

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

MARRY  
ME, *Marietta*

CINDY  
SPENCER PAPE

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

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Marry Me, Marietta

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# *MARRY ME, MARIETTA*

Cindy Spencer Pape

*Dedication*

This story is lovingly dedicated to the memory of a lovely young lady.

Lara Anne Panches

10/4/1989 to 2/12/2009

You touched the hearts of more people in your short nineteen years on earth than  
you could have ever imagined possible.

## **Chapter One**

*Wingate Village, Devonshire  
March, 1862*

Marietta James hurried through the village, keeping her face turned down to avoid the rain. Why she hadn't brought her umbrella, she wasn't sure, but she always seemed to forget the thing on the days it actually rained. If she carried it skies would be clear. Now her one reasonably nice bonnet would likely be ruined, and there would be no money to replace it until next quarter day.

The click of her boots on the cobblestone streets and the rolling thunder in the distance made the village square a noisy place indeed this afternoon. She'd left for home at her usual time, but the storm had darkened the skies enough that it could have been midnight. Her heel turned on a cobble and she fell, bruising her hip and splashing mud all over her skirts.

"Fabulous," she muttered. There was a crack of thunder and she barely heard the approaching carriage in time to scramble out of the way. The conveyance racketed down the lane, its driver heedless to others less fortunate in their modes of transportation.

"Thank you, Mr. Winstead." The youngest scion of the local lord was a reckless lout—she was surprised he hadn't wrecked the new carriage yet. Picking herself up, she brushed what mud she could off her skirts and continued on her way. As the coach turned the corner, she heard a loud yelp then a thump. The carriage continued on.

Marietta scurried to the corner and saw the animal—a large dog—lying beside the road. As she drew closer, she began to make out its pale color and distinctive shape.

"Oh no. Not Monty." She knelt beside the dog and laid her hand on its side. In the dim light of the streetlamps, her fears were confirmed. This was indeed the faithful companion of the family who lived next door to Marietta's small cottage. What had

Monty been doing out in such a storm? The good news was that his chest still moved. Monty was hurt but alive.

Marietta paused a moment to consider her options. She could take the dog to his owners, but if he was gravely injured, that might be traumatic for the Denslow children, especially little Lara, who had been gravely ill and doted on her faithful companion. She could take him to her own small house, but she would have no idea how to care for him. Another house that was closer held Monty's best chance for survival. Marietta didn't care for Doctor Adam Hamilton, but her feelings were of no importance. She should run to Dr. Hamilton's house for help.

She stood then paused. She hated to leave him lying so close to the road, even for the few minutes it would take. She'd have to carry him herself. Carefully, she gathered the injured dog to her chest and lifted him. He was heavy but she managed. Marietta had grown up on a working farm—she was no fragile village maiden. Not for the first time she gave thanks for her sturdy build and her sensible, if unfashionably loose, stays. With slow, careful steps, staggering only a little, she carried Monty down the darkened street toward the doctor's residence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam lounged in front of the crackling fire in his front parlor, reading a medical journal when he heard something banging on his front door. It sounded less like a knock and more like a muffled kick. Knowing that anyone out on a dreadful day like this must be in serious need of his services, he hurried to the front door of his small house and yanked it open.

"I'm sorry, I don't treat animals," he began when he saw the small woman with the big dog in her arms, standing on the step. He couldn't see her face behind the bloodied yellow fur, but the animal had to weigh nearly half what she did.

"Please, Doctor. It's Monty, the Denslows' dog. Alfie Winstead just hit him with his carriage."

*Oh hell.* “Come on in.” He recognized the voice now, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t give a rip about the snooty little widow, but he did care a great deal about little Lara Denslow. He’d just barely been able to save the child after last winter’s pneumonia and he knew she was still weak. Losing her best friend could give the girl a major setback.

He took the dog and hurried to his surgery. When Marietta James followed him in, he saw she was limping just a bit. Her skirts were torn and covered in blood and mud up to her waist.

“Did the carriage hit you, as well?”

“No, I simply fell when I jumped out of the way. I’m fine.” Her sharp gaze darted curiously about the room before landing back on Monty. “What can I do to help?”

His housekeeper and assistant had both left this morning for a two-week holiday, so he had to admit another pair of hands would be useful. “Wash up in the sink over there,” he murmured as he lit the lamps around the examining table.

She removed her sodden cloak and bonnet, tucking them tidily out of the way as she rolled up her sleeves and began to wash. Meanwhile, Adam checked the dog’s heart and respiration rate, relieved to find both of those indicators seemed normal. While he didn’t normally practice on animals, he had studied dogs a bit—mostly to placate his mother, who loved her Dalmatians almost as much as her offspring.

Mrs. James stood across from him, her hair hanging in wet clumps and her cheeks red with cold. Her jaw, however, was firm as she looked at him with her big brown eyes. “What would you like me to do?”

“Fetch the kettle from the stove and fill a basin with hot water,” he said. “And bring me several of those cloths from that shelf.”

Carefully, Adam palpated the dog’s limbs and trunk. One broken leg, but no major injuries to the torso or head, thank God. He turned Monty over and examined the nasty gash on his left flank. Almost instantly there was a basin of water at his right hand and a stack of clean linen at his left.

Monty's eyes fluttered open as Adam began to wash the wound. Instantly, the woman stepped to the dog's head and stroked his ears, murmuring softly to the beast while simultaneously holding his shoulders still so Adam could work.

"Good dog, Monty. There's a good boy." Her voice was sweeter than he'd imagined, deep for a woman's but soft and kind.

"Can you reach that bottle of ether?" The graze was full of mud and debris—cleaning it would not be easy, and he didn't want Monty to bite his rescuer in a moment of pain.

"Of course." A quick flutter of movement and the glass bottle was in his hand.

He dampened a cloth with a few drops of the anesthetic and handed it to Mrs. James. "Hold this in front of his nose for a few moments."

She did, soothing the patient until his eyes drooped closed. "He's unconscious, Doctor."

"Alcohol." He didn't stop to wonder at the comfort with which he'd started treating her as his assistant. Moments later the bottle of ethyl alcohol was in his hand. She stood beside him, dampening cloths and dealing with soiled ones until he had the wound cleaned. He told her where the suture needles were located, and had her hold the skin together while he stitched. Through it all, she didn't flinch.

He'd set the bone and was wrapping the splint on Monty's foreleg when the dog stirred again. Marietta James held the animal's head until he was done bandaging. Then he dosed poor Monty with a few drops of laudanum and sighed.

"That's all we can do. If infection doesn't set in he should be fine."

"Thank you," Mrs. James said in a voice that was suspiciously shaky. "I can't pay you until quarter day, I'm afraid..." She collected the used equipment and began returning things to where she'd found them. The used basin went in the sink while unused linens and bandages were rerolled and returned to their places.



“You don’t owe me any money,” he told her. “I’m fond of Lara Denslow myself. Honestly, I feel in your debt for your assistance. You aren’t by any chance a trained nurse, are you?” He thought he remembered that her late husband had been a soldier. Had she followed the drum and perhaps tended wounded on the Peninsula?

“Nothing so useful, I’m afraid.” She leaned against the examining table and studied the dog. Her softly arched brows knit together in worry. “Just a farm girl who often pitched in when there were livestock emergencies.”

“Well, thank you.” That also helped explain her carrying the dog to his house. Most women of his acquaintance couldn’t have lifted the dog, let alone managed more than a few steps, carrying its unconscious weight. He finished washing his hands then gathered Monty up in his arms. “If you’ll help me lay a blanket in front of the fire, I think I’ll keep our furry friend with me tonight.” He led her back to the parlor and its warm hearth. Though he always kept the stove burning in his surgery, that room was nowhere near as warm as this.

She took a blanket from the back of a settee and folded it, laying it on the rug before the grate. Adam carefully placed the unconscious dog on the pad, checking pulse and respiration one last time. Then he turned to face his unpaid assistant.

“Mrs. James...” Adam paused as he looked at her plump, pretty features. She shook from head to toe and her lips were blue. “Damnation, woman, why didn’t you say anything?” He took her icy hands in his and began to chafe them. The woman was damn near frozen. Her hands were also scraped from her fall, though she’d cleaned them well enough in the surgery that they should be safe from infection.

“N-not imp-portant,” she stuttered. “But if I c-could sit by the f-fire for a m-moment...”

“Here.” He pulled an armchair up as close to the grate as he could without disturbing Monty and pushed her down into it. Almost immediately he pulled her back up again. “No. You should get you out of those wet clothes first. I’ll go upstairs and

fetch you something to put on. For now, take those wet things off and wrap up in the blanket. I'll stay on the stairs until you're ready for me to return."

