

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

*Promise
of a
Family*

*Matchmaking
Babies*

JO ANN BROWN

Mills & Boon Love Inspired Historical

Jo B. Ann

Promise of a Family

«HarperCollins»

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Family in Training? After rescuing six children abandoned in a boat, Captain Drake Nesbitt is determined to ensure their safety and locate their unknown parents. But first, he needs someone to nurture the babies. He's grateful for the support of kindhearted Lady Susanna Trelawney. Although Susanna has given up all hope of marriage and happiness after her fiancé's betrayal, the adorable children evoke all her maternal instincts. Soon she's falling for her tiny charges—and their handsome rescuer. Can Susanna convince committed bachelor Drake that he's more than just a onetime hero, but a man who has room in his heart for a family after all? Matchmaking Babies: Seeking forever families and speeding up the course of true love.

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Matchmaking Babies: Seeking forever families and speeding up the course of true love.

"One day the children will appreciate that your family has provided for them. Not every abandoned child is so blessed."

"What happened to you, Drake?"

"The neighbors took me in with their brood, which was large enough that they never seemed to notice one more."

"So they became your family?"

"No. They were never cruel to me, but I was always an outsider. I was never allowed to call them mother and father."

"Oh, how horrible! You must have been so alone and so lonely, even in such a crowded house."

"No one else has ever said that." He quickly looked away.

"If I have pried too much..."

"No, it feels good to have someone understand." He shook his head with a grin.

Before she could ask another question, the twins called to her. As he stood, she went to swing the girls out of the sleeping hammocks. He could sense that Susanna was just as anxious to leave the solitude belowdecks. As for himself, he would be glad to return to where they would not be able to talk about the past and what he planned to do in the future.

A future when the rolling waves of the sea would come between him and Susanna.

No, he definitely did not want to think of that. Not until he had to.

JO ANN BROWN has always loved stories with happy-ever-after endings. A former military officer, she is thrilled to have the chance to write stories about people falling in love. She is also a photographer, and travels with her husband of more than thirty years to places where she can snap pictures. They live in Nevada with three children and a spoiled cat. Drop her a note at joannbrownbooks.com.

Promise of a Family

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And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

—Matthew 18:2–3



For Jo Piraneo

Who has an amazing gift for making my jumbled comments into something beautiful

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[Chapter One](#)

Porthlowen, *Cornwall* 1812

“There! It is leaking right there!”

At the shout, Drake Nesbitt looked down into his ship where his first mate and crew were struggling to fix the damage *The Kestrel* had suffered after crossing the path of a French privateer. Sunlight sparkled on water in the depths of the ship. Hurrying to join his crew, he muttered under his breath as he pulled off his new boots. He had thought the last of the holes in *The Kestrel* had been plugged yesterday.

He set the boots where the water would not reach them, then joined his crew. They stepped aside to let him examine where water washed into the ship with the rising tide. He pushed away a lantern. Even though it would have helped him see the damage to the hull, he did not want his crew to view his frustration. They must have enough of their own.

For a fortnight *The Kestrel* had been moored in Porthlowen, a cove beneath the hills rising like broken steps to the Cornish moorland. The mouth of the cove narrowed to a curved strait between high cliffs, providing a sheltered mooring for his ship and a fast current on the tides that would take them back to open water once his ship was seaworthy again.

His ship. He enjoyed saying those words. He had worked hard for years to be able to invest in the ship and finally buy her outright. Now he worked even harder to save enough to purchase another, with his eye on building a fleet of trading ships along the southern coast of England.

He had known it would take time to make repairs, but he ached to be back upon the sea, to know the freedom of moving with the waves, to escape the memories that still gnawed on him whenever he set foot on land. When he steered his ship from one port to another, he could avoid risking his heart as he did once. Then, he had ended up looking like a fool.

Never again.

That pledge had echoed through his head every day and every night, anytime when he was alone and his thoughts caught up to him. He had believed Ruby was as precious as the gem whose name she shared, so he'd offered her his heart, despite the difference in their social standing. He had dared to believe that the daughter of a baronet and the captain of a trading ship could ignore the canons of Society and marry and live happily for the rest of their lives.

It had not been Society that destroyed his hopes. Ruby had betrayed him when, within hours of his setting sail after they had pledged their unending love to each other, she was seen in the arms of another man.

Never again.

Standing up as much as he could in the cramped space, he said, “Close it up, lads.”

Drake climbed to the main deck, knowing that the crew would work better without the captain watching over their shoulders. He sat on the stairs to the quarterdeck and tugged his boots back on. The soft leather was as comfortable as he had hoped when he saw it hanging in the cobbler's shop. The boots were stylish, too, but he did not care what was de rigueur in Society. Treating himself to a new pair of boots had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, the kind he made with skill. The proof of that was the profit from *The Kestrel's* recent voyages where he had followed his instincts with cargoes and routes.

However, he had bought his new boots in Penzance days before *The Kestrel* was ambushed by French privateers and half their cargo of barley and wheat was ruined during the battle. The other half had been unloaded in Porthlowen. He had sold it for far less than it was worth because the damp grain would have gone bad before he reached the merchants waiting for it in Dublin. Now he had to

reimburse the English traders who hired him to deliver their goods. In addition, he had bills to pay for the supplies needed to repair the ship.

Gazing at the masts where the sails were tightly furled, he sighed. Two wasted weeks. How much longer before they could leave Porthlowen and be on their way again? He had never expected it would take longer to handle the repairs than to make arrangements to hand over their French prisoners to the local authorities.

A fierce smile pulled at his lips. *The Kestrel* had been damaged, but the French ship now sat on the bottom of the sea and the French privateers who had survived were in cells more than fifty miles away in Dartmoor Prison. There, they would stay until the English defeated the French. He had no pity for them in spite of tales of how appalling the conditions were in prison. He was glad there were fewer privateers to hound honest men trying to earn a living in the waters around Britain.

For now, fixing *The Kestrel*, which had been riddled with shot, forced Drake and his ship to remain in the harbor. He glanced toward the village that followed the crescent cove. Living in a small cottage and staring at the same scenery day after day would be a slow death for a man like him, especially when the siren song of the waves lapped upon the rocks and the sand. He raised his gaze toward the fine house situated where the moor met the cliffs that hid the cove's entrance. He had been told an earl resided there, but even such a luxurious life offered no appeal to him.

There were times when he imagined coming home to a woman and children who awaited his return eagerly. Sparkling eyes, warm lips, and arms that welcomed him—and only him—into them.

Never again.

Familiar footsteps behind him, echoing hollowly on the deck, broke into Drake's thoughts. Grateful to escape the memories of his greatest humiliation, he turned. "Benton, what happened below?"

His first mate, a gangly young man who never seemed to gain an ounce, raked his hand back through his sweaty hair, leaving red spikes across his head. "We missed one, Captain."

"We?"

"I meant *I* missed one." Benton shook his head, a glum expression lengthening his usually cheerful face. "I thought I checked every inch of her, but I didn't see that small hole. We will start at the bow and go back to the stern on both sides all over again."

"Good." He allowed himself a smile as his first mate met his eyes. He trusted Benton with both his ship and his life. The crew called them Lightning and Thunder because they had learned that when there was trouble, Drake would be there in a flash, with Benton following quickly behind him.

"It should not take long to fix that one small hole, Captain, or to examine the complete hull."

"Take the time you need, because I don't want to get under way and find the ship is taking on water again."

"Aye."

Drake paused as he was about to answer. A strange sound, like a faint cry or mew, wafted over the water.

"What was that?" he asked, tilting his head to try to capture the noise.

Benton shrugged. "A gull probably."

The thin sound came again. Louder this time.

"That doesn't sound like a gull." Curiosity urged Drake forward. He reached the starboard railing in a pair of steps. Gripping it, he shadowed his eyes with his other hand. "Look."

It was a jolly boat, a small boat used to transport men and cargo from a ship to the shore. It was close to the rocks. Dangerously close. Even as he watched, the bow bumped hard against the wall of stone.

Something moved inside it. Was that what had made the whimpering sound? Had someone been so cruel as to toss kittens into a boat and push them out to sea? If he got his hands on—

The rest of the thought vanished as tiny fingers rose over the side of the boat and waved in his direction.

Benton gasped. "A child?"

Drake did not answer. He ran toward the plank down to the wide stone pier where *The Kestrel* was moored. He reached the quay in a pair of long steps and raced along the shore toward where the jolly boat slammed against the rocks over and over. It would not survive long, for the wood was already dried with salt stains and pocked with holes.

