

A woman with red hair styled in a bun, wearing a red and white lace dress and a pearl necklace, is shown from the chest up, looking upwards. The background is a lush garden with a gazebo and a stone path.

# MARRYING *the* MATCHMAKER

A SHANAHAN MATCH

Book 4

Jody Hedlund

“Jody Hedlund’s novels are a joy to read.”

—ELIZABETH CAMDEN, RITA and Christy Award-winning author

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*Book 4*

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*the*  
MATCHMAKER

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# 1

**ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI**

**JULY 1849**

She'd done it. She'd finally sold a story.

Trying to remain as composed as possible, Zaira Shanahan stepped out onto Seventh Street and closed the door of the newspaper office behind her. She only managed two strides before she clasped her hands together and released a squeal of delight.

Her dreams were coming true. She was an official author.

Well, her pseudonym, K. S. Flanders, was the author . . . which didn't bother Zaira too much. The fake name was just a technicality. All that mattered was that she was being published.

Thankfully, Mr. Knapp hadn't pressed her to reveal more about who K. S. Flanders really was and had accepted that the fellow was a friend who wished to remain anonymous. If the newspaper owner had suspected Zaira was K. S. Flanders, he hadn't said anything when he'd offered her a weekly column. Maybe he'd decided people would be more willing to

read episodes from an unknown man than from a nineteen-year-old woman, especially the daughter of one of St. Louis's most prominent families.

Whatever the case, Zaira wasn't complaining.

"A weekly column." She couldn't keep a wide smile from blossoming. "Just think, by Sunday all of St. Louis and beyond will be reading my story."

Oh, sweet saints. Her stomach flipped like a steamboat paddle wheel. She had four days to write and deliver the next installment. Sure, she could use some of what she'd already written. Mr. Knapp had mostly liked it. But he'd given her a short list of edits to pass along to K. S. Flanders—edits that included adding more intrigue to leave readers anticipating the next segment. He'd also requested that the feelings between the heroine and her love interest be more realistic and contain more depth.

He'd agreed to publish two chapters. After that, he would gauge the public's response before approving more. It went without saying that if the story wasn't well received, K. S. Flanders would have a short publishing career. But if the two segments got good reviews, then she'd be able to keep on publishing in the weekly column.

She took several more rapid steps away from the *Daily Republican* office—which was housed in a temporary building since the old one had been destroyed in the fire that had ravaged St. Louis only a few months ago in May. As she caught her reflection in the window of the law office next door, she halted again and admired the young woman she was becoming.

She, the middle Shanahan child, who often got lost in the crowd of her five siblings, was growing up and doing

something with her life, something she loved, something that gave her purpose.

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. The fashionable straw bonnet with the wide brim framed her distinct, Shanahan heart-shaped face with high cheekbones and a dimple on her chin. Even though she'd done her best to tame her long, curly red hair into a chignon, the humidity of the hot July day had teased some shorter strands into escaping, so she looked less elegant than she'd hoped.

The summery green of the ribbon on her hat was the same shade of velvet trimming her gown, a romantic color that matched her eyes and also made her skin and hair come to life. Not only that, but the gown was flattering to her figure and made her appear older and more womanly.

She released a happy sigh, gave her petite frame a nod of approval, then turned away from her reflection. As she did so, she collided with a man hurrying down the boardwalk from the opposite direction.

"I beg your pardon." The fellow reached out to steady her. As his hand circled her forearm, he froze.

She shifted and found herself facing Bellamy McKenna, the Irish matchmaker. His easy smile disappeared and was replaced by a scowl, and his dark brown eyes narrowed beneath his tweed flatcap.

It didn't matter one iota that Bellamy was peering at her as though he'd just had a run-in with a dirty rat. With his dark hair, tanned skin, and chiseled features, he was still the most gorgeous man in St. Louis, and nothing could mar his utter beauty, not even his obvious irritation.

As her sister had always said, Bellamy was a heart-stopper and looked more Italian than Irish. While that was

an accurate description, Zaira likened Bellamy to a Celtic warrior from the old myths. He was strong and full of valor and unwilling to back down from a challenge. At the same time, he was charming and witty and savvy with a bit of enigma, a puzzle that needed solving.

