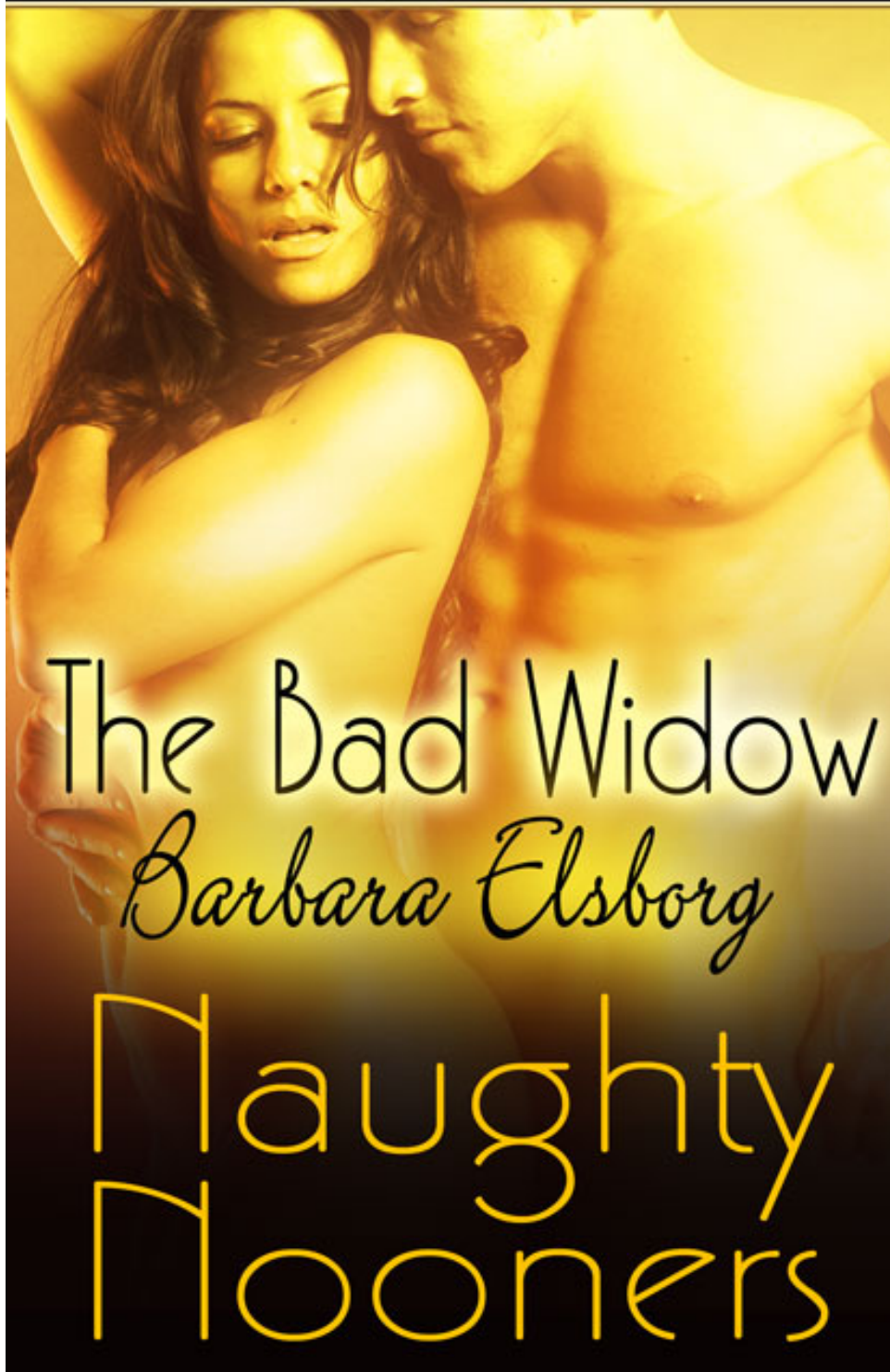


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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The Bad Widow

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THE BAD WIDOW

Barbara Elsborg

Chapter One

Rose cursed when she saw the two men walking toward her through skeins of early morning mist. Silas Smith, the pastor's son and Henry Potter. Spotty young men with too many rampaging hormones, and Puritan fanatics for parents. Double trouble. She'd been careless to be caught out here alone. She watched Henry's gaze sweep over the surrounding forest and return to rest on her. He had a nasty glint in his eye and a lascivious twist to his mouth. *Shit.*

Silas smiled to reveal stained, crooked teeth. "Good morrow, Widow Thorne."