He sped past seaweed that had dried in thick clumps on the rocks. Clambering up one of the giant boulders, he jumped into the water on the other side. The water was cool, but he paid it no mind as he flung himself forward, wading toward the boat. Hearing shouts, he looked back to see several of his crew on the pier. They motioned wildly with their hands. He glanced forward and groaned. A small child was trying to stand up in the boat. If he did, he was sure to tip the boat over and end up in the water.

Drake reached the boat and grasped its bow to steady it. Only then did he look inside. His eyes widened as he counted six children, the youngest not much more than a newborn. It was swaddled, a piece of blanket covering its eyes so the sun did not burn into them. In addition, there were three older boys, possibly as old as three or four, and two girls who must be twins, because they were almost identical. One of the older boys, the one who had been struggling to stand, said something. It was baby gibberish, and he guessed that boy was closer to two years old.

"Sit down," Drake said, forcing a smile.

The boy hesitated, a stubborn scowl furrowing his brow beneath his wispy, brown hair.

"Sit down, and we'll go for a ride up onto the sand. Doesn't that sound like fun?" He needed the children's cooperation or they could set the small boat awash before he got them around the rocks and to safety. He doubted any of them could swim, and he did not want to have to choose which one to save.

The children began to giggle as he splashed through the water, keeping himself between the boat and the rocks. He grimaced when the waves lifted the boat and struck him so hard that he stumbled against stone. He fought to regain his footing. The sand slipped away beneath his boots.

He snarled wordless frustration under his breath. His new boots! Why hadn't he paused the short second it would have taken to yank them off?

His self-recrimination was interrupted by a sharp cry. An older boy sobbed loudly as a blond boy pinched his arm again.

"Stop that!" Drake snapped.

That set the blond boy to crying, too.

Benton waded through the waves and seized the other side of the jolly boat. "What is wrong with them?"

The younger boy began weeping, as well.

Drake motioned for his first mate to help him steer the small boat to shore. With two of them to balance the boat that wanted to skip and dance on each wave, they made short work of climbing out of the water and dragging the boat onto the sand.

All the children, including the baby, were howling now. Drake fired orders to his crew. Food and something to drink for the older children. The baby must be fed, too. Telling Benton to see to the children's needs, he turned on his heel.

"Captain?" called his first mate.

"What?" He did not keep his barely restrained rage out of his voice.

"Where are you going?"

Fury whipped through his words. "To find the rotters who put these children in a boat and left them to die."

"But how will you know who did this?"

“There is always one person in any village who can be counted on to know everyone in that village. He would know who is capable of putting these children in a boat and setting them adrift. In addition, he will be willing to help.”

“Who is that?”

“The parson.” He scowled as water squeezed between his toes in his ruined boots. “And when, with his help, I find those curs who were so cruel, I will make sure they are sorry they ever set eyes on these children. I promise you that.” He strode toward the village.

* * *

Closing the book, Susanna Trelawney leaned back in her chair. The household accounts had balanced. At last. She needed to speak to both Mrs. Hitchens, the housekeeper, and Baricoat, the butler, about checking their reports more closely, because she had found too many mistakes. She was thankful for Mrs. Ford. As always, the cook’s records were exact to the last ha’penny.

Just as Susanna liked. With a sense of order in the great house, chaos could be kept at bay. Her family could go about their lives without having to worry about something unanticipated upsetting them.

As it had that horrific week when grief had held the house and her family in its serrated claws, shredding their hearts. Her own heart had not had a chance to heal from being broken by the one man she had ever loved. Franklin Chenowith had run off to marry another woman on the very day that the banns were first read for Susanna’s wedding to him. Susanna had considered that woman, Norah Yelland, her bosom bow. She had surrendered her sense of control when she fell in love, and she had paid the cost, losing both of her best friends in one instant.

The cost had been too high, and instead of vowing to love Franklin till death did them part, she had tried to forgive them. She had struggled with it, and she promised herself that she would never allow herself to be so foolish again. She would remain in control of her emotions and her life.

No matter what.

No! It did no one any good to dwell on the past. Instead, she should work to keep everything in proper order so serenity could reign in the house.

Susanna patted the accounts book and sighed. She loved working in this quiet room with its burgundy walls and coffered ceiling, even though the hearth was too narrow to heat the room much above freezing on the coldest winter days. She gazed out the window toward the moor. The undulating ground offered perfect grazing for both cattle and sheep. Like most of the windows in the great house Cothaire, it offered no view of the sea. A beautiful vista would be lovely, but cold winds blasted the seaside of the house, pitting any window glass and chilling rooms. Any room in Cothaire that faced the sea had thick exterior shutters that could be closed and locked from the outside in advance of a strong storm.

The sea was an integral part of their lives. Many of the villagers provided for their families by fishing and trading upon its waters. Her sister Caroline’s husband had been one of them until he was killed far out at sea less than a week after Mama’s sudden death. It had been a terrible time, and if she could have spared her sister—or her two brothers and her father—a moment of that sorrow, she gladly would have.

“Lady Susanna?” came a familiar voice from the doorway.

“What is it, Venton?”

The footman, wearing the family’s simple gray livery, dipped his head in her direction. She and Venton had grown up together at Cothaire because his mother had been the nursery maid when Susanna was the last one living within the two-story nursery. Knowing Susanna was lonesome because she was more than a decade younger than her brother Raymond, Mrs. Venton had brought her son to the nursery with her until Susanna was almost six.

Since then, their lives had gone on separate but parallel paths. Venton had worked hard to rise to the rank of footman, and Susanna had learned to handle a household and be a proper wife to the

man chosen for her by her father, the Earl of Launceston. Then her future had changed when her mother died five years ago and Susanna took over the management of her father's house while her older brother Arthur, who was the heir, assisted in running the estate.

"Lady Susanna, his lordship requests your presence," Venton answered, and she again pushed aside uncomfortable thoughts about the past. Linger on them was silly.

"Of course. Where is he?"

"The smoking room."

Her brows shot skyward before she could compose herself. As she stood, she affixed a calm expression on her face, though curiosity roiled inside her. The smoking room was the domain of her father, her brothers and their male guests. She could not remember the last time she—or any other female—had been invited into it.

What a surprise! And she had hated surprises ever since she got such a public one when Franklin failed to appear for the first reading of their wedding banns.

As if she had given voice to her astonishment, Venton said quietly, "His lordship has been reading there all afternoon, and he had planned to take his tea there."

"Thank you, Venton," she replied as she walked past him. She understood what he had not said. Papa's gout must be plaguing him again. The painful condition was the primary reason that he had turned over so many of the duties of Cothaire to her and her brother Arthur as well as her sister, Caroline, the oldest sibling, who acted as Papa's hostess.

The smoking room lay beyond the main dining room. Like the drawing room, where the ladies could withdraw from the table, the smoking room allowed the men to converse more easily and blow a cloud of tobacco smoke if they pleased.

That strong odor greeted Susanna when she knocked on the door and her father called for her to enter. Chairs were arranged for the ease of conversation in front of a huge hearth. On every wall hung either swords and pistols or pictures of foxhounds and horses. Some of the portraits of horses were life-size and dominated the room.

"Ah, my dear," said her father with a wide smile. "Do come in."

Harold Trelawney, the Earl of Launceston, still had the tautly sculptured face that he had passed on to his sons. His hair, once as ebony as his children's, was laced with silver that matched the color of his eyes. Only Susanna had inherited his silver-gray eyes; her siblings' eyes were crystal blue like their late mother's.

Papa did not rise. She did not expect him to when he suffered from another acute episode of gout.

However, another man stood from a chair that had its back to the door. Her eyes followed, astonished by the height of the dark-haired stranger. Strong muscles moved lithely beneath his navy blue coat, and her heartbeat faltered, then raced like a runaway horse. As he turned to face her, she found herself captured by the brownest eyes she had ever seen, and breathing suddenly seemed a chore. A deep tan told her that he was a man accustomed to working outside.

As his gaze swept over her, she forced herself to breathe normally so he would not guess the unsettling effect he had on her. She could not chide him because she had been staring at him boldly. She lowered her eyes demurely and continued to appraise him from beneath her lashes.

The lines at the corners of his eyes suggested that he smiled often and easily. Perhaps so, but he was not smiling now. His mouth was drawn into a straight line, and his ebony brows lowered in a scowl. By his sides, his hands opened and closed with what looked like impatience. Was he in a hurry to be done with whatever business had brought him to Cothaire? Or was some emotion stronger than restlessness gripping him?

