

Merrie's Hero
The Strasburg Chronicles – Book Two

By

Pippa Greathouse

©2016 by Blushing Books® and Pippa Greathouse

All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,

a subsidiary of

ABCD Graphics and Design

977 Seminole Trail #233

Charlottesville, VA 22901

The trademark Blushing Books®

is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Greathouse, Pippa

Merrie's Hero

(The Strasburg Chronicles – Book Two)

Cover Design by ABCD Graphics

This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

Table of Contents:

Prologue	5
Chapter One	6
Chapter Two.....	15
Chapter Three.....	19
Chapter Four	27
Chapter Five.....	33
Chapter Six.....	43
Chapter Seven	49
Chapter Eight	58
Chapter Nine	63
Chapter Ten.....	70
Chapter Eleven.....	74
Chapter Twelve.....	80
Chapter Thirteen	86
About the Author	88
EBook Offer.....	89
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	90
Blushing Books	91

Prologue

Strasburg, Virginia, Spring of 1843

Thirteen-year-old Merriweather Thatcher, with her long chestnut ringlets tied in ribbons, gasped as her puppy broke free from her grasp. Strasburg was busy; wagons and carriages, not to mention foot-traffic, were heavy through the middle of town, and Papa had expressly told her not to take her puppy to town. Her vivid sky-blue eyes became huge as she started after him.

"Bailey! Come back!"

But Bailey had seen a cat on the wooden walkway across the street, and he was not the slightest bit interested in coming back.

Screaming, Merrie ran after him. She did not notice the large carriage coming toward her; all she saw was Bailey in the middle of the street, with the Becker's wagon bearing down on him.

"Bailey!" Lifting her skirts high, she sprinted toward the middle of the street.

Mr. Becker had seen her. He was trying desperately to stop the horses to keep them from trampling her, but in a moment, she would be right there, under their hooves.

An arm reached out, grabbing her and carrying her back to the walk.

"No!" she cried out. "Bailey! He will be killed—"

A hard swat landed on her bottom. A deep voice shouted down at her, "Do not dare move, young lady!"

It happened within seconds. She watched, helplessly, as he put her down firmly and ran under the wheels of the Becker wagon. Horses reared, shouts filled the air, a carriage ground to a stop, and everyone raced to the middle of the street to see if he had been killed.

But a moment later, he emerged from under the wagon, with a wiggling Bailey in his arms.

The crowd cheered and returned to their destinations; Mr. Becker, in the wagon, put a hand to his chest, thankful no one was hurt. The carriage moved on.

"Bailey," Merrie breathed, as the wiggling bundle was placed back into her arms. She looked up thankfully and smiled. "Oh, sir! You are my hero—"

Her voice caught in her throat. The face of the man who stared down at her was anything but happy. He was scowling down at her with an unrelenting and forbidding expression. "Take that dog home." He growled, his brown eyes flashing. "And I swear, Merriweather Lynne Thatcher, if ever I catch you out here with him, I will spank you so hard you will never sit down again."

Merrie's eyes were downcast now and filling with tears. But as she raised them sadly to his, they spilled down her face silently.

Francis Adams, the man she had adored for as long as she could remember, had actually struck her bottom, had shouted at her and, worst of all, had threatened her!

A moment later, she turned, running as fast as her legs would go, toward home. Merrie did not stop running until she had arrived upstairs in her room.

Heartbroken, her pent-up tears erupted now in a flood, and she threw herself down on her bed, sobbing.

Chapter One

Six years later, September 1849

Merriweather leaned out the window to see the early autumn color on the hillside, despite the orders from the driver to stay inside. She looked eagerly out to see the mansion toward the right, with fountains and stonework, engraved with the inscription that said, *'The Adams House,'* not far from town. It had always fascinated her, and no less so now. It had not changed at all in the years she had been away. The rose garden was still in bloom, in front of the marble steps.

Francis was the heir and owner now. Her mother had written her shortly after she had gone east to school that the elder Mr. Adams had passed away. He had left everything he owned to his son and only heir, Francis. And what he had owned was substantial.

