

# *Hart's Reward*

*Pirates & Petticoats Novel Three*

*By Chloe Flowers*

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This book is dedicated to my parents, husband and children, who have supported me and encouraged me in realizing my dream of becoming a writer.

To Bonnie LaBadie, you know why.

Kathy Wilhelm, you rock.

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Love and smooches to you all.

## CHAPTER ONE

July, 1811

Harbour Town, Georgia

Keelan rolled over and nuzzled Landon's neck. His chest vibrated with a satisfied hum. She kissed the place where his pulse surfaced and he pulled her closer, then stroked small circles on his chest, around his heart. It beat strongly beneath her fingers.

"Good morning, love," he murmured. "Did you sleep well?"

Keelan smiled and kissed his shoulder. "I slept well, but not long...although I'm not complaining."

Landon ran a gentle hand down her side to her hip and pulled her closer before caressing the naked curve of her bottom. "Should I apologize?"

Her breath hitched. "Absolutely not." She snuggled closer and kissed his chest. "I'm enjoying my role as a new bride."

Landon's hand stilled. "Keelan...I'm sorry we couldn't be properly wed in Harbour Town. If things had gone as I'd planned, we'd be married in the eyes of the church by now."

"It isn't your fault." She placed her hand over his and brought it to her heart. "No one could have predicted yesterday's events." Things had certainly *not* gone as planned.

His chest rose and fell with a deep sigh. "Making you my wife is important."

Keelan squeezed Landon's hand. "How could we go on with the wedding without him?"

"I promised we would marry."

"Landon Hart, you listen to me." She placed her other hand on his cheek and turned his face toward hers. "The promise you gave to me in front of Daniel and my brother is enough. I love you with all my heart. I trust you with all my heart. I don't need a piece of parchment to bind me to you."

Landon brought their interlaced fingers to his lips and kissed them. "I love you, Keelan. I promise, as soon as we deliver the cargo to Philadelphia, I'll seek out a priest to marry us. Then we set sail to find your brother."

"I believe you." Landon's eyes were a startling blue, especially against the backdrop of his tanned skin and dark locks. "I know it took me a long time to finally trust you." She'd been brought up to be wary of men of the sea. The woman who raised her was a bitter shell of a wife left alone while her husband sailed for the Royal Navy. The she learned that woman wasn't her real mother she'd been relieved, actually. Catherine had never showed any affection for Keelan, and spent most of her time in her shop in Chatham, England, leaving Keelan to be raised by her maid and the valet, Daniel.

Keelan smiled. "Then I came to know you, and the kind of man you are. How could I not fall in love with you?" She moved a hand over Landon's heart. "You asked me to join you, and I have."

Landon rubbed his thumb over the top of her hand. "Still, I gave you my word, and I'll see we are wed as soon as possible." He gave her a pained grin. "Your brother, Conal, may be content with our hand fast, but I know your mother, and she'll have a word or two to say if I escort you across her threshold before a priest says we're married."

She tapped the scar on his chin with her finger. "Then we'll have to do everything we can to keep you in her good graces." Kidnapped from her crib as a toddler, Keelan had not yet met her parents. It was all the more reason to finish their business and find her brother, so he could take her home to meet her real family.

"We need to make a quick docking in Charleston to pick up the last group of runaways and then we'll set sail northward." Landon took a quick breath. Concern seeped into his eyes. He worried that the price on her head in Charleston would muddy up the sediment that had settled into the dark places there. Lower men who held no honor or pride would seek her out for the reward. True, the pirate Gampo had departed the city, but he'd left a message at the docks promising a reward to anyone who found Keelan Grey and brought her to him. If she was not alive, so be it. He'd accept a piece of her scalp as proof.

If only Keelan didn't have such a distinguishable head of hair. Once, the curls had been long enough to brush her waist. God had also graced her with a deep auburn color; a cross between a chestnut brown and burnished copper, hence Gampo's conciliatory acceptance of a piece her scalp.