Into the silence that had settled on the room, Papa said, "This is my youngest, Lady Susanna. My dear, may I introduce you to Drake Nesbitt?"

“How do you do, Mr. Nesbitt?” She noticed the line of dried salt on the knees of his pale brown breeches and sodden black boots. Had he been wading in the harbor without taking off his boots?

“Captain Nesbitt,” he corrected so coolly that the temperature in the room seemed to drop a dozen degrees.

Captain Drake Nesbitt? That explained, at least, why his clothing was stained with salt. But why was he here? Ships often sailed into Porthlowen Harbor without their captains coming to Cothaire.

Fighting to keep her voice even, she asked, “Papa, what do you wish of me?”

“I want you to...” He shifted, and a groan slipped past his tight lips. He motioned her to remain where she was when she started to step forward.

Susanna complied because his left leg was already wrapped in wool cloths. She knew they had been soaked in boiled goutweed in the hope of easing his pain. There was nothing more she could do.

“My lord,” Captain Nesbitt said, “time is of the essence.”

She frowned at his lack of compassion.

Before she could say anything, her father replied, “That is true. Please listen closely, Susanna, while I explain what has brought Captain Nesbitt here.” He quickly outlined an astounding tale of a small boat drifting into Porthlowen Harbor carrying a cargo of six small children.

More than once, she swallowed a question as she glanced from Captain Nesbitt to her father and back. Captain Nesbitt nodded each time to confirm what Papa said. Not that she did not believe her father, but the tale was unbelievable.

“Where are the children now?” she asked when her father paused.

“Still on the shore,” Captain Nesbitt answered. “I thought to obtain some guidance before I did anything further.”

“But those poor children must be hungry!” She frowned at Captain Nesbitt. “And frightened and filthy.”

“That is why I ordered my crew to find something for them to eat. My greatest concern is for the youngest child. It cannot be more than a few months old, and it needs a mother’s milk.”

Before she could answer, Papa said, “Susanna, I am certain that putting this problem in your competent hands is the best solution. I trust you and Captain Nesbitt are capable of handling it.”

She opened her mouth to protest. To say she was the wrong one to see to the children. Her reaction had nothing to do with the many tasks she managed in the house. It had everything to do with Captain Nesbitt. She did not like how her heart seemed to beat a bit faster when he looked in her direction. Until she knew she could control that rebellious organ, which had led her to betrayal once, she preferred not to spend a single moment in his company.

But her wishes were unimportant when her father could hardly move. She would do as Papa requested and see to the needs of those abandoned children. She reached for the bell on a table by her father’s chair and rang it. Hard.

Baricoat appeared instantly. The butler had a knack for knowing the family would be ringing for him even before they picked up the bell.

She gave quick orders. A footman was dispatched to have a carriage brought. Another ran to the kitchen with a request for a hearty tea to be ready for the children upon their arrival. A third headed for the village to see if one of the young mothers who had recently given birth would share her milk with a foundling. In the meantime, she had no doubts Mrs. Ford could devise something to feed the baby.

When a maid arrived with a straw bonnet, a pair of kid gloves and a light shawl, Susanna donned them. She walked out of the room, still giving orders to check the nursery that had been closed up since she left it herself years ago. Baricoat offered to prepare a list of what needed to be done to make the nursery suitable for the children.

“Thank you, Baricoat,” she said. Looking over her shoulder, she added, “Captain Nesbitt, aren’t you coming?”

His mouth straightened again, but he spoke a gracious farewell to her father before following her to the entry hall. When the door was opened, a small carriage waited by the front steps.

The coachman handed her into the carriage, then stepped aside to allow Captain Nesbitt to enter. For a moment, the captain hesitated, glancing at the seat where the coachman was settling himself and picking up the reins. Then he climbed in and sat beside her, leaving as much space between them as possible.

She was tempted to tell him that she was no more in favor of the arrangement than he was. Instead, she called to the coachman to get them under way. The sooner she reached the village and collected the children, the sooner she could be rid of Captain Nesbitt. And the sooner she could regain her composure that was jeopardized each time Captain Nesbitt's dark eyes caught her gaze.

It could not be fast enough.

Chapter Two

The earl's carriage rattled over rough cobbles as it entered the village, which was a collection of stone buildings. A few hardy plants grew in the lee of them. Drake did not see any trees rising more than ten feet and guessed that storms off the sea were dangerous to anything higher. The village had a smithy, where the smith watched them drive past while his assistant worked over the forge and never looked up. There were a few small shops, including one belonging to a cobbler. Drake resisted looking down at his ruined boots.

During the short ride from Cothaire, Lady Susanna had acted like a constable interrogating Drake for a hideous crime. She fired question after question at him.

"How old are the children?" she asked.

"I am not sure."

"Girls and boys?"

"Yes."

Her scowl warned him that she was not in the mood for jests. He was tempted to remind her that *he* had not asked her to tend to the children from the jolly boat. Her father had.

"Three boys and two girls," he said. "I don't know what the baby is, but I am sure it is either a boy or girl."

"What are their names?" she asked and glanced away as if she found the sight of him intolerable.

"I did not wait to be introduced," he retorted, vexed at her cool dismissal. Didn't she realize he was going out of his way to help? He hardly needed the problem of six small children when he should be supervising the work to make *The Kestrel* seaworthy once more.

"Captain Nesbitt, I am trying to determine how to help the children." Her voice was far calmer than his had been. "Why are you acting as if this is a game?"

Drake relented. Dealing with the children had upset his plans. No doubt, Lady Susanna had other things to do, as well, though he had no idea what important tasks a fine lady might have.

"Help me understand one thing," he said.

Lady Susanna had been staring at the square tower on the parish church, and he was unsure if she would give him the courtesy of looking in his direction. When she turned toward him, he was as staggered as he had been in the earl's smoking room by the unusual color of her eyes. With the strong emotions she was struggling quite unsuccessfully to keep hidden, they gleamed like burnished steel. Everything about her shone from her ebony hair to her pink lips. He could not keep from wondering what she would look like when she smiled. She was a dainty miss, the top of her head not quite reaching his shoulder, but he already had seen she was no fragile flower. Her spine seemed to have been fashioned of stronger stuff than the tin pulled out of the local mines.

"Of course, Captain Nesbitt," she replied in a tone that suggested saying his name left a bad taste in her mouth.

He shoved his foolish thoughts aside. She did not like him. Well, that was fine. He had no interest in her other than making sure the children were taken care of and the person who put them

in the boat paid for that cruelty. It was better, in the long run, for her to dislike him and for him to dislike her. That made it easier not to make the same mistake he had before when he had been beguiled by a pair of pretty eyes.

Never again.

“What do you need to understand?” she asked when he remained silent.

“After we brought the children’s boat up on the sand, I went first to the parson of the Porthlowen church.” His brows lowered. “His surname, if I recall rightly, is Trelawney, just like your family’s. Is that a coincidence?”

“No, it is no coincidence. Raymond Trelawney is my brother.” A hint of a smile added a new light to her eyes, and he guessed her full grin would be scintillating. “The living at the Porthlowen church has always been given to a younger son in the family, and Raymond is well suited for the position. His faith is strong, and he has a compassionate heart.”

“Maybe so, but he was quick to pass the matter of the children from his hands to the earl’s.”

Her smile vanished. “As he should have. My father, Lord Launceston, needs to know when something as astounding as a boatload of babies washing ashore occurs. Everyone knows that, so whoever you had chosen to speak to in Porthlowen would have done the same.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” She folded her hands primly, her gloves white against the green-sprigged fabric of her gown. “If you are still in Porthlowen on Sunday, Captain, you and your crew are welcome to attend services at our church.”

“Some of my men already have.” He wished he could take back those words when her eyes narrowed.

“But you have not?”

“Not yet. Someone needs to oversee the work my ship needs, and that is the captain.” He did not intend to add more. He believed in God, but his relationship with Him was lackadaisical. He figured if God needed to get his attention, He would. So far, that had not happened.

“I suppose.”

Drake changed the subject that was making them both even more uncomfortable. “I asked Parson Trelawney if anyone had reported any missing children, and he said no.”

Lady Susanna waved in response to a greeting called out to her by a young auburn-haired woman who stood in the doorway of the village’s main shop. The earl’s daughter called for the carriage to stop.

The redhead hurried over. “You have heard about the children?”

“Yes. Captain Nesbitt came to the house to explain how he found them floating in a jolly boat.” She paused, then introduced Drake to the other woman.

Elisabeth Rowse was almost as tall as he was. Her face was plain, but her bright green eyes glowed with intelligence and kindness. When she smiled as she greeted him, her whole face transformed. The mouth that had looked too wide now was an amazing grin.

