



Almost Perfect (Fool's Gold, Book 2)

By Susan Mallery

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Now Liz must return to town and face the man who doesn't know of their son's existence. And this time she won't have the option of making a quick getaway. Ethan and Liz can't deny their passionate attraction, even after all these years. But will their desire be enough to spark a second chance at love?

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Editorial Review

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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Liz Sutton had always known the past would come back and bite her in the butt—she just hadn't known it was going to happen today.

Her morning had started normally enough, with getting her son on the bus to school, then going down the hall to her home office, where she wrote five fairly decent pages before stopping for some serious pacing, followed by deleting three of the last five pages. She was figuring out who to murder in the first chapter of her new book, not to mention how he or she would be murdered. Was decapitation just too predictable? Luckily her assistant knocked on her door, sparing her from making a decision.

"Sorry to interrupt," Peggy said, frowning slightly as she held out a piece of paper. "But I thought you'd want to read this."

Liz took the single sheet. It was an e-mail, sent to her Web site. There was a link there for fans to get in touch with her. Peggy handled most of the e-mails, but every now and then she found something she didn't know what to do with.

"A crazed stalker type?" Liz asked, pathetically grateful for the interruption. When the writing was slow, even a death threat was more thrilling than the current work in progress.

"Not exactly. She says she's your niece."

Niece?

Liz scanned the sheet.

Dear Aunt Liz,

My name is Melissa Sutton. My dad is your brother Roy. I'm fourteen years old and my sister Abby is eleven. A few months ago, our dad went to prison. His new wife, our stepmom, said she would take care of us, but she changed her mind and left. I thought Abby and me would be fine. I'm really mature for my age. My teachers say that all the time.

She's been gone a while now and I'm really scared. I haven't told Abby because she's still a kid, but I don't

know if we can make it. I don't want to tell Dad what happened because he really liked Bettina and he'll be sad she didn't wait for him.

So I thought maybe you could help. I know we haven't met before, but I've read all your books and I really like them.

Hope to hear from you soon. Your niece, Melissa.

P.S. I'm using the computer at the library, so you can't e-mail me back. But here's our phone number. Even though the lights are off, the phone still works at home.

P.P.S. We're living in your old house in Fool's Gold.

Liz read the e-mail a second time, trying to get the words to make sense. Roy was back in Fool's Gold. Or at least he had been, before heading off to prison.

She hadn't seen her brother in nearly eighteen years. He was a lot older and had left the summer she'd turned twelve. She'd never heard from him again. Apparently he'd married a couple of times and had kids. Daughters. Girls who were living alone in a house that had been run-down and disgusting twelve years ago. She doubted there had been many improvements since.

Questions tumbled through her brain. Questions about her brother and why he'd returned to Fool's Gold after being gone so long. Why he was in prison and what on earth was she supposed to do with two nieces she'd never met?

She glanced at her watch. It was barely eleven. As it was Tyler's last day before summer vacation, he was getting out at twelve-thirty. If she got the car packed in time, they could leave directly from his school and be in Fool's Gold in about four hours.

"I need to deal with this," Liz told her assistant, as she wrote an address on a piece of paper. "Call the electric company in Fool's Gold and get the power turned back on. They should take a credit card for payment. Do the same with the other utilities. I'll call the girls and let them know I'm coming."

"Are they really your nieces?" Peggy asked.

"I guess. I haven't seen my brother since I was their age, but I can't let them stay there alone." She shook her head, determining what else had to be done. Her next book wouldn't be published until the fall, so she didn't have to worry about publicity and book tours. She could work on her new story anywhere she had her laptop. At least that was the theory.

"I don't know how long we'll be gone," she continued. "I'm guessing it will take a couple of weeks to get everything straightened out."

Peggy stared at her. "Just like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Aren't you going to think about it? Most people would hesitate. You don't even know these girls."

True, Liz thought. But what choice did she have? "They're kids, by themselves, and they're family. I have to do something."

"Which is just like you," Peggy said. "You leap in and do what you think is right which is admirable. But not always smart."

"Someone has to take care of this." Besides, she'd grown up having to take care of things. Her mother hadn't bothered. "With luck, I won't be gone too long."

"Don't worry either way. I can handle things here."

Liz forced a smile. "I know you can. I'm going to pack and then get Tyler. We'll drive to Fool's Gold today."

"Maybe it will be nice to go home."

Liz did her best to look normal. "Sure. Okay, I'll call the girls."

She waited until Peggy left before picking up the phone. She dialed the familiar number, then let it ring eight times before hanging up. No answer. Of course, it was a weekday. The girls were probably still in school. She would try again later, from her cell.

She had to pack for herself and her son, phone a few friends and let them know she would be gone for a couple weeks, e-mail her editor and agent to tell them the same. Logistics, she thought as she collected the notes she'd made on her current novel. She was good at logistics. The ability to plan and deal with problems was part of the reason she enjoyed writing her detective mystery series. She'd always been good at the work. It was the rest of life that caused her to stumble time after time.

"Introspection later," she murmured aloud. "Action now."

She powered off her laptop, then disconnected it from the docking station. After collecting her notes, a few pens, pads of paper and her address book, she went down the hall to her bedroom.

A little over an hour later, she'd packed what she hoped was enough, loaded the car and gone over everything with Peggy. Her assistant would take care of the house and make sure the bills were paid.

"Are you all right?" Peggy asked.

"Sure. Great. Why?"

Peggy, a forty-something former executive assistant, frowned. "Just checking. This is a lot to take in." She hesitated. "You know if there's no one else to take care of the girls..."