Merrie scowled. The last time she had seen Francis was the day he had rescued Bailey, her puppy, from under the hooves of Mr. Becker's horses and wagon. She would never forget that day, and certainly would never forget the swat and the scolding he gave her upon the return of her puppy.

She hoped never to see Francis Adams again, *ever*.

Her cheeks reddened at the very thought of it. She had left home in the fall of 1843, a gangly thirteen-year-old, with eyes and a mouth too large for her face, and returned a young lady who was quite beautiful. Her deep auburn hair was still quite long, almost reaching her waist; but she had not, in spite of being gone six years, grown much taller. Her eyes, no less blue than they had ever been, were twinkling with eager excitement at returning home. Her parents had sent her regular letters, along with her close friend, Carlotta, who was soon to be married and moved away from Strasburg. But the letters had been informative; in some ways she had felt as if she had never left home.

Once again, the driver shouted at her to get back inside. She moved inward, slightly, but did not stop looking out the window, in an attempt to see if her parents were waiting for her at the station. If they were not, she would be dreadfully disappointed.

* * *

She could see him now, her tall and sweet papa, waiting in front of the station.

"Papa!" she called, waving out the window, and her father looked up at the sound of her voice, his eyes alight.

"Merriebelle!"

She grinned at his use of her childhood name. She did not wait until the driver descended to open the coach door. Throwing it open, she jumped to the ground, running into her father's arms.

"How is my little Merriebelle?" he asked, lifting her off the ground.

"Oh, Papa, I am so glad to be home!" She giggled, the tinkling of her musical voice drifting. "Is Mother here?"

"No, Merrie. I came to pick you up. Your mother is having tea with Mrs. Greene this morning. You will remember her; Mr. Greene owns the General Store."

Merrie's eyes danced. "All right! I shall be glad to see her! How is Bailey?"

Mr. Thatcher waited for her trunks and put them into the wagon he had left waiting not far away. He turned, then, his face serious. His hands were on her shoulders, and Merrie searched his face.

"What is it, Papa? Is Bailey all right?"

"Bailey is fine, Merrie. I do have some bad news for you, however. Here, my sweet girl. Get in."

Merrie's eyes grew worried.

"I-if Mother is having tea...and you are here...and Bailey is all right...then..." She paused. "Papa, *what is it?*"

"It is the house, Merriebelle. It has burned. We did not think a letter would reach you before you left school. Your mother and I are staying with Aunt Syl and Uncle Herman at the present, until a new one is built."

"Ooh...Papa. I am so sorry! Do..." She bit her lip. "Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Herman have room for me?"

"I shall not lie to you, Merriebelle. It is tight. But Aunt Syl insists that you are welcome. And it is only temporary, until the house is rebuilt. Drew Carson and his men will start on it next week. She did not have room for Bailey, however—"

Merrie gasped. "Please, Papa—you did not give him away—"

"No. He is staying with Carlotta Abbott—who is very anxious to see you. Bailey is an older dog now, Merriweather. And too lazy even to chase their barn cats. But he seems quite happy there." He leaned over and hugged her. "Carlotta wishes you to visit her this afternoon, if you can."

"I would love to see her, Papa. But—later? After I see all of you?"

"Agreed."

Her father had pulled up in front of the tiny house belonging to Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Herman, and Merrie immediately jumped down, ignoring the 'tsk' of her father. Uncle Herman descended the front steps, enveloping her in a bear hug. And tiny Aunt Syl, trailing behind him, offered Merrie her cheek.

"Do come in, child," she said, smiling. "I am sure you need rest. We have put a cot in the library for you, so you may have some privacy. And lunch will be served shortly."

"Yes, ma'am. That will be fine." She obediently followed.

Her trunks were in the library by the time she had reached it. There was enough room to squeeze by them toward the window. The cot would have to be folded for use during the daytime, she realized. A pang of homesickness hit as she realized that her bedroom and all of her furnishings were gone for good. But there was no help for it now. And her family was safe; that was the most important thing.

* * *

Marilyn Thatcher appeared at the door and looked her daughter over carefully.

"Ooh, my little darling! You are even more beautiful than when you left. How could you have changed so? Come up and see where your father and I are staying."