She was well-disguised, though. The tavern keeper's wife at The Whistling Pig had helped her dye her skin and hair. Keelan had passed as a Persian galley boy on her brother's ship easily enough.

The fact that they had to return to Charleston so soon caused the worry.

Landon had told her about her Uncle Fynn, who had once been made a pirate's slave. Fynn had insisted on being a part of a secret society who helped slave families escape bondage. It was well-known that single runaways had a

greater chance of success, but families, with children, less so. Fynn focused on freeing families, even though the danger was greater. Sadly, Fynn had been killed during the last battle with the pirate Gampo. His two sons along with Landon and Conal, still continued Uncle Fynn's mission as Freedom Runners by using their merchant ship business as a distraction. The two entities, The Freedom Fighters and Ahern Shipping formed an easy partnership.

Keelan thought of Gampo and a soft shiver trickled up her spine. "Perhaps my name will have been forgotten. Do you think I'll still be in danger in Charleston, even with Gampo gone from there?" It was a half-hearted optimism that made her ask, even though the answer was obvious.

Landon's jaw clenched as it rested against her head and she took that to mean 'yes.'

"He left word on the docks he wanted you dead or alive. All that's needed to collect the reward, is a token from your head," he said.

The skin on her scalp tingled.

Landon reached up and smoothed her curls. "You'll have to remain Mahdi, our Persian galley boy, until we depart Charleston," he said. He was concerned, but she could still hear the smile in his voice. He was thinking back to the day he discovered her disguised as Mahdi. That day, she'd managed to fall into the brass bathing tub while he occupied it. Her disguise had been brilliant until he noticed the line of demarcation across her chest where she'd applied a stain to her skin.

"When will we reach Charleston?" It was imperative that they complete this mission quickly. The next one, chasing after her brother, would be no less dangerous.

"Less than a day. The quicker we can pick up our cargo there, the sooner we can head for Philadelphia"

Other Freedom Runners would take the runaways from port and send them on their way to Canada. Then she and Landon would sail for Jamaica to catch up with her cousin Brendan and rescue her brother Conal.

"With both the *Desire* and the *Reward* on their tail, the pirates who stole your brother's ship will not find a place to hide in Jamaica," Landon promised.

She, Landon and her cousins, had been awaiting her brother at the hotel when a member of his crew found them and gave them the news.

Under the cover of thick fog, a group of pirates seized his ship. They forced most of the crew into long boats and set them adrift in the murky mist of the harbor. By the time the men were able to paddle to the wharf, the pirates had taken the *Seeker* and her brother and set sail for Jamaica. It was still uncertain why the pirates had kept some of the crew and released others. Perhaps they were short-handed. She swallowed as the next thought darkened her mind.

Perhaps they needed slaves.

As soon as he could pull up the anchor, her cousin took the *Reward* to give chase through the fog, leaving his younger brother, Ronan, to travel with them aboard the *Desire*. At fourteen, Ronan, who everyone still called Ronnie, didn't take the news well that his brother had left him behind. In fact, he'd been downright dour.

"Do you know what started the animosity between Gampo and Fynn?"

Landon took a deep breath and exhaled. "No, but we're determined to end it. It's my hope there are no more lives lost in the process." He brushed the ringlets from her face. "Fynn was the first casualty. For twenty years those two acted more like a couple of toothless dogs than ruthless enemies."

Keelan discovered she had a family and siblings just a day ago. Losing that connection so soon after finding it would be unbearable. "Can we find a way to negotiate a truce?"

"Perhaps," he kissed her forehead, "if we get there in time. Your brother sometimes needs a voice of reason. He tends to react first and ask questions second."

"Are you saying that he's impetuous?" She poked him in the ribs.

Landon grinned. "It must be a family trait."

"So is disguise."

Landon slipped his hand up to cup her breast. "While you have learned to act the part of a fourteen-year-old boy with a fair amount of success, I fear your brother would fail, in a most miserable fashion, disguised as a fourteen-year-old girl."