Liz might suddenly be responsible for two nieces she'd never met. "I know. I'll deal with that when I have more information."

"Mac and I went to Fool's Gold on our honeymoon. Back when I thought marriage was a good thing. I didn't know you were from there."

No one did, Liz thought grimly. She found life easier when she didn't talk about her past. "I left right after

high school and moved here. San Francisco is my home now."

Peggy smiled at her. "If you need anything, call me."

"I will."

Liz went downstairs to the single car garage and got into her Lexus. She'd packed four suitcases, a couple boxes with Tyler's favorite movies, his Xbox and a handful of books. She went over the inventory because that was easier than thinking about what she was doing. Going back to the one place she never wanted to be. The town where she'd grown up.

For a second she wondered if she really *had* to do this. Go rescue a couple kids she'd never met. Then she shook off the thought. Right now there wasn't anyone else. She couldn't leave the two girls on their own. She would deal with the problem, get it resolved and return to her life. Staying was not an option.

Midday traffic was relatively light and she made it to Tyler's school in about twenty minutes. He was talking to his friends, probably making plans for hanging out. When he saw her small SUV, he waved and hurried over.

"Jason says his family's for sure going to Disneyland in August and they're gonna call and talk to you about me going with them," he said as he climbed into the passenger seat.

"Hello to you, too," she greeted with a smile.

He grinned. "Hi, Mom. How was your day?"

"Interesting."

"Great. Now can we talk about Disneyland?"

Her son was the brightest and best part of her life, she thought as she stared into his dark brown eyes. He had her smile, but everything else came from his father. As if her DNA hadn't been strong enough to overpower his.

Tyler was smart, funny, warm and caring. He had dozens of friends, an easygoing disposition and plans to be an architect when he grew up. She knew that everyone said the early teen years were the worst with boys. That by thirteen or fourteen, he would be making her life hell. But that was a problem for another time. Today, Tyler was her world.

A world that had just been shifted off its axis and was tumbling freely through space.

"Disneyland sounds like fun," she agreed. "I'll talk to Jason's mom. If they want to take you and you want to go, then we'll arrange it."

His grin widened. Then he glanced toward the back of the vehicle.

"Whoa, are we going somewhere? Road trip?"

She pulled into traffic, heading toward I-80. She would take it east, until she turned off to drive into Fool's

Gold.

"Sort of," she said and tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

Over the years, she'd done her best not to lie to her son. Not about her past or his father. For the most part, she'd simply told him there were questions she wouldn't answer. At four or five, he'd been easily distracted. At eight, he'd been determined to find out the truth. Now he asked less, probably because he knew he couldn't wear her down. But she knew he wondered.

"I got an e-mail today," she announced. "You remember I told you that I have a brother?"

"Uh-huh. Roy. We don't ever see him."

"I know. He's a lot older and he left when I was twelve. I woke up one morning and he was gone. I never saw him again."

She still remembered her mother's sobs, made thicker and louder by the alcohol lingering in her system. From that moment on, her mother spent her life waiting for Roy to return. Nothing else had mattered, certainly not Liz.

Liz had left town shortly after graduating high school. She'd phoned home once, a few weeks later, saying she thought she should check in and tell her mother where she was.

"Don't bother calling again," had been the woman's only response before hanging up the phone.

"So Uncle Roy e-mailed you?"

"Not exactly." Liz didn't know how much to reveal. Telling the truth was one thing, but sharing details was another. "He's, um, in some trouble and I have to help. He has two girls. Your cousins. Melissa is fourteen and Abby is your age."

"I have cousins? You didn't tell me about cousins."

"I didn't know about them until today."

"But they're family."

True enough, she thought. And the word *family* implied caring and connection. Maybe in most places, but not in the Sutton household. At least not until Liz had had Tyler. She'd done everything she could think of to break the cycle of neglect. She'd been determined to be a warm, loving mother, to offer her child a safe haven.

"I didn't know where Roy was," she said. "He never got in touch with me after he left." For six years, she'd waited, hoping he would come get her and take her away. Until he'd walked out, he'd always taken care of her. Been a buffer between her and her mother. Protected her from the worst of it.

By the time she'd been old enough to go looking, she told herself she no longer cared.

"Do they know we're coming?" Tyler asked. "Do they know about me?"

"Not yet, but they will. We're going to stay with them for a couple of weeks." She didn't mention the fact that Roy was in prison. Time enough for that later. Nor did she discuss the possibility of the girls living with them permanently. Maybe other family could take care of them.

"I grew up in a small town called Fool's Gold," she said. "It's in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains."

"Do they get snow?" he asked eagerly. Because at age eleven, seeing snow was about the best it could be.

She laughed. "Probably not in June, but yes, they get snow. There's lots to do there. Hiking, swimming. There's a river and a lake."

"We could go camping."

She made a noncommittal noise in her throat, mostly because the thought of camping ranked right up there with being awake during open-heart surgery. Not even thinking about it was pleasant. But then she wasn't an eleven-year-old boy. She hadn't been fascinated by worms and dirt and play cars and plastic guns, either.

More traits she knew he got from his father. Which was another problem. Not the traits, the man himself. Odds were Ethan was still in Fool's Gold. The one place he'd asked her not to be. He'd made it clear he didn't want her or his kid around.

Well, he was just going to have to get over it, she told herself. This was an emergency. She wouldn't make a big deal about Tyler being in town and she certainly wouldn't tell her son about his father. Not when Ethan had rejected them both so completely.

She would deal with the girls and get out as quickly as possible.

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Robert Lindsey:

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