



# The Words Shimmer

JENN MATTHEWS



# Chapter 1

MEL JACKSON STEPPED INTO THE busy canteen. The smell of chips made her stomach rumble and her mind slip backwards to her school days. *I didn't realise I was so hungry.* The sounds of trays clanking, chairs scraping, and people chatting were just short of deafening when combined. Her ears slowly became accustomed to the cacophony, however, and she was able to focus on the students, lecturers, and for today, members of the public that milled around her. The crowd didn't bother her—she was quite used to winding her way through busy areas, usually carrying heavy equipment. She squared her shoulders with her chin lifted to create the outward appearance of someone used to maintaining their own personal space.

She lurched forwards as someone shoved past her, a dull pain spreading across her back at the impact. Mel spread her hands, trying valiantly to stop the momentum, but her palms hit the glass counter with a *thwack*. Further pain shot up her arms and she only just contained a whine. She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment, then turned in time to see her assailant grabbing the last sausage roll. He shouldered his way toward the till, not giving her a second glance. Anger roiled inside her, but she shook herself and tried to smile apologetically at the server. The look she got in return stank of disapproval. *It wasn't my fault. I didn't ask to be bowled over by some kid wanting the last pastry!*

Mel shuffled down the line and muttered under her breath, but then turned as she heard someone shouting.

“Hey! Mel!”

It took her a moment before she caught sight of someone she recognised stepping up to her in the line. “Sarah.”

“Hey.” Sarah held out a hand, which Mel shook warmly. “Weird seeing you without your greens.” She glanced up and down Mel’s body.

Mel’s cheeks burned at the scrutiny, but she tried to ignore the feeling.

“You look so different with your hair like that too. No ponytail today?”

“No.” Mel laughed. It was too hot, really, for her hair to be down; the July heat was filtering into the large buildings of the university and making it stick to the back of her neck. She felt like she was going for an interview somewhere, all posh clothes and shiny shoes.

“You looking to do the Masters?”

Mel shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Brilliant. Well,” Sarah said, cocking her head to one side, “be great to have you. You’re exactly the kind of person the course is aimed at, and your experience will be invaluable.” She winked and strode away.

Her laughter continuing, Mel waved as Sarah disappeared into the crowd. She then looked over the choices on offer, not immediately sure what she wanted to eat. The queue was long and moved slowly, with quite a few people before her. She looked around again, people-watching.

*Please, let no one choke on anything. I’m off duty today and not really wearing appropriate clothing for resuscitation.*

She caught sight of a young man in his twenties, his black hair neat and proper, eating a sandwich with delicate precision. *If only everyone would eat like that.* With a sigh, she turned back to the queue and waited her turn.

Once she’d selected a meal and drink and had it settled on her tray, she turned back to the room to find somewhere to sit. She’d decided on a toasted sandwich and chips, regrettably not something she could carry outside. She tongued the inside of her lip for a few heart beats, her gaze pulled magnetically towards the sensibly eating man, and his dark-haired female companion.

The man stood, his lunch apparently finished, and he made his way through the busy tables, leaving his seat unoccupied.

Mel shook her head so her hair fell behind her shoulders and scanned the canteen for another seat. Nothing. A few other people were looking too, so she scooted towards the vacated seat quickly, approaching with what she hoped was an apologetic look. "Sorry. Nowhere else to sit. Mind?"

The brunette looked up from behind large black-rimmed glasses and showed no suggestion of disagreeing or that she was even interested. Mel gave her a tight smile in response and slid into the seat, her tray landing haphazardly on the table in front of her.

The woman looked at Mel, then at the tray, and back at Mel.

*She's pretty.* Mel flicked her eyebrows up once in acknowledgement of the fact. "I suppose as we're spending lunch together," she said, chuckles bubbling up in her throat, "I ought to introduce myself." She held out a hand. "Melissa."

The other woman stared at her, the fork that held a mouthful of salad hovering by her mouth.

Mel cleared her throat awkwardly, but continued to hold her hand out, with the opinion that sometimes one needed to wait a little while for another person to find their manners.

"Ruby Clark." She put her fork carefully into the plastic box in front of her and took Mel's hand. "Nice to meet you."

*Northern accent.* Mel tried not to grin too widely. Ruby's wide eyes suggested that she wasn't the most outgoing of people, perhaps unused to having complete strangers introduce themselves. Mel did it every single day in her job, and it was therefore a matter-of-fact issue for her.

"Call me 'Mel' though." Their hands fell away. "Sorry, should have said." She tried to add lightness to her voice and lowered her gaze to her food. "Have I made a terrible choice or are the chips here as good as they look?"

