

**I always enjoy taking a peek into the future to see how my characters are faring. John and Bathsheba, the hero and heroine of my third book, *My Favorite Countess*, are on their way to a party on Christmas Eve. It will turn out to be special evening for both of them, one that fulfils a long-held dream for Bathsheba. And isn't that one of the fantastic things about the holiday season? That sense of wonderful possibilities is so much a part of Christmas Eve!**

## **Yorkshire**

### **Christmas Eve, 1818**

Bathsheba Blackmore pressed a hand against the carriage window, peering out at the frigid Yorkshire dales. The view, flat and dreary at this time of year, was fading into ghostly oblivion under a gentle but steady snowfall. After glancing uneasily at her husband, she fussed with her velvet muff, rearranged her lap blanket and silently scolded herself for being a nervous ninny.

John set aside the small book on blood disorders he'd been reading and cocked an enquiring eyebrow. "Is something wrong, my dear? You seem a trifle anxious."

"Heavens, no," she responded instantly. John rarely displayed even the slightest hint of nerves. A physician and scientist, he approached every problem with a steady calm and an incisive intellect. The only thing he ever truly worried about was her, and Bathsheba hated that. Before their marriage she'd caused him a whole host of problems, and on their wedding day she'd silently vowed to never do so again.

John studied her for a few moments, amusement lighting up his silvery-grey gaze. When his mouth quirked into a knowing smile, Bathsheba capitulated. "I can never hide anything from you, can I?" she grumbled in mock complaint.

"It's a most annoying habit, isn't it? Now, tell me what's wrong."

"I'm just being silly, but I'm not very fond of travelling in bad weather."

John glanced out the window. "It's not that bad and the road is perfectly safe. I would never expose you to any danger, my love, you may be sure," he said with a reassuring smile.

Bathsheba's stomach fluttered with girlish pleasure. They had been married for over a year and she still couldn't believe her good fortune. Not so long ago, she'd been one of the most powerful and sought after women of the *ton*. She'd also been vain, selfish, short-tempered, and wildly unsure of herself, all flaws that her handsome and talented husband had overlooked. That struck her as a miracle on the level of Moses parting the Red Sea.

And if she was still occasionally sharp-tongued...well, John didn't seem to mind that either, especially since any arguments they had were usually resolved to their mutual satisfaction in the bedroom.

“If we do end up in a ditch it will be your fault,” she replied. “But I’ll be willing to forgive you *if* you agree to discuss the plans for the new charity hospital with Lady Randolph. Honestly, that woman’s head is as hard as marble, and nothing I say about the architectural designs makes the slightest dent.”

It still felt odd to think of the former Miss Elliott as Lady Randolph. Bathsheba had once held that very same title, courtesy of her first husband, the fifth Earl of Randolph who had died some years back. The title had passed to his cousin Matthew, a kind if rather absent-minded man. Matthew had married Miss Elliott, a strong-minded bluestocking, within weeks of Bathsheba’s marriage to John. To say that the former and the current countesses had differing approaches to life was a massive understatement.

“I’m happy to do so,” John replied, “if you will tell me—”

He broke off when the carriage bumped through a rut in the road then slewed sideways before leveling out. Dodger, the spaniel at their feet, woke with a bark and scrambled up to a sitting position. Grabbing the carriage strap, Bathsheba directed a glare at her husband, who responded with an insouciant shrug.

“Not in the ditch yet.”

“The operative word is *yet*,” she said dryly, then bent to comfort her dog. “Hush, Dodger. It’s just a little rut in the road. If we do end up with a broken carriage wheel, I promise your master will carry you the rest of the way to Compton Manor.”

John snorted. “Not likely. And why in God’s name did you bring Dodger along, anyway? I can’t imagine Lady Randolph will greet his appearance at her party with joy.”

“I know. Animals belong in the stables and barn, not in the house,” Bathsheba responded, mimicking Lady Randolph’s disapproving tones. “But Dodger simply jumped into the carriage and nothing I said could make him budge.” Not that she’d actually tried.

“I suppose this is your way of punishing Lady Randolph for refusing to take your advice,” John said. “Not that I blame you. But you should expect some minor fireworks on our arrival.”