Thinking of her older brother's neatly trimmed beard and upper arms nearly as thick as her thighs, she had to agree.

With that, Landon pulled her on top of him and gave her a long, languid kiss, cupping her bottom and pressing her hips to him. His mouth began to move more urgently against hers and she thrilled in the heady passion they shared for each other. Her heartbeat quickened and she trailed her lips over his neck, kissing and licking the tender spot beneath his ear. His skin was a golden brown from the sun, his chest covered with a light coat of dark hair and chiseled muscle.

He stroked her hair. "You've stolen my heart, love, and burrowed so deeply into my soul you've become a part of it."

"There's no place else I'd rather be," she murmured. "I love you."

"And I love you."

She kissed him and he stirred against her. Azure eyes smoldered with passion and his mouth quirked up into a slow seductive grin. They were going to be late. Again.

It was sometime later before they emerged to the main deck. Gus, Landon's

first mate stood at the helm, gazing out over the ocean. "Well, that don't look good," he said, pointing to the west.

Keelan tied her hair back in a long scarf, once again playing the part of Mahdi. Swift, low moving gray clouds formed an enormous anvil shaped wall that consumed half the horizon. In the distance, lighter gray sheets of rain fell beneath it.

Gus swallowed. "That ain't no pitter-patter, spring shower."

"We'll not have the speed to skirt it," Landon said. "Shorten the sail. Bring in the top gallants, main and mizzen top sails, and out the small jib to balance it."

"Aye, sir." Gus responded, before relaying his captain's orders.

Sailors scampered up the ratlines. The runaway slaves were also put to tasks and a few followed the sailors up the tops. She caught her breath as the men soon became the size of swallows perched up in the yards.

Keelan tried to help the crew prepare for the storm. She grabbed a rope when told, pulled when told, let the rope slack when told. Soon, many of the big sails were reefed and secured snugly to the yard arms.

"Yer see, boy, a big blow would catch them big sails and have the stern flying off leeward," Gus told her. "Good way to capsize yer ship. We're gonna heave to and wait the storm out." He raised his grizzled face to the wind. "Good thing, too. Wind's picking' up."

As if to prove his point, a portion of the shoulder-length hair Keelan had pulled back slipped free from beneath her hat. She tucked it behind her ear. Dark and foreboding, the clouds crowded the ocean. Thousands of white caps dotted the water as the wind churned the sea. Even now, the *Desire* rolled between the growing swells.

How dangerous was it?

Keelan tied the chin strap to keep her hat from flying away. How easy would it be for a huge swell to cap over and fall on the *Desire*, filling her with ocean water?

Landon had once told her that he'd sailed through and around many storms. That should have helped her feel more confident. Still, it was hard to quell the unease.

Daniel, once the valet to the man who'd raised her, was also on deck lending a hand to the ropes and securing large barrels around the main mast. She ran over to help him. Perhaps staying busy would keep her mind off the approaching gale.

Daniel was more like an uncle to Keelan. He'd taught her not only reading and mathematics, but also to fence and duel with swords. With the commodore out at sea for months at a time, and his wife tending a shop in town, it had been important for her to learn ways to protect herself. Skills which had already come in handy more than once.

“What can I do?” Keelan was feeling anxious. She needed to stay in motion so thoughts of the impending storm didn’t invade her mind.

“Tie this off,” Daniel grunted between pulls, “while I keep the line tight.”

Keelan had seen the different knots sailors used to secure lines to belaying pins or clews, but wasn’t quite sure which knot was proper in this situation, so she tied it and wrapped the end of the rope around the knot several times and tucked it in, hoping it was good enough.

“Mahdi!”

Mahdi was her name while in disguise; she scolded herself for nearly forgetting. Landon hailed her from the helm.

“Go below!” He shouted into the rising wind. “Help Marcel secure the galley and the cargo.”

She nodded and headed toward a small hatch located closest to the kitchen. The clouds were churning and flashing in the distance.