"They're not bad. Not that I advocate fried food in any sense." Ruby eyed Mel's food with disdain, so Mel plucked a chip from her plate and munched cheekily. Ruby's gaze lowered back to her salad.

“Well, it’s not a normal day for me.” Mel shrugged. “I’m here for the open day.”

“Are you?” Ruby seemed mildly interested now, and Mel was pleased. *She’s intriguing; I might as well include her in some topic that takes her fancy.*

“Looking at doing my ECP training. Oh.” She stopped talking with her mouth full and swallowed, patting her finger against her plate. “ECP stands for Emergency—”

“Care Practitioner. I know.”

“Oh good. Saves me explaining.”

“I’m an anatomy lecturer, not a moron.” Ruby’s clipped words held a trace of humour, but they made Mel catch herself all the same.

“Do you teach any of the ECP modules?” Mel asked politely, pushing away the desire to tease and joke. *I don’t think she’s that kind of person.*

“No. Mostly nursing students. If you can call them that.” Ruby carefully speared a tomato piece and ate it, her mouth working slowly.

Mel shifted her gaze to her own food, not wanting to stare.

Ruby placed her fork down and took a paper napkin, pressing it to each corner of her mouth. Her large dark eyes seemed to study Mel, her thick eyebrows pushed down just a bit. “So, you’re from a nursing background yourself?”

“Nope. Paramedic through and through.”

A flutter of something akin to disgust shot across Ruby’s features, and Mel felt her hackles rise.

“What’s the matter with that?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Again, with the clipped words.

Mel folded her arms and sat back in her chair, deciding to regard Ruby with an air of aloofness and scrutiny. “Oh, come on, spill.”

“I just come across a lot of gung-ho, thrill-seeking paramedics. You’re all fast-driving, crisis-loving, ego-maniacs, are you not?”

“What? Course we’re not.” Mel’s stomach was starting to ache. Maybe she hadn’t eaten enough yet. She leaned back over her table and shovelled chips into her mouth before picking up her sandwich,

the crusty edges feeling harsh against her fingers. “We’re not like that at all.” She considered the statement, then grimaced around her sandwich. “Okay, well, perhaps one or two...”

“You’re all like that.” Ruby sounded completely sure.

*Who made you the boss of judging everyone on the planet?* “I’m guessing you’re an RGN,” Mel said, meaning a Registered General Nurse.

Ruby nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, I can’t say I’ve seen eye-to-eye with every single nurse at every single A and E. Most of them seem to think all we do is scoop and go. Who needs proper assessment skills when you can drive fast?”

“Who indeed.”

“Okay, you know what? You’re really starting to get on my wick.” Mel balled a fist and held it steady on the table top. When she realised how that looked, and that Ruby’s gaze was trained on her hand, she consciously loosened her fingers. “Have you any idea the skills we have to have these days?”

“So you can do a manual blood pressure.” Ruby’s eyes were narrowing.

“Yeah. And an ECG, and interpret it, and we administer around thirty drugs, all independently without a medic.”

“Patient Group Directive,” Ruby stated, with a piercing and amused look in her eyes.

*Is she enjoying pissing me off?* Mel took a slow breath in and let it out, rolling her shoulders back to allow some of the tension to drop. “PGD is still independent.”

“Anyone can give a bit of paracetamol to someone with a headache.”

“We give controlled drugs, without supervision. Are you able to do that?” Mel decided to give as good as she was getting, so set her jaw. “I suppose it’s been a while since you even did a shift on a ward.”

“Yes, a whole week.” Ruby’s accent made the word ‘whole’ sound so different to how Mel would say it. It was long, drawn out, with

more than a little sarcasm pushing it into the cavernous canteen. Ruby seemed very satisfied with this. “I do a shift a month.”

“Must be hard, working under all those doctors when you’re so used to having hundreds of student nurses looking up to you like you’re some kind of deity.” Mel focussed back on her plate and began to eat again, an air of forced nonchalance in her movements. “You obviously think you’re the boss of everything.”

It was a cheap shot, but Mel felt overwhelmingly satisfied when Ruby scraped back her chair and gathered her things, nearly dropping the water bottle that appeared to be full of something purple. Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she stuffed her hands into her beige jacket pockets and pushed her glasses up her nose and into place. “I really wouldn’t sign up. From what the ECP lecturers have told me, paramedics rarely do well on the course. Something about not being focussed enough for the workload.” She looked Mel up and down. “You seem a bit long in the tooth anyway, don’t you?”

Mel screwed her face into a frown and her gaze followed Ruby as she sauntered off, easily picking her way through the crowds of extra people.

Sitting back again, Mel allowed herself to seethe. *How dare she make such assumptions about me!* She tapped idly at her plate with her fingertip, then pushed her hand under her own leg to stop herself from fidgeting. She was pretty sure she’d only ever see Ruby in passing again. But Mel was one hundred per cent sure she was signing up to the course now.

