

***My Favorite Countess* is, of course, Bathsheba's and John's story. But it also includes characters from my previous books, including Meredith and Stephen, the heroine and hero of *Mastering The Marquess*. One might even say that Meredith and Stephen (the Marquess and Marchioness of Silverton) are ultimately responsible for bringing Bathsheba and John together.**

In this prequel chapter, the action occurs several months before the opening of *My Favorite Countess*. Meredith has news of an interesting nature to relate her husband, news which will later precipitate events for both John and Bathsheba.

Belfield Abbey January, 1817

Silverton dismounted and handed Pharaoh's reins to the waiting groom, who hurried to lead the bay into the warmth of the stables. It was a bloody cold day even for the end of January, and if Silverton had any brains he would have taken a closed carriage into Aylesford instead of gallivanting cross country on his favorite stallion. But he and Meredith would be leaving the estate in two days and the thought of the months ahead—cooped up in overheated ballrooms, stifling saloons, and parliamentary committee rooms—had driven him out for one last gallop across the Downs. He wasn't eager to return to London, but duty commanded that he resume his seat in Parliament and attend to the many business concerns awaiting him in town.

His wife hated the idea of leaving as well. Meredith much preferred the country, no matter the time of year or the weather. If she had her way, they would divide their living arrangements between the Abbey and Silverton's estates up north, spending their days in the measured and satisfying routines dictated by country life.

Sometimes he thought himself the most selfish bastard on earth for dragging Meredith to London with him, but he couldn't bear any kind of separation between them. Even a few hours away from her—like today—put his teeth on edge. He'd long since given up trying to fight his compulsion to keep her close.

Not that Meredith had any desire for them to be apart. Only a few weeks ago, in a misguided attempt to wrestle his selfishness under control, Silverton had suggested she remain in the country for another month or so, perhaps inviting her sister to visit. Meredith's eyes had flashed and her beautiful mouth had thinned in displeasure. When she had frostily asked if he wished to be away from her, he had immediately taken her to bed to prove the opposite. The subject, thankfully, never rose again.

He spun on his heel and headed across the inner courtyard toward the house. Most of his friends, blast them, took great pleasure in ribbing him for his insanely possessive behavior, but he and Meredith had surmounted too many obstacles and dangers in their quest to be married. They would never take their life together for granted.

Entering the old building through the door that led into the back hallway, Silverton handed his greatcoat and hat to the footman who had magically appeared at his side. An unfamiliar yet welcome hush lay over the great house. Most of their extended family and the other holiday guests had already departed for London. Only Trask and Sophie remained, and they were just as likely to be off by themselves, or cooing like a pair of besotted doves over their first-born child, Belle. With a little luck, Silverton would find Meredith alone. Perhaps in her private sitting room or, if he was very fortunate, in their bedroom.

Waving away the footman's offer of refreshment, he headed toward the front of the house. He'd been up at dawn, meeting with his estate steward and then riding into Aylesford for a discussion with the magistrate about local political matters. Meredith had still been sleeping when he arose and he'd been reluctant to wake her, although he'd been sorely tempted to caress and kiss her lush body into arousal. But his poor love had been worn out by all the company and commotion of family and the holidays, and so he had let her sleep.

She would be awake now, however, and he had every intention of making up for the morning's lost opportunity.

He strode across the Great Hall toward the stairs. At this time of day it should be possible to slip up to their apartments unobserved, since tea time had long since passed and the dinner bell wouldn't yet ring for a few more hours. If he could just get up the stairs without running into anyone...

"Hold up, Silverton. Good God, man. Where's the fire?" Simon St. James, the Earl of Trask, strolled out of the library, cradling his infant daughter in his arms. A sardonic grin spread across his face. Apparently, he knew exactly where the fire was.

Smothering a curse, Silverton came to a halt, not bothering to hide his irritation from his friend.

"Well, what is it?" he responded in a disgruntled tone. Simon ignored his display of bad temper as he strolled across the floor of the cavernous hall.

"Why, Silverton," Simon drawled. "You're racing as if the devil himself is after you. Why don't you join me for a glass of port in the library? You must be frozen after that demented ride you took this afternoon. It will be just the thing to warm you up."