A dark feeling of foreboding crept up her spine.

## CHAPTER TWO

A long, lithe, orange cat darted past her as Keelan walked down the narrow passageway to the galley. She poked her head around the corner. Marcel was wrestling a barrel toward a closet along with a young brown-skinned girl. Now that they were safely away from port, the family of runaways came out of hiding to help the crew.

"Mahdi! Where have you been?" Marcel drove his hip in to the barrel, but it only moved an inch. "Come, help us."

Keelan smiled at the little girl clutching her stomach, then answered the cross cook, "Captain Hart had me helping with the ropes on the main deck. What can I do here?"

Marcel harrumphed and grumbled while he rocked the barrel forward in small steps, "Dozens of men to help with ze sails and no one helps old Marcel." He nodded to his little helper, who appeared to be about eight. "Yanda and her mother, are helping secure ze galley."

"Where is Elle?" Keelan asked Marcel. Yanda's mother Elle had been a cook for her last master, so it seemed practical to place her in the galley.

"She iz checking the cabinets in ze next room, making sure they are latched." He glanced up at Keelan and muttered, "Useless, both of zem."

What did Marcel mean by that? Did he think the slaves were not experienced enough with cooking to work a galley? When Elle stumbled in from the next cabin, arms pressed tightly against her belly, Keelan understood and took pity. The woman glistened with sweat. Her eyes were red and her face ashen.

Seasickness. It's hard to want to do anything but die when hit with that kind of nausea.

Marcel gestured to the other side of the barrel. "It iz heavy, but we must lock it in zere. You push, I pull, eh?"

She nodded and together they managed to wiggle the cask into the narrow pantry closet while Marcel spat a string of French curses at the stubbornness of the barrel, at Elle's lack of strength and Yanda, who paused to vomit on the floor. After it was secured, he pointed to a bucket of sea water and a mop and the girl nodded with a mumbled, "Sorry, Monsieur."

They shuttered and locked the pantry shelves to prevent items from pitching to the floor in rough seas. Marcel placed a tin of dried meat, biscuits and a couple rounds of cheese handy before he shut the door. He nonchalantly pressed a broken biscuit into Yanda's palm on his way out and popped the other half into his mouth.

From there they moved elsewhere on the orlop deck, tying down loose items or stowing them. Port holes were closed and locked, although seawater had already managed to surge in. They trudged through an inch of water on the lower decks. The ship pitched and groaned. Keelan caught her breath and listened to the inhalation and exhalation of the ship. Would it stay together through the storm or break into pieces? She studied the beams holding the ship together like huge fingers gripping a vase. The vessel sounded as if it was in pain, groaning, squealing, moaning.

Marcel, sensing her trepidation, pointed to the water which had seeped in. "Iz from the hause bucklers."

At her confused expression, he tried again. "Ze pressing of ze ship against the water when swells come, push water through ze house bucklers. The *Desire*, she iz strong and brave. And nimble as a cat. No reason to worry. We sailed through worse."

As they finished, a large group of crewmen came down below and collapsed wearily at the tables propped between the guns on the gun deck. Marcel jerked his head toward the galley and they went to prepare the meal, which would be nothing more than a piece or two of dried beef, hard biscuits, grog and a chunk of cheese.

The lurch and groan of the ship had Keelan gripping edges of the tables as she staggered past. Before the arrival of rough seas like this, she'd been getting used to being on the water, and actually enjoyed it. She still moved like a landlubber, however, and was anxious to develop "sea legs." Lanterns swung in unison, casting quick shadows followed by fans of light. The *Desire* pitched sharply and Keelan stumbled. A burly arm shot out and grabbed her collar.

"Careful, boy," Gus said. "Best ye find a spot and stay there."

"How do you keep you footing when the ship bucks and tilts?" She was breathless from her effort to stay upright.

Gus sat back and scratched his salt and pepper beard then gripped his tankard before it flew to the floor. "Seein' how yer father is a horsemaster, I'll put it this way..." He finished his grog. "When the horse jumps a hedge, do ye try and keep yer seat straight and still on the saddle?"