Every single Irishwoman in St. Louis wanted to be the one to *solve* Bellamy . . . including Zaira. There was no sense in denying it. Doing so would be like denying that the stars came out at night.

The trouble was that Bellamy was not attracted to her. Not even a tiny bit. In fact, he seemed to dislike her more every time he saw her.

She had a feeling his contempt was because she knew about his little—or perhaps not-so-little—secret. And he wasn't keen on her bringing it up once in a while.

Regardless, she enjoyed teasing him and didn't intend to stop. It made life more interesting, and she was all about making life interesting, since more drama meant more fodder for her stories.

“Well, well, well.” She gave him another once-over. Usually, he wore black trousers with a white dress shirt and black vest. But today he had on a matching suit coat that lent him the air of a gentleman. “If it isn't Mr. W. B. M. himself.”

Bellamy glanced quickly around the nearly deserted street. For midday, the quiet was eerie without the usual carts and drays and wagons rumbling by. Only a handful of men loitered in front of a barbershop a few buildings away, talking together in hushed tones as if they were at a funeral.

Maybe they were. The city seemed to be dying more every day that the cholera epidemic lingered. The death toll last week had risen to over seven hundred people. And if her par-

ents knew she'd ventured downtown into the danger, they'd lock her in her room at their country home, Oakland, and never let her out.

Bellamy's eyes turned almost black as his gaze returned to her. "You shouldn't be here."

"Afraid I'll tell everyone your secret?"

"You should be afraid I'll be telling everyone yours." His voice was low.

Whenever she talked with Bellamy, her blood hummed with an energy she loved. "What exactly do you think my secret is?"

"You know that I know."

She wasn't sure if he really knew about her publishing efforts or if he was bluffing. Either way, she suspected he wouldn't say anything to her parents any more than she'd say something to Oscar.

She nodded at the canvas he was holding, hidden behind brown paper. "Which one do you have there? The field of wildflowers?"

That had been her favorite of the paintings she'd seen in his studio in the shed.

Bellamy's eyes only narrowed on her all the more. "Go home and stand there."

The first time she'd noticed him coming out of Templeton & Evans Gallery back in the spring, she'd been surprised to say the least. She hadn't expected a man like Bellamy to be interested in art. But he'd most definitely been carrying a canvas, although it had been covered and she hadn't been able to see what it entailed.

Secretly, she'd followed him to the shed behind Oscar's Pub, where he'd stowed the canvas away. When he'd gone

into the pub, she'd snuck into the shed and investigated long enough to discover not just that canvas but others—incredibly beautiful paintings of landscapes around St. Louis. Each of them had the initials W. B. M. in the corner.

All she'd needed to do was return to Templeton & Evans to find several more of those paintings with the same initials. They'd been for sale, and the price tags on them hadn't been cheap.

A few weeks later when she'd been trying to sell another one of her stories, she'd seen Bellamy coming out of a different art gallery, and her curiosity had gotten the best of her. She'd gone right up to him and asked him if he was an artist with the name W. B. M.

Instead of staying calm and unruffled like he usually did, he'd been flustered and defensive. His reaction had given her the answer she'd been looking for—that Bellamy McKenna was a very talented artist.

“You need to nip along, Zaira,” Bellamy said. “The city isn't safe.”

“Aw-w-w.” Zaira cocked her head and gave him what she hoped was her most flirtatious look. “It's so nice to know you care about me, Bellamy. I feel so special.”

He scoffed, his eyes now flashing with danger—a danger that invaded her and marched into her veins.

Similar to previous interactions with Bellamy, she didn't understand the emotions he brought to life in her, but she liked the excitement and thrill of their nearness and their conversations.

“Don't be daft.” He leaned in farther, his face only inches from hers, his gaze riveted to her mouth. “You know you're just a little lass playing grown-up.”

Something in the way he was studying her mouth sent a sizzle through her, one that scorched her insides and made her inhale sharply.