Well, it had been up until now, Rose thought. She'd had a lovely morning finding every one of the plants she'd been seeking, plus a cache of field mushrooms to fry when she got home.

"What's in the basket?" asked Silas.

He moved his podgy frame to one side of her and boney Henry took the other.

"My breakfast."

The men circled, staring at her, hands reaching toward her body though they didn't touch.

"We've not had breakfast yet," said Silas. "We've been out looking for goodwife Mary Pym."

"Why? Are you going to eat her?" Rose asked.

Henry narrowed his eyes, the joke bypassing his brain cell. "Maybe you know something about her disappearance. We'll go back to your cottage and discuss it."

"No."

Silas grabbed the basket and Henry grasped her wrist, digging in his nails.

"No meaning yes?" Henry snarled.

The mist thickened around them. Rose chewed her lip and considered conjuring a large snake from the basket, one that would bite Henry and then squeeze Silas until he popped. Maybe that was unfair to the snake. It would also seal her fate. Rose had heard the rumors circulating even before Mary Pym's ridiculous accusation and knew it was time to move on. Past time.

She puffed out a breath. She'd hoped this village might be the place but the men of Eastchester had been a huge disappointment, just like the men in the last twelve settlements. Silas put out his tongue, waggled it up and down and cupped his balls. *Oh lovely*. She'd leave today.

"I've got something to show you." Silas thrust his hips against her thigh as Henry kept her in place.

Rose felt the hard ridges of their cocks pressing against her.

"Sorry, I don't work with inferior material, boys."

Maybe she didn't need the snake. Silas' face turned beet red. He looked as if he were about to explode. Henry trembled with fury.

"You fucking cunt," Silas said with a growl. "You'll pay for that."

He knocked her off her feet and raised his fist. *No, you'll pay*. Rose opened her mouth but the blow never landed. Silas wailed as his arm was wrenched behind his back. Henry moved to help him and crashed to the ground. The mist cleared and Rose looked up into the most mesmerizing face she'd ever seen. Sensual lips curved into the hint of a dangerous smile. Strong, straight nose. Green eyes the color of new holly leaves. Black shaggy hair.

Almost before she had time to lick her lips, the dark-haired stranger had pummeled both men into submission. The pair rolled on the ground clutching their groins. Rose's gaze slipped down her rescuer's lean, muscled body. The bulge in his pants didn't look like inferior material.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

He looked over his shoulder, then turned to smile at her.

She scrambled to her feet. "Thank you for dealing with the vermin. The least I can offer you is breakfast."

He whistled and a horse stepped out of the mist. Once her savior sat astride, he reached for Rose's hand. A moment later she perched in front of him, clutching her basket.

"What's your name?" When he didn't answer, she turned. "Can't you speak?"

He shook his head.

"Mouth the word." Rose watched his lips. "Will?"

He smiled and nodded.

Strong arms wrapped around her and she settled back against his broad chest, enjoying the feel of his erection rubbing along the cleft of her bottom as the horse walked on in jerky steps. How quickly life changed. A good-looking guy. A great body. A cock she just knew would be fantastic and he couldn't ruin things by saying something stupid. Could life get any better?

Yes, it could. The moment he'd kicked the door of her one room-cottage closed, Will ripped her frumpy dress from the neck to the waist. She was so sick of wimpy men asking *Is it permissible to touch your bosom? Can I lick your nipple? Where's your love button?* At last, a man who knew what he wanted and took it. More sounds of material tearing and Rose stood naked in front of him. He twirled a strand of her long, white-blonde hair between two fingers and she heard his breathy gulp, saw the way his pupils darkened and his nostrils flared, and wished for a moment he *could* speak.