At last. Here was something with which Keelan was familiar, although she hadn't jumped a horse since she was twelve. She shook her head. "You'd fall off if you tried to keep your seat on the saddle. You have to stand in the stirrups and keep your legs soft to absorb the impact of the jump."

Gus cocked his head. "Ye Persians sure do use peculiar language, but aye. So, ye does the same thing on the water. Mount the *Desire* as ye would a proud filly. Ye'll never tame her, so don't try. All ye can do is melt into her rhythm. Keep yer knees soft and let her rise up to ye. When she sighs and falls away, don't fight her and try to follow. Let her go. She'll come back to ye in her own time. Keep yer guts even with the world and ye won't gets seasick."

Keelan let go of the table and heeded his advice. Sure enough, it was similar to jumping her pony. She'd have to mention this method to poor Elle. She grinned her thanks to Gus, then asked, "Where's the captain?"

"He has first watch," Gus replied, dipping his tankard into a bucket hanging from a rope secured to the ceiling. "Best fer ye to stay below, outta the way, though."

After serving the men their rations for the evening, she helped Marcel secure the galley before she went back to their cabin. The room tilted and shifted causing her feet to slide and her stomach to slam into her ribs.

*Keep my guts even with the world. Keep my guts even with the world.*

Relaxing her legs, she allowed the *Desire* to take the lead in this rolling dance. A powerful wave hit the ship and she was pleasantly surprised and happy with the way she rode it. Now that Gus had revealed the secret to handling the motion, it was much easier to move about. She slipped a couple biscuits in her pocket for Landon, and left the galley to make her way to the ladder and up to the main deck. Was he alone at the helm? She'd forgotten to ask Gus. If so, he might like some company until the next watch took over and he had a chance to rest below and eat.

A lash of stinging, sea spray hit her full in the face when she raised the hatch. The main deck forward sloshed with water, and the entire ship rose and fell in a furious coupling with the sea. The waves crashed against the ship's sides and exploded into the air, bringing the ocean to the ship.

For a second, she hesitated. Keelan Grey Hart might want to retreat below to stay dry, but the boy, Mahdi, would be more courageous, wouldn't he? She looked toward the helm, her husband's form was barely visible through the torrent. If Landon could brave the gale, so could she. Had she not once raced a horse through similar weather, trying to beat a terrible storm? This couldn't be any worse than that.

Keelan climbed out and took a step. The deck jolted, as if trying to fling her away from the safety of the hold. Everything was shiny and slick with seawater. Her feet flew away from her and the tilt of the ship sent her crashing to the boards. Wet and bruised, she pulled herself up by grasping the lines attached to the belaying pins.

Terror pulsed through her limbs. This was a mistake. She shouldn't have come up on deck. She'd underestimated the power of the ship and the winds

and the storm. Landon was only a hundred yards away, but he might as well have been in China. Through sheer will and self-preservation, she managed to gain her footing in time for the *Desire* to send her tumbling toward midships.

Unless she found some sort of purchase, she'd fly by and continue on until she was flung like a piece of cloth into the furious ocean. Keelan was at the mercy of the glistening boards that locked together to form the bones, the sinew, and the skin of the *Desire*, which heaved against the rage of the ocean.

Before she reached the rail, another wave hit the ship. Her feet flew away from her again and she hit the deck hard, her breath knocked from her chest. Before she had time to inhale, the *Desire* saw fit to pour her into a space between two of the petite guns on the deck, instead of tossing her into the sea. Keelan's cold, wet fingers curled around the thick ropes securing the gun.

If she'd had the time, she might have screamed or sobbed in fear, but the tempest didn't permit a pause for such frivolous displays of emotion. It only continued to pound the ocean like a giant child throwing a tantrum, left fist plunged into the water, right fist plunged into the water...