“I hardly believed what I heard when a lad came to the shop looking to buy milk,” Miss Rowse said. “Six children abandoned in a boat. Have you ever heard of its like, Susanna?”

Drake was astonished how casually Miss Rowse addressed an earl’s daughter, but said nothing until Lady Susanna bade the redhead a good day and ordered the driver to continue toward the strand. His amazement must have been visible, however.

“Elisabeth is betrothed to my brother Raymond,” Lady Susanna said. “They plan to be married soon.” Without a pause for a breath, she continued, “Do you think the children were stolen?”

“It is a possibility.” He would have to be on his toes, because Lady Susanna had a quick, tireless mind. “Overlooking any possibility would be unwise.”

“A horrifying possibility, I must say.”

He nodded as the carriage came around the last building on the street. In front of them, *The Kestrel* tilted at a steeper angle than earlier. The figurehead on the front, a hawk raising its wings to

catch the air, leaned so low that its feathers almost touched the water. Instead of his men plugging the leak, they must have come out to watch him and Benton tug the jolly boat out of the water. He scanned the beach, but there were so many people gathered there that he could not see his men.

“That ship by the quay looks ready to be torn apart and sold for scrap,” she said with a shake of her head. “Why would anyone leave a ship in that condition in our harbor?”

“Because it is being repaired. Before you ask how I know, I will tell you that is *my* ship.”

“Oh.”

He had startled her, because she did not have a retort.

“It was damaged in battle with a French privateer,” he added when a flattering blush climbed her cheeks. Not being on the defensive with her was a change. “It is nearly repaired, but we discovered another leak today. By the morrow, if all goes well, she will be proudly afloat once more.”

“Was anybody killed?” she asked in a strained voice.

“Not among my men, but a couple of the French pirates did not survive.”

“Papa laments that if the war continues much longer, Napoleon will have the chance to build many more vessels to harry our ships.” She looked back at him, her face troubled.

He wondered if that was the first honest emotion she had shown other than her distaste for him. “Britain and our allies are winning more often than not in the Peninsular campaign.”

“But Boney is a wily adversary with dreams of ruling the world. If he cannot have Spain, he will look elsewhere for lands to make his own. Mark my words.”

Drake smiled in spite of his determination to keep distance between them. Her logic was undeniable, especially as he had argued much the same himself when he and members of his crew sat around the table in the wardroom.

“Everyone in Porthlowen must be on the beach, save for the few we saw along the street,” Lady Susanna said, drawing his attention to the throng on the strand.

“Curiosity is compelling.”

“Especially when this may be the most exciting thing to happen here.” Again she gave him a half smile. “Perhaps ever.”

He nodded. The villagers were accustomed to ships coming and going in every possible condition, and no one in the village had blinked when *The Kestrel* barely made it to the quay. Even marching the French prisoners of war through the village to where they could be handed off to the local militia to be taken to Dartmoor Prison had caused little more than a slight stir.

A jolly boat filled with children was something else entirely.

“Is that why you are asking all these questions, my lady? Because you are curious?”

Her frown returned. “I am asking because I want to be prepared for what needs to be done to help the children. I prefer not to be surprised.”

The carriage stopped, saving Drake from having to answer. He got out and held up his hand to Lady Susanna before the coachman could. When she placed her slender hand on his much broader one, it was as light as a spring breeze. She stepped out, the fringe on her shawl brushing his arm. A flowery scent teased him, so faint that he had not noticed it until now when she stood beside him, closer than when they had been seated in the carriage.

She withdrew her hand and edged away, looking everywhere but at him. “Captain Nesbitt, if you will lead the way, please.”

He considered offering his arm but told himself not to be addlepat. She was lovely, but he had been betrayed once by a beautiful woman. Not that it mattered. Lady Susanna Trelawney made it clear with every word and action that she considered him a bothersome disruption to her day. Maybe he should be grateful that she was more honest than Ruby had been.

Never again.

“This way,” he said gruffly, vexed at how he had to remind himself of what that big mistake had cost his heart. Simply because a woman smelled delightful was no reason to do more than appreciate the moment.

Drake did not look back as he walked toward the crowd. At first, he thought he might have to elbow past people who failed to move when he said, “Pardon me.”

Then Lady Susanna spoke the same words, and the villagers stepped aside as if they were the Red Sea being parted by Moses. She thanked them prettily, and Drake noticed the men touching their forelocks and the women giving a quick curtsy. The Trelawney family was well respected and perhaps even well loved in Porthlowen. When she assured the onlookers that the children would be taken to the earl’s house, the people thanked her before heading to the village and returning to what they had been doing before word of the jolly boat raced along the street. They obviously thought the matter resolved now that it was in the earl’s daughter’s hands. Maybe there was more to Lady Susanna than he had guessed.

Drake followed in Lady Susanna’s wake through the dispersing crowd and saw most of his crew surrounding the small boat. The children sat on a piece of canvas beside it. Two women who were old enough to be the babies’ grandmothers loitered nearby, handing pieces of cake to them. Another woman of the same age sniffed at the sight before pushing past Drake and Lady Susanna with a mutter about spoiling children.

“Pay Charity Thorburn no mind,” Lady Susanna said under her breath. “From what I have heard, she and the Winwood sisters have not once seen eye to eye in the past fifty years. If one of the sisters said the sea is wet, Mrs. Thorburn would argue it was dry.”

When Lady Susanna turned to greet the Winwood sisters, Drake could not help smiling. Splatters on the children’s shirts and in their hair must have come from the soup Obadiah always had ready in the galley. The elderly cook was on his knees, holding the baby. An absorbent cloth was wrapped around his finger. He dipped it into a bowl by his side; then he placed it in the baby’s mouth to let the infant suckle.

Lady Susanna bent to touch the baby’s head. She smiled warmly at Obadiah, who gave her a toothless grin in return and flushed like a new cabin boy who had stayed too long in the sun.

“Tis milk and water and a wee bit of honey,” Obadiah replied to a question Drake had not heard. “Twill fill the mite’s belly for now. My da used the same mixture for lambs when the ewes wouldna let them nurse.”

Thanking him, she turned to where the children regarded her with wide, red-rimmed eyes. They must have been crying the whole time he spoke with the parson and the earl and while he brought Lady Susanna to the beach. He was grateful the older women had come with fresh cake. He thanked them as Lady Susanna sank to her knees beside the boat and put her hand on it as she greeted the children.

“Who is *she*?” asked Benton quietly as he appeared at Drake’s elbow. “Are there more like her in the village?”

Drake scowled his first mate to silence, then said, “She is Lady Susanna Trelawney, the earl’s daughter.”

Arching his brows, Benton whistled softly.

He did not have a chance to reply because Lady Susanna motioned for him to join her. Aware of the eyes of his crew and the few remaining villagers on them, he pushed down his resentment that she crooked her finger at him as if he were a dog trained to obey.

He squatted beside her and saw one of the older boys pinch the other one again. The second boy let out a shriek that was more anger than pain. He scooped up the two boys and carried them to Benton.

“Keep them apart,” he ordered as he set them at his first mate’s feet.

In an instant, the two boys were taunting each other and poking each other and ready to come to blows.

“How?” asked Benton, trying to pull them away from one another.

Drake shrugged. “You can handle a whole crew of cantankerous sailors. Two small boys should not be too great a task for you.”

When he turned to go back to where Lady Susanna was talking in a hushed voice to the remaining children, he wondered if Benton realized that Drake had given him the easier chore. At least his first mate did not have to work alongside a woman who made no secret that she longed to be rid of him.

He wished he could say the feeling was mutual, but she intrigued him. Her hand gently cupped a tear-streaked face as she leaned toward the children. Behind her cool exterior, she had a gentle heart. So why was she revealing that to everyone but him?

* * *

Captain Nesbitt was definitely correct about one thing, Susanna decided. The two toddler girls, who looked to be around two and a half years old, were identical. They must be twins. With their fine black hair and dark green eyes, they would catch every man’s attention once they were grown. Now they were frightened children surrounded by strangers.

Pointing to herself, she said, “I am Susanna.”

The twins looked at each other and at a younger boy who was struggling to stay awake. Before he could tip over, Susanna picked him up and set him on her lap. She touched his forehead, but no hint of fever suggested he might be ill. She must check each child for signs of sickness, though if one was ill, they all probably would soon be. She wondered how long the youngsters had been in the boat. Their faces were red from the sun but not blistered. Either they were accustomed to the sun off the sea or they had been drifted quickly into Porthlowen Harbor after being set afloat.