Then she forgot everything because in the time it took her to blink, he was naked too, all solid planes and rounded muscles, long lean legs and narrow hips. Rose's mouth felt as though she'd inhaled sand. His long, thick cock reared up from a nest of wiry, black curls like some eager beast, anchored by heavy, dark balls. His swollen

cockhead shone with pre-cum making her mouth water in excited anticipation. A pearl of moisture blossomed at the slit, growing so fast it broke over the crest and trickled down the length of his shaft. An echoing spurt of moisture erupted from Rose and wet the top of her thighs.

The wispy contact of Will's hand sliding down the side of her body made the breath catch in her throat. When his fingers trailed over her belly and paused at her hairless mound before slipping between her legs, a whimper escaped. Rose's knees shook. She clamped them together and trapped his hand. The sound he made, a low growl of raw need, sent Rose racing toward the edge of the cliff. He pushed her thighs apart and thrust two fingers inside her and she plunged over the sheer drop, coming hard, muscles clenching, pleasure bursting from every pore. Her head spun. Where had this man come from? *Will o' the mist*? How could she persuade him to never leave her?

Rose took a ragged breath before she spoke. "More."

Will grinned and lifted his hand to his lips, licking then sucking each finger in turn. Rose sighed and he caught the back of her neck, lowering his face to hers, his breath brushing her lips in a tantalizing tease before their mouths fused.

Rose was lost. Gone. Swept away faster than a husk of wheat in a millrace. His tongue slid alongside hers, tangling and playing as he explored every part of her mouth. He tasted sweet, of the woods, flowers, mist, something...else but as Rose reached for recognition, he deepened the kiss and her mind fogged with lust. She was bewitched. All she could think about was Will. Inside her. Fucking her. Making her come and come and come until she screamed. His hands roamed her back, p

ulling her close, trailing down her spine, cupping her ass, rocking her hips into his. One finger pressed into the crease of her bottom and slid down the dark path to the hot junction between her thighs, silky slick with her cream. He pushed forward to her clit, rubbed with the right amount of pressure, circled and pressed as Rose quivered against him. Her vision blurred as though the room had filled with smoke. It felt as though he had fingers everywhere—delving into her cunt, massaging her clit, pressing against the

puckered ring of her anus as well as her back, her legs, her arms. *Impossible*. Rose groaned into his mouth. He caught the sound and let out a choked laugh. Her hands explored smooth skin, hard flesh and his body grew fiery under her touch, his cock swelling and throbbing against her stomach.

Clutching her hips, Will edged her back until her legs hit the bed, then he lowered her gently, still kissing her, feeding her the heat from his mouth until she burned to the point of combustion. Rose's inner muscles clenched around his fingers as he dipped and twisted them in and out of her slick channel. Will licked and nipped a wet path to her breast. His lips and teeth teased one nipple, his fingertips massaged the second while his other hand wound her to a frenzy, stretching her, stealing her control, winding her to destruction.

Awash in sensation, Rose clutched Will's arms and her back arched in need. Tremors seized her body, rippling from her core, sending ribbons of fire fluttering down her veins.

"More," she gasped.

He bit down on one nipple, pinched the other, scissored his knuckles inside her and Rose came again, the world turning black for a moment in a hiatus of unfathomable delight before she unraveled in shuddering ecstasy. *Ooh, he's good*.

"Will, Will, Will." She gasped his name over and over until the blurriness vanished from her eyes and she could see his upturned mouth.

He soothed her brow, blew whispery breaths along her collarbone and Rose's heartbeat calmed. Then Will slid down to bury his face between her legs and her pulse jumped back onto a galloping horse. He pushed her thighs over his shoulders and tucked his hands under her backside, opening her to him. The heated look in his eyes when he raised his head, the way his Adam's apple rose and fell meant she could deny him nothing. He'd put her pleasure first and no man had ever done that.

Will trailed his tongue along her swollen outer lips, sucking, lapping, kissing, and the increased ache in her womb dragged a series of louder and louder groans from her

throat. The contractions began again, tiny tightening clasps that grew in intensity with every twisting swirl of his tongue, each panted breath, the rasp of his chin and the gentle nip of his teeth.