Keelan peered through the rain to the hatch leading into the hold, then the distance to the helm, and then to Landon. Retracing her steps back below was more treacherous than continuing her fight to the helm at this point. It took every ounce of strength and courage to release her grip from the ropes and drive forward to the helm, where two other sailors were clinging on to the wheel with Landon, straining to keep the ship from broaching into the sea.

The thrumming, creaking and whistling of the ropes, lines and spars cracked and whined in her ears. The wind and rain pelted her skin. She'd no idea the storm had become so viscous while she'd been below. In her defense, she'd no idea what to expect of it, but then again, she'd never been one to take heed of a storm warning, had she?

To say that the journey toward the helm was arduous would have been grossly understating the event. If she'd been any less stubborn she'd never have made it. The bowsprit reared up skyward as if to impale the turbulent clouds, making Keelan's legs as heavy as stone. Then it swooped down to crash into the waves in a violent explosion of white, which had her teetering on her toes, light as a mouse. She finally made it past the main mast encircled with the barrels she and Daniel had secured earlier. Only a few paces to go, thank God.

Several smaller sails were still in service, their sheets flat and rigid in the wind. Shielding her eyes against the salt spray, she sought Landon at the helm. His feet were braced wide, and he was heaving his broad chest into the wheel. His dark wet curls whipped around his face, his jaw set. She pulled herself toward the companion ladder that led up to where he stood. Almost there.

"Keelan!"

His shout stopped her. There was a note of panic in his voice that made her

pause. He waved his arm. "Move leeward! Starboard!"

Confused, she froze.

"To your right, dammit!"

A loud crack followed by a low rumble sounded behind her and she turned as the barrels around the main mast came loose. They began to roll away, toward the front of the ship. One hit the foremast and split open spilling sand across the deck. The bowsprit once again crashed down into the waves.

A jolt of horror shook her limbs. Next, the front of the ship would rear back up and when it did, the barrels would reverse direction and roll toward the stern. Toward her.

*Dear God, help me.*

She turned and ran. The pitch of the ship had her running up a steep, slippery slope. A half dozen strides away from her goal, the plume of water hit and shook the front part of the ship. For a second the rumble ceased.

But only for a second.

Panic nearly paralyzed her limbs. The barrels began to roll and bounce toward her. She turned back toward Landon. He had leapt down the companion ladder toward her.

"Take to my arm!" He reached out to her as his boots hit the main deck. "Hold on!"

With that, he grabbed her and flung her toward the shelter between two canons secured on the right side of the ship as a barrel clipped the farthest gun, and launched into the air, whirling fiercely. Twisting his body, Landon put himself between Keelan and the flying barrel.

It hit them with the force of a raging bull then crashed to the deck and broke into pieces.

Keelan gasped in pain and tried to take a breath. A heavy weight prevented any movement. She was face down on the deck. She craned her neck enough to see Landon's body covering hers. And he wasn't moving.

"Landon!" she cried his name, but he didn't move.

Another voice pierced the gale. She strained to raise her head until finally, Landon was lifted away from her. A sailor dashed up the companion ladder to take the helm along with two others. Gus tossed Landon over his shoulder and Ronnie grabbed Keelan's wrist and pulled her to her feet.

Together, they battled the pitch and roll of the ship to the captain's cabin. Gus dropped Landon on his bed then turned to her, his eyes flashing.

"What the hell did ye think ye were doin' out on that deck? Yer a *lubber*. Ye ain't got any sailin' know-how. Ye just 'bout killed yerself and yer captain, ye witless scamp!"

Gus's fists were clenched and he advanced upon Keelan like a raging ox. If she hadn't been braced against the cabin wall, she'd have collapsed right there

in her boots.

Ronnie stepped between Gus and Keelan. "Twas a greenie mistake, sir." His eyes shifted between the two. Gus hadn't been told that Keelan was Landon's wife. They'd decided to wait until after they left Charleston. In Gus's eyes, she was a young boy, a novice and a liability.