She didn't argue, which Adam took as a sign that she was dangerously chilled. His encounters with Mrs. James had been few, but she'd never struck him as a woman who hesitated to say her piece. She'd always seemed to set herself above the other residents of Porter Street, though given her care for Monty he was now beginning to doubt his impressions. Perhaps what he'd taken for coldness had really just been reserve.

She stood obediently. As he turned to dash up the stairs, he tried not to imagine her hands releasing her heavy bombazine skirt.

He had a warming brick on the hearth in his bedroom and a kettle full of hot water on the stove in his kitchen. He fetched the brick first, wrapped in a towel, along with a pair of woolen socks, his flannel dressing gown and a clean nightshirt, which had been hung near the fire so it was warm.

He hurried down the stairs, pausing just before he entered the parlor. "Can I come in?"

"If—if you would," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm afraid I'm a bit...stuck."

"What's the matter?"

"My hands are shaking and I've managed to put a knot in my laces. If I could borrow a knife?"

"You're soaked through to the skin, aren't you?" He rounded the doorway and saw her standing in her corset and petticoats. When she didn't respond, he continued. "Idiot woman. If you can't manage laces, do you think you'd be safe with a knife?"

"Oh bother. Can you help?"

It was horribly against protocol, but then so was letting her catch a chill. At least she was a respectable widow, not a young girl. Resolutely, Adam stepped to her side and took the recalcitrant laces into his hands, trying mightily to focus his eyes on the knot and not on any part of her voluptuous curves.

“S-sorry.”

“For what?” he gritted between his teeth. “For not getting run over completely, or for rescuing a little girl’s pet? I didn’t take you for a fool, madam. Try not to act like one. No apologies are necessary.”

Once he had her corset unlaced, he turned his back while she finished undressing, handing her his shirt and dressing gown over his shoulder. Once she assured him she was swathed in fabric, he turned back and wrapped her in a quilt off one of the settees and guided her cocooned body down into a chair, noting her wince as his hand accidentally grazed her hip. He removed her boots and the stockings she’d rolled down to her ankles then covered her icy feet with his socks and tucked them up into the blanket with the hot brick. “Now sit here and don’t move. I’ll go make a pot of tea and be right back.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Here, drink this.”

The warm sound of a man’s voice woke Marietta from her doze. She was too tightly wrapped in her blanket to move, but she opened her eyes and looked up at the big, handsome face of Dr. Adam Hamilton.

He was tall and fit with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Thick shocks of golden-brown hair waved back from a strong, chiseled face. Darker gold brows arched over vividly blue eyes and a day’s growth of whiskers softened the sharp lines of his jaw. Looking at him made her feel warmer than the rock at her feet.

“The tea will help warm you from the inside,” he told her. “You need to drink it.”

“All right.” She maneuvered her hands around and found an opening in her cocoon. Though she’d stopped shivering outright, her hands weren’t quite steady as he handed her the fragile china cup, so he wrapped his fingers around hers and guided the cup to her lips. The flavors of strong tea and honey filled her mouth and she wrinkled her nose. “Sweet.”

“Prefer it plain, do you?” His lips twitched with amusement. “So do I, but the honey is good for you right now. Finish this and your next cup can be plain. Have you eaten tonight?”

She swallowed another sip. “No. I was on my way home to do so.”

“Well, finish your tea while I go pull my supper out of the oven. Knowing my housekeeper, she left me more than enough to share.”

Marietta thought about calling him back and telling him not to bother, but it really felt so nice to be warm, or at least almost warm, that she couldn't seem to find the energy to argue. Besides, she couldn't walk home in a man's dressing gown and the thought of putting her wet clothing back on had her shivering all over again.

For the last two years she'd done her best to ignore the handsome doctor living just a few houses down from her little cottage. She knew he came from wealth and privilege, which frightened her more than she liked to admit. Her experiences with the scions of nobility had all been negative. Never again would she put herself in the power of a man who thought he was entitled to whatever or whomever he desired.

And yet here she was, virtually naked in his parlor. He hadn't attempted to take the slightest advantage. Marietta knew she wasn't all that attractive—she was short and plump with unfashionable straight dark hair and brown eyes. He'd also called her an idiot, so it was clear he wasn't interested. Either way, it appeared that having a meal before she went back out in the cold would be safe. As her own housekeeper only came twice a week, there was no one waiting for her who would worry.

Maybe she should get herself a dog. A cat would be easier, but a dog was better company. She wouldn't feel so alone in the house at night with a dog, either. Living alone was something she'd never really gotten used to, not even after eight years of widowhood.

“Supper is served,” Dr. Hamilton said, returning to the room. He pulled a small table in front of Marietta after sliding poor Monty off to the side. The lamp and ashtray from the table were set on the desk in the corner then he strode back into the kitchen.

He returned with a tray piled high with two bowls of steaming stew, a loaf of bread and a pot of tea.

“Ha. It looks strangely like the supper I’d planned at my house,” she told him as she sat up and rearranged her blanket so her arms were freed but her lap was modestly covered. “Our housekeepers must follow the same guidelines.”

“Well, mine is off visiting her daughter.” Dr. Hamilton pulled up a straight chair on the other side of the table. “Along with her son Thomas, my assistant.” He set one bowl of soup in front of Marietta, took one for himself then handed her silver and a bread plate.

“Convenient having both of them in your employ.” She took a sip of the hearty beef broth, full of meat and vegetables. “And I must say, yours is the superior cook. This is divine.”

“Or you’re simply starving so that anything tastes like manna,” he offered. “Though she is good.”

They sat in awkward silence for a while. The only sounds were the clink of spoon on china and the crackle of the logs in the hearth.

“After dinner, I’d like to examine your hands and your hip,” he said about halfway through the meal. “What you did, carrying him all that way, after you’d been hurt yourself—it was a truly generous thing to do.”

Marietta paused with her spoon halfway to her mouth. “Thank you, Doctor. But it was nothing any charitable person wouldn’t have done. And my injuries are nothing to worry about. Scrapes and bruises, nothing more.”

“No thanks to the Honorable Mr. Winstead,” he grumbled. “Lord Wingate needs to take that young hellion in hand before he kills someone.”

“I won’t argue with you on that score,” Marietta acknowledged with a shiver. “I’ve no use for spoiled rich boys who believe the world belongs to them.”

“Nor do I,” he replied with a strange, speculative gaze. “But what about well-to-do young men who use their good fortune to help others?”

He was talking about himself. If Marietta could have untangled her foot from her wrappings, she was sure she’d have found it in her mouth. “Well,” she said, scrambling for the right words. She was still slightly muzzy so it was difficult. “I think if one has the resources to do so, then assisting others is an admirable way to use them.”

His smile then was brilliant, warm and open, and shocking her to her mostly warm toes. “Exactly, Mrs. James. Which is why I stay here, I suppose. I could afford a more affluent practice, but I wouldn’t be needed there, not the way I am here. While I might make more than quilts or chicken pies in fees, it wouldn’t be nearly as rewarding.”

Marietta’s view of the man was changing rapidly. She’d assumed that he charged more than her neighbors could afford to pay for his fine clothing and fashionable carriage. Had she been wrong? For the first time she looked at the blanket wrapped about her and realized it was a quilt—and a very familiar one. “Did Ella Denslow make this?”

He nodded. “She insisted on paying me something after Lara’s recovery last winter.”

“I thought so. I have one just like it at home.”

One dark gold brow arched in question, as if asking what she’d done to earn it. “I know you were with Lara through the crisis of her illness,” she said. “Didn’t you wonder where the other four children were?”

“Mrs. Denslow said they were with a neighbor...ah.” He smiled again. “It seems we have more in common than we thought, Mrs. James.”

She shrugged, though she was sure her own lips twitched with amusement. “Ella is a widow with five children. I am a widow with none. She occasionally allows me to borrow hers.”

“Of course.” Now his grin was downright conspiratorial, as if he knew she only phrased it that way so Ella didn’t think she was imposing when Marietta minded her children. “So tell me, what were you doing out in such weather?”

“I teach three days a week at a school for orphaned girls,” she admitted. “As you said, if one has the resources to help, one should do so. My skills are not as grand as yours, but it is rewarding to teach girls how to read and cipher so they can get jobs in shops rather than...”

“Than on their backs,” he said bluntly. He raised his teacup in salute. “And I think that is a grand thing to do, as well.”

“Thank you,” She couldn’t believe she’d told him so much.