At the quick rise of her chest, Bellamy's attention dropped to her bust. The style of her summer gown was cut low, leaving the swell of her chest showing above the lacy edge of her bodice. His gaze seemed to reach out and caress her skin, and she drew in another breath, this one more pronounced than the last.

Was this what desire truly felt like?

She'd tried to write about it realistically. But maybe it was impossible to portray something she'd never experienced firsthand. Did she need to facilitate a relationship with someone like Bellamy so she could experience more depth of emotion the way Mr. Knapp had suggested? Maybe she could have her first kiss? For research purposes?

She wouldn't mind making Bellamy her subject. Her thoughts spun with all the possibilities even as her gaze snagged on Bellamy's mouth. With such a handsome mouth—one with a ready grin—he was probably a very good kisser.

“Stop, Zaira,” he growled.

“Stop what?”

“Stop flirting with me every time you see me.”

She took a rapid step back, his words like a splash of cold water against her overheated body. “I'm not flirting.”

“Oh aye. It's easy to see that you like me.” His voice held too much swagger. “But nothing will ever happen between us.”

How was it that Bellamy could read people so well? Almost as if he could get into their minds—her mind—and see every single thought.

It was slightly mortifying. But thankfully she didn't embarrass easily. Instead, she forced herself to smile brightly. "I didn't expect anything to *happen*, Bellamy. But since you brought it up, maybe that's what you're hoping for."

He released another scoff. "Ach, now I understand why there's talk of your da coming to me soon to find you a match."

She hadn't heard that talk. But with Kiernan now happily married to Alannah, maybe her da was ready to start the matchmaking process for the next of his children. If so, she'd have to find a way to dissuade him and buy herself more time.

"You tell them I'm too young for a match." Her smile faded. "I'd like to wait until I'm at least twenty-one." Even if her mam had been younger than her—only eighteen—when she'd married Da, surely there was no hurry.

Bellamy shrugged and finally took a step away from her.

Without his presence overwhelming her, she allowed herself a full breath.

"It's not my job to question *when* a person gets married." Bellamy carefully adjusted the canvas he was carrying. "'Tis only my job to question *who* a person marries."

She arched a brow. "Seems like you're having a hard time with even that lately."

He arched his brow back.

"The week of finding Deirdre Whitcomb a match is coming to a close." She knew about Senator Whitcomb's visit to Bellamy and the weeklong deadline for finding a match for his daughter. Everyone in St. Louis and the surrounding countryside had heard about the challenge. No one understood exactly why the match was so important. Some

speculation abounded that a much older politician wanted to marry Deirdre and Senator Whitcomb couldn't turn the fellow down without ruining his political career.

Bellamy blew out a tense breath that told Zaira the young matchmaker hadn't yet been able to find anyone Deirdre would accept. With only one day left before the week's end, Bellamy was likely to fail. And if he failed in this important match, he would lose the confidence of the community—a confidence he'd just started to gain after the matches he'd formed for three of the Shanahan siblings. In fact, if Bellamy was unsuccessful with the senator's daughter, then Oscar wouldn't let his son take over as the official matchmaker, at least not for a while.

"I'm friends with Deirdre," she said.

"Is that a fact?"

"Oh aye." Well, maybe *friends* was a stretch. But Zaira did have the same social circle as Deirdre and was familiar with the young woman since they'd grown up together.

"So now you think you'll be telling me the kind of man Deirdre needs?" Bellamy's lips quirked with the beginning of a smile—an arrogant one that said he didn't believe Zaira had any information to offer.

"I can help you, Bellamy. But if you don't think so, then go ahead and keep looking for a match. I'm sure you'll figure it out since you're so smart."

"I will figure it out just fine, so I will."

She shrugged and gave him her most innocent smile. "Good luck." She turned and began to walk away. She could feel Bellamy's gaze trailing her, the heat of it scorching her skin. It wasn't fair that one man could affect a woman so intensely. Why couldn't she have that effect on him? Instead, she only seemed to annoy him.

She made a point of walking as gracefully as possible for a few more steps before she turned, pressing her hand against her chest, to the spot where he'd been staring a few moments ago.

He was still watching her, and his attention shifted to where she was holding her hand, just as she'd intended. "If you change your mind and want the name of the love of Deirdre's heart, you know where to find me."

