



Dr. Forget-Me-Not (Matchmaking Mamas)

By Marie Ferrarella

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DIAGNOSIS: TRUE LOVE!

Filling the lives of orphaned kids with hope is what gives meaning to Melanie McAdams's own life. So what if she's a little lonely? That doesn't mean she's ready to fly into the arms of Mitchell Stewart, the shelter's handsome new volunteer. Or that her totally irrational attraction to the dedicated doctor means she's ready to put the pain of the past behind her.

Everyone needs dreams, including the compassionate teacher who thinks staying single is a hedge against heartbreak. But Melanie can't deny the powerful chemistry not even science can explain. And with the help of some special matchmakers, Mitchell plans to take their we-won't-call-it-a-romance to the next level...which is beginning to look a lot like love.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

This USA TODAY bestselling and RITA ® Award-winning author has written more than two hundred books for Harlequin Books and Silhouette Books, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.

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She was doing her best to get lost in other people's lives.

Melanie McAdams knew she should be grateful for the fact that she was in a position to help them—which was what she was doing here at the Bedford Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter where single mothers could come with their children and remain as long as needed. The women were encouraged to attempt to stitch together a better life for themselves and their children. Melanie had been volunteering here for almost three years now—and when, nine months ago, her own life had suddenly fallen apart, she'd taken a leave from her job and volunteered at the shelter full-time.

But today, nothing seemed to be working. Today, trying to make a difference in these people's lives wasn't enough to keep the dark thoughts from the past from infiltrating her mind and haunting her.

Because today was nine months to the day when the somber black car had come down her street and stopped in front of her house—the house she and Jeremy had planned to share. Nine months to the day when she'd opened her front door to find a chaplain and army lieutenant John Walters standing on her doorstep, coming to solemnly tell her that her whole world had just been blown up.

Coming to tell her that Jeremy Williams, her high school sweetheart, her fiancé, her *world*, wasn't coming back to her.

Ever.

No matter how good she was, no matter how hard she prayed, he wasn't coming back. Except in a coffin.

Melanie gave up trying to stack the children's books on the side table in one of the shelter's two common rooms. They just kept sliding and falling on the floor.

When did it stop? Melanie silently demanded. When did it stop hurting like this? When did the pain fade into the background instead of being the first thing she was aware of every morning and the last thing that she was aware of every night? When did it stop chewing bits and pieces out of her every day?

Four days, she thought now. Four days, that was how long Jeremy had had left. Four days and he would have been out of harm's way once and for all. His tour of duty would have been over.

Four days and he would have been back in her arms, back in her life, taking vows and marrying her.

But it might as well have been four hundred years. It hadn't happened.

Wasn't going to happen.

Because Jeremy was now in a cold grave instead of her warm bed.

"Are you okay, Miss Melody?" the small, high-pitched voice asked.

Trying to collect herself as best she could, Melanie turned around to look down into the face of the little girl who had asked the question. The small, concerned face and older-than-her-years green eyes belonged to April O'Neill, a beautiful, bright five-year-old who, along with her seven-year-old brother, Jimmy, and her mother, Brenda, had been here at the shelter for a little over a month. Prior to that, they had been living on the streets in a nearby city for longer than their mother had been willing to admit.

Initially, when April had first made the mistake and called her Melody, Melanie had made an attempt to correct her. But after three more attempts, all without success, she'd given up.

She'd grown to like the name April called her and had more than a little affection for the small family who had been through so much through no real fault of their own. It was an all too familiar story. A widow, Brenda had lost her job and, after failing to pay the rent for two months, she and her children had been evicted.

With no husband in the picture and no family anywhere to speak of, the street became their home until a police officer took pity on them, loaded them into the back of his squad car and drove them over to the shelter.

Melanie told herself to focus on their problems and the problems of the other homeless women and single mothers who were under the shelter's roof. Their situations were fixable, hers was not.

Melanie forced herself to smile at April. "I'm fine, honey."

April appeared unconvinced. Her small face puckered up, as if she was trying to reconcile two different thoughts. "But your eye is leaking, like Mama's does sometimes when she's thinking sad thoughts, or about Daddy."

"Dust," Melanie told her, saying the first thing that occurred to her. "There's dust in the air and I've got allergies. It makes my eyes...leak sometimes," she said, using April's word for it and hoping that would be enough for the little girl.

April was sharper than she'd been at her age, Melanie discovered.

"Oh. You can take a pill," the little girl advised her. "The lady on TV says you can take a pill to make your aller-gee go away," she concluded solemnly, carefully pronouncing the all-important word.

April made her smile despite the heaviness she felt on her chest. Melanie slipped her arm around the very small shoulders, giving the little girl a quick hug.