“I’m familiar with the school—I’ve treated a few of the students from time to time. It’s a good place.”

Of course he had—he was the only physician in the vicinity. “I’m sure they all appreciate your time, Doctor.”

“Adam,” he said unexpectedly. “My name is Adam.”

“Oh.” She blinked, unsure how to respond. Then she saw his smile again and returned it. “Marietta.”

“Such a pretty name,” he said.

Marietta laughed. “Which is usually followed by ‘for such a plain brown wren’. But thank you...Adam.”

“Plain? You? Clearly they need their eyes examined. There’s nothing plain about you at all.”

His outraged glare was so convincing, Marietta felt warmed all the way through. Though it could have been from the soup, the rational part of her brain argued. “You’re a true gentleman. Thank you.” At that, another damp strand of hair fell loose from its pins and dropped across her cheek. The texture of it was so fine she often had trouble getting it to stay in place.

“Are you warm yet?” He gathered their empty plates and loaded them back onto the tray.

“Yes.” Marietta moved to assist him, only to have him shake his head at her.

“Stay where you are. I’ll be back in a moment to see to your hands.”

He whisked the dishes off then she heard bottles clink in his surgery before he returned with a fresh basin of water, a clean cloth and a bottle of iodine. He inspected her scrapes, daubed them with the antiseptic then gently blew on them to ease the sting.

“I told you they were nothing,” she said with a tremor in her voice that had nothing to do with the pain and everything to do with his nearness.

“Hush,” he reproved. “We both know they hurt. Now I know it may sound scandalous, but I really should see your hip.”

She felt her face flame. “That isn’t necessary, Doctor. I promise ‘tis only a bruise.” It was hard to get the words past lips gone suddenly dry.

“Unless you’ve recently taken a medical degree, I ought to examine it. Over here on the settee. It is too cold in the surgery.” He helped her stand then unwrapped the blanket from her waist and legs.

Marietta allowed him to lay her on her side on the brocade-covered settee. With the blanket over her legs, she carefully tugged the dressing gown up until there was a three-inch gap, revealing the bruise. She squeezed her eyes shut as his gentle fingers probed the tender skin. She winced when he touched her hipbone, but she didn’t shriek.

“It’s a deep bruise, but I don’t believe anything is broken,” he said finally. His deep voice had gone husky and soft, leading Marietta to believe he might be feeling some of the same jumbled emotions she was suffering. He slid his hand slowly down the length of her leg as he covered it back up. “You might want to rest it for a day or two.”

“I don’t think I’ll be running any races tomorrow.” She shifted to sit upright on the settee, taking in the fine view of Adam Hamilton in his shirtsleeves by firelight. “But I



should be getting home, I suppose." Being this close to the doctor was causing her head to spin and making it hard to breathe.

"The storm has only worsened," Adam said softly. This time his hand reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "You should stay. And though I should be horsewhipped for what I'm thinking right now, I promise you'll be safe."

He wanted her. Her heart beat a delighted tattoo in her chest. It had been a long time but she still recognized desire, both when she felt it and in the eyes of the man looking at her so intently. Yearning throbbed low in her belly as she gazed back at him.

Could she? She'd never once been tempted to cross the boundaries society placed on unmarried women. But now, here with Adam, the temptation was more than she could bear. Surely just this once she was entitled to remember how it felt to be a woman, wanted by and wanting a man.

She knew she would regret this impulse later, but it had been so long and she'd been so alone. Gathering all her courage and throwing caution and reason aside, she smiled at him. "And what if I'm not concerned about safety? I'm not an innocent, Adam. And I'm not your patient."

"But you're not..." He continued to cup her cheek with his hand and she ached with her need to feel those strong fingers all over her body.

"Not what? Loose? No. There's been no one since Jack—my husband—died. But that was eight years ago." And he'd been abroad for the last year and a half of their brief marriage, so it had really been more than nine.

"Eight years? Did you marry at twelve?"

"Sixteen. Thank you though. I'm twenty-six. And you?"

"Thirty-two. And never married, if that matters."

"Being not married *now* matters." When had she grown so bold? Suddenly nervous, she looked down at her iodine-covered hands.

“Marietta, will it insult you if I ask you to stay?” He carefully removed the remaining pins from her disheveled coiffure “I should like very much to do so.”

She swallowed hard then looked up to meet his eyes. “I should like that too.”

## **Chapter Two**

Adam's kiss was mesmerizing. It had been years since Marietta had been kissed, but she was sure she'd never before experienced anything so beautiful.

He tasted of tea, of the dinner they'd shared, and of something else she couldn't define. His scent was rich and masculine with just a faint citrus tang from soap or cologne. Whatever it was, the combination made her swoon. His lips were gentle at first as he shaped her lips with his and cupped the back of her head with one big hand. His other hand dropped to her thigh. He nudged the dressing gown aside, branding her cool skin with his warmth. Marietta clutched his shirtsleeves, holding on for dear life as she melted under his caress.

Her body softened and moisture pooled between her thighs. She opened her lips, welcoming the thrust of his tongue as he swept inside, tasting her and claiming her. He stroked it gently along her cheeks and tongue, as if memorizing every nook and cranny. Her breasts swelled, her aching nipples rasping against the fine cotton lawn of the shirt she wore and she leaned closer, intent on rubbing them against the hard planes of his chest.

"Are you warm enough," he asked huskily when he drew his mouth away from hers.

She blinked at him. She'd forgotten all about being cold. Between the crackling fire, the warm meal and the heat radiating from Adam's body, she was warm as could be. "I'm fine," she said. Then she gathered enough courage to lean forward and kiss him this time.

Adam's strong arms wrapped around her as he tugged her down off the settee to straddle his lap. She went willingly, desperate to be closer. The kiss continued

unbroken as he settled her astride his knees, bringing her bare mound against the prominent bulge beneath the rough wool of his trousers.

Marietta slipped one hand up under Adam's shirt, smoothing her palm along the firm surface of his muscled back. Her other tunneled through his wavy hair. Their tongues chased one another back and forth, and they pressed their bodies as closely together as possible through their clothing.

Eventually that veiled contact wasn't enough. Adam insinuated his hands between their bellies and untied the knotted belt of his dressing gown then pushed it down off Marietta's shoulders. He tugged his shirt up over her head, leaving her completely bare. His lips kissed a line down her neck to her collarbone then lower still to capture the furred peak of one of her breasts.

"Adam," she cried. She clasped his head to her nipple. Oh God, it had been so very long since she'd been touched and probably never with this kind of reverence. His tongue lashed the tender bud as he suckled. Marietta's belly tightened as pressure built in her womb and moisture slicked her thighs. When he stopped, she cried out in protest until he moved to lave her other breast, causing her cry to turn into a moan.

He kept up the onslaught until her breasts ached in time to the throbbing between her legs. Then he lifted her up off his lap and stood. Pausing only to arrange the quilt she'd been wrapped in on the floor near the fire, he pressed her unresisting body down onto it then stood, gazing at her intently as he sat to remove his boots.

"You are lovely," he said as she started to cover her heavy breasts with her arms. "Don't hide from me."

"I'm a bit..." she began, "stout, I know. I'm sorry."

"Why should you be sorry? What man would want a wasp-waisted woman when your curves are so natural and healthy? Not to mention extremely feminine and very, very delectable."

Her heart skipped a beat then she remembered another concern. "Adam," she began, licking her lips. Her thoughts had only just cleared enough to remember why

this was a dangerous course of action. “Do you have...something to protect us? Surely as a physician you have access to...” she hesitated on the word, one a lady shouldn’t even know, according to society’s dictates. But as they taught the older girls at the school, society liked unwed mothers even less. “Condoms?”

His eyes, which had been so heavy, flew open. “Of course. Forgive me for forgetting.” Barefoot and with his trouser buttons gaping, he hurried across the room and into his surgery, returning moments later with a paper packet in his hands.

“These are not foolproof, Marietta,” he warned. After stripping off his shirt and trousers, he knelt beside her on the quilt and opened the packet.

Marietta was too intent on staring at Adam’s naked body to pay much attention to his words. The man was magnificent, a golden god in the dancing firelight. His frame was lean and toned, without an ounce of fat to soften it. A light pelt of dark gold curls covered his broad chest and narrowed down to a thin line that bisected his flat stomach before thickening again to surround his genitals. Her heartbeat raced as her gaze followed that line then took in the sheer size and beauty of his erection. The fact he was clearly aroused – and by her – took her breath away.

“You must promise,” he said as she watched him roll the French letter on, “to inform me at once, should our precautions prove ineffective.”

