



RESTRAINED HEARTS

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RESTRAINED HEARTS

BY

LEANNE SHAWLER

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RESTRAINED HEARTS
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*To “Scheherazade,” my LiveJournal friend,
my editor Laura,
and to my husband Dan.*

CHAPTER 1

The wind howled, and the sound would have chilled Callum Craythorne to the bone if he hadn't already been freezing. Ice dusted his shoulders and slipped down the back of his neck. His horse's mane glittered with frosty crystals, its head bent low against the frigid blast.

Callum's eyes slitted against the elements as he tried to make out the path before him. The pine trees seemed to lean over man and animal with branches heavy with snow, a discouraging sign.

Within two hours of starting this leg of the journey, Callum realized he'd ridden into trouble. He should have remained at the last inn. He wanted to push home. Home to the wild, desolate hills of the Lake District.

He had hoped London would distract him from the fact the war had left him a hollow, black shell. However, Society had proved too bright and too shallow. So, he had come to live quietly with his demons at home.

He caught a flicker of warm, yellow light far ahead. He urged his

RESTRAINED HEARTS

horse forward. Any cover would be better than exposure to the fierce weather.