Her bones melted, stars burst in her head and she let out a sob. He had power over her. The first male she'd found who'd made her want with such desperation. Will had given her a taste of his strength and Rose both feared and desired him in equal measures. He was perhaps the most dangerous man she'd ever met because he meant her no harm, only pleasure. What would she give up to have him forever?

Rose shook the fog from her head. She could give him pleasure too, make him hers—but because he wanted to be, not through any trickery. She was already his, he just didn't yet know it. She rolled Will onto his back and dropped off the bed to kneel on the floor, tugging him until his backside reached the edge of the mattress. Rose gazed at his straining cock, licked her lips at the sight of the thick purple veins that ran down its length and the glistening, velvety tip that invited her to taste.

His balls looked hard as stone, drawn up tight at the base of his cock, ready to burst with joy. One fingertip stroke along a bulging vein and his noisy intake of breath made her jump. Why couldn't he speak? He leaned on his elbows, staring at her. For a moment his pupils didn't look perfectly round. They reminded her of...Rose sighed...of something, but another glance and she decided she'd been mistaken. More interesting things to investigate.

One lick, base to tip, and Will growled, his fingers tightening in her hair, pulling her closer. Rose circled her tongue around the sensitive tip, dipping into the slender slit, drawing out a salty jewel of pre-cum. His thighs clenched around her. Rose shouldered them apart and kissed, licked, lapped her way to his balls. She took them in her mouth, separated them with her tongue and sucked gently.

When she raised her head to look at him, the intense pleasure on his face returned some of her power. He was as much hers as she was his. She released his sac with a sweet kiss. Using one hand to caress his angular hip bone, she wrapped the other

around his root, drawing up the length of his cock, twisting as she sucked at the head until he trembled and gasped beneath her.

Rose closed her mouth over him, pressed down and swallowed until his cock bumped the back of her throat. Using her saliva and his juice as lubricant, she sucked him down, deep swallows and shallow pulses, hard lips and soft mouth, twisting pulls and straight sucks until he bucked beneath her. His fingers stroked her throat, tracing the movement of his shaft beneath her skin until suddenly Rose found herself propelled onto her back. Will loomed over her, wide-eyed and panting, shaking his head in warning.

A nudge at her soaked folds and he slid his cock into her with a throaty groan, circling his hips, stretching her carefully. Rose gasped as her muscles contracted around him, dragged him deeper. He felt perfect. Will flexed his hips, pulling out until only his tip remained in her, then sliding back to bury his length inside her. Rose watched his face, saw him struggle to maintain his control as he moved into her with both long and slow pulses, saw the exact second he lost himself as his hips thrust forward and he sank his entire length inside her until his balls slapped her flesh. His face tightened, his breathing grew ragged and his green eyes darkened.

“More,” she gasped.

Will gave a choked laugh and used his whole body to fuck her in stronger and stronger movements until he was pounding her into the bed.

“Deeper, harder, faster.” Rose wrapped her hands around his upper arms, her legs around his hips and thrust up into his down stroke. He increased the tempo, powering into her in an impossible lightning-fast action, the burning friction so exquisite Rose screamed her delight. When Will changed the angle of his penetration, twisting his cock at the deepest point so he pressed further inside her, deeper than any had been before, Rose looked straight into his eyes and saw stars explode.

She couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. He dragged her to oblivion and back, pulled a climax from every cell of her body. The muscles of her cunt

contracted powerfully around his cock, he stiffened above her, and they fell to pieces together. She came with such force, she shook with the intensity, her back arching to meet Will's chest as he jetted hot seed into her. Rose felt every spurt, wanted no other woman to take this from her, and when he buried his face in the dip between her shoulder and neck, something that had been a long time broken, mended inside her. He'd made her belong. Wrapped in his arms, Rose knew her life would never be the same again.

Chapter Two

Will had heard them coming before her, which amazed Rose. Even in post-coital bliss she should have detected the menace. Mist clouded her vision and she blinked it clear. Will's face tightened and his gaze sharpened. Rose sighed. No matter how dangerous he looked, he couldn't save her. There was a painful irony that for so many years she'd hoped for someone to do just that, but now that was the last thing she wanted. Will would die if he tried. Instead she had to save him by giving him up.