“Of course,” she said, barely registering his words. She was too intent on watching him cover himself and wishing it were her hands doing the job. It was one of the new rubber condoms which stretched, requiring no strings or ribbons to tie it in place like the older-style ones made of sheep’s gut. She’d read about those, though she had never seen either kind in person.

Once sheathed, Adam moved to kneel between her thighs. Marietta expected him to simply spread her legs and take her, had even closed her eyes in preparation for the invasion. Her lids flew open again in shock as she felt him slide his hands beneath her buttocks and his lips kissed her mound.

“Delicious,” he murmured, using his tongue to trace the seam of her nether lips. “So warm and wet. Is all that for me, my beauty?”

Her face flamed. Who else? But she only nodded. This type of loving was entirely outside her limited experience.

“Your taste is exquisite – sweet yet salty and perfectly spiced.” He used his thumbs to part her folds as his tongue delved deeper, penetrating her opening then sweeping up to tease her taut clitoris.

Marietta clutched at handfuls of the blanket while he licked and sucked at her. Her entire body trembled with the pleasure that coiled deep inside. When his lips closed around the taut nub of her clitoris and sucked, the dam burst, sending rivers of pleasure coursing through her being, filling her from fingers to toes.

“Beautiful,” he whispered. He kissed her muff gently until the tremors ceased then wiped his chin with his hand as he leaned up to taste her lips.

Marietta wrapped her arms around his shoulders and returned his kiss with a hunger that would have been embarrassing if she hadn’t been too far gone to care. She tasted herself on his lips and tongue, and the unique flavor only ignited her further. Instinctively she bent her knees to create a better cradle for his hips as the tip of his cock nudged at her entrance.

Leaning up on one elbow, he used his other hand to position himself. He rubbed his erection against her cleft, wetting the thin rubber membrane. She expected it to feel strange, unnatural, but all she could feel was the strength and heat of him even through the sheath.

“Please,” she murmured, canting her hips upward hungrily. “I need you.”

“No more than I need to be inside you,” he replied. He moved his arm to balance his weight on either side of her body then laced his fingers through hers, holding them just above her head. Slowly and with carefully controlled strength, he pushed inside her wet heat, filling her completely.

“I wanted to go slowly,” he said, kissing her eyelids as he withdrew to the very tip then slowly surged forward until he was touching the tip of her womb. “But I’m not sure I will be able to. It has been a long time for me, Marietta, and you are so wondrously tight.”

She wanted to tell him that fast was fine, but all that came out was a whimper as he repeatedly thrust in and out of her clutching channel.

Adam’s entire consciousness was focused on the softness of the woman beneath him and the hot clasp of her snug muscles as they rippled around his cock. Her orgasm had never completely stopped, so her sweet little cunt fluttered around him like a thousand tiny fingers, even through the rubber of the condom.

How had he ever mistaken Marietta for snooty and straightlaced? She burned for him like a flame now that she had discarded her reservations. Her dimpled cheeks sported a rosy blush that went all the way down to her generous breasts, and her eyes were the color of the richest chocolate, dark and sparkling. Her lips, plump from his kisses quivered as she gasped for breath. Her hips rose eagerly to meet his every thrust, taking him deeper than he’d ever been, or it least it felt that way to him.

In no time at all his control broke. He pounded into her, fucking her for all he was worth. Their fingers knotted together above her head, thrusting her luscious breasts up to him like a feast. He bent his head and sucked one rosy tip into his mouth. Her nipples were as ripe and delicious as fresh berries and nearly as dark a pink. Her walls clenched around his shaft as he sucked deeply, letting him know she loved that attention. His cock shuttled faster and harder until he felt her tense then shatter around him. The fierce clamp of her cunt milking him was enough to slam him into release. He held himself deep as he cried out her name and poured himself into the sheath, spurting so long and hard he feared it would break.

Spots danced before his vision as he collapsed, barely mustering the strength to roll to the side rather than crushing the woman beneath him. He rolled her with him as he

reluctantly withdrew from her welcoming body. She cuddled against him, sweaty and limp, her head pressed tight to his heaving chest.

“Thank you,” he whispered long moments later when he was able to speak. “That was – amazing.”

“Thank *you*,” she mumbled into his chest. “I had no idea it could be like that. The best I’d ever known before was – nice. This wasn’t nice at all. It was astonishing.”

Her late husband had been a dolt, Adam concluded. Though medical literature decried the existence of natural female sexuality, he’d never ascribed to that theory. His youthful education at the hands of a lusty chambermaid had been too thorough to leave him any doubt about feminine desires and orgasms. While many of his colleagues may have felt threatened by healthy, lusty women, Adam considered them fools. It was a lucky man indeed who found a partner who matched his desires.

He shifted his lower body away from hers to remove the spent sheath. The tip was full of fluid with no sign of leaks, making him breathe just a bit easier. He looked around for a way to dispose of it discreetly but found none, so he untangled his limbs from Marietta’s and stood.

She lay warm and smiling in front of the hearth, but he could see her eyes droop and knew she’d be chilled very soon. Covering her with his unfolded dressing gown, he hurried to toss the rubber condom in the kitchen dustbin. When he returned, Marietta was dozing.

Well, she needed it, but he couldn’t leave her here by the hearth. He pulled on his drawers and trousers then quickly checked on his patient. Monty still slept peacefully by the grate, just a few feet from his savior. Moving as cautiously as possible, Adam bent and lifted Marietta into his arms. She smiled up at him groggily.

“Time to go, so soon?”

“Time to put you to bed, madam. You need a good night’s sleep to combat the chill you took from the rain and cold.” He walked to the stairs. Odd how much he was



looking forward to seeing her dark hair spread out across his pillows. They'd only just finished and he was already hardening again.

"I need to go home," she said reluctantly, pulling her head from his chest to look him in the eyes. "The neighbors can't see me leaving in the morning. At least now, in the rain, they won't likely be watching."

He paused, just a few feet shy of the stairs. "I'm more worried about your health than your reputation."

"I know, and that's admirable. But a widow's reputation *is* important, Adam. I like Porter Street and I like this village. I don't want to have to move away because I've been branded a light skirt."

"Fine." She was right of course. Unless he wanted to be putting a ring on her finger inside a fortnight, he should take her home right now. So why didn't that prospect seem as frightening as it should? "But we're bundling you up in some of my clothing. You're not putting your wet things on again. Even if we're spotted, no one will know what you're wearing under my oilskin coat." Honestly, he doubted if anyone would even see so much as her fingertips or the toes of her boots.

"Thank you." She grinned ruefully. "I'll hide them from Mrs. Durnst and bring them back to you tomorrow when I can come quite openly to check on Monty."

He carried her up to his bedroom, cursing himself for being a noble idiot as he handed her a shirt, a heavy woolen jumper and his smallest pair of trousers. Then he left to fetch the rest of his own clothing, which was still strewn all over the parlor floor. He knew he'd never resist temptation if he walked back into his bedroom, so he dressed in the parlor.

Looking down at the rumpled quilt on the floor, he winced. He couldn't believe he'd taken her on the floor. She'd said he was her first lover since she'd been widowed, and on top of that, she'd been tired and injured. Adam cursed himself. Marietta might not have been reared to a life of privilege like he, but she was a lady, through and

through. She deserved a bed at the least. Not a blanket just a few feet away from an injured dog. Not him, rutting like a deranged animal.

He pulled on his shirt, stockings and boots, his mind immediately forming a plan. He fully intended to see Marietta again—all of her. One sample had simply not been enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marietta woke the next morning feeling cold and stiff. She'd had the most astounding dreams...

Except they hadn't been dreams—at least not all of them. Her skin heated as she remembered lying with Doctor Hamilton—Adam—and everything they'd done.

At least, thank God, they'd taken precautions. Though she'd never conceived during her short marriage to Jack, she couldn't be sure she was barren. Having a child so many years after her husband's death would hardly be considered miraculous. And what a terrible example she would set for the girls at the school she tried so hard to help.

Her hip was sore as she climbed out of bed. Adam had suggested she rest as much as possible today, and though she had things she'd intended to do, she rapidly came to the conclusion that he was right. Her nose was stuffy, and just making tea and toast hurt her abraded hands. By the time she was dressed and had cleaned up her breakfast dishes, she gave up and retired to her favorite chair with a book. Her housekeeper Mrs. Durnst found her there a little later, dozing over the pages.

"Just came from the doctor's house," the older woman said as she brought Marietta a cup of tea. "He told me you'd fallen last night, saving the Denslows' dog from Mr. Winstead's carriage."