Merrie followed meekly upstairs, as her mother's words tumbled over each other, trying to explain what had happened. Bailey, it seemed, had knocked over a lantern late in the evening, which caught the curtains. One thing had led to another and before they could get help to save the house, it was gone.

"But you and Papa got out—and that is what's important." Merrie's eyes were wide.

"But I must tell you, my darling, Carlotta wishes you to stay with her until her wedding, and you would be wise to accept. You will not be happy in the library, I know it. Syl is sweet, but it is just too small for you; there is no place to even unpack your trunks. Now. Tell me how you have been."

Merrie giggled. She settled on the bed, and when her father came up to get her, he found her sitting on the bed, facing her mother, with her legs curled up under her, giggling and telling stories about school.

"My girls," he said, leaning his head in. "Aunt Syl has lunch for us downstairs. Hurry!"

* * *

By three o'clock, Carlotta's groom, along with Mrs. Abbott, were taking her out to their country home. Carlotta had chattered all the way.

"We have your usual room for you, next to mine, Merrie! I know you hate being away from your family, but you will be so much more comfy here! Did you know there is a ball tonight? I wrote you about it."

Merrie's eyes were dancing. "Yes, but you did not say where it was."

"It is a surprise." Lottie was grinning. "You will know when we get there."

Merrie eyed her friend. "Lottie? I am not sure I will like this kind of surprise..."

But her friend only laughed and hugged her fiercely. "If your gowns were consumed in the fire, I have one you can wear. Come up to your room with me."

Merrie had settled into the room, chatting with Carlotta the entire afternoon. Her hair was left down for the ball, since time was short, and ribboned with tiny flowers in a vivid blue to match her eyes and her dress.

"Oh, Merrie! You look so beautiful!" Lottie was watching her pirouette in the middle of the room. "It is so good to have you back."

"But you, my friend, are about to leave." Merrie put her lower lip out in a pout.

"Not for a month yet. We have much time to catch up before then. And then, David and I shall be glad to have you visit. He promised that you are welcome any time. Are you ready?"

"Yes!" She leaned forward, whispering, "This is my first ball, Lottie! Pray I do not make a fool of myself."

"Merrie, you will not. I have faith in you. Since David is in Boston until the wedding, I shall probably not be dancing much this evening, anyway. But it will be good for the gentlemen of Strasburg to know you are back, will it not?"

Merrie rolled her eyes and made a face at her friend, as they approached the carriage. Peeking out the window, she noticed the direction the driver took.

"All right, all right, my friend. Now, will you tell me just where this secretive ball is taking place?"

"No. You will see when you get there." Carlotta was grinning, but was also determined.

Merrie leaned back and sighed. "You, my friend, will be the death of me. I know it."

A giggle erupted from the seat across from her.

"And in addition, I was asked specifically to bring you with me."

A look of dismay overtook Merrie's face.

"Lottie..." Her eyes widened. "Not Dudley Overton. Please tell me it is not—"

"No." Lottie was hooting with laughter now. "I would not do that to you, my dear friend. Stop imagining nightmares. You will see, soon enough."

Merrie's stomach began to feel queasy. Dudley Overton had also been writing to her while she was away at school. She had befriended him before she left home, only to be plagued with letters from him that eventually had turned into love poems, then love letters, and she had finally had to write back to try to let him down gently. His return letter had seemed angry and abrupt. There had only been one letter after that one, and Merrie had thrown it away, instead of opening it.

"You are killing me, Lottie," she muttered under her breath.

"Not so, Merrie Thatcher. I believe you will be pleased. Now. Close your eyes and relax. You had a long trip back, and we shall not be there for at least ten minutes."

Merrie eyed her friend suspiciously. But she was forced to admit, she *was* tired. Leaning her head back against her side of the carriage, she closed her eyes, her long thick lashes resting against her cheeks.

When the carriage began to slow, a few moments later, Carlotta reached across and touched her arm, gently.

"Merrie?"

She moaned, slightly.

"Merrie, we are here."

"Go away... I want to sleep," she whispered, without opening her eyes.

"Oh dear." Carlotta looked toward the driver, who had opened the side door. "I had forgotten how soundly she sleeps," she said, concerned. "Merrie?" Her voice was louder now.