“I am Susanna,” she repeated to the twins. “Who are you?”

“Wufry,” one of the little girls said.

“Ruthie?” asked Captain Nesbitt as he came to kneel beside Susanna. He held out his hands for the little boy.

Susanna shook her head because he had fallen asleep, and she did not want to disturb him until she must.

“Wufry.” The little girl scowled at Captain Nesbitt. “Wufry!”

In a hushed voice, he said, “The females around here must learn that facial expression early.”

“What?” She looked at him and found he was so close to her that she could not see anything beyond his broad shoulders. As she raised her gaze to his, everyone else on the shore seemed to fade into the distance. Could one disappear into the brown depths of another’s eyes?

Then he grinned. “Her irked frown is just like yours.”

Susanna gasped, knowing she should chide him for his rudeness, but she had been sent to help the children, not to teach Captain Nesbitt proper manners. Heat raced up her face when she recalled how many were watching and might have overheard his whisper. The best course of action would be to collect the children and return to Cothaire posthaste.

“Wufry!” insisted the little girl again.

Lord, Susanna prayed, open my understanding as well as my heart to these children You have brought forth out of the sea. She shuddered when she thought of how easily they could have died before reaching Porthlowen. Let me help them now and please guide me in tending them as carefully as You guided them to safety.

Listening closely to the little girl, she repeated the child’s word over and over in her mind. She smiled and asked to give herself more time to decipher the name, “So your name isn’t Georgie?”

“No.” The child smiled, and the little girl beside her looked at Susanna for the first time. “Wufry.”

“And I guess your name isn’t Aloysius, either.”

Both twins giggled.

When Captain Nesbitt started to speak, Susanna waved him to silence with a curt motion. He scowled but nodded. Good. He could be reasonable.

“Wufry!” said the little girl again.

Hoping her first real guess would be right, Susanna took a deep breath and said, “So your name must be Lucy.”

The little girl grinned, showing gaps in her baby teeth. She flung her arms around Susanna’s neck, tugging her toward the boat. The edge cut painfully into her ribs because she protected the sleeping boy from the splintered wooden side.

“Me Wufry.” The toddler pointed to her sister. “She Mowie.”

“So you are Mollie,” Susanna said after repeating the word in her mind. She smiled at the other twin, who seemed shier than her sister. “Lucy and Mollie. Two very pretty names. Captain, will you assist Miss Lucy and Miss Mollie to the carriage?”

He reached for Lucy. His nose wrinkled as he took her hand and then reached for her sister’s. Both were in need of a change of clean clothes and fresh napkins because the ones they wore were soaked.

Susanna stood, balancing the little boy against her. He stank, too, but she had smelled worse.

Her gaze met Captain Nesbitt’s over the children’s heads. A smile quirked at his lips, and she found herself returning it. Something lit in his eyes, something powerful. She should look away. She could not. She was held by his gaze as surely as if he held her in his arms. A shiver ran through her at that thought. Not an icy shiver, but a heated one.

A small hand tugged at her bodice, and, grateful that she could break the connection between her and Captain Nesbitt, Susanna looked down to see the little boy was awake.

“Gil.” The smallest boy jabbed a finger at his chest.

“You are Gil?” she asked.

He nodded and ordered, “Down!”

“As you wish.” She set him on the ground. When she straightened, she saw the playful twinkle in Captain Nesbitt’s eyes. No doubt he recognized Gil’s tone because it sounded much like his arrogant one.

Why was she letting the ship’s captain slip into her thoughts so often? Her focus should be on the children and discovering why they had been floating in a jolly boat in Porthlowen Harbor.

As if she had made that last thought a request, Gil took off running faster than she could imagine such short legs could move. She gave chase, but slowed when the little boy stopped beside the man who was feeding the swaddled baby.

Gil tapped the blanket and said with pride, “My baby.”

Susanna glanced back at Captain Nesbitt. She was not surprised that he was watching intently. He had been honest when he said, because he had saved them, he considered these children his duty.

When he motioned for her to take the lead, probably because he had trouble understanding the childish talk, she asked, “Does your baby have a name, Gil?”

“My baby. My—”

A shriek silenced everyone, and she saw the two older boys swinging at each other. The man trying to keep them apart was not succeeding, because one boy ran in and slapped the other before the man could halt him.

“Captain...” she began.

He pushed past her, shoving the twins’ hands into hers. Scooping up the blond boy, he draped him over one shoulder. Then he grabbed the dark-haired boy and balanced him on his opposite hip. They wriggled but halted when he barked a sharp order.

Susanna laughed. She could not stop herself. The two boys were frozen in shock, and Captain Nesbitt looked a bit green about the gills with one of the boys' rear ends close to his nose.

"My baby!" Gil cried, patting the baby's swaddling.

The baby screamed again.

He pulled back in horror. "My baby!"

Susanna gave him a swift smile. Babies cried, but not usually with such intensity. At least not when she held one during church services.

Looking past Gil to the old man holding the baby, she asked, "Is the milk fresh?"

"Aye." He motioned to a lanky boy standing beside him. "Tell m'lady where ye got the milk, lad."

He stared at his feet. "At the shop. The lady there said it was delivered this morning. Her assistant poured it out while I was watching, and it smelled as fresh as if it had just come out of the cow."

"What do you know of milking, boy?" demanded the old man.

"Grew up with cows, I did," asserted the boy.

To halt the argument before it went further, Susanna said, "If Miss Rowse told you that, it is the truth." She released the twins' hands and held out her arms. "May I?"

"Aye," the old man said gratefully. He settled the baby in her arms, then stood with the help of the lad who had gotten the milk.

As she went toward a row of low boulders, a young woman followed her and asked, "Do you need more milk for the little one, my lady?"

Susanna smiled at the young woman. The hem of her dress and apron were covered with wet sand like Susanna's. Wisely she had bare feet, so she did not have to deal with shoes caked with heavy sand.

"Are you Peggy who is helping Miss Rowse at the shop?"

She nodded. "Peggy Smith, my lady." She dipped in a quick curtsy but kept staring at her toes. No doubt, the dark-haired girl wondered what Susanna had heard about her, knowing that news spread quickly in the small town. A newcomer like Peggy would be the talk of Porthlowen until something else caught the gossips' fancies.

"Thank you for bringing milk for the baby. He or she seems full for now."

The girl started to say something, then hurried away. Sand sprayed behind her as she sped toward the village.

Behind Susanna, Captain Nesbitt barked an order, but the little boys kept swinging their fists at each other. They managed only to hit him. He put them on the ground, trying to keep them apart.

Gil refused to be parted from the baby. He had trailed Susanna to where she sat on a stone. He watched intently as she placed the baby on her lap. She cooed nonsense words to the baby, but it kept crying with all its power. His lower lip began to tremble, warning he was ready to sob, too.

What is wrong? Lord, help me help this suffering child. Both of them.

With care, she began to undo the blanket that had been wrapped tightly around the baby, keeping it secure and warm. It stank like the other children. Each motion of the blanket seemed to pain the baby—a girl, she discovered—more. She slipped her hand under the long shirt so she could rub the baby's stomach. It was not hard with colic, but the baby screamed again.

"My baby!" cried Gil, tears oozing out of his eyes.

Her own widened when she raised the shirt and saw a tattered piece of paper attached to the garment with a straight pin. Pink spots on the baby's chest and stomach showed where the point jabbed her at the slightest motion.

"Oh, you poor dear," she murmured.

"What is that?" asked Captain Nesbitt.

She looked up, shocked, because she had not heard him approach. His dark coat was stained, and the seam on one shoulder had torn. “The other children?”

“Being watched closely by some of my crew while others shake sand out of the canvas and fit it into the carriage so the seats are not ruined.”

“Thank you,” she said, telling herself she should not be astonished. He had shown his compassion toward the children from the moment she was introduced to him.

“What do you have there?”

“I don’t know.” Careful not to prick the baby again, she drew out the pin and wove it through a corner of her shawl.

He caught the slip of paper before it could fall into the sand. As he scanned it, he clenched his jaw. He handed it back to her.

She struggled with the bad spelling and splotched ink. She guessed it said:

Find loving homes for our children.

Don’t let them work and die in the mines.

Whoever had pinned the note to the baby’s shirt must have been desperate to have that message found.

Beside her, Captain Nesbitt growled something wordless, then said, “Their own families put them in the boat and set them adrift.”

She wanted to deny his words. She could not. Looking from the sleepy baby on her lap and the little boy leaning against her knee back to Captain Nesbitt, she whispered, “How could anyone do that to these sweet children?”