"Did he?" Marietta flushed. Surely that's all he'd said. She hoped that Mrs. Durnst wasn't clever enough to read any more into the situation.

“Aye. Told me to remind you to stay off your feet today and keep those hands dry. No baking for you today, missus.”

“No, no making bread today.” It was a weekly ritual she enjoyed, but she could afford to buy from the bakery instead, as long as she wasn’t extravagant. “How was Monty? And what were you doing at the doctor’s? Is everything all right?”

“Aye, fine.” The housekeeper added a log to the fire in the grate and swept a few imaginary flecks of ash back off the hearth. “Mrs. Gordon asked me to stop by in the morning to check on him while she’s away for her daughter’s confinement. Lucy Mason and Aggie Sellers are trading off fixing his supper.”

Marietta recognized the names of the other domestics on the street. One was like Mrs. Durnst, who had two or three houses she cared for on a rotating basis, while the other was the live-in servant of an elderly man several houses down. It was nice to know they were all helping take care of Adam while his own housekeeper was out of town.

“And the dog is fine, mum,” she chattered on. “Doctor says he’s taking him back to the Denslows later today. A right good thing you did, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Thank you. But all I did was take the dog to Dr. Hamilton. He’s the one who saved him.”

“And assisted in the surgery, as he tells it. Not to mention carrying a dog who weighs near as much as you do, through a storm.”

Marietta felt herself flush. “Well, I’m glad he’ll recover. Monty is a good dog. I wonder how he came to be out on such a dreadful night. The Denslow children must have been worried sick.”

“I reckon he had a meeting with that mastiff bitch of Mr. Woodruff’s,” Mrs. Durnst said with a knowing smile. “Wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a litter of pups in the neighborhood not too far down the road. Ah well. I’m off to finish sponging those wet clothes you left hanging in the kitchen. Next time, you just leave them for me to wash,

as well." Then she bustled off, back to the kitchen, leaving Marietta alone with her thoughts.

Had she left any telltale signs of her impetuous behavior at Adam's house? He'd collected all her hairpins and clothing and carried them here when he'd brought her home last night. Then he'd gone to tell Ella that Monty was safe while Marietta changed out of his clothes and into her nightgown. On his way back home, he'd stopped and gathered his belongings, only coming in as far as the rug by the kitchen door. Her lips still tingled though from the way he'd kissed her before striding back out into the night.

How could she have let herself make love to Adam Hamilton? Certainly she missed the pleasures of the marriage bed, though now she had begun to suspect that she'd never really known what pleasure could be found. Adam was the scion of a noble family, whether he admitted it or not, that truth could be seen in his clothes, his speech and every mannerism he possessed. Marietta had learned her lesson about getting involved with that kind of man. Never again. She'd barely escaped intact last time, and this time she would have nowhere to run.

### **Chapter Three**

Adam was sulking. There was no other word for it. He'd tried for a week to spend some time alone with the delectable Marietta James and had not managed so much as a moment. The woman was avoiding him, and Adam could not for the life of him determine why. All he knew was that he wasn't going to tolerate it for long. After just one night, she'd come to mean far too much to him to let her go without a fight.

He'd stopped by her home the day after the incident in his parlor, ostensibly to tell her that Monty was recovering nicely and to check on her injuries. While she appeared a little worse for wear, her housekeeper had hovered in the doorway, acting as chaperone, and after checking her hands, he'd left her in Mrs. Durnst's care with a bottle of cough syrup and instructions to fetch him should her cold turn worse. That was the last he'd seen of her for several days. He'd spotted her a time or two walking in the street, either to the school where she taught, or to the butcher's or grocer's. After that first day she walked without a limp, so he assumed she was fully recovered. When he tried to stop her to chat, however, she simply nodded politely and scurried by. No question about it, Marietta was ignoring him.

He sent his last patient on his way and set his temporary assistant Jeremy Dobbs to scrubbing down the surgery. Jeremy was a pleasant lad, off for medical school in the fall, but his lack of experience meant more work for Adam, and the week had been a long one.

The sound of a knock at the surgery door broke into his thoughts. Swiftly he crossed to the door and opened it. A young girl, maybe ten years old, stood on the stoop, her hair wild, her eyes frightened.

"Me mum's having the baby," she told him. "She says you must come quick."

“Right away, Adelaide,” he told her. He reached for his coat and bag. “Come along, Jeremy.”

“A-a baby?” The lad gulped? “M-m-me, sir?” His tanned complexion went chalk-white.

Adam shook his head. “Fine. You stay here in case someone else comes. If it’s an emergency, you can come let me know. Otherwise, tell them to come back tomorrow. Understood?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Rolling his eyes, Adam followed the girl out of his house and down the street.

He reached the Collins’ modest home just a few moments later, hustling little Adelaide into the house ahead of him. “Where’s your mum, Addie? Upstairs?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “I’m to watch Freddie, Mum says.”

Christ, he’d forgotten that there was a boy somewhat younger than Adelaide. He supposed she was old enough to keep her little brother quiet. Normally Mrs. Gordon and Thomas accompanied him to these things to assist, especially if no other neighbors had taken the other children home with them. He followed the girl up the stairs to where he could hear the Mrs. Collins trying to soothe her son.

As he entered the small bedroom, the frantic woman looked up from her bed with relief in her eyes while a boy of maybe five sat on the floor with a handful of wooden soldiers, complaining that he wanted to go outside.

“Thank the Lord you’re here, Doctor. Addie, take your brother out to the garden for a bit, would you?” She looked back at Adam. “Doctor, where’s Mrs. Gordon?”

Oh hell, he’d forgotten for a moment that Nan Collins was too modest to let the doctor examine her without a woman present. This situation was rapidly going to hell on him. When a contraction hit, causing the woman to double over and cry out, both children started to whimper.

Adam hurried to the bed and took Mrs. Collins' hand. "She's away, ma'am. You've only me, I'm afraid. How close together are the pains?"

"No," she cried, squeezing painfully on his hand. "Need...a woman...here... 'tisn't...right." The spasm passed and she panted heavily.

Adam thought frantically for a solution. Nan Collins' husband was a mostly decent man but a dolt. He was a foreman at the local factory and probably wouldn't be home for several hours. He'd probably told her it wasn't right to have a doctor examine her without a woman, and he'd probably take it out on her if Adam defied him. He'd also kept her from making friends with the neighbor women, which was probably why none of them were here now, boiling water or caring for the children.

"Addie, do you know Mrs. Denslow?" he asked.

Adelaide nodded slowly.

"I want you to take your brother to her house and tell her I sent you. Then ask her to send Mrs. James here to me. Do you think you can remember that?"

Addie nodded again, but Adam saw the doubt in her eyes. He let go of the mother's hand, and drew a pad and a pencil from his bag. Hastily scribbling a note he hoped Ella Denslow could decipher, he handed it to the child. "It's just a few houses down, Addie. Take your brother now and go."

He turned to the mother. "I'm going to start some water warming in the kitchen. I'll be back up when Mrs. James arrives. Call for me if you need me before that. It's not worth risking your life or the babe's for a bit of modesty."

The woman nodded and Adam followed the children back down the stairs, watching out the window until they reached the Denslows' walk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marietta pulled the last loaf of bread from the oven and set it on her kitchen table to cool. There. That should see her through the next week. She covered the loaf with a clean towel and sat down in a chair, pushing a stray strand of hair back behind her ear.

“Mrs. James,” a voice called through the open top half of the split kitchen door. Though only March, the day was warm and the heat of the oven was oppressive in the kitchen. “Marietta, Doctor Hamilton needs your help.”

Ella Denslow stood on the step, two children clinging to her skirts, and one—not her own—in her arms. The boy, maybe five years old, squirmed mightily, but Ella held on with all the might of a seasoned veteran. “Mrs. Collins has gone into early labor and won’t let the doctor in her room without another woman present. He’s asked for you.”

Adam had asked for *her*? Marietta’s heart raced as she felt both flattered and frightened all at the same time. “But I know nothing about childbirth,” she protested. “Why don’t I mind the children and you go help?”

Ella shook her head. “No, he asked for you,” she said. “Now be off with you.”

Grimly Marietta stood, barely remembering to wash the flour from her hands before grabbing a shawl off the hook by the door. “Fine,” she mumbled to her friend’s back. “But this can’t be a good idea.”

Seeing Adam at the door of the Collins’ family home only reinforced that opinion. He was still every bit as handsome as she remembered, and when he grazed her hand as he took her shawl, tiny jolts of lightning skittered along her skin.