Alcohol couldn't hold a candle to Meredith when it came to warming things up, and Simon knew it. After all, the man felt the same way about his own wife.

"Don't be such a sapskull," Silverton growled. "I'm sure you know exactly where I'm going."

"I do, and I intend to emulate your example with my own dear wife, once I divest myself of my current responsibilities." He gently hoisted Belle onto his shoulder, patting the sleepy little thing as she gnawed on the fabric of her papa's coat.

Silverton couldn't hold back a smile. Not that he had any desire to play nursemaid to a drooling baby, but it was amusing to see how domesticated his friend had become since the birth of his daughter. Simon was still the canniest businessman he knew, but the earl had sharply curtailed travel to his holdings around England since marrying Sophie Stanton. And now that Belle had arrived, the man would barely step foot outside his townhouse in the evening. If not for Sophie—a devoted mother, but one who still enjoyed a full round of social events—the *ton* would rarely set eyes on the Earl and Countess of Trask.

“But while I'm waiting for Belle's nurse to reappear,” Simon continued, “you might as well join me for a drink. As much as I adore my daughter, she does lack a certain flair when it comes to conversation.”

Silverton had every intention of telling his friend to go hang when he noticed something disturbing.

“Good Lord, Trask,” he said, peering at his friend's coat. “What the hell is that on your shoulder?”

Simon glanced at himself and uttered a resigned groan. “That, my dear fellow,” he said as he shifted the little mite in his arms to his other shoulder, “would be what Sophie calls one of Belle's *little accidents*. I swear she casts up her accounts more than a drunken sailor on shore leave.”

Silverton shuddered. Like Simon, he was particular about his coats, and the idea of one of Weston's creations marked in so ruinous a fashion didn't bear thinking about. He would love his children as much as Simon loved Belle, but surely one's clothes needn't be sacrificed on the altar of parental devotion.

As if to underscore the opposite point, Belle reached out one tiny fist—which just moments ago had been crammed into her drooling mouth—and yanked on Simon's cravat with all her infant strength. Simon grinned at her like the idiot he had obviously become.

When Silverton didn't bother to suppress his look of horror, his friend scowled. “Go stuff yourself, Silverton. Just wait until it happens to you. Then we'll see what you have to say about the matter.”

“Really? I shall be sure to tell you all about it,” Silverton replied politely. The idea of jostling a colicky baby on one's shoulder struck him as something to avoid, especially since the jostling never seemed to end well.

Not that he didn't look forward to having his own children. He did, and the sooner the better. Especially a boy. He couldn't wait for the day when he could spend time with his son, teaching him all the things his father had never taught him. Silverton had vowed long ago not to make that same, cold-hearted mistake. He would show his boy everything—how to ride a horse, how to bait a hook, how to find all the secret paths and hiding places in the forests of Belfield Abbey.

His children would grow up by his side, never doubting for a moment that their father loved them and would protect them with his last breath.

A shriek of laughter from Belle pulled him from his brief reverie. He smiled as he watched Simon bounce the infant, chortling with delight, in his arms. Of course, Silverton would love any daughter God granted him as much as he would love a son, but girls were rather alarming creatures. So delicate and fragile. Not that any child of his marriage was likely to be fragile. Meredith was a beautiful Amazon, and he hoped any future daughters would take after their mother.

At the thought of his wife, the restless and familiar ache to be with her came flooding back. “Where are Meredith and Sophie, by the way?” he asked.

“Up in your apartments,” Simon replied, pausing from his inane cooing to Belle. “Meredith wasn’t feeling well, so Sophie took her upstairs.”

Silverton’s heart jolted. “Why didn’t you tell me before? What’s wrong? Has someone sent for the doctor?”

Simon rolled his eyes. “Calm down, Silverton. She’s fine. She said she felt a little queasy.”

Then, unbelievably, his friend smirked at him, as if he knew a secret.

“She’d better be all right or I’ll have your head for it,” Silverton snapped. He was being unfair to his friend, but whenever Meredith felt ill—which was rare, thank God—Silverton had a tendency to act irrationally. Not that he had any intention of apologizing to Simon, nor would his friend expect him to.