Bathsheba gave him a bland smile, not bothering to deny his observation. She did enjoy annoying Lady Randolph but that wasn’t the real reason she’d let Dodger come along. The dog was her constant companion, faithful, cuddly, and sweet, keeping her company when John was out visiting patients or working in his study. Not that Bathsheba was ever really lonely, not with her younger sister Rachel to care for and a husband who meant the world to her. But sometimes she wished for something more. Something she could never have, and which she had thought herself reconciled to a long time ago.

She wanted a baby, and the older she got the more she longed for one. She’d known for years she was barren, and given the horrors of her first marriage that had been a blessing. But when she met John everything had changed, including her growing desire to be a mother. It was selfish and stupid of her to pine for it, and she would rather die than show John even a moment’s discontent with their life. But that niggling emptiness tapped away at her, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it.

Expelling a sigh, she nudged Dodger with her foot. "I suppose you'll just have to be my ridiculous little substitute," she muttered, more to herself than to the dog.

John gave her a quizzical smile and then looked out the window. "We're arrived. You'll also be glad to hear that the snow has stopped. We won't have to stay overnight at Compton Manor after all."

"Thank God for small mercies. I don't think Rachel would be very happy if we didn't make it home for Christmas Day." Her sister, always frail of health, was at home with a slight cough under the eagle-eyed care of Bathsheba's maid, Miss Boland. Bathsheba had to admit she almost envied Rachel, tucked up in her cozy bed, as John handed her down from the carriage into the wind-whipped evening.

As the butler ushered them in and took their wraps, Bathsheba cast an approving glance around the entrance hall of Compton Manor. The lovely old building hailed from Jacobean times. The panelling of the timbered hall glowed with the rich sheen of beeswax and lemon oil, and swags of fragrant greenery decorated the staircase and mantelpiece. A large mistletoe bough hung from the central chandelier, and gigantic crystal vases filled with white roses and berry-laden branches of holly were scattered about on tabletops. She had to admit that Lady Randolph had done a spectacular job bringing Christmas cheer to the old estate.

"Dr. Blackmore, Bathsheba, here you are," exclaimed a cheerful voice. "We were afraid the snow would keep you away."

Bathsheba turned to meet Matthew, Lord Randolph, accompanied by his wife.

"How delightful to see you," Bathsheba said, giving him a hug. "We wouldn't miss your Christmas party for the world."

Matthew kissed her cheek. "I know you're lying through your teeth, but I'm ever so grateful you've come. My dear wife would have been dreadfully disappointed if you hadn't."

Since Lady Randolph was currently giving Dodger the eye of doom as he frisked about her skirts, Bathsheba had her doubts. When she turned that doom-laden stare her way, Bathsheba couldn't hold back a grin.

"Happy Christmas, Lady Randolph," she said. "I can't tell you how glad we are to be here. Especially Dodger. He simply insisted on coming."

"Indeed," Lady Randolph replied in a sardonic tone. Then she surprised Bathsheba by breaking into a slight smile. "Well, since it is the eve of our Lord's birth we must be charitable. After all, the Christ child was born in a stable, surrounded by animals, so I suppose we can tolerate Dodger's company for one evening. But please do not make such visitations a habit, Mrs. Blackmore."

Bathsheba was spared a reply by the commotion of more guests arriving outside the front entrance.

“That will be the Reverend and Mrs. Spencer,” said Lady Randolph. “Dr. Blackmore, if you would be so kind as to remain in the hall. Mrs. Spencer is bringing you a new patient, one I am most eager for you to examine.”

John’s eyebrows went up. “To a Christmas party? Why didn’t Mrs. Spencer simply send for me earlier in the day? I would have been happy to stop by the vicarage.”

“Because this patient will be staying here at the manor for a few days. She’s an infant, recently come into our care, and I’m reluctant to place her into the orphanage until you can assure me that she won’t pass any contagion on to the other children. Mrs. Spencer and I thought it best she remain here.”

“An orphaned infant?” Bathsheba cast a concerned glance at her husband. “I don’t recall hearing about this. Do you, John?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t heard of the death of any young parents. Who does the child belong to, Lady Randolph?”

The countess grimaced. “Her parents are not, in fact, deceased. This child’s misfortune is of another sort.”

The bustling entrance of the vicar and his wife interrupted any further explanations.

“Oh, Dr. Blackmore,” exclaimed Mrs. Spencer, clutching a heavily swaddled bundle to her chest, “I’m so thankful you’re here. This poor child seems to have caught quite the little cold, and she’s been miserable for the last two days.”