"Carlotta? May I help?" a deep voice spoke behind the driver.

"Yes! I cannot convince her to awaken, sir."

The tall, blonde, wavy haired, muscular man entered the coach, grinning. And stared down at Merrie Thatcher, unable to move his eyes from her face.

* * *

A grin spread slowly across his face, as he reached down to pat her cheek. His voice deepened. "Merriweather Lynne? Wake up, young lady."

"No..." she said, frowning. "Go away."

His laugh pierced her sleep, and she opened her eyes and blinked.

He sat down next to her in the seat and took her shoulders, pulling her into a sitting position. "Merriweather? You are about to miss your very first ball."

Merrie stared at him, still half asleep. Suddenly, her eyes opened wide and she inhaled sharply.

It was Francis Adams.

There was no place to go. Merrie stared wide, into his dark brown eyes, realizing he was as amused as she was dismayed. Her shoulders grasped in his hands, she tried to back away, but it was futile.

"And where do you think you are going, young lady?"

Her eyes flashed suddenly. But she said nothing. He pulled her forward, giving her no choice but to rise, and lifted her out of the carriage, setting her on the ground, gently.

"Here you go, Merriweather."

She bristled. Forcing herself to speak, she looked up at him.

"Thank you, sir." She turned back to give Lottie a '*How could you!*' look and then turned back to Francis, lifting her chin. "And my name... is *Merrie!*"

He threw back his head and laughed, and Merrie glared at him, horrified. Then she turned and ran toward the house as fast as she could.

But a glance up at the front of the house as she approached told her all she needed to know.

The marble engraving on the front of the house read, "*The Adams House.*"

So he was the one holding the ball, she thought in dismay. She hurried past the butler, who bowed deeply when he saw her.

"Good evening, sir," she called out. She had been in the house only once, but hurried down the hall, following a trail of guests. She was looking for a place to hide but suddenly realized she was in the ballroom.

Merrie froze.

It was full. The music had not yet started. Desperately, she began to look frantically for another exit.

"Merrie Thatcher! Your mother said you were back!"

Merrie turned to see Mrs. Greene. "Yes, ma'am. I just arrived this morning. It is good to see you, but I fear I must be excused—"

But it was too late. Already, there were several ladies who had come over to speak to her; she was surrounded now. They were asking questions, giving compliments, mentioning nephews and sons that they wished to introduce. Merrie looked from one to the other, trying to smile, but fighting the urge to cry. She needed desperately to disappear.

"Excuse me, ladies. I believe I shall capture Miss Thatcher for the first dance."

Merrie closed her eyes. *It was Francis' voice.* But the loud, incessant voices of the ladies surrounding her began once again, and she turned to face him. The look on his face was amused.

"Come, Miss Thatcher," he said, holding out a hand.

Merrie took it, her cheeks crimson, and Francis promptly took her onto the dance floor and nodded toward the orchestra. They began a slow, soothing melody.

She could not bring her eyes upward to meet his. "I...suppose I should thank you," she said, quietly.

"Because I rescued you from the matchmakers? Yes, indeed you should."

"You are doing a waltz for the first dance, sir? Not a minuet?"

Francis raised a brow. "My ball. My choice of music. You prefer something more difficult?"

"*No!* No. I just..." She looked away.

"I owe you an apology, Merriweather. I asked Carlotta to bring you. I feared if I asked you, you might refuse."

"*Oh.* I see." It sounded lame, even to her.

"So do not blame her for bringing you without telling you."

She was moistening her dry lips, still unable to raise her eyes.

"Tell me, Merriweather—"

"*Merrie.*"

"Merrie," he acknowledged. "Are you still upset with me for threatening you, six years ago?"

She gasped, unable to believe he had actually brought it up. Pulling free from his arms, she took a step back.

But Francis, seeing how close she was to one of the staff with a serving tray full of champagne goblets, reached for her. When she saw his extending hand, she quickly backed up another step.

That is when it happened.