He turned on his heel and took the stairs three at a time. Simon’s mocking hoot of laughter drifted up after him. It was all well and good for him to laugh, but no one had ever tried to poison *his* wife. Meredith’s cousin had almost succeeded in killing her before she had married Silverton, and only by a lucky chance had the dastardly plot failed.

A stab of guilt lanced through him as he strode down the hall toward his rooms. Someone *had* tried to kill Sophie only last year, and if not for Simon’s last minute intervention the bastard would have succeeded. In a bizarre twist of fate, Silverton’s best friend had been forced to snatch his woman from mortal danger, just as Silverton had rescued Meredith from a similar fate. Since those dark days, both men had vowed nothing would ever harm their women again.

He reached the door of their bedroom, knocked once softly, then went in. Meredith reclined on a chaise in front of the fireplace, which crackled with a hearty blaze. Sophie was curled up across from her in an overstuffed armchair. They were engaged in close conversation, but looked up when he entered the room.

Meredith swung her feet to the floor and stood, her beautiful grey eyes lighting up with a welcoming smile. “Silverton, you’re home. I wasn’t expecting you until later.” She moved to greet him, but he grasped her by the shoulders and gently propelled her back to the chaise.

“Sit, my love. There’s no need for you to get up if you’re not feeling well.” He picked up her woolen shawl, which had fallen to the floor, and draped it around her shoulders. Her creamy complexion lacked its usual roses, but her gaze was clear and her lush mouth curved into a teasing smile.

“My lord,” she said. “I’m fine. You needn’t make a fuss, I assure you.” She shifted her legs on the chaise to make room for him to sit beside her. “What about you? You must be frozen after your ride. Shall I ring for tea? Sophie and I were just going to have some.”

He glanced at his cousin, who regarded him with what he always thought of as her catnip smile. When he narrowed his eyes suspiciously, the smile turned into a mischievous grin.

“What?” he demanded.

“You’ll find out,” she answered in a smug voice. Her bright hazel eyes, brimming with laughter, glittered behind the lenses of her spectacles. By that look, Silverton knew something was afoot.

“Why is everyone acting so strangely?” he grouched.

“No one is acting strangely, my love,” Meredith said in a soothing tone as she patted his hand. Now Silverton was absolutely sure something was wrong. Whenever his wife adopted that tone, trouble always followed.

“Sophie,” she continued, “would you be so kind as to ring for tea? I’m sure we could all use a cup and I’m certain my husband needs something to eat. He seems to be a bit out of sorts, don’t you think?”

Silverton went nose to nose with her, adopting an imperious look. It usually worked on most everyone, but not on his wife.

“Meredith, I’m not hungry. And I insist you tell me right now what is wrong.”

She gave him a glorious smile, as if she knew his stern expression masked only concern. Which, of course, it did. But worry and irritation faded as he gazed at her lovely face, her long, raven hair—loose over her shoulders—and her beautiful body. His own body responded with a flare of passion, as it always did.

But as unyielding as that physical bond between them was, he loved even more her sharp, practical mind and her generous spirit, and the way she filled his life with an easy joy that meant more than all his riches combined.

“Now I know you haven’t eaten because you’re acting a perfect beast,” she teased. “Sophie, I think we’d better feed your cousin before mayhem breaks out.”

“I’ll show you mayhem,” he muttered, dropping a soft kiss on her lips. He held her gaze, not bothering to hide his lascivious intent.

Predictably, she blushed. She always blushed when he looked at her that way, and it never failed to charm him.

“Ahem, well,” interjected Sophie, “if you don’t mind, I think I’ll ring for tea and then leave the two of you alone.”

She jumped to her feet, and Silverton rose with her.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for tea?” he asked with a notable lack of enthusiasm.

His cousin snickered. “Stephen, you are so obvious. Of course I’m not staying for tea. Besides, I’d best find out what my husband has done with my daughter. I’ve left them alone for too long and bad things usually happen when I do.”

“I’m afraid it already has,” Silverton said dryly.

“Please don’t tell me that Belle threw up on Simon again,” Sophie pleaded.

Silverton smiled.

Sophie expelled a long-suffering sigh and clapped a hand to her cheek. “That’s the third time in two days. Honestly, the child is a menace. I’m going to have to start draping Simon in sheets to protect him.”