She didn't wait for his response. Instead, she continued down the street.

Aye, she was going to use Bellamy McKenna for research whether he wanted it or not.

A decorative horizontal frame with ornate scrollwork at each end, containing the number 2 in a serif font.

Today is the day, Bellamy.” Oscar’s voice boomed through the apartment, stirring Bellamy to wakefulness.

He stretched on the sofa where he slept most nights. Even with his eyes closed, the bright daylight coming in the open windows indicated that it was at least midmorning.

A shadowy presence stepped above him, one containing the waft of strong coffee. “You better have a good and decent fellow lined up for the senator’s daughter.”

What a great way to start the day, with Oscar nagging him just as he had all day yesterday.

“I’ve got it under control, so I do.” Bellamy draped his arm over his eyes and pretended to sleep so Oscar would go away and leave him alone.

“Ach, it doesn’t look like you have control of anything.” Oscar’s loud slurp filled the quiet of the apartment. “Least of all that young woman.”

Bellamy inwardly sighed. The only word Deirdre Whitcomb knew was *no*. She’d said it to at least twelve candidates

he'd presented to her, including an old flame he thought she still cared about.

Even using his unconventional methods, Bellamy hadn't convinced her to fall for any of the men. And rightly so, if he was honest with himself. None of them had been good for her. But then, who was her true love?

His thoughts jumped back to the conversation he'd had with Zaira yesterday when he'd run into her on his way to one of the galleries.

Even just thinking about that woman again sent a jolt of heat through his gut. Ach. Whyever did she have to be so beautiful every time he saw her? Not only had her rosy cheeks and bright green eyes been prettier than usual, but the gown she'd been wearing had molded to her body, showing every blessed hill and valley of her figure.

Thankfully her stunning red hair had been mostly tucked out of sight. Because whenever it was down, he could hardly think coherently around her and usually made a total bumbling blaggard of himself . . . Although he'd acted like a bumbling blaggard around her yesterday, too, letting himself get carried away with staring at her.

"Well?" Oscar hadn't budged from the spot beside the sofa.

"Doncha be worrying." Bellamy forced his thoughts from Zaira to Deirdre. "I have just the right man for her."

It wasn't entirely a lie. He might not know the right man, but Zaira did.

*"Oh aye. I can help you, Bellamy. But if you don't think so, then go ahead and keep looking for a match. I'm sure you'll figure it out since you're so smart."*

He'd have to humble himself and tell Zaira he'd been

wrong and that he needed her help after all. He nearly groaned at the prospect of doing so. Not that he was opposed to apologizing. He'd had to do his fair share of that over the years. But the idea of having to admit he was wrong to Zaira was like having to eat dirt.

Oscar took another noisy slurp of coffee. "I don't need to be reminding you that everyone is watching how you handle this. Everyone. And if you don't form the right match, you'll be setting yourself back."

Bellamy was just beginning to earn his reputation as a good matchmaker, and he couldn't afford any mistakes now.

Aye, the stakes were high.

Part of him wanted to shrug and pretend he didn't care. He had his artwork, and that fulfilled him. He'd sold a decent number of paintings already as W. B. M., which stood for William Bennett Moore. Bellamy had chosen the name of an American because no curator wanted to buy paintings from an Irish immigrant. He'd discovered that in his early days of trying to gain interest in his work.

Only after switching and taking a new identity had his paintings started to sell. Until the cholera outbreak, he'd been doing well. Mr. Davenport, the curator at Templeton & Evans, had started to ask about Mr. Moore having a show at the gallery. Of course, Bellamy had told Mr. Davenport that Mr. Moore was not open to the idea, that he was too unsociable.

Regardless of the opportunities starting to open up, Bellamy had anticipated inheriting the matchmaker role for most of his twenty-two years. Every oldest son in the McKenna family had taken up the job through the centuries—

his da, granda, great-granda, and more as far back as they could recall to the Middle Ages and even beyond.

Bellamy couldn't be the first to walk away from it or, worse yet, fail at the job. No, he had a responsibility, and he took it seriously.