Francis could not reach her quickly enough to prevent it. The servant, with his back turned, did not realize until it was too late that Merrie was right on top of him and turned just in time to have the whole tray of full goblets knocked completely out of his hands. As it went flying, the ballroom erupted in gasps. Merrie, seeing the chaos she had caused, cried out in embarrassment. Francis reached for her once again, but she evaded his grasp and disappeared into the crowd.

And ran.

The house was large; Merrie took twists and turns, until she realized she was in the bath off the ladies' parlor. She ran inside, thankful that it was empty, and hid in one of the stalls, covering her face with her hands and sobbed.

How could Carlotta have done this to her? She had never, ever, been so embarrassed, not even in school, when the headmaster, for a series of ridiculous pranks, had caned her in the office. She thought now, she would rather have been punished a hundred times, than to have to go through this evening again.

Merrie leaned back against the wall, wondering if there was a way possible to be able to get out to the coach and hide out there, until the ball was over. She was quite sure Francis would never wish to speak to her again.

She heard the door open, then close again. "Merrie?"

It was Carlotta's voice. "Merrie, it is me—Lottie. Are you all right?"

She did not answer. Trying to keep silent, she held a hand to her mouth.

"Merrie, I am so sorry. I should have told you that the ball would be here. Francis wanted to see you, and he told me not to tell you, but..." She paused. "I should not have listened. I never thought this would be so difficult for you. If I had, I would have stayed home."

"Lottie," she choked out, finally. "It—is all right. I am—just embarrassed at causing the servant to drop the champagne—"

"Francis tried to reach for you, to prevent it," Carlotta said softly. "But you were too fast for him." She was grinning now; Merrie could hear it in her voice.

Finally, she stepped out. "I had no idea that was why he was reaching for me," she said quietly. "Oh, Lottie! I have ruined a perfectly good ball."

Carlotta reached for her, hugging her. "I am sure that is not the first time the staff has ever spilled champagne." She giggled.

Merrie was giggling now, too. "But, I think, my dear friend, I shall go out to the carriage and wait this out. Please promise me that you will enjoy the rest of the evening?"

"You may try it, Merrie. But you know Francis would come out looking for you."

"Then I shall find some place in the house where I can hide." Merrie frowned. "Someplace where he cannot find me."

Carlotta's expression was incredulous. "It is his house, you know. I think he would find you."

"Trust me. I shall be able to find a spot." Merrie lifted her chin.

"All right. Good luck, my friend," she whispered.

Slowly, Merrie opened the door and peeked out. Seeing no one, she took a few steps out of the ladies' parlor, toward the hallway leading to the front of the house.

She had just turned the corner when she saw Dudley Overton approaching.

Instantly, she turned away, putting her back to him and closing her eyes.

He cleared his throat. "Miss Thatcher," he began, quite loudly. "I would like to command—"

"

Her eyes opened in fright. *Of all the people she had not wished to see here! Could it possibly get any worse?*

But Francis Adams' tall figure was standing in front of her now. His expression of amusement was gone. She looked up as if to say, "*Help!*"

"My apologies, Mr. Overton. I believe Miss Thatcher and I have not finished our dance. Later, perhaps..."

Before Merrie knew it, he had pulled her back out onto the dance floor, holding her to him closely.

"And those eyes," he said in her ear. "Voiced a silent call for help if ever I saw one."

"Thank you, sir," she whispered. "I so did not wish to see him."

His arm was still firmly about her waist; but he leaned her shoulders back, slightly, looking down into her eyes. "I was the lesser of the two evils, then?"

Suddenly, unable to stop it, she let a giggle escape.

"Ah. That is much better." He smiled. "I promise you I shall not let you back into any more of the champagne."

"I am sure they will avoid me for the rest of the evening." She shook her head.

"It would not be the first time one has dropped a tray. Do not be dismayed. I shall watch over you carefully."

This time, she raised her eyes to his, curious to see if he was poking fun at her. But there was no hint of it in his gaze.

"May I ask for every dance this evening, Miss Thatcher? To keep your former suitors away?"

"How—sir—did you know?"

"Your eyes do not lie, Merriweather. It was evident."

She lowered her gaze. "Am I that transparent, then?"

His grin flickered over her face.

"Yes, indeed, you are,"

"Ooh..."