“Let me take her so you can rid yourself of your pelisse and bonnet,” John said.

He expertly tucked the baby into the crook of his arm while he eased back the swaddling blanket. When a thin, distressed wail rose up from the bundle, Bathsheba’s heart clutched. Sidling over to her husband, she went up on her toes to peer at the little package cradled in his arms.

A round-faced, unhappy baby gazed up at her. The infant had flushed cheeks and a plump button nose that was as red as her cheeks. Her blue eyes were droopy and tear-filled, and silky blond hair curled in a damp mess on her head and stuck to her cheeks. But when those cornflower blue eyes latched onto Bathsheba, her baby mouth trembled into a small, sweet smile.

“Oh, John,” Bathsheba breathed. “She’s beautiful. Do you think she’s very ill? She’s so flushed.”

Her husband’s hand smoothed over the baby’s skull and then rested against her cheek. “I suspect she’s simply over-heated from her wrappings. I don’t think she has much of a fever, but I’d like to examine her right away.”

Mrs. Spencer, a shy and fluttery sort of woman, clasped her hands anxiously to her breast. “Oh, Dr. Blackmore, I do hope I didn’t over-swaddle the little dear. It’s such a chilly night out that I didn’t want her to catch something even worse.”

“You did perfectly right, Mrs. Spencer, I’m sure,” John said with a reassuring smile.

Carefully, Bathsheba brushed the baby's damp hair from her flushed cheeks. A chubby hand shot out from under the blanket and grabbed her index finger. The breath caught in Bathsheba's throat as the baby wrapped her little hand tight. When the mite let out a tiny sneeze a moment later, she still didn't let go. In fact, she pulled Bathsheba's finger into her toothless mouth and began gnawing on it.

Bathsheba let out a choked laugh. If anyone had told her a year ago that a damp, messy baby could instantly reduce her to an emotional wreck, she would have sliced them in two with a few choice words.

"What's this little darling's name?" she asked.

Lady Randolph shot her a startled look, pausing for several moments before answering. "It's Mary. Mary Cooper. Dr. Blackmore, I've prepared a nursery upstairs. I'd like to get her examined and settled, if you don't mind. I'm sure she needs her sleep, and I have no intention of making you spend Christmas Eve looking after a fractious infant."

"It wouldn't be the first time," John said cheerfully. He glanced at Bathsheba. "Would you like to carry her up, my dear? I would be happy for your assistance."

"I'd better not," she answered regretfully. "This blasted gown has a ridiculously large ruffle on the hem. I don't want to trip on it going up the stairs. You'd best carry her, and mind you watch Dodger."

"Very well, but I'd still like for you to help me."

Bathsheba nodded and carefully pried her finger from the baby's grip. Mary obviously didn't like that, letting out another aggrieved wail. The sound of it cut straight to Bathsheba's heart, and she had to hold her hands tight against her sides to resist a fierce impulse to snatch the baby into her arms.

Taking a deep breath, she followed her husband and Lady Randolph up the stairs, with Dodger trotting happily beside her. Clearly, the dog had no intention of missing out on any of the fun.

"You mentioned that the baby's parents aren't dead. If that's the case, why has she come into your care?" Bathsheba asked.

One of Lady Randolph's favorite charities was the local orphanage in Ripon. Under her exacting eye the children were all well-cared for, but Bathsheba hated to think of handing this vulnerable child over to strangers.

Lady Randolph glanced back. "Her mother was a prostitute who came to my Institution for Unwed Mothers. We were trying to train her into a respectable profession, but she was resistant. She snuck out three nights ago after telling one of the other girls that she had booked passage on the stagecoach to London. Apparently, she fell into her old ways to obtain money for the trip. Rebecca Cooper is a flighty, loose-footed girl, I'm sorry to say."

Taking in the stern set of Lady Randolph's mouth, Bathsheba could almost feel sympathy for Rebecca. *Almost*. What she could not sympathize with—or even understand—was how the woman could abandon her baby to strangers. "How old is she?" she asked.

“Mary is four months. Thankfully, at least her mother didn’t abandon her at birth. That happens all too frequently, especially in hard times such as these.”

“And the father? What happened to him?” John asked as they turned into a corridor leading to the guest rooms.

“No one knows who the father is, including Rebecca.” Lady Randolph’s frosty tone indicated the subject was closed.