His eyes burned with fervor as he said, “*That*, my lady, is what I intend to find out.”

Chapter Three

“Good night, sweet one.” Susanna tucked the blanket around Lucy, who shared a mattress with her twin sister. Both girls were lost in dreams and sucking their thumbs, Lucy her right one and Mollie her left.

The house had been in a hubbub by the time Susanna returned with the six children. She had been sure that Captain Nesbitt would send someone from his crew with her, but he escorted them himself, insisting that he must speak with her father. She was curious what they discussed, but Papa would let her know if he felt it was necessary.

She had turned her attention to tending to the children and trying to restore order in the house. Baricoat had brought her a long list of obvious deficiencies in the nursery, so she decided to keep the children in her rooms until the nursery was safe and comfortable. Busy with making those arrangements, she still had noticed when Captain Nesbitt left.

He had stridden out with purpose and waved aside the offer of the carriage. He glanced over his shoulder only once before he vanished down the long drive to the gate. She had shifted away from the window so he would not see her watching him. Scolding herself for caring what he thought, she hurried back to the myriad decisions she needed to make to ensure the children’s arrival disrupted the household and her family as little as possible.

There was plenty of room in Cothaire for six small children, but somewhere hearts ached with worry. She did not want to imagine what had compelled anyone to put them in a boat and push it out into the waves. Even if the children had been born outside of marriage, every parish had ways of providing for them.

Help us find these children’s families, she prayed over and over. *Ease their fears and point us in the right direction.*

Two mattresses had been brought into Susanna’s dressing room while the children, except the baby, were offered tea and sandwiches and cake at a table in the kitchen. Mrs. Ford and her kitchen staff had served the youngsters whatever they wished and made sure they ate slowly so they would

not sicken. All the children were thin. She wondered how long they had been adrift. Or had they been half starved before they were placed in the boat?

The past year had been difficult for Cornwall. The wheat and barley harvests had been poor and the pilchard season a disaster. The small fish, which the rest of England called sardines, usually provided a ready source of food along the coast. With her father's permission, Susanna had ordered the Cothaire pantries opened weekly to allow local families to take food. She was unsure if other great houses shared the practice. If not, starvation among the fisherfolk, the farmers and the miners' families was an ever-present threat.

Straightening, Susanna went to the next mattress, where the three boys were supposed to be asleep, too. Little Gil was rolled up like a hedgehog at one end, but the two older boys, who called themselves Toby and Bertie, were tussling again.

"Enough," she said in a loud whisper that would not wake the other youngsters. "It is time to sleep."

Toby, the slight boy with darker hair, whined, "He is taking my spot."

"He is taking *mine*." Blond Bertie glared at the other boy.

She took Toby by the hand and brought him to his feet. Picking up his pillow, she led him to the other mattress, where the twins slept. "Here," she said.

"But—"

"Sleep here tonight. Soon you will have your own bed."

His eyes grew as wide as tea saucers. "My own bed?"

"Yes, but you have to share tonight." She waited until he curled up at the foot of the mattress and then pulled a blanket over him. "Go to sleep."

He mumbled something as he looked past her toward the other mattress. She eased to her right, blocking his view of the other boys. Giving him a stern look, she waited until he closed his eyes.

Susanna left one light burning low in the dressing room and went into her sitting room. The lamps were dim there, too, but moonlight came through the trio of tall windows that looked out, as most windows in the house did, over the gardens and the rolling fields beyond them. She could mark the seasons by the flowers that bloomed and faded in the garden.

She dropped heavily to the chaise longue. Leaning her head back, she stared up at the ceiling. The mural there was lost in the shadows, but she could re-create in her mind every bright color of the fields and the orchard as well as the people who had gathered to flirt and pick apples.

Ah, to be so carefree! She could not even recall what it felt like. The weight of her added responsibilities ground down on her. On the shore, while she had the assistance of Captain Nesbitt, taking care of the children had not seemed like such a huge undertaking. Now...

A knock came at the door, and Susanna pushed herself to her feet. That must be one of the maids with the baby. Mrs. Hitchens, the housekeeper, had already selected a wet nurse from among the volunteers in the village. The young woman, who was about to wean her own baby, was willing to come to Cothaire several times a day to feed the nameless baby.

"Caroline!" Susanna gasped when she opened the door. She had not expected to see her oldest sibling at this hour when the family should have been at the table.

Caroline Trelawney Dowling had a welcoming face. That was what their mother had always said, and Susanna believed it was true. Kindness and warmth glowed from her pale blue eyes, whether she met a friend or a stranger. She was a bit plumper than fashion demanded, but that had not mattered to her late husband. John Dowling had loved her exactly as she was, and she had loved him for that.

Loved him still, Susanna knew. Neither death nor the passage of five years had changed that. Often, Susanna wondered what it would be like to have a man love *her* like that, but common sense always quickly returned.

"May we come in?" Caroline asked.

Only then did Susanna notice her sister carried a tiny bundle in her arms. “You did not need to disrupt your evening meal to bring the baby here.”

“There was no disruption.” Caroline smiled down at the baby. “Papa is taking his supper in his rooms, and Arthur has not yet returned from his visit to the far tenant farms. You know he never arrives home until long after dark when he goes there.”

Susanna stepped aside to let her sister enter. Pointing to the half-closed door that led to her dressing room, she put her fingers to her lips.

Caroline nodded.

“I have a drawer lined with blankets for this babe,” Susanna whispered, holding out her hands.

“May I hold her awhile longer?”

“Of course.” She should not be surprised. Her sister had longed for children of her own, but that dream had been dashed when John died. “Why don’t you sit?”

When her sister chose the chaise longue, Susanna turned up a lamp before sitting on a nearby chair. She watched as Caroline snuggled the baby close, gazing down at her with obvious affection. Susanna bit her lower lip. If her sister became too attached to the baby, her heart was sure to break when the children’s parents were found.

“Don’t fret, little sister,” Caroline said as if Susanna had spoken her thoughts aloud. “I know this darling sprite is here only for a short time, but that is no reason not to savor every moment while I can.” She looked up and smiled. “Tell me. Who was that very good-looking man who came to the house with you?”

“Drake Nesbitt. He is the captain of that listing ship in the harbor.”

“He seemed very solicitous of you.”

“You are mistaken. His thoughts were focused solely on the children.”

Caroline chuckled softly. “Then explain why he was watching *you* all the time.”

“He was?” She clamped her lips closed when her sister’s smile broadened, but she could not halt the quivers from deep in her center. Oh, bother! She had not intended to say anything so silly. Gathering her composure around her anew, she said, “Captain Nesbitt rescued the children, so he wished to make sure they were comfortable here. As I am the one arranging that, he had every reason to watch that I did as I promised.”

“I agree.”

“Good.”

“He had *every* reason to watch you, but why did you watch him leave Cothaire?”

Susanna refused to let her vexation surface that someone had noted her by the window and carried the tale to her sister. “I happened to be by the window.” That was the truth. “He is a sailor. I will never be so want-witted as to tangle my life up with one of them.”

Her sister’s face lost all color.

“Oh, Caroline! I am so sorry. I did not mean you were foolish to marry John.”

“I know you didn’t.” Her older sister sighed.

“I am sorry to remind you about him.”

Caroline drew her feet up beneath her and leaned back against the high end of the chaise longue, shifting the baby in her arms. “You did not remind me. I never forget. Not ever.” She squared her shoulders. “Papa tells me that I need to put the mourning behind me as it has been more than five years since John left on that voyage. I don’t know how.”

Moving to sit by her sister’s feet on the chaise longue, Susanna said, “You could ask Papa.”

“I don’t think he knows, because he still misses Mama more than he will admit.”

“What about asking Raymond?”

Caroline shook her head. “Take advice on love from my younger brother who is not yet married? I don’t think so.”

“But he is our parson.”

“I know, and I appreciate his concern and teachings for our congregation.” A faint smile smoothed out the lines of grief in her face. “Still, I cannot imagine speaking to my baby brother about the state of my heart. Perhaps I should speak to you instead.”

“Me about marriage?” Susanna gave a sharp laugh. “I am less of an expert than Raymond is.”

“But losing the one you love has nothing to do with being married. It has to do with healing your heart.”

Susanna opened her mouth but clamped it closed when a sharp cry came from the dressing room. She jumped to her feet. Racing across the sitting room, she pushed open the door just in time to see Toby and Bertie roll off the mattress and across the floor. Bertie got up. Toby chased him. Bertie screeched. The other children woke up and climbed off the mattresses, eager not to miss what was happening.