"You have to leave right now," she said.

Rose grabbed a robe as he pulled on his pants. The noise of the approaching mob grew louder. Flickering lights shone through the windows. Rose tied the belt around her waist and gathered up the rest of his clothes.

"There's a tunnel." She kicked aside the rug and lifted a trapdoor.

Will took her hand, tugged at it.

"No." Rose shook her head. "Not me. Just you. They'll find the tunnel if we both escape."

"Kill the witch. Burn the witch. Kill the witch." The chants were quite clear.

Will gave a frantic glance toward the door.

Rose winced. *Burn the witch?* Oh damn, anything but burning. She could see Will wasn't going to move. He'd get himself killed.

"Look, everything will be fine if you do as I say. Use the tunnel. Escape. Don't worry about me. Remember the place where we met? I'll see you there tomorrow night."

"Burn the witch. Rip her apart. Pull out her tongue."

Ouch. Rose hoped they didn't. She squeezed Will's hand. "Trust me," she said, and kicking hard at the back of his knees, she pushed him down the hole. Rose dropped the trapdoor back in place and arranged the rug and a rocking chair over the top. She sat in the chair and took a shaky breath. The chair wobbled beneath her as Will pushed up on the floorboards and grunted.

"Will, don't," she said. "Run."

The latch on the door lifted and Rose muttered a few words under her breath. The chair slammed back into place and she heard a faint croak. She sighed with relief.

Villagers burst into the one-roomed cottage. At the head was Silas' mother, Betty Smith.

"Witch!" she shrieked. "She's possessed my son. She fills his head day and night."

"And my son," added Joshua Potter. "She threatened to turn him into a toad."

"He already *is* a toad," Rose muttered.

"Your trial will take place tomorrow, Witch. Until then you'll be confined to the cage," said Pastor Smith.

He grabbed her and pulled her to her feet. Rose's breast slipped free of the robe. The women gasped, the men gulped.

"May I get dressed?" Rose asked.

"Four goodwives must stay in case you attempt escape," the Pastor said. "Check her for an extra nipple."

"No, only the two. Sorry." Rose let the robe fall.

"Filthy whore," Betty Smith and Grace Jackson chimed together and struggled to herd the men out.

Rose couldn't resist. "Your husbands liked sucking them. One each side."

The women gave a shriek as their men turned back, wide-eyed in horror, shouting denial. Rose laughed and grabbed her gray dress from the hook. As she'd anticipated,

her brazen display was a perfect distraction and no one thought to check out the garment.

"You won't be laughing tomorrow when we burn you at the stake," the Pastor shouted as the door slammed.

Rose frowned. *Probably not.*

* * * * *

The trial was like all the others. A line of villagers queued up to make one outrageous claim after another. Well, some of the claims might have been true. At least they'd decided on the duck pond rather than the stake. That might have had something to do with the way Rose had pretended a terror of water. Thank goodness the pastor was a sadistic bastard.

Light was starting to fail when they led her outside. Torches blazed and Rose shuddered. She hoped they didn't change their minds about burning her at the stake. It normally took weeks to get the smell of smoke out of her hair. Three men dragged her along the path to the pond and the rest of the village trailed along behind. Nothing much else to do on a Saturday night.

"Good sirs, I am innocent." Rose wondered if she was making enough fuss, whether it was worth squawking at all.

Rough hands pushed her into the chair. She'd watched them building it. Pastor Smith had been to Westchester to see one in action. He never liked to be outdone.

"Silence, Widow Thorne. If you're innocent, God will save you."

Doomed then. Rose sighed. She wasn't a widow but she'd quite liked the idea of being called Good Widow Rose Thorne. They fastened a rope around her waist, anchoring her to the back of the chair. Rose breathed in hard as they tied it, pushing her body forward to create a small amount of slack when they were done. Then Joshua Potter slammed a huge rock on her lap and all the air whooshed out of her. *Bastard.*

"Prepare to meet thy Maker," the pastor said with a sneer.

"You're about to murder a poor, innocent widow." Rose made her lip quiver.