Silverton laughed. His cousin had grown into a capable wife and mother, but she still possessed her youthful flair for the dramatic. “You’ll be happy to know that your husband doesn’t seem to mind in the least.”

“You won’t either, I suspect,” Sophie replied. She gave a bemused laugh. “It’s amazing how happy Simon and Belle are together. With only a look, Simon can reduce the most hardened businessman to a state of babbling incomprehension. But he’s such a pussycat with Belle that Nurse complains he spoils her past all redemption. Unfortunately, I don’t have the heart to scold him for it.”

“Nor should you. He’s a wonderful father,” Meredith said in stout defense of Simon. “Besides, it’s not possible to spoil that child. She’s an absolute angel.”

“Hardly, but my husband agrees with you,” Sophie replied as she gathered up her shawl and work bag. She bent to give Meredith a kiss. Silverton smiled at the contrast between them—Sophie looked a mere slip of a girl next to his tall, generously proportioned wife. Their

personalities also couldn't have been more dissimilar, but over the past two years the two women had become inseparable friends.

"Thank you for everything," Meredith said with a meaningful look.

"You know you can always ask me anything," Sophie murmured. "Never doubt that."

Silverton frowned. They were doing it again. Talking in code. One would think they were a pair of spies in Wellington's Army.

"What the devil is everyone talking about?" he asked.

Sophie dashed over to give him a quick peck on the cheek. "Don't worry, Stephen. Simon will tell you everything you need to know."

And with that annoying and cryptic remark, she left the room in her usual impetuous rush.

Silverton turned to his wife, propping his hands on his hips. "Meredith," he said, lowering his voice in a clear warning, "if you don't explain why you're all playing escapees from Bedlam, I'll drag you to that bed, get you out of your gown, and keep you there until you tell me the truth."

She perked up. "Do you promise?"

He let out a grudging laugh and sat next to her on the chaise. She scooted over and snuggled against him, giving a happy sigh as he wrapped his arms around her. Silverton let her rest in silence for a few moments, enjoying the bone-deep serenity that always washed over him when he held her close.

Then he put a finger under her chin and tipped her head up so he could look into her face. Her expression was serious, even solemn, but her color had returned to a healthy glow.

"Are you well now, my love?" he asked.

She nodded. "Of course, silly. You mustn't worry so much. It was just a little stomach upset."

How could he not worry, given their past? Even now, well over a year after her kidnapping, there were days he could barely stand to let her out of his sight.

"Do you know how precious you are to me?" he murmured as he feathered light kisses across her cheek.

She hummed a throaty sound of approval as she tilted her head to give him access to her neck. He nibbled his way across her jaw, kissed behind her ear, and then moved down her throat. She shifted in his arms, pressed her breasts against him, and then jerked back with a wince.

A wince?

“Meredith, what in God’s name is wrong?”

She rearranged her bodice, muttering under her breath. He thought he heard a rather salty curse.

“Meredith.” He growled the warning this time.

“Well, it’s just that they’re sore,” she said with a sheepish smile.

His mind went blank. “What’s sore?”

Her cheeks blazed with a crimson flush. “You know,” she whispered, gesturing at her upper body. “My breasts.”

“Sweetheart, we’re alone in our bedroom. There’s really no need to whisper. And why are your breasts sore?” he asked, his concern returning. He hoped it wasn’t anything he’d done to her. Their lovemaking did tend to get rather enthusiastic at times.

“Well,” she said hesitantly, looking almost nervous, “I suppose it’s because I’m pregnant.”

Time stumbled to a halt.

“You suppose you’re pregnant?” he echoed, stunned by the news.

She stared at him with a startled expression. “No, Stephen. I know I’m pregnant. The other thing—” again she gestured at her chest— “is what I suppose is caused by the fact that I’m breeding.” She finished with a tentative smile.

He shook his head, belatedly comprehending why Simon and Sophie had acted so smugly. They already knew Meredith was with child. By all rights he should be annoyed they had received the information before he did, but the ground seemed to be shifting under his feet and it hadn’t yet settled. He’d have to remember to be annoyed with them later.