## *Chapter 2*

RUBY STRODE AWAY FROM HER Mini Cooper, pressing the button on the key behind her, locking it with a bleep. She walked purposefully towards the main entrance, her briefcase swinging from its long strap, her handbag atop it.

Wednesday was her favourite day, mostly because she only taught during the morning. The afternoon was supposed to be for extra-curricular activities for the students. Therefore, she used the time to catch up on essay marking, lesson plans, and whatever took her fancy once she was done.

Before she could get to the short path that would take her in through the front doors, a taxi pulled up close by. The back door opened and nearly fell off its hinges with the force at which it was pushed. Two rubber-ended crutches thumped onto the tarmac before one trainer, then a thick-socked foot joined them.

Leaning forward to get a proper look, Ruby noticed the passenger had a plaster cast on her lower left leg, and a frustrated frown on her face.

Like someone in an old people's home, the woman in the plaster cast rocked forwards once, then twice, and then used the momentum to haul herself onto her good foot. White knuckles gripped the car door, which swung towards her with the force of her pull.

Ruby's nursing instincts kicked in and she lunged towards the taxi, grabbing the door before it could swing back into the passenger and cause more harm. It was then that Ruby recognised the woman attempting to, now successfully, get out of the taxi.



Mel pushed her hands into the crutches to steady herself before looking up with a relieved smile. The smile fell away as their gazes locked and Mel realised who her knight in shining armour was. “Oh.” She looked around the sunny car park, perhaps hoping for someone else to take over so that she didn’t have to deal with Ruby. “Thanks.” The reluctance flowed from her entire body.

Ruby decided to continue with her nurse persona; something caring and non-judgemental. *Maybe we got off on the wrong foot three months ago.* “No problem.” She couldn’t help eyeing the plaster cast with a chuckle of amusement and was pleased when Mel rolled her eyes with a snort.

“Don’t ask.”

“Actually, I wasn’t going to.”

Mel began to shuffle slowly towards the front entrance of the university and looked back at the taxi as Ruby closed the door for her. The taxi drove away, and they were left alone. A few students gave them a wide berth as they too went about their day.

Ruby walked next to Mel, her hand hovering at the small of her back in a gesture so familiar to her. *The number of patients I’ve taken to the toilet or to the snack machine in this way.* When Mel smiled up at her, she smiled back.

“I’m fine once I’m going.” Mel gazed determinedly at the double doors, and the relief that crossed her face when they reached them was endearing.

“You decided to do the training, then?” Ruby asked, holding the door open for her, and then returning to her slow walk next to Mel, her hand behind her once again.

“Yeah. Well.” Mel chuckled and indicated her crutches. “Seemed logical, especially while I’m off work. Can’t sit around all day waiting for my bones to heal.”

“Eight weeks?”

“I’ve done one week, so, yep seven more to go.” She sighed. “If only I was, perhaps, a decade younger. It’d only be six.”

“You don’t look like you’re in the age group to require more than six weeks.”

“A compliment?” Mel’s eyes were good-humoured. “That’s refreshing.”

Ruby pursed her lips around a grin and fixed her gaze in front of them. Mel was heading towards the eastern area of the university, where Ruby knew they taught most of the ECP modules. They’d need to exit into the central, outside area, which contained benches and a small fountain containing fish; and that would require a small step down. Ruby’s internal nurse couldn’t quite allow Mel to attempt this on her own, so she remained close.

“How old are you?” Ruby put a hand to her throat and looked away. “Apologies. I haven’t had my morning coffee yet.”

Mel laughed. “I don’t know why people are weird about their age. I’m forty-seven.”

Ruby looked up at the tall woman, whose crutches were on one of the top settings. She took in the strawberry-blond hair that was pulled back into a ponytail, the green piercing eyes, and the striking cheekbones. Her gaze travelled downwards, resting on strong arms encased to the elbow in a red chequered blouse. *Bare below the elbow.* She blinked and shook her head at her own thought.

“How old are *you*?” Mel asked.

Ruby felt her cheeks reddening. Had she been caught staring?

“It’s only fair.” Mel stopped in front of the door to the central garden and frowned at it, so Ruby reached to push it open for her. “Thank you.”

“Forty-two.”

Mel seemed to look her up and down, and Ruby indicated with a shaky hand that she should go out of the door first. Her hand floated at Mel’s back again.

“I’ll parrot the compliment back at you.”

“Please, if you could tell my girls that, it would be great. They seem to think I’m ready for the grave.”