“Thank you,” he told her. “Judging by the timing and intensity of her contractions, I don’t think it will be long.”

“I still think Ella would have been a better choice,” she said as she followed him up the stairs. “The closest I’ve come to this was helping midwife a horse. And that was over ten years ago.”

“I don’t need an assistant with experience,” he said, pausing at the top of the stairs. “I need someone who understands me and won’t take offense when I bark out orders or run screaming if things get messy. Ella would be a good choice, but I have more confidence in you.”

“Very well.” She snapped a salute. “Your lieutenant is reporting for duty, Captain.”



“At ease, soldier,” he teased back with the wry smile that made her knees go weak. “Now let’s get on with the campaign.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was well past dinnertime when Marietta placed a wrinkly, red-faced baby girl into her mother’s arms while Adam packed up his equipment. The new father had ducked in to inspect the infant, even going so far as to hold his wife while Marietta and Adam changed the bed linens. Once the parents were convinced that their older children were truly welcome at the Denslows for the night, and Adam was assured that both mother and babe were well, the two of them took their leave, walking together toward Marietta’s home.

“Thank you,” Adam said again. “You’re a far better assistant than even Thomas. If you ever need a position, I’d hire you as a nurse in an instant.”

“No, thank you,” she told him. His sincere compliment warmed her heart almost as much as seeing little Maryann Collins held safe in her mother’s arms. “I’m well enough situated on my own, though I’m glad I was able to help.”

“I’m going down to the pub for a bite of supper,” he told her. “I’d like to buy you a meal as well since I know you missed your own.” His arm went around her waist and her traitorous body leaned into his warmth and strength.

She opened her mouth to tell him no just as she hesitated before the steps to her front door. She’d had her one night of wild passion. Asking for more would be just tempting fate. The words that emerged surprised her as well as him. “I’ve a better idea. There’s fresh bread and a chicken pie in my kitchen. Why don’t you come inside and eat here instead?”

Adam caught his breath at the clear invitation in her low, husky murmur. She was inviting him in for more than just food, and he knew she was shocked at her own brazenness in doing so. His heart swelled along with his cock. He wasn’t sure when

he'd begun to fall in love with her, but it was probably right when he'd seen her standing on his doorstep with the dog in her arms. It had been a steep, steady decline ever since. Now all he had to do was convince her of the fact without frightening her off in the process.

"That's the best offer I've had all week," he said cautiously. He didn't want to do anything to frighten her into rescinding the invitation. "Chicken pie is a favorite of mine."

He held the door for her then followed her inside, straight through to the kitchen where five loaves of bread lay covered by towels on the table. He hung his soiled coat on a peg by the back door, taking her shawl and hanging it alongside. Then he watched while she removed her apron. The sleeves of her blouse were rolled up to her elbows and still dusted with flour as well as disinfectant. Her hair hung past her waist in a thick braid, though numerous sable tendrils had escaped to frame her face and neck. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes were bright. To his eyes, she was altogether lovely.

They washed up together with the ease of long-time companions then Adam helped her carry food and dishes into the small dining room off the parlor. Her house was neat and tidy but full of color and comfort, feminine without being fussy. Just like the woman. She blushed prettily when he held her chair, smiled warmly as she poured his tea, handing it over black, without asking if he liked cream or sugar. She remembered every detail of that night, he suspected, just as he did.

"So tell me, Marietta," he began as they ate, "where is it you come from? Your accent is very refined for a farmer's daughter."

"I come from a small hamlet in Kent," she replied. "The vicar's wife was my mother's dearest friend and I was educated with her daughters."

He studied her as she spoke and saw the tension that crept into her shoulders and the tightening of her lips. He knew there was something, somewhere in her background that had hurt her terribly. Perhaps it was simply that she had loved her husband deeply and never gotten over losing him, but he didn't think that was it. There was something

darker, some reason that such a warm woman was so shy when it came to men. "Tell me about your husband, if you would. You said you wed at sixteen? And he was a soldier, was he not?"

"Yes." She stared down at her plate. "Jack was the youngest son of a baron and determined to be a soldier. Six months after our wedding, he was sent to India and I never saw him again."

"You loved him very deeply?" He only hoped the lucky bastard had deserved a woman like Marietta.

"He was my best friend for a little while," she said, a wistful little smile. "He was all smiles and enthusiasm. I was quite swept away, and of course I was sorry he died. He was only twenty."

"I'm very sorry for your loss." That wasn't quite a lie. He was sorry she'd had to suffer, even if he was glad that here and now, she was free. "So what brought you to Devonshire? Do you have family here?"

"There was some—unpleasantness with Jack's family after his passing," she admitted. Her pink cheeks had gone ashy pale. "I felt it was best to remove to a different part of the country."

"What happened?"

"Nothing worth telling," she said. She set her fork down, now not even pretending to eat.

"It is to me," he said simply. He set down his own fork and reached across the table to take her chilly hand in his. "Did they blame you somehow for his death?"

"No. Not at all. His parents barely bothered with their offspring at all, let alone a peasant daughter-in-law. But Jack's older brother is a lot like Alfie Winstead. He honestly believes that being the heir to all he surveys means he owns the people as well. I disliked being cast in the role of poor relation and was even more unwilling to become a plaything. My friend Veronica—one of those vicar's daughters I mentioned—is the headmistress of the charity school here. She offered me a chance to do something useful

with my time. I have a small inheritance from my mother's family plus my marriage settlement, so I had the means. I took the opportunity and have never looked back."

Adam felt rage boil low in his gut, burning its way to the surface. He'd heard her words, but more importantly, he'd read between the lines. "He attacked you." He'd have to go find the man and he'd have to kill him – preferably with his bare hands.

"He tried." She pulled her hand from his and picked up her teacup but her shaking hands caused her to slosh more than she sipped. "I was able to hit him with his own whisky bottle, knocking him unconscious. I took the train to London the next morning then arrived on Veronica's doorstep the following day. One of the school's governors is a solicitor. He helped me transfer my funds and made sure no charges were leveled against me back in Kent."

"You amaze me." He drew her hand across the table to kiss it. "Can you ever trust the son of another lord?"

Her smile quivered, but it was a smile nonetheless, and the weight on his shoulders lightened at the sight. "I believe I already have, haven't I? Who is your father, Adam? A marquis? A duke?"

"Merely an earl," he told her, wanting no more secrets between them. "Haverford. His country seat is not too far away – I visit on occasion, particularly if my brother or sister are there with their families."

"So that's where you go when you disappear for a weekend. I presume your brother is the heir?" There was no judgment in her expression, but she'd shifted to be just a bit farther away. She was withdrawing from him based on his parentage, just as he'd feared.

"He is. Alec also has two healthy sons of his own, to further assure I'm never forced to change professions. Our middle brother served with the Light Brigade in the Peninsula."

"I'm sorry." She was quick enough to infer that Arthur had died—as most had in that unit. That slight acknowledgement of grief was enough to draw her back to him, at least partly.

Adam shrugged. "Life moves on. And happiness, of any kind, is fleeting at best. It seems a shame to waste it when an opportunity arises."

Her tiny smile disappeared almost before it was formed and she quirked an eyebrow at him. "Regardless of the cost?"

"No. Costs should be considered. But if the balance is to the good, then why not? I promise, Marietta, that I will never intentionally cause you pain. Regardless of where the future takes the two of us, neither I nor anyone in my family will ever try to abuse you in any way."

"I'd like to believe you," she admitted. "But I'm not sure about anything, Adam. Except that I want you so badly it hurts."

Her words were so softly spoken he barely heard them, but his whole body responded until he was afraid his cock would burst through the front of his trousers. He looked down at his empty plate and wondered if it were too soon to take her up to her bed.

"I'm glad of that," he said carefully, wiping his hands with his napkin. "Are you still hungry?"

"No." She placed her hand in his and stood. He saw her work to muster a smile. "Mrs. Durnst doesn't come tomorrow, so we can leave the dishes until morning."

He wanted to lean down and kiss the worried frown from her lips, but he knew that if he started something here in the dining room, he'd never be able to stop until he'd had her again. She deserved better this time than another frantic coupling on the floor. Instead, he just pulled her close to his side and moved toward the staircase, carrying a lamp in his other hand. "In that case, my dear, why don't you show me the rest of your lovely house?"

"The cellar, perhaps?" she teased boldly. "Or the attic?"

He tugged playfully on her braid and wagged his eyebrows for effect. "Careful there, love. Saucy wenches are liable to be spanked."

"Hmmm. I've heard that can be...arousing."

Adam stopped halfway up the stairs and gaped at her in shock. "Madam, *where* did you hear that?"