The countess led them to the end of the hall and opened the door into a small but comfortably furnished bedroom overlooking the inner courtyard. A cradle was set up by the fireplace and clean linen, a pile of infant’s clothing, and various medicinal supplies were stacked on a table nearby.

“One of the kitchen maids is very experienced with infants,” the countess said. “I’ll send her up to help you, Dr. Blackmore, and then she’ll stay with Mary for the rest of the evening.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Bathsheba blurted out. “I’ll be happy to stay with her, at least for a while.”

Lady Randolph’s thin eyebrows arched in amazement, and even John looked surprised. Perhaps they didn’t think she was capable of taking care of a sick infant, but she was. Bathsheba had practically raised her sister after their mother’s death, nursing her through more than one serious illness. And she was a doctor’s wife now, more than familiar with illness and all manner of medical problems. She could certainly take care of one little baby with a head cold.

“Mrs. Blackmore, are you telling me you’d rather nurse a sickly infant than join the festivities downstairs?” Lady Randolph’s tone of voice was frankly skeptical.

“I’m perfectly happy to do it,” Bathsheba replied, trying not to feel defensive. “I help John all the time.”

“And very capably, too,” John said as he put the baby down on the bed and began unwrapping her blankets and linen.

As Lady Randolph continued to assess her with a sharp gaze, Bathsheba resisted the impulse to glare back at her. Perhaps it was silly to spend time with Mary, or start to grow attached to her. No good could come of that since the child was destined for the orphanage and possibly adoption. If Bathsheba knew Lady Randolph, she already had prospective parents in mind.

They stared at each other, silently debating. Finally, Lady Randolph capitulated with a brisk nod. “Very well, Mrs. Blackmore, I’ll leave Mary in your capable hands. I’ll be up later to see how you go on.” She scowled at Dodger, who sat at their feet with a foolish doggy grin on his face.

Bathsheba let out a ghost of a laugh after the countess left the room. “Did she really just say that, or am I losing my mind?”

John grinned at her. “I was a witness. She actually said you were capable.”

“Will wonders never cease.” She joined her husband by the bed, watching carefully as he conducted his examination. Despite her runny little nose—which Bathsheba for some demented reason found both heart-wrenching and adorable—Mary gurgled happily as he checked her over. Unwrapped from her linen shift she was cheerfully naked, waving her plump white arms and kicking out both legs. When John gently palpated her round belly, she actually chortled with glee.

Despite her efforts not to appear a complete idiot, Bathsheba couldn’t help melting. “Oh, John, she’s perfect isn’t she?”

He flashed her quick smile. “She is, I’m happy to say, and aside from a mild cold perfectly healthy, as far as I can see. She’ll need a few days to recover and then there’s no reason she can’t be placed in the orphanage.”

Bathsheba thumped back down to earth. “John, I hate that idea,” she said before she could stop herself.

Her husband’s large but gentle hands, wrapping Mary back up, stilled for a moment. Then he expertly finished the swaddling. “I’m sure Lady Randolph already has someone in mind to adopt her. I wouldn’t worry about it, my dear. Mary will be well taken care of.”

*But would she be happy? Would those strangers love Mary the way she deserved to be loved?*

Bathsheba didn’t dare voice those thoughts because, really, they were not her concern. Lady Randolph clearly had everything under control.

John picked Mary up and without warning plopped her into Bathsheba’s arms. Her heart lurched, and she clutched the small bundle close to her chest, almost afraid to move.

“I’m going down to the kitchen to see about a poultice,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice. “Her chest is clear, but it’ll help her stuffy nose. Why don’t you rock her a bit? Perhaps she’ll fall asleep if you do.” Then he turned on his heel and left the room, leaving Bathsheba to stare after him.

She looked down at Mary. The infant’s blue eyes gazed up at her, solemn and full of innocence and trust. For a minute or two they contemplated each other, and then the baby’s rosebud mouth split into a heart-stopping, toothless smile.

“Oh, you little darling,” Bathsheba whispered. Her vision blurred and she had to blink away tears. She wandered over to a rocking chair set on the other side of the fireplace, never taking her gaze off the baby’s face.

Dodger padded over. He snuffled through Mary’s curls, gave her skull a little lick, and then settled down to sleep by the rocking chair.