Not only that, but he'd learned over the past six months of helping the Shanahans find their matches that he was good at pairing couples. He hadn't been sure at the beginning with Finola Shanahan. But once he'd started down the road of matchmaking, he'd realized that the matchmaker blood ran thickly through his veins. He'd loved every moment of finagling and scheming and planning. He'd even enjoyed the challenges and overcoming the difficulties.

More than anything, he'd felt an incredible sense of satisfaction when he'd been able to bring two people together in real love relationships that would last forever. The McKenna matchmakers might be unlucky in finding love for themselves, but they had a magic touch when it came to finding love for others. That was all that truly mattered. If Bellamy could spend his life helping others succeed where his own family had fallen short, then maybe he could make up for all their mistakes.

Oh aye, he was ready for the full responsibility of matchmaker, had dreamed of the day when he would take over for Oscar. But if Bellamy didn't prove himself with the senator's daughter, no one would want to come to him. It wouldn't matter that he'd had success with the Shanahans.

No, everyone would hear of his failure and assume he didn't have what was needed to be a matchmaker. They would likely take matters into their own hands and form matches without any help. Already many among the younger

generation were doing so and forgoing the wise input of the matchmaker. After time, a new generation would believe the role of the matchmaker was no longer necessary, and it would fade into oblivion as an antiquated relic of bygone years.

If he didn't prove that a matchmaker was capable and necessary, then the loss would be his fault, at least in St. Louis.

Bellamy blew out a noisy breath, opened his eyes, and met Oscar's probing dark gaze. The older man's face was ruddy and perspiring, and the day had barely begun. His thick gray hair was combed into submission but wouldn't stay that way for long. At sixty, he was slowing down, the years of living by the philosophy that "it was never too early for a decent draught" showing in his heavy paunch and big veinous nose.

"Did you hear me now?" Oscar's voice boomed louder.

"How can I be forgetting the consequence of failing when you've told me a few dozen times a day for the past week, so you have."

"Instead of being direct with the lass, have you tried a subtle approach?"

"Aye—"

"The matchmaker is all about being able to feel the pulse of a relationship, expecting the unpredictable, and not controlling love—only guiding it."

"Naturally."

"She might be grazing in the same pasture every time and need help seeing that the grass is greener elsewhere."

Bellamy knew the job of the matchmaker was to keep the lass from getting stuck on the same kind of men and turning her out to a new pasture with someone she might not have expected but who was actually better for her.

Bellamy stifled a sigh. “I’ve heard your advice plenty and am doing it just so.”

“Then get yourself up and make haste.” This time Oscar lumbered away from the sofa through the tidy but sparsely furnished apartment. With two bedrooms and a main living area, the place was spacious enough for all of them, though Bellamy didn’t have his own room. He didn’t mind, since he wasn’t in the apartment often.

A moment later, Oscar exited and started down the creaking steps to the pub.

Bellamy pushed himself up until he was sitting on the edge of the sofa. With the late hours they worked at the pub every night, they usually weren’t early risers. Bellamy kept even later hours painting in the shed, so it wasn’t unusual for him to sleep away the mornings, sometimes not getting up until almost noon.

But today, he knew as well as Oscar that he was wasting time abed when he still had the looming challenge of finding a partner for Deirdre Whitcomb.

Somehow everyone had learned of the senator’s challenge and of Bellamy’s confident response that he would find a match for the man’s daughter. If only the senator had given him longer than a week.

But Bellamy had discovered the senator was getting pressure from Senator Snyder, who held the position of majority leader and was a powerful man. It had taken only a little asking around for Bellamy to learn that most of the younger senators did Snyder’s bidding or ended up with ruined reputations and short political careers.

The rumor circulating around St. Louis was that Snyder wanted to marry Deirdre. But since he was a widower in his

forties, Deirdre had refused, and her father didn't have the heart to force her into the marriage. He'd come to Bellamy to form a love match for his daughter, probably hoping a hasty marriage to a man Deirdre loved would provide a feasible excuse for why she wasn't available to Snyder.

Regardless, Bellamy was failing the mission. Now he had no choice but to talk to Zaira and see if she could help him.