"Should I marry you, do not think that you would ever get away with trying to lie to me."

Her eyes flew to his at that, wide. "I—do not understand you, sir."

He pulled her closer. "*Oh, but I think you do.*" He glanced to the sidelines to see that Mr. Overton was not far away and carefully guided her to the other side of the ballroom. "Are you thirsty, Miss Thatcher?"

"A little, sir," she admitted. He guided her to the refreshment table and handed her a glass of punch.

"For you."

She giggled, suddenly. "I was hoping for champagne." Her dimples were teasing now.

"Ah. No champagne for you, little girl." He added, "And do not take long to drink your punch. Mr. Overton is heading this way."

She took a gulp, handing the glass back, and he set it down. A moment later, they were back out in the middle of the floor. When he looked down at her, however, her chin was lifted defiantly.

"I assume, young lady," he said into her ear. "There is a reason for those defiant eyes I see? Is it because I called you a little girl? Or because, perhaps, I would not allow you champagne?"

"I am not a little girl, sir," she said.

"You are nineteen."

"I—yes. How did you know that?"

"Carlotta told me."

She scowled.

"And you may remove the scowl. I asked her or she likely would not have told me."

"Well, *still*..." she trailed off.

He leaned back somewhat. "Are you always this difficult, Merriweather Thatcher?"

"I am not difficult, sir," she retorted.

"Indeed, you are. I believe I shall have to work with you on being less so."

She stiffened. "And how, sir, do you intend to do that?"

She grimaced, wishing she had thought out her question before speaking.

"Do you wish me to demonstrate, young lady? Here, in the middle of the ballroom?"

"I..." She gulped and glanced around at the crowd of people. "I do not think so...sir."

"That bothers you, I can see. Here comes Mr. Overton again. And Charles Wilmington. You must avoid *him* at all costs, Merriweather."

She exclaimed in dismay. "I agree, sir. I have heard stories..."

He frowned. "Shall I take care of the situation for you? Unless you wish to dance with these men."

She shook her head. "I do not."

"All right. Then be silent, Merriweather." He waited until Mr. Overton approached and asked if he might cut in. "I do apologize, Mr. Overton, Charles. But I believe her card is full for the rest of the evening."

Mr. Overton politely returned a bow and backed away. Charles looked indignant.

"I believe, Francis, that is against etiquette."

"So it is. Enjoy your evening, Charles, and tell your parents greetings from me."

Charles frowned but bowed, after a moment, and left. Francis, leaning down, said softly in her ear, "You do realize you are now forced to dance the rest of the evening with me?"

She grinned. "You are my hero, sir. I shall not mind."

"I can rescue you from everyone except Father Michael."

She looked up. "He is here? I have not seen him."

"He is. So is my friend, Geoffrey. But I shall not allow him to dance with you, either." He was grinning now. "I prefer to keep you to myself. And you have not answered my question, Merriweather."

She frowned up at him. "I shall not answer any questions unless you address me as Merrie," she said defiantly.

"This defiance needs working on, I see. But I am up to it."

She looked away. "And what was your question, sir? I seem to have forgotten."

"It is whether or not you have forgiven me for threatening you, six years ago. *Merrie*." His emphasis on her name, along with the question, brought another blush.

"Well..." She bit her lip. "I suppose, since you have rescued me three times this evening—"

"Four."

"Four." She nodded. "I think it would be rude of me to continue to hold it against you." Her eyes were twinkling now.

"Yes." His were twinkling as well, "It would, indeed."

* * *

Carlotta was already in the coach when Francis escorted Merrie out and put her inside. He had asked permission to see her again and to take her for a ride Sunday afternoon after Mass. Merrie agreed, without hesitation. He bowed over her hand and returned to say goodbye to his guests.

Carlotta was grinning when Francis closed the door.

"Well, Merrie?"

Merrie stared back, blankly. "Well?" she echoed.

Her friend merely threw back her head and laughed. "The ballroom floor, in Francis' arms, is a unique place to choose for hiding from him," she said, grinning. "But I did get a chance to hear what some of the local girls thought about him dancing every dance with you. It was not pretty." She was giggling now and added, "But oh, Merrie, *it was choice!*"