As Bathsheba slowly rocked she lost track of time, all her attention focused on the warm bundle in her arms. Mary sniffled and squirmed a bit but gradually her eyelids began to droop. And when her mouth opened in a huge yawn, Bathsheba couldn’t hold back a soft laugh. But part of her felt like crying as emotion twisted through her body to finally settle in her heart. It felt both intensely peaceful and yet momentous and earth-shattering all at once.

The long case clock in the hall bonged out the turn of the hour. When the sound of the chimes faded, Bathsheba heard faint snatches of song rising up from the front of the house. Carefully, so as not to jolt the dozing baby, she rose from her chair and made her way to the door. When she opened it, the sound of carols drifted along the corridor. She listened, picking out Matthew's melodious tenor and the clear soprano of the vicar's wife.

As the words and music of Silent Night wrapped gently around her and the baby, Bathsheba smiled, torn between exasperation and tears. Everything this night conspired against her, pushing her in an impossible direction. She returned her gaze to the child sleeping in her arms and knew without a shred of doubt what she wanted. What she *had* to do.

When a firm tread sounded on the floorboards, she raised her eyes to see her husband return. He came to stand before her, bending slightly to press a tender kiss on her mouth. Then he rested a hand, one that had healed so many including her, on the baby's head.

"Have you decided?" he asked.

Her mind went blank. "Ah...decided what?"

"To adopt Mary. I expect that's what you've been thinking about, isn't it?"

Bathsheba gaped at him. "How did you know?"

He gave her a wry grin. "I always do, remember?"

At any other time she would have teased him, but the emotional tumult in her breast prevented her. "Do you mean it? You would be willing to let me—us—take on this responsibility?"

"I hardly imagine I could stop you, my love. Besides, I think Rachel would like to be an aunt, don't you?"

Bathsheba looked down at the sleeping baby in her arms then up at her husband, trying to see the future. Adopting Mary would be a huge responsibility, one that would change their lives forever. Did John truly want this for her? For them?

And now that the moment was upon her, was she ready for it?

She hedged for a moment as she tried to think with her head instead of her heart. "What about Lady Randolph? I don't think she believes I'd make a very good mother."

"On the contrary. She just spent the last fifteen minutes trying to convince me that we're the perfect couple for little Mary. The countess certainly won't be putting any obstacles in our way."

Bathsheba chewed over that surprise for a few moments, and then worked up the courage to ask the only question that really counted. "And what about you, John? Bringing a baby into the house will change everything. We're not sure how Rachel will react, and you're already so busy. I don't want you to—"

John placed a gentle finger across her lips. "Hush, love. It's drafty out here in the hall. Come back into the bedroom."



He led her to the rocking chair then went down on his knees before her. Dodger grumbled at the intrusion and then went back to sleep.

John wrapped his long fingers around Bathsheba's hand as it rested on Mary's chest. "You don't have to convince me that taking in this child would be anything but a blessing, Bathsheba. I know how much you've wanted a baby, and it's been a great sorrow to me that I couldn't give you one."

"But the fault was mine," she protested.

"It was no one's fault, but that didn't make the pain any less real, for both of us." He brushed Mary's soft curls from her forehead then tenderly cupped Bathsheba's cheek. "This child deserves a family—a mother—who loves her. She will be cared for in the orphanage, and perhaps adopted. But that future is uncertain at best. Why not open our hearts and our home to her? Surely we have enough love between us to do that."

Bathsheba stared into her husband's silvery gaze, falling in love with him all over again. Fortunately, before she could dissolve into a mawkish puddle, the baby awoke with a startle and immediately began fussing.

"She's hungry, I expect," John said, once more the practical physician. "I'd best go down and find out what arrangements Lady Randolph has made to feed her, and see how Cook is progressing with my poultice."

He rose to his feet and headed for the door, as calm as ever, as if he hadn't just turned her world upside down.

"John," she called softly.

He turned and lifted an enquiring brow.

"Thank you," she managed in a tight voice. "Thank you for everything."

He shrugged. "I love you," he said, as if that explained it all. And she supposed it did.

When he opened the door, the sound of a lively chorus of Joy To The World rang up from the front hall, filling the room with music. Bathsheba gazed at the infant snugly cradled in her arms. All the joy in the world couldn't begin to encompass what she felt in that moment. Leaning down, she pressed a kiss to the baby's forehead.

"Happy Christmas, sweet Mary," she whispered. "Welcome home."