His eyes narrowed. "We both know you're not innocent. You're not coming up again."

Neither are you. Rose swallowed her smile, thinking of the impotence spell she'd cast widely that morning during a slow bit of the trial. There would be some disappointed women tonight. Maybe a few grateful ones.

She looked at the hostile faces. The villagers were all there—well, all but one. Half the women were probably wondering if it would be their turn next, the other half trying to guess if Rose had shagged their husbands. No, she hadn't. Only the most vitriolic of her accusers and the biggest liar was missing. Rose could hear everyone muttering, wondering if they should proceed without goodwife Mary Pym, the one who'd started the rumors about Rose in the first place. Mary's absence hadn't stopped them holding the trial.

Yesterday had been such a great day. Rose might have thought she'd conjured Will out of the air but for the fact that she still ached between her legs and went damp at the thought of him. The frog spell should just about be wearing off but Rose had no expectation he'd be waiting for her in the forest because the spell would make him forget he'd been a frog and unfortunately forget her too. For once in her life she'd really done the right thing. Rose gave a heavy sigh.

"She's casting a spell!" a voice shrieked.

Rose wanted to roll her eyes but imagined the hysteria that would bring and didn't. She wished they'd just hurry up and do it. She squeezed out a few tears to make it look as though she cared.

"I am innocent!" she cried. Maybe it would give someone a guilty conscience that would last down the generations. Serve them right. "Please, someone save me."

A frog hopped onto her foot and slipped under her dress. Rose gulped. *Will?*

"Silence, Witch," Potter shouted.

Pastor Smith began listing her many crimes—again. Giving Good Widow Sand a carbuncle on her nose—served her right for refusing to pay Rose what she owed. Curing two children of toothache—what was wrong with that? Yes, she’d needed to use pigs bones but it worked, didn’t it? Making Pastor Smith fall in love with an ass. Rose swallowed her giggle. At least she’d only made him kiss the beast. On the lips. A guffaw escaped and Rose tried to make it look like a cough. Then the crime that had condemned her, Mary Pym’s claim that Rose had fornicated with the devil. As if.

“If thou art a witch, thou wilt float to the surface,” Potter said, and out of sight of the rest, loosened the rope that held her to the chair.

Without the rope around her waist and the rock on her lap, she might well have floated. Air would be trapped in her gown and up she’d pop like a cork. Guilty. As it was, even with the rope loose, she’d be stuck in the chair and definitely drown, proving herself innocent. *Wonderful.*

The frog gave a loud croak and Rose swished her skirts over it. If it *was* Will, she didn’t want them claiming the frog was her familiar and stamping on it. From the sudden flurry of activity, Rose guessed they’d decided they couldn’t wait any longer for Mary Pym. Rose noticed Mary’s husband hadn’t raised the alarm about her disappearance until he’d found a suitable scapegoat.

“Art thou ready, Widow Thorne?”

“No, I ate less than an hour ago. I shouldn’t go swimming.”

Down the chair went, taking her with it. These people had no sense of humor.

As duck ponds went, it wasn’t too bad. Situated at the end of the millrace, the water was better than some mud baths she’d been dunked in. The chair descended and she raised her hand for a quick wave at the faces staring down before they disappeared from view. It was murky at the bottom but her eyes soon adjusted. The frog hopped out from her skirts and swam a little way away to join two more tucked at the base of a rock. Not Will then, yet the three sat and watched her.

Rose reached for the knife she'd sewn into the lining of her dress and cut the rope around her waist. She slid off the chair and put the rock on the seat. A few lead weights sewn into the bottom of her dress would ensure she stayed down. Lucky she could hold her breath for twenty minutes. They really ought to come up with something better than rope to secure the condemned. An iron bar would have caused her more problems. Rose made a mental note to sew a rasp in the lining next time, just in case some bright spark had an epiphany.

She spotted a rather pale and bloated goodwife Mary Pym sitting waiting for her, securely tied to an old plough Rose had found half buried in the silt. Likely murdered by her husband – and who could blame him for wanting rid of such a shrew – but Rose didn't like bodies to go to waste. It wasn't easy maneuvering Mary onto the chair but Rose pinned her in place with the boulder and retied the rope. Then she settled on the bottom and waited.