"I'll have to try that," she promised. "Now, why did you come looking for me?" she asked, diverting the conversation away from her and back to April.

April's expression became even more solemn as she stated the reason for her search. "Mama says that

Jimmy's sick again."

Melanie did a quick calculation in her head. That made three times in the past six weeks. There was no doubt about it. Jimmy O'Neill was a sickly boy. His time on the street had done nothing to improve that.

"Same thing?" she asked April.

The blond head bobbed up and down with alacrity. "He's coughing and sneezing and Mama says he shouldn't be around other kids or they'll get sick, too."

"Smart lady," Melanie agreed.

As she started to walk to the communal quarters that the women and their children all shared, April slipped her hand through hers. The small fingers tightened around hers as if she was silently taking on the role of guide despite the fact that she and her family had only been at the shelter a short time.

"I think Jimmy needs a doctor," April confided, her eyes meeting Melanie's.

"Even smarter lady," Melanie commented under her breath.

The comment might have been quiet, but April had heard her and went on talking as if they were two equals, having a conversation. "But we don't have any money and Jimmy feels too sick to go to the hospital place. Besides, Mama doesn't like asking for free stuff," April confided solemnly.

Melanie nodded. "Your mama's got pride," she told the little girl. "But sometimes, people have to forget about their pride if it means trying to help someone they love."

April eyed her knowingly. "You mean like Jimmy?"

"Exactly like Jimmy."

Turning a corner, she pushed open the oversize door that led into one of the three large communal rooms that accommodated as many families as could be fit into it without violating any of the fire department's safety regulations. Polly, the woman who ran the shelter, referred to the rooms as dorms, attempting to create a more positive image for the women who found themselves staying here.

The room that April had brought her to was largely empty except for the very worried-looking, small, dark-haired woman sitting on the bed all the way over in the corner. The object of her concern was the rather fragile-looking red-haired little boy sitting up and leaning against her.

The boy was coughing. It was the kind of cough that fed on itself, growing a little worse with each pass and giving no sign of letting up unless some kind of action was taken. Sometimes, it took something as minor as a drink of water to alleviate the cough, other times, prescription cough medicine was called for.

Melanie gave the simplest remedy a try first.

Looking down at the little girl who was still holding her hand, she said, "April, why don't you go to the kitchen and ask Miss Theresa to give you a glass of water for your brother?"

April, eager to help, uncoupled herself from Melanie's hand and immediately ran off to the kitchen.

As April took off, Melanie turned her attention to Jimmy's mother. "He really should see a doctor," she gently suggested.

Worn and tired way beyond her years, Brenda O'Neill raised her head proudly and replied, "We'll manage, thank you. It's not the first time he's had this cough and it won't be the last," she said with assurance. "It comes and goes. Some children are like that."

"True," Melanie agreed. She wasn't here to argue, just to comfort. "But it would be better if it went—permanently." She knew the woman was proud, but she'd meant what she'd said to April. Sometimes pride needed to take a backseat to doing what was best for someone you loved. "Look, I know that money's a problem, Brenda." She thought of the newly erected, state-of-the-art hospital that was less than seven miles away from the shelter. "I'll pay for the visit."

The expression on Jimmy's mother's face was defiant and Melanie could see the woman withdrawing and closing herself off.

"He'll be all right," Brenda insisted. "Kids get sick all the time."

Melanie sighed. She couldn't exactly kidnap the boy and whisk him off to the ER, not without his mother's express consent. "Can't argue with that," Melanie agreed.

"I brought water," April announced, returning. "And Miss Theresa, too." She glanced over her shoulder as if to make sure that the woman was still behind her. "She was afraid I'd spill it, but I wouldn't," she told Melanie in what the little girl thought passed for a whisper. It didn't.

Theresa Manetti gave the glass of water to Jimmy. "There you go. Maybe this'll help." She smiled at the boy. "And if it doesn't, I might have something else that will."

Brenda looked at the older woman and she squared her shoulders. "I've already had this discussion with that lady," she waved her hand at Melanie. "We can't afford a doctor. Jimmy'll be fine in a couple of days," she insisted, perhaps just a little too strongly, as if trying to convince herself as well as the woman she was talking to.

Theresa nodded. A mother of two herself, she fully sympathized with what Jimmy's mother was going through. But she didn't volunteer her time, her crew and the meals she personally prepared before coming here just to stand idly by if there was something she could do. Luckily, after her conversation with Mai-zie yesterday, there was. It was also, hopefully, killing two birds with one stone—or, as she preferred thinking of it, spreading as much good as possible.

"Good to know, dear," she said to Brenda, patting the woman's shoulder. "But maybe you might want to have Dr. Mitch take a look at him anyway."