Susanna reached out and took each little boy by the back of his shirt. She pulled them as far apart as her arms could stretch. Bertie was cradling his arm, and, even in the low light, Susanna could see a bite mark near his elbow.

“He bit me,” Bertie cried, thick tears rolling down his face.

“Did you bite him, Toby?” She wanted to be fair, but she had seen the dark-haired boy tormenting the smaller Bertie all evening.

“He take my pillow.” Toby puffed up in righteous indignation. “He gots pillow. Me want my pillow.”

“He pinched me.”

“He stuck out his tongue.”

“He—”

“Enough,” Susanna said, wondering how she was going to keep the peace when the little boys detested each other.

“Are they hurt?” asked Caroline as she stepped through the doorway.

“My baby!” Gil flung himself against Caroline so hard that he knocked her back a half step. Her shoulder thudded on the door frame. Pain rippled across her face. Her grip tightened on the baby, and her eyes filled with fear that she would drop the little girl.

Torn, Susanna wanted to help her sister but knew the boys would begin fighting the second she released them. She hesitated only a moment, then rushed to her sister and plucked the baby from her arms. Behind her, Bertie let out another screech.

“Give me the baby,” Caroline said over Gil’s demands to see “my baby.”

“But you are hurt.”

“I hit my elbow, and my fingers went numb. I am fine now.”

“If you are sure—”

Bertie screamed.

“I don’t think we have any choice.” Caroline took the baby and bent to let Gil look at the little girl, who, remarkably, still slept.

Susanna whirled to halt the boys again. This time, she did not get as good a grip on their shirts. They squirmed away. Toby picked up a pillow and swung it at Bertie. The other children squealed with excitement.

“Stop now!” she ordered.

Toby hit Bertie again with the pillow. The blond boy fell to the floor and started screaming as if he had been dropped off the roof.

She wondered how much he was pretending to be hurt and how much was true. No matter. She needed to regain control. Again she asked the boys to stop. Again they ignored her. She seized the backs of their shirts, getting a better hold this time. They fought her and each other to escape.

“May we help?”

Not daring to release either little boy, Susanna looked over her shoulder. Raymond and Elisabeth stood beside Caroline. Her brother wore his usual black coat, waistcoat and breeches. One end of his white cravat popped out as he took Toby's arm and drew him away from her and Bertie.

Elisabeth knelt in front of the angry child and tried to soothe him. He refused to be placated.

Raymond gave them a sympathetic smile. "Let me take..."

"Toby," Susanna supplied, keeping a tight hold on Bertie.

"Let me take Toby," Raymond said in his deep voice that was perfect for the pulpit. "He can stay with me at the parsonage tonight."

"You don't have room for a child there."

"Quite to the contrary. I have far more room than I need."

Elisabeth stood, still holding Toby's hand. "If the situation remains tense, I have some special sweets at the store that might help."

Both boys froze at her words.

"Sweets?" asked Toby and Bertie at the same time.

"Only if you behave nicely tonight," Elisabeth replied. "I will check with Parson Trelawney and Lady Susanna in the morning."

They both nodded hard.

"That is settled, then." Raymond glanced toward where Caroline was gently rocking the baby. "Separating these two should make it easier on you."

"It will." Susanna relaxed a bit. "I have no idea how they did not tip the jolly boat over with their antics."

"Because the good Lord had them in His hand, guiding them to this shore, where they would find a haven." He smiled at them. "Don't forget that the Book of Proverbs teaches: *'Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'*"

"And the right path was here to Porthlowen." Caroline cradled the baby close. "I'll have another mattress and that drawer brought to my rooms. I don't think Gil will let his baby sister out of his sight again."

"It appears we have excellent solutions for the children," Raymond said. "Don't you agree, Susanna?"

"So our solution is divide and conquer?" asked Susanna, only half jesting.

Elisabeth drew Toby with her toward the door. "Let's give the children a chance to get to know us, and then we shall see how we can convince these two boys to get along better."

"Thank you," Susanna said. The two words could not convey the depth of her gratitude. She needed help to bring the house back to its usual serenity, and she was glad she did not have to ask Captain Nesbitt for it.

Where had *that* thought come from? There were many servants as well as her other brother to assist her with the children. Not that her older brother Arthur would volunteer as Raymond had. As the heir, Arthur seldom concerned himself with household issues, leaving, as their father did, such matters to Susanna. Even so, she had plenty of hands to assist her.

So why had Captain Nesbitt popped into her mind? Had it been Caroline's comments about him watching her? Those comments had sent a round of warm shivers rippling along her exactly as when the captain smiled at her. No, it was more likely because her neatly ordered existence had collapsed, and he was part of the reason. The best way to banish thoughts of him from invading her head was to end the tumult in the house.

She would start now. Thanking her sister and brother again, she led the twins and Bertie back to the mattresses and tucked them in. One small step, but it was in the right direction.

* * *

“Captain?”

Drake shook himself like a dog coming out of the water. Benton’s voice had the impatient sound of a man who was tired of being ignored. Looking toward where his first mate stood by the main hatch and wondering how many times Benton had called, he walked away from the railing. He had been watching the crew sealing the outside of yet another small hole...until his thoughts drifted ashore and up to the grand house.

He forgot about the children’s plight and Lady Susanna’s dazzling eyes when he saw Benton’s grim expression. “What is the bad news? More holes?”

“We did discover a few more in the starboard hull. Captain, we would be done much sooner if you didn’t keep sending men off to ask questions about the children.”

“A few days will make no difference.” He saw disbelief on Benton’s face and was not surprised. Three days ago, before he had spotted the jolly boat, Drake had been as impatient as a wind-filled sail to get under way. “And they are keeping their ears open for anyone who needs cargo moved. We need to have something in the holds before we sail.”

“We could go to Padstow or around Land’s End to Penzance and Truro. We would find cargo there.”

“As well as the men whose cargo was ruined by the attack. I would like to have enough money to pay them for the lost goods before I encounter them.”

Benton chewed on that, then nodded. “I understand, Captain. Our reputation and *The Kestrel*’s are at stake.”

Drake was pleased. Even a year ago, Benton would not have comprehended the tough decisions a captain had to make. The young first mate would soon be ready to take over his own ship. Drake would miss Benton’s willingness to tackle any job and his good rapport with the men.

Clapping his mate on the back, he said, “Let’s get to work.”

“Aye, Captain.” He hurried to the hatch and down to the lower decks.

Drake started to follow, but again his gaze focused on the grand house beyond the village. He looked away. There was nothing there for him, but he could not keep from wondering how Lady Susanna and the children fared now that a few days had passed.

Less than two hours later, his curiosity overmastered his good judgment. He was admitted to the great house as soon as he reached its door, and a footman offered to take him to where he could speak with Lady Susanna. The footman led the way up one grand staircase and then along a long hallway decorated with paintings of people who must be Lady Susanna’s ancestors. He could not imagine being surrounded by so much history of generations past. After all, he had known neither his father nor his mother, for they had abandoned him in a neighbor’s care soon after his birth. He had found his first true family when he signed on a trading ship as cabin boy.

“This way, Captain Nesbitt,” said the footman in his light gray livery that did not have a single piece of lint on it. He began up a narrow stairwell.

Drake followed, uncertain where they were bound. He had been in great houses once or twice, but never beyond the public rooms, so he had no idea what to expect when they reached the top of the steps.

It was as if they had entered a different house. An odor of dampness and neglect filled each breath he took. No thick carpets covered the wide floorboards that needed to be restrained. The walls were bare, though he could see the shadowed outlines where pictures had hung between doors. They were closely spaced, so the rooms beyond them must be not much bigger than his quarters on *The Kestrel*. A few tables were pushed against the walls. All were either scratched or chipped.

As they left the double row of doors behind and walked along a blank wall where paint peeled off in long strips, voices emerged from a doorway at the far end of the hallway.

A man said, “The first thing we need is a good nursery staff.”

“No,” replied a female voice. “I believe you are mistaken on this.”

Even if Drake had not recognized the melodious tone, he could identify Lady Susanna by her poised, self-assured words.

“The first things we need,” she went on, “are uncracked windows and fresh paint on the walls. I doubt if anyone has been up here since the nursery was closed.”

“Making all those repairs will take time and money. I doubt we can get the windows replaced in less than a month or more. By that time, the children will be back with their families.”

“I hope you are right.” A hint of humor warmed her voice. “In that case, you can see it as early preparations for your heir, Arthur.”

