of course she was, Madeline thought, not even surprised. Because that was how the mayor got things done. A well-planned ambush followed by a lack of time to come to one's senses.

An hour. Not nearly enough time to lose five pounds, have a makeover and become glamorous and sophisticated. Why, oh, why hadn't she learned French? Or aikido? Anything that would make her interesting for Jonny Blaze? She briefly wondered if aikido was the martial arts training or the dog breed, then sighed. Too late to worry about that now. As it was, she was going to be stuck being herself.

"I'm going to tell him I don't have any experience with planning a wedding," she said. "I need to be honest about that."

The mayor smiled. "I would expect no less, my dear."

Users Review

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