"Dr. Mitch?" Melanie asked. This was the first reference she'd heard to that name. Was the volunteer chef referring to a personal physician she intended to call?

"Sorry, that's what my friend calls him," Theresa apologized. "His full name is Dr. Mitchell Stewart and he's a general surgeon associated with Bedford Memorial Hospital—right down the road," she added for Brenda's

benefit. "He's been doing rather well these past couple of years and according to mutual sources, he wants to give a little back to the community. When I told Polly about it," she said, referring to Polly French, the director of the shelter, "she immediately placed a call to his office and asked him to volunteer a few hours here whenever he could." She moved aside the hair that was hanging in April's eyes, fondly remembering when she used to do the same thing with her own daughter. "He'll be here tomorrow. I'm spreading the word."

Brenda still looked somewhat suspicious of the whole thing. "We don't need any charity."

"Seems to me that it'll be you being charitable to him," Theresa pointed out diplomatically. "If the man wants to do something good, I say let him." Theresa turned her attention to Jimmy who had mercifully stopped coughing, at least for now. "What about you, Jimmy? What d'you say?"

Jimmy looked up at her with hesitant, watery eyes. "He won't stick me with a needle, will he?"

"I don't think he's planning on that," Theresa replied honestly. "He just wants to do what's best for you."

"Then okay," the boy replied, then qualified one more time, "as long as he doesn't stick me."

Theresa smiled at Brenda. "Born negotiator, that one. Sounds a lot like my son did at that age. He's a lawyer now," Theresa added proudly. "Who knows, yours might become one, too."

The hopeless look on Brenda's face said she didn't agree, but wasn't up to arguing the point.

Theresa gently squeezed the woman's shoulder. "It'll get better, dear. Even when you feel like you've hit bottom and there's no way back up to the surface, it'll get better," Theresa promised.

For her part, Theresa was remembering how she'd felt when her husband had died suddenly of a heart attack. At first, she had been convinced that she couldn't even go on breathing—but she had. She not only went on breathing, but she'd gone on to form and run a successful catering business. Life was nothing if not full of possibilities—as long as you left yourself open to them, Theresa thought.

The last part of her sentence was directed more toward Melanie than to the young mother she was initially addressing.

"I'd better get back to getting dinner set up," Theresa said, beginning to walk away.

Melanie followed in her wake. "Are you really getting a doctor to come to the shelter?" she asked.

It was hard for her to believe and harder for her to contain her excitement. This was just what some of the children—not to mention some of the women—needed, to be examined by a real doctor.

"Not me, personally," she told Melanie, "but I have a friend who has a friend—the upshot is, yes, there is a doctor coming here tomorrow."

"Photo op?" Melanie guessed. This was the Golden State and a lot of things were done here for more than a straightforward reason. It seemed like everyone thrived on publicity for one reason or another. "Don't get me wrong," she said quickly, "some of these people really need to be seen by a doctor, but if this is just some kind of publicity stunt so that some doctor can drum up goodwill and get people to come to his state-of-the-

art new clinic, or buy his new skin cream, or whatever, I don't want to see Brenda and her son being used."

Sympathy flooded Theresa's eyes. She had to restrain herself to keep from hugging Melanie. "Oh honey, what happened to you to make you so suspicious and defensive?"

She was *not* about to talk about Jeremy, or any other part of her life. Besides, that had nothing to do with this.

"This isn't about me," Melanie retorted, then caught hold of her temper. This wasn't like her. She was going to have watch that. "This is about them." She waved her hand toward where they had left Brenda and her children. "I don't want them being used."

"They won't be," Theresa assured her kindly. "This doctor really does see the need to give back a little to the community." That was the story Maizie and the doctor's mother, Charlotte, had told her they'd agreed upon. "He's a very decent sort," she added.

Melanie looked at her, confused. "I thought you said you didn't know him."

"I don't," Theresa readily admitted. "But I know the woman who knows his mother and Maizie would never recommend anyone—even a doctor—who was just out for himself." Theresa paused for a moment as little things began to fall into place in her mind. She had the perfect approach, she thought suddenly, pleased with herself.

"Dr. Mitch is a little...*stiff*, I hear, for lack of a better word. I hate to ask, but maybe you can stick around a little longer, act as a guide his first day here. Show him the ropes."

Melanie would have thought that Polly, the director who was bringing him on board, would be much better suited for the job than she was. "I don't know anything about medicine."

"No, but you know people," Theresa was quick to point out, playing up Melanie's strengths, "and the ones around here seem to trust you a lot."

Melanie shrugged. She didn't know if that was exactly accurate. She was just a familiar face for them. "They're just desperate..." she allowed, not wanting to take any undue credit.

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