Gus was as furious as the tempest outside. "Well, if it wasn't fer this gale, he'd get five lashes from the cat," he spat, shaking his fist.

Ronnie cleared his throat and shifted on his feet. "Mahdi has some knowledge of healing. He can help the ship's sawbones treat the captain. It'll keep him outta the way."

Gus scowled then shrugged before stomping out. "Go git the surgeon. I'm on watch," he snapped before slamming the door.

Keelan leaned against the cabin wall and squeezed her eyes shut. What had she done? A choked sob escaped her throat and she fell away from Ronnie's grip and staggered to her husband's bedside.

"Landon!"

His shirt was soaked and stuck to his chest like skin. She placed her ear over his heart and closed her eyes, listening.

*Dear God, please...let him be alive.*

Was that a soft, distant heartbeat?

It was.

He was alive.

She examined him, checking for bruises, blood and feeling for broken bones. A small trickle of blood flowed from his ear.

"Let's pull him out of these wet clothes, Miss Keelan," Ronnie whispered, touching her shoulder. "The doc will want to see all of him."



A day later, steady rain pummeled the ship, but the wind and rough seas had abated, somewhat. The sun tried to shove its way through the clouds, but the clouds refused it.

The ship's surgeon examined Landon's head, touching a large lump on his temple.

"It hasn't changed since last night, a good sign. We'll just have to wait it out," he said, packing up the wooden carrier holding his surgeon's supplies. "That large bruise on his upper back and shoulder may be hiding a broken bone or rib, but it's the hit on the head to worry about."

"How long until he wakes?" Keelan asked, dreading the answer.

"Don't know." He shook his head, turning toward the door. "He may not."

Two days later, Landon still hadn't moved nor made another sound since he'd

been placed on his bed; not when they'd removed his clothes nor when Keelan poured whiskey on the small cut on his temple. Knowing how much whiskey stings an open wound, she'd expected a response of some sort, but Landon didn't even flinch. Putting her head on his chest, she checked yet again for his heartbeat.

It was still there, thank God.

If only she hadn't tried to traverse the deck in the storm. If only she'd stayed below and out of the way, Landon might not have been injured. Why hadn't she simply turned back?

For the thousandth time, she whispered, "Please, Landon, love, wake up." She pressed another kiss on his forehead.

This time, as if he'd heard her, Landon's eyelids twitched and he let out a low moan.

"Landon?" Keelan tried to keep her voice level and calm, but she couldn't contain the intertwined notes of relief and concern.

His eyes finally opened and he slowly moved his startling blue gaze to her face. His expression changed from wariness to confusion. He lifted his head and winced.

She pressed his shoulders back down. "Go slowly, you're hurt."

"Where am I?" He rubbed his forehead.

"You're in your cabin aboard the *Desire*. You were hit on the head and have been unconscious for two days," she explained.

He attempted to sit up then grimaced, and sunk back to a reclining position. "What happened?"

Keelan bit her lip, then answered, "It was my fault. I shouldn't have come up on deck. We were hit by a loose barrel during the gale. I...I didn't tie it down correctly. You were struck on the side of the head and back by one of them. Do you remember that?"

"There was a storm?" His hand was over his eyes, as if the light pained him.

He didn't remember the storm? She spoke in a low tone, "Yes. It's blown us quite a ways off course, but Gus said we should arrive in Charleston in a day or two, depending on the wind and the current."

Landon glanced at her from under his hand. "What about Captain O'Brien and Captain Ahern? Did they weather the storm fairly? Have their ships been sighted?"

For a moment, Keelan wasn't sure how to answer. It was impossible for either to be sighted. Both ships were currently bound for Jamaica. Perhaps now wasn't the time to tell her husband his memory was off. She put her hand on his chest. "You're a bit disoriented. You were hit hard."

He brushed her hand away. Hurt by this, she sat back and regarded him. He was acting...differently. Something was wrong. His cool, aloof stare had her

heart pounding in her chest and her stomach flipping in trepidation.

“Who are *you*?” he finally asked.