Mel wobbled on her crutches, and Ruby’s hand automatically lay flat against her spine, the belt of her jeans hard against her fingertips. Mel steadied herself, then stepped down and out.

The sunshine caught the long straight hair clasped tightly in her ponytail as it swung like a pendulum, and Ruby smiled. *Such a*

*pretty colour.* She followed her out and removed her hand once she was secure in the knowledge that Mel wouldn't fall. They began a slow but continuous journey along the concrete path and rounded the block towards another door.

"This is me." Mel stood still, her mouth pulled to one side. "Thanks for the... support."

"That's all right. Make it up to me at some point." Ruby took a chance and swished her hair back. "I love a nice Zinfandel."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Mel winked, and Ruby lowered her head so she could hide behind the top rim of her glasses. Mel's feet shifted towards the door, and she hesitated before practically jumping through. It swung closed behind her, and Ruby touched her chin as she watched her go.

*I wonder how she fractured her leg. Probably tibia fibula. She considered Mel's predicament. She's going to end up struggling. I know they have practical lessons.*

## Chapter 3

THE MINUTE RUBY SAW THE email, she locked her computer and raced out of her office and down the corridor. Skidding into the staff meeting room—which, thankfully, was not far away—she took in the sight of the whole department beginning to pack up. Her unexpected foray into patient handling with Mel had made her late checking her emails, and therefore late to a spontaneous staff meeting.

Alexander sent her an apologetic look and then looked around, a stack of papers in his hands. He seemed unwilling for her to read what they contained even as he held them out to her. “You weren’t here. You got the last thing on the list.”

“What’re you on about?” Ruby looked down at the collection of papers and read the words *Gardening Project* across the top of the first page. “What’s this?”

Ruby’s head of department, Christine, approached them, a large grin on her face. “Lucky you. You get the kids.”

“Excuse me?”

Christine flounced away, indicating that Alexander should explain.

His blue eyes followed Christine desperately, but he held a hand out towards the door. “Let’s go back to your office. You’re going to have to sit down.”

Ruby followed him with an air of trepidation. Kids and gardening. *Oh bugger*. She sat when Alexander tapped the back of her worn leather desk chair.

“It’s a project. All the lecturers got one. The university wants to implement a general rule that everyone must use their free time to

help out charities. Andy got a painting project with the older adults at the nearest care home; Sonya got a youth offender's charity." He scratched the back of his neck and leant a hip against her desk. "You got a gardening project with Year 4s."

"And I'm supposed to do this when, exactly?" Ruby pressed the papers into the wood of her desk, rolling her eyes as she scanned what was written.

"Wednesday afternoons."

She glared at him. Not her beloved Wednesday afternoons.

He cleared his throat. "It, erm... starts in March next year. So you've got tons and tons of prep time."

She glared at him some more. Just for good measure.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "It's all detailed in the paperwork." His voice was little more than a squeak.

"What charity is this in aid of?"

"Air Ambulance. They're run completely by charitable funds, with minimal NHS involvement." He relaxed, knowing he was on much safer ground now. "Good cause, don't you think?"

"Suppose. Was it a 'first come, first served' type of situation?"

"It was."

Ruby groaned and stuck her fingers into her hair. "Painting and old people I would've been happy with."

"I did try to get you that one, but Andy was insistent."

Ruby groaned again and let out a dry sob. "I love my Wednesdays."

"I know." Alexander fidgeted. "I'm sorry." He eyed her curiously when she looked up. "Why were you late, anyway? You're usually so prompt for your first coffee." He pointed to the slightly steaming cup on her desk.

She lifted it gratefully to her lips and sipped. The taste, as always, made everything feel better, even before the caffeine hit her bloodstream. "Somebody needed help getting in from the car park. Someone on crutches."

"Hmm." He studied her, and she rolled her eyes. "Not your usual reaction. Had they not brought their own support?"

She finally lifted her coffee in the air. "Thank you for this."

"You're welcome."

“I met her in July. She’s a paramedic, doing her ECP training.”

Alexander scrutinised her, but his eyes also held a teasing sparkle. “Even more baffling. You hate paramedics.”

“I don’t hate them, exactly.” Ruby huffed at him affectionately. “I suppose she seems like one of the good ones.”

“You reckon?” A smile tugged at his lips.

“Anyway,” Ruby said, swerving the conversation away from the reasons why she’d run to the aid of an attractive woman, “I’m hoping you know at least *something* about gardening.”

He shook his head. “I’ve never been the sort of person that enjoys getting their hands dirty.”

“Fantastic!”

“Hey, *you* were late, not me.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that.” Ruby grumbled again and sipped from her coffee, hoping it would ease the ache that had started in her gut. *Fabulous. Just what I need: extra-curricular activities. As if I don’t have enough to do.*

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