"So?" Jenny's question came from the kitchenette off to the side of the living area.

Bellamy rested his elbows on his knees, then buried his face in his hands. He loved his sister, but he wasn't in the mood for a lecture from her this morn any more than he'd been needing the lecture from Oscar.

Her agile footsteps crossed the room toward him. She stopped in front of him and held a cup of coffee low enough that the waft of the strong brew rose to fill his senses.

He took the mug from her. "Thank you."

She smoothed a hand through his hair just like she'd always done since he'd been a wee babe. "You're a grand man, Bellamy McKenna. Doncha be forgetting that because I sure won't be."

With twelve years' age difference, Jenny had been more like a mother to him than sister. In fact, Jenny had been the one to raise him for most of his childhood. She'd fed and clothed him, rocked him to sleep when he'd been fussy, hugged him when he was scared, and kissed his scrapes when he'd been hurt. She'd been there for him every step of his life with a fierce, motherly love he'd never gotten from their mam.

The only thing he'd gotten from Mam was his love of painting. During the rare times when Mam had been around

and available, she'd taken great pleasure in teaching him how to paint. She'd always come to life when she held a paintbrush in her hands. Her melancholy had disappeared for a short while, and in those moments, she'd been someone he'd admired and someone he'd wanted to be like.

If only Oscar had accepted her for who she was, painting and all. But he never had supported his wife's talent or efforts. He'd only criticized her and made her feel bad about painting, the same way he had with Bellamy.

Bellamy had long ago determined that he didn't care what Oscar thought of his painting. Oscar could criticize him all he wanted, but it wouldn't change Bellamy's desires or plans to paint. He intended to carry on and do everything his mam had dreamed of and never been able to accomplish.

Jenny's fingers smoothed back his hair again before she cupped his cheek. "You know that even if you make this match, you'll still have to do the one thing you don't want to if you plan to solidify your place as the next matchmaker."

He knew what she was referring to—the pressure for the matchmaker to get married. It wasn't necessarily a requirement, but most people would be more willing to take marital advice from a married matchmaker than from a single one. Bellamy understood the logic. He just hoped to prove he was different.

He offered his sister a half grin. "So, you're trying to scare me away from following in Oscar's footsteps, are you?"

Her beautiful brown eyes regarded him seriously. She had such pretty features, but over recent years she'd grown more haggard, especially her eyes, which had taken on a perpetually tired and sad look.

Bellamy suspected some of the sadness had to do with the

fact that she'd never been able to have any children of her own. Now that she was nearing her midthirties, perhaps the reality of her childlessness weighed more heavily. Whenever he asked her about it, she always denied that she wanted children, claimed that raising him had been enough for her. But he suspected if given the chance, she'd take a baby or two of her own.

She bent and kissed his forehead, then straightened. "I'm just wantin' you to be happy, Bellamy."

He offered her a grateful smile. "I know. And I thank you, Jenny."

She pressed both hands to his cheeks and held him in place. "Regardless of what you think, you weren't meant to do this life alone."

She was hinting again at his need to take a wife, but he ignored it. "That's why I have you."

"Oh aye. You'll always have me." She held him for a few more seconds, her eyes still sad. Then with a sigh, she released him and started toward the door.

He wanted to reassure her he'd be fine without a wife, but he'd already done so on other occasions. Yet she still persisted in pushing him toward marriage.

She was as well aware as he that every matchmaker in their family had problems with their spouse leaving, cheating, or divorcing them. Their marriages had apparently started with renowned love and passion, but each one had eventually combusted with disaster.

Bellamy wasn't sure why the matchmakers were lucky with others but so unlucky in love for themselves. A part of him suspected his family was cursed, and that no matter how hard he might try to avoid the curse, he'd end up unlucky too.

Curse or no, he couldn't put off marriage forever. But he intended to delay it as long as he could—hopefully for years, until he was older and more mature. Maybe after growing in his matchmaking skills, he'd eventually have the discernment to choose a partner wisely and be able to break the unlucky streak or curse or whatever it was.

For now, though, he wasn't rushing into anything. No matter what Oscar or Jenny might say, he was waiting to get married.