Meredith’s brows pinched together in a worried frown. “I thought you’d be happy. Why aren’t you happy?”

He took a deep breath and refocused all his attention on her. Any aftershocks from this emotional earthquake would have to bide their time. Right now, he had a pregnant wife to reassure.

He gathered her into his arms. “Of course I’m happy. Just a little stunned, that’s all.” She let out a relieved sigh and snuggled her head under his chin. “Although I’m not sure why I should be surprised,” he mused. “We’ve certainly been trying hard enough, haven’t we? It was simply a matter of time.”

Meredith nodded, her silky black hair tickling his chin and releasing a fragrance softly reminiscent of the Abbey's gardens in springtime.

"I was beginning to worry it would never happen," she said softly.

The catch in her voice squeezed his chest with an inexplicable yearning, and the need to give her everything she ever wanted. He would move the heavens themselves if it would make her happy.

"How long have you suspected?" he asked.

"Only a few weeks, but I wanted to check with the doctor. One of the kitchen maids burned her hand yesterday. When Dr. Gibbons came out to treat it, I asked him to examine me. He confirmed that I was with child and said the baby should come sometime in September."

Silverton tipped her across his lap and over his arm, the better to see her face. She squirmed to get comfortable, then smiled at him, her eyes so full of love it made his heart ache. Her little squirm against his groin made something else ache, too, but he wasn't quite sure what to do about that—especially given her reaction to their embrace a few moments ago.

"If you thought you were breeding, why didn't you tell me?"

She turned her face into his shoulder. "I didn't want to disappoint you."

He blew out an exasperated breath. Gently grasping her chin, he made her look at him. "Meredith, don't be such a gooscap. You could never disappoint me."

"I know how important it is for you to have children. To have a son and heir."

He frowned. "What's important to me is your happiness. You are happy to be pregnant, aren't you? Are you worried or frightened?"

She stared back at him, her grey eyes round and serious. "Are you?"

Now that she'd said it, he could face it—admit that fear *did* temper his reaction. It lurked quietly at the edge of his senses, a dark thread in a vibrant tapestry. Their child would be a creature of joy, but the process of birth would risk the very thing he held most dear.

"A bit," he hedged. "What did the doctor say?"

Her brow cleared. "He said that an Amazon like me shouldn't have a whit of trouble, and that he could detect no problems with my pregnancy."

Silverton bristled. "He called you an Amazon?"

She rolled her eyes. "My lord, you call me that all the time."

“That’s different,” he said, offended. “You know I mean it as a compliment.”

“Well, I’m sure the doctor did, too.”

He opened his mouth to object to Gibbons’ impertinence, but Meredith cut him off. “The important thing is that our baby is healthy, and so am I. Now,” she said, patting his chest, “doesn’t that make you happy?”

He hugged her close. “Of course it does, my love. Forgive me for being such a callous brute, but one doesn’t become a father every day. It’s a wonder I have any wits left in my head after the shock you’ve given me.”

Meredith gave a husky laugh, one so sensual it shot fire through his veins. “How very thoughtless of me, my lord. I think you should allow me to make it up to you.”

She relaxed back in his arms, a wicked smile curving her lips as her gaze turned smoky with desire. As lust fired through him, he leaned over her, bringing his mouth to within an inch of hers.

“What do you have in mind?” he whispered.

She gently pushed him back. “Let me show you.”

Rising gracefully from his lap, she took him by the hand and led him to the bed. But as she turned to come into his arms, a strange expression crossed her face, and she blanched.

“Excuse me,” she gulped. “I’ll be right back.” Then she clapped a hand over her mouth and ran toward her dressing room.

Silverton let out a regretful sigh, then followed in her footsteps. His poor angel. The least he could do was rub her back and hold up her hair while she emptied her stomach. And he would find her better medical care than old Dr. Gibbons could provide. As soon as they reached London, he would hunt down the best physicians in town to attend to her. Nothing could be allowed to go wrong for either Meredith or the baby, and he would do whatever it took to bring them safely through the coming months.

A visit to his tailor might be in order, too, now that he thought about it. If Simon’s experience was any indication, Silverton would need a whole armoire full of new coats.

He gave a soft laugh and followed his wife from the room.