Around her in the gloom, Rose could see other bodies. Goodwife Jane Merrick floated in the reeds, swaying with the grasses. Forbidden to dance in life, she was making up for it in death. Pastor Smith had rocks attached to her legs before she'd been thrown in. Rose snorted and sent a stream of bubbles to the surface. She'd tried to warn Jane but the woman wouldn't listen.

Rose started as the chair suddenly rose. She smiled to herself. This should be good. She heard muted screaming and scraps of distorted conversation. *"Dear Lord. She's turned into a hideous monster. Good Lord, she's changed into Mary Pym."* They could tell the difference? Rose giggled, then slapped a hand over her mouth to stop the bubbles.

As soon as the flare of torches had gone, she slipped the lead weights from her skirts and rose through the water to pop her head above the surface. Misty. Where had that come from? No one around. Rose swam across the pond and crawled out.

She made her way to the spot where she'd left a change of clothes the day after she moved into Eastchester village. No way of knowing how quickly any place would take

to accuse her of witchcraft. The shortest time had been a week, the longest seven months.

Usually, the idea of moving on and continuing her search filled her with enthusiasm. Not this time. Rose had found what she'd been looking for. A man to love and she'd had to push him away. Oh God, she'd not just pushed Will away, but turned him into a frog, albeit temporarily. Could she risk hanging around and trying to find him? How could she not? But she wasn't stupid. Will would have to wait awhile. She needed to get as far away as she could by morning, then sleep until nightfall.

Rose rubbed herself dry and dressed. As she made her way through the forest, the mist grew thicker yet her hands were able to brush it aside like a veil. When she looked behind her, she couldn't even see a light from the village. *Weird*. The quiet snicker of a horse froze her mid-step.

Before Rose could move, a strong arm wrapped around her chest and a hand clamped over her mouth. Her heart bounced between her throat and her stomach. Not with fear. Soft lips caressed her neck, rough stubble grazed her shoulder. Rose closed her eyes and turned in Will's arms. How had he remembered her? How had— His tongue speared her mouth as he tugged her into his embrace. Rose was instantly wet for him, desperate for him. Never breaking lip contact, his fingers skimmed her body, thumbs brushed her nipples, hands roamed her back and her clothes dissolved under his touch.

What? Then he was naked too and lifting her onto his cock and Rose cared about nothing else. She sighed into his mouth as he slid into her. His hands squeezed her hips as he drove his cock up and dragged her down. Rose began to come from that moment, pinpricks of sensation shooting from her inner core as she tightened around him in convulsive spasms. His mouth consumed her, his body overwhelmed her. Rose gasped her cry into his throat as she spiraled toward the nearest she'd get to heaven. The mist whirled around them like a tornado. *Magic!* Her last cohesive thought before every

sense shattered. She dragged his climax into hers as they clung to each other, united, merged as one.

Rose opened her eyes and looked into his face. "I love you."

Will smiled. She knew what he was. She'd forgotten and now she remembered. His scent. His eyes. Fae. Another like her. *Hers*. It *had* been Will in the pond, making sure she escaped.

"I'm ready to go home," Rose whispered. "I've found what I was looking for."

Will cocked his head.

"The perfect frog," she said.

He opened his mouth and gave a loud croak.

Rose slapped him 'round the head. "That sounds nothing like a frog."

"Yes it does."

"Oh, you can speak. I've gone off you now."

Will laughed and pulled her into the mist.

About the Author

Barbara Elsborg lives in West Yorkshire in the north of England. She always wanted to be a spy, but having confessed to everyone without them even resorting to torture, she decided it was not for her. Vulcanology scorched her feet. A morbid fear of sharks put paid to marine biology. So instead, she spent several years successfully selling cyanide.

After dragging up two rotten, ungrateful children and frustrating her sexy, devoted, wonderful husband (who can now stop twisting her arm), she finally has time to conduct an affair with an electrifying, plugged-in male – her laptop.

Her books feature quirky heroines and bad boys, and she hopes they are as much fun to read as they are to write.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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