"Another teacher at the school. Veronica hired two seamstresses to teach needlework who used to sew costumes for the London stage." Her cheek dimpled as she grinned up at him. "Listening to them can be verrrry educational."

He was going to die on the spot. His ladylike little widow had hidden depths of passion he couldn't wait to discover. Tugging at her hand, he practically dragged her the rest of the way up the stairs. There were only three doors leading off the small landing and, looking through the two open ones, it was easy to see which was her room and which was the spare. Both were tidy and pleasant, but there was a hairbrush and a half bottle of scent on the one dresser and a dressing gown hanging over the back of a chair. The bedspread was a bit more faded but a brighter, cheerier design, and a patchwork pillow graced the seat of the rocking chair. This, he knew, was where Marietta slept. Thank God the bed was big enough—though barely—for two. He pulled her inside the room, set the lamp down on her dresser and tugged her into his arms.

Kissing Marietta felt like coming home. He moaned as she opened her lips, welcoming his tongue inside. Her taste was as sweet as he'd remembered, and he couldn't believe he'd survived a full week without it.

She wasn't wearing a corset, and that knowledge had been making him hard all afternoon. Even disheveled with flour on her nose, she'd still aroused him, body and mind. Soul too, he suspected.

Her small fingers worked feverishly on the buttons of his shirt and collar then she slid those strong little hands inside and tugged his undershirt up and out of the way. Her touch was like hot silk against his skin and he gripped her round bottom through her skirts with one hand while he buried his other in her silky hair.

Marietta's tongue dueled with his own, giving back as well as taking his passion joyfully. Her belly rubbed against the straining ridge of his erection, making him fear he'd spill before he even got inside her. That was not going to happen, he vowed, not tonight. Tonight Marietta would have the kind of loving she deserved—slow and thorough. He'd make sure she found her pleasure so many times she wouldn't have the energy to send him away.

Finally, desperate for breath, he drew his mouth away from hers and trailed a line of kisses over to her ear then down her throat to the high ruffled collar of her shirtwaist. He had to set her back just a bit in order to insinuate his hands between them and undo the buttons. There seemed to be a thousand of the tiny things and he took painstaking care not to damage her garment, though all his masculine instincts urged him to rip the offending thing away. When he'd opened it from neck to waist, he slipped it off her shoulders, leaving her in a sturdy cotton chemise that bared only her shoulders and arms. Adam growled in frustration then reached behind her back to attack the fastening of her heavy woolen skirt. First thing he had the chance, he was buying her some silk undergarments—very thin silk with lots of delicate lace to frame her beauty and cling to her curves.

While he dealt with her skirt, Marietta made short work of the buttons of his trousers. When the placket opened, she slipped her hand inside and opened the buttons on his drawers as well, freeing his aching shaft. Adam groaned as she took his cock into her soft, strong hands.

"Careful, darling, or that may surprise you," he muttered as she stroked her fist up and down the length of him. He shrugged his braces off his shoulders and pushed his trousers and drawers down to the floor alongside her skirt. Since Marietta was busy exploring his manhood, he took a moment to pull his shirt and undershirt off over his head as well, tossing them carelessly aside.

"Last time," she said breathily, "you kissed me—down there. Would you mind terribly if I wanted to return the favor?"

“Oh God, my love.” Just the thought of her sucking his cock into that hot little mouth brought him close to orgasm. Her clever thumb found the droplet of pre-ejaculate and smeared it around the crown, inflaming him even further. “I wouldn’t mind a bit. But *later*, please. This time I want to be buried in your sweet cunt when I spend.”

“I want that too, Adam.” The coarse word should have offended her but it didn’t—it only aroused her more. She stepped back from him and pulled her chemise off over her head. Her round, full breasts heaved from her panting as she untied her drawers and shoved them down too. She kicked her clothing aside then sat on the bed to remove her stockings and boots, fumbling impatiently at the buttons on the latter.

Adam took a step to help her then realized he was still tangled in his own clothing when he stumbled. He bent to pull off his own boots and stocking, hating that for even a moment he had to look away from Marietta’s voluptuous curves. When he straightened, it was to find her bent over the bed to pull down the covers, the lush globes of her arse pointing at him in blatant invitation.

Unable to resist, he stepped up, bringing his groin flush against her buttocks. She was shorter, so the angle wasn’t right for him to slide inside her just like this, but the cleft of her cheeks cupped his rigid cock and he rubbed it against them, loving the rough friction of skin on skin. His hands circled her body to cup her breasts, his thumbs finding the plump nipples that were already pebbled with desire. He could smell the rich spice of her cream and knew she was already wet and ready to take him.

“Adam,” she cried as he pinched her nipples and rolled them between his fingertips. “I ache for you. I never knew it could be like this.”

“Neither did I,” he told her. One hand left her breast to travel downward and find the creamy heat between her thighs. Her sable curls were drenched, and his fingers slid easily between her swollen lips to find her clitoris, already standing out from its protective hood. “You are the most responsive woman I have ever known. Take your



other breast in your own hand, sweetheart. Feel how good it is to touch your own nipples.”

“Yes, Adam.” She obeyed and held herself up with the other and braced on the bed.

“Do you touch yourself at night, Marietta?” He pulsed his hips, rubbing his cock along the crack of her arse while he inserted one finger into her slippery channel. “Do you pinch your nipples and slide your own fingers into your cunt?”

“S-s-sometimes,” she confessed. “It has never been anything like this though. Nowhere close to what you made me feel the other evening.”

Oh God, that image was almost more than he could take. “Have you ever thought of me while you did so?” He’d masturbated to thoughts of Marietta every night for the last week. It seemed only fair that she had done the same.

“Yes,” she cried. “Even before—last week, I sometimes pictured your face, your hands. Why do you think I avoided you so much? You made me feel things I didn’t want to feel.”

“Fuck, Marietta.” He couldn’t take any more. He lifted her to the bed so she was on her knees with her arse poised right at the edge. It lined up her cunt perfectly. He gripped her hips in both hands and pushed his cock into her tight passage in one long stroke. Once seated, he held himself deep, trying to gather enough breath to move.

“Oh,” she cried. “You’re even deeper this way. Adam, I feel so full, so complete.”

He brought one hand around her belly to toy with her clitoris and the other cupped one of her breasts, kneading as he began to pump into her from behind. He could feel her walls tightening around him as she neared her peak and he pinched hard on her clitoris as he rammed his cock all the way home. Once, twice. On the third stroke she fractured, keening his name as her cunt convulsed around his shaft.

Her pleasure triggered his, and Adam let out a yell too as hot semen exploded out his balls and into her womb, blast after blast until he could barely stand. Long moments later he climbed onto the bed and pulled her against his chest. He wrapped his arms

around her and cradled her close. This was it. He was never going to be able to let her go.

“Adam,” she murmured a few minutes later, when she could almost breathe again. Bravely, she slid her hand down his muscular chest and flat belly to where his cock, still damp with her juices, rested. “Are you awake?”

“If I’m not, then I’m having a wonderful dream,” he teased as her hand closed around his shaft. He was still partially hard, she discovered to her delight. As she stroked his length, he stiffened further, until in moments he was fully erect.

“You don’t think I’m too wanton, do you?” she wondered, hesitating a little before she turned her face into his chest and kissed his warm skin.

“I think I’m a lucky man,” he replied. “Nothing two adults do in the privacy of their bedroom is wrong, Marietta. Not as long as it pleases both of them and no one gets hurt.”

“So you really don’t mind...” She shifted onto her knees and let her lips trail down the thin line of golden hair that ran from his chest down to his groin.

“Dearest, you may touch me, kiss me, in any way you like.”

“Mmm.” She hummed her approval as she tasted the salty musk of his skin. His scent grew stronger as she approached his cock, and the richness of it had her inner walls clenching all over again.

When she reached his penis, she kissed the very base, feeling him pulse in her hand. “Does that feel good?”

“Good. But kissing the tip will feel even better.”

“Very well.” She licked a line up the thick column of the shaft, pausing at the underside of the mushroom-shaped tip. The darker color intrigued her, and she licked her way around the underside of the ridge.

When Adam groaned, she was sure she was doing things correctly. She clasped the shaft in one hand and lightly touched her tongue to the slit where a small droplet of seed was already beading. The taste was odd—salty and bitter—but erotic as well. Cautiously, she closed her lips around the tip and tasted again.

“That’s it, Marietta. Suck the head of my cock into your hot little mouth.”