The footman stepped into the doorway and announced, “My lord, my lady, excuse my intrusion. Captain Nesbitt is here and wishes to speak with you, my lady.”

“Tell him,” Lady Susanna said, “that I will be with him shortly. Thank you, Venton. Arthur, I am sure we can complete the nursery quickly if we put our minds to it.”

“My lady, Captain Nesbitt—”

“I heard you, Venton. That will be all.”

The footman cleared his throat and said, “My lady, Captain Nesbitt is *here*.”

Drake stepped forward. He scanned the room. It was in as bad repair as the corridor, but shelves still contained carefully packed boxes that might contain toys or clothing or even books. He struggled to imagine how anyone could leave books in a damp room. He owned one book, a well-read copy of *Robinson Crusoe*, and he kept it carefully wrapped in oilcloth in his quarters.

“So I see,” said the man who had been conversing with Lady Susanna. He had her ebony hair and high cheekbones. He affixed Drake with an icy stare.

Drake met it steadily. He might not be the heir to an earldom, but he had information of import for Lady Susanna.

His supposition was confirmed when she said, “Arthur, allow me to introduce you to Captain Nesbitt. Captain, this is my older brother, Lord Trelawney.”

Even though he hated to be the first one to look away, Drake could not halt his gaze from shifting to Lady Susanna. He realized he had been avoiding looking in her direction. Rightly so, because a single glance at her stole his breath away.

She was dressed in a simple pale blue gown that was covered by a gray apron. Her hair was piled up carelessly on her head. A few strands had escaped to curve along her left cheek, and he had to clench his hands at his sides to keep from reaching out to brush those tresses back along her face. A streak of dust shadowed her right eye.

“My lord,” he said, offering his hand.

Lord Trelawney seemed astonished, but shook Drake’s hand. “I will leave you to make plans for the children.”

“Arthur, we need to discuss further repairs to the nursery.” Lady Susanna frowned.

“I will study the list in the morning. As for now, if you need anything, Venton will be here to assist you.”

Drake understood Lord Trelawney’s true message to his servant. The footman would make sure that nothing untoward happened. The urge to laugh tickled the back of Drake’s throat. Lady Susanna hardly needed a chaperone. She could freeze a man in place with a single look.

As soon as Lord Trelawney took his leave, Venton moved to stand just inside the doorway. The spot gave him a clear view of the main room and a smaller one beyond it.

“I thought you had taken your leave of Porthlowen,” Lady Susanna said.

“When I did not return?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, there is still more work to be done on *The Kestrel*. And, if you remember, I told you that as long as I am in Porthlowen, I would do what I could to help the children. How are they?”

Her shoulders eased from their rigid stance, and an honest smile brightened her face. “Better than I dared to hope. The twins and Bertie have become inseparable. They are fun and funny. My sister is caring for Gil and the baby she’s named Joy, because she is such a happy child.”

“And Toby? Are he and Bertie still quarreling with each other?”

“Toby lives with my brother at the parsonage. We thought giving the boys some time apart would be wise. From what Raymond tells us, Toby has charmed most of the older ladies in the parish, especially Hyacinth and Ivy Winwood, who have made plenty of excuses to call at the parsonage.” She hesitated, kneading her fingers together, then asked, “Have you come because you have news about the search for the children’s families?”

He nodded, and color washed from her face. Was she fearing that he had found the children’s parents or that he had not? True affection had been laced through her words as she spoke of them.

The spot beneath her eye looked even darker, and he frowned as he caught her chin gently and tilted her face toward the light streaming in through the cracked window. He ignored the growled warning from Venton. He drew in a sharp breath of his own when he saw the puffiness beneath the darkness near her eye. It was not dirt. It was a bruise. She had been struck.

“Who darkened your daylight, my lady? Tell me the cur’s name, and I will make him regret being so discourteous to you.”

She drew away and laughed, wincing when her eyes crinkled in amusement. “I appreciate your chivalry, but Miss Mollie gave me this black eye.”

“One of the twins? But how...?”

“We were playing, and she flung her head back. I did not move swiftly enough. You see the result.”

“Maybe I should invite her to join my crew. She could come in handy if French privateers try to board us again.” He glanced over his shoulder at Venton, who was listening with sudden interest. Hadn’t the tale of *The Kestrel*’s battle been told and retold throughout Porthlowen? Apparently the footman had not heard of it before or wanted more details.

“What have you discovered about the children, Captain?” Lady Susanna asked.

“I sent men along the shore as far north as Trevana and as far south as Land’s End. No one they spoke to had heard that six children were missing. Or at least nobody would admit they had.”

She gave a terse laugh. “Captain, even if the children’s parents refused to step forward and own up to what they have done, others would notice children had gone missing. A single child might be hidden from neighbors until it was placed in the boat, but not six.”

“Then we will continue looking. I can send men across the moors to Penzance and Truro. Even as far as Looe, if necessary.”

She walked toward the shelves, her skirts whirling dust behind her. Running her fingers along the shelves, she wrinkled her nose when she looked at the dust on them. She slapped her hands together to clean them. The sound echoed in the empty room as she faced him.

“Maybe we are looking in the wrong place,” she said.

“It is unlikely they came from beyond Cornwall. Devon or Wales is a great distance for a jolly boat to travel.”

“But not a ship.”

He was puzzled. Usually his mind could keep up with any conversation. It might be that he was paying too much attention to the sway of her skirts as she walked toward him.

“A ship, Captain Nesbitt,” she said. “A ship can easily sail from Devon or Wales or even much farther away, as you know.”

“You need not instruct me about sailing, my lady, but I would appreciate if you could enlighten me about what exactly you are talking about.”

Her cheeks went from pale to flushed in a heartbeat. Her voice became as glacial as her brother's. "Let me put it simply. French privateers attacked *The Kestrel*. You halted them, Captain, but maybe another ship was not so fortunate."

What she was trying to tell him shot like a ball through his brain. Why had he failed to see that possibility himself? He had told her, after all, that they could not discount any theory until they were certain it would not lead to the children's families.

"I will have my men make inquiries about missing ships as well as missing children," he said.

"Good." She started to walk away again, and he knew he had been dismissed.

He did not move. "My lady?"

"Yes?" She kept walking.

"I hope your idea is wrong."

She stopped but did not turn. "Why?"

"Because if it is correct..."

She spun to look at him with horrified eyes. "Please tell me that you are not about to suggest that their own parents put them in the boat."

"No, because that is not how privateers work. They want the cargo and the ship. Once they board, the ship's crew and passengers are doomed." He closed the distance between them until she had to tilt her head back to look up at him. Raising his hand, he slipped the loose hair back behind her ear. He heard her breath catch, and his heart quickened like a ship driven by a gale.

It took all his willpower to ignore both her reaction and his own. His life was already too enmeshed with the events and people of Porthlowen, and he would be gone soon. But he could not leave without warning her of a truth he doubted she could imagine.

Wiping a bit of fluffy dust from her cheek, he held her gaze as he whispered, "If you are right, no ship and no port, including Porthlowen, may be safe."

He was shocked when she pulled back with the calm smile that was beginning to annoy him. He knew that expression was aimed at covering up her true emotions because her fingers trembled. Because he had touched her or because of what he had told her?

As if she spoke of nothing more important than the color of the water in the cove, she said, "We have never been assured of safety in Porthlowen. Before the French, there were other pirates and raiders, as well as storms and droughts and sickness."

"Very well. It seems you understand. Therefore, I will bid you a good evening, Lady Susanna."

"Good evening, Captain." She relented from her icy pose as she added, "I truly appreciate you bringing me the information your men have gathered. We are grateful for your continuing efforts."

"I helped rescue those children. I would be coldhearted not to be concerned about their well-being."

She nodded, and he wondered if she ever lost control of her tight hold on herself. Even when she had gasped at his touch on her cheek, she'd quickly reverted to her cool exterior.

Drake got his answer when her name was shouted from the hallway, and a maid burst into the nursery. The young woman's eyes were wide with dismay as she cried, "My lady! It is Miss Lucy! She tumbled down the stairs and landed on her head. We cannot wake her."

Alarm wiped all other emotion from Lady Susanna's face as she pushed past him. He caught her arm, and she whipped around, fury now mixed with fear.

"Let me go!" she ordered.

"I will, but I am going with you so *you* don't fall down the steps in your haste to get to her."

She nodded. "Hurry! I need to be there when she regains her senses."

He steered her out of the room past the maid and the footman, who exchanged worried glances. He knew their thoughts as surely as if they were his own.

What if the tiny girl never woke?

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