Her womb clenched at Adam’s frank instructions, and she felt fresh cream slicking the tops of her thighs. After drawing in a deep, shuddering breath, she opened her mouth around him and took the broad, dark head all the way inside her mouth.

“Perfect,” he said with a sigh. “Now suck it, darling. And stroke my shaft with your hands.”

She couldn’t speak, but she nodded, making her head bob up and down on his cock. The taste, scent and feel of him, the sounds of his little gasps of pleasure all urged her on. In giving him pleasure, she was arousing herself to a new level, one that would have been frightening if she hadn’t implicitly trusted Adam to take care of her. Yet at the same time, knowing she had the power to reduce him to a state of speechless quivering made her feel more powerful than ever before.

She sucked deeply, drawing him all the way to the back of her throat. With one hand she circled his shaft and stroked up and down. With the other, she reached down to cup the taut globes of his bollocks, taking in the textures of the crisp hairs and crinkly skin of his sac. She squeezed very gently with her palms, at the same time as she swallowed, caressing his tip with the muscles of her throat.

His groan sounded as if it were wrenched from the very core of his being. “Stop, darling...”

She paused, pulling her mouth away. “Did I do something wrong?” Her heart sank at the thought. She was sure she’d been giving him the kind of pleasure he’d shown her.

“Jesus, no. You’re doing everything right.” He dragged in a ragged breath. “But I’m very close to spending and I didn’t think you’d want me to do so in your mouth.”

“Oh?” She hadn’t even thought about that, she’d just wanted to make him happy. “That’s not healthy, I suppose?”

His laugh was raw but his expression let her know the harshness wasn’t an insult. “Oh darling, it’s fine. Many women don’t care for the experience, that’s all.”

Marietta thought about that for a moment. “Would you enjoy it?”

He reached down, grabbed her shoulders and pulled her up for a kiss. “I’d enjoy anything you wanted to do to me,” he said after he’d finished ravaging her mouth. “And anything you’ll let me do to you. There are a lot of ways to fuck, Marietta, and I’d enjoy teaching you each and every one.”

“Oh.” She felt her skin heat even further and knew she was probably bright pink all over. It amazed her that this wonderful, sensual man wanted *her* and she didn’t want to waste the opportunity. “In that case…” She let her voice trail off as she slid down his chest again to kneel, this time, between his legs.

When she slurped the tip of his cock back between her lips, she swore his ragged groan shook the rafters of her house. She applied herself to worshipping him with hands and mouth, glorying in the way his hips lifted and twitched every time she sucked. Her hands both wrapped around his shaft, tugging in time to the movements of her mouth. With the tip of her tongue, she tickled the underside of his crown.

“Marietta!” With a roar, he stiffened, his spine bowing up off the bed as hot rushes of fluid filled her mouth.

Reflexively, she swallowed, over and over again, as his thick seed poured into her throat. When he was done, he fell back, panting onto the mattress. She swallowed one last time then licked him clean before crawling back up the bed. Her body was so aroused she nearly climbed atop him to impale herself on his still mostly hard cock.

As if he were reading her mind, Adam pulled her onto his chest so she straddled his belly. “I want inside you again, darling. Take me.”

She braced her arms on his shoulders while she rose up above him. Adam held his shaft steady while she lowered herself until the damp head was nudging against her slick nether lips.

“That’s it – take me into your heat, Marietta.”

With a whimper of pleasure, she lowered herself, feeling her flesh part around the blunt tip. Her tissues stretched around his girth, impossibly full and hard again. When her mound rested on the skin of his groin, she forced herself to breathe. She’d never been filled so deeply.

“Now ride me, darling. Use me to find your pleasure.”

Slowly, Marietta rocked forward and back, gasping at the nearly painful sensations. With each pass, she moved farther, took more, and gradually increased her pace. Dear God, this was amazing. She’d never been so in control of her own bliss.

Then Adam reached down and fingered her nub with one hand and caught the tip of one nipple with the other.

Marietta cried out as the multiple stimuli lashed her into a frenzy of pleasure. She ground down on his cock, taking him so deep she could barely tell where she ended and he began. She heard the damp sound of flesh meeting flesh and his shallow breathing, along with her own moans and it sent her crashing over the edge. Sparks flared behind her closed eyelids as she clamped down on him and shattered.

Adam pulled her down onto his chest and held her close, still filling her shuddering channel with his length. He stroked his hands up and down the length of her spine, lulling her into blissful slumber.

“Now you’ll have to marry me,” he said against the shell of her ear some moments later. One of them – she didn’t quite remember which – had managed to pull the covers up over their bodies as the perspiration started to dry. She lazed against his chest, halfway asleep and utterly content. His words created a coil of hope in her chest, along with a knot of worry in her belly. He didn’t mean it. He was just being a gentleman.

“Because we didn’t use a sheath?” she asked. “My courses are due tomorrow or the next day. I’m no physician, but I’m fairly certain that a woman is unlikely to conceive at this point in her cycle. We should be safe.” Which was a relief, yet at the same time a trifle disappointing.

“No, not because of that. Mind you it’s a valid concern, but it hadn’t even crossed my mind. I’d love to have children with you, Marietta, but only if you want that too.”

God, he always knew exactly the right thing to say to smash every one of her defenses. “The neighbors, then? You’re afraid we’ll be caught?”

“Marietta, I don’t know what your village in Kent was like, but I assure you, in most places a widow is allowed some degree of freedom—even a ‘special friend’. Of course the neighbors would find out eventually, but as long as we were discreet and proper in public, no one would care. The people here love you. They wouldn’t begrudge you a bit of happiness, and I like to think they’re fond of me as well.”

“Of course they are,” she replied. That was understood. “Then what?”

Adam rolled her to her back, leaning on his elbows above her. The new position allowed her to see the fierce sincerity in his gaze.

“I want to marry you because I don’t want to sneak back to my house tonight and wake up tomorrow morning alone. I don’t want to have to hide my regard for you, to only be allowed furtive trysts now and again. I’ve fallen in love with you, Marietta. I don’t want to hide that love. I want to shout it from the rooftops.”

He loved her? Her heart beat so fast she was afraid it would burst from her chest. No one, not even her late husband, had ever looked at her with that intensity of emotion burning in his eyes. “But how? Adam, we’ve only known each other—really known each other—for a week. Are you sure it isn’t just lust?” Though it had been enough time for her, she knew. She’d been head over heels in love with him since she’d watched him fight to save a little girl’s dog.

“That’s long enough, it seems. I’m mad for you, my love. About your body, yes, but I’m even more in love with your courage, intelligence and remarkable sense of humor.

With the way you're not afraid to stand up to me and the kindness that lets you teach girls who might otherwise be lost. Say you'll marry me, Marietta. Let me wake up every morning to see the love that even now is shining in your beautiful dark eyes."

"I do love you, Adam. Of course you know that. I don't think I could have let you make love to me if I didn't. But are you sure? Very sure? Forever can be a very long time." Tears of happiness gathered at the corners of her eyes. She was almost afraid to breathe for fear of waking and finding that this had all been a dream.

"Forever with you could never be long enough. I love you. With all my heart."

"Then yes, Adam. I'd love to be your wife."

## **Epilogue**

*One Month Later*

The entire population of Porter Street gathered at the village church just a month later for the wedding. The orphans from the school gazed in awe at the Earl of Haverford and his family while one unusual guest watched the ceremonies from the floor beside a middle pew.

Monty panted happily, knowing he'd done his job. His human was nearly healthy again and he'd managed to do a good turn for two of the people who had helped her survive her illness. While he hadn't intended to be hit by a coach when he'd slipped out that evening to check on Marietta, it had been worth it to bring these two together. They'd acknowledged his help too by inviting a four-legged guest to attend their nuptials.

Later, at the reception in the parish hall, Monty watched as one of the neighbor children presented the newlyweds with a special gift. The squirming mongrel pup was just two months old, but Monty knew his son would be a good guardian for the new family.

He lay down, resting his head on his paws. He'd been fed all kinds of treats—pork chops and steak and even a bit of wedding cake. The bride and groom, flushed with happiness and excitement, waved goodbye from the door, off on their week-long wedding trip to the seashore. His human, Lara, knelt in her best dress by his side, scratching his floppy ear.

Yes, life was good for a guardian angel. Even one with four legs instead of wings.



## **About the Author**

Cindy Spencer Pape has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher and an elected politician, though she swears she got better. Her degrees are in zoology and she currently works in environmental education, when she can fit it in around writing. She lives in southern Michigan with her husband, two teenage sons, a dog, a lizard and various other small creatures, all of which are easier to clean up after than the three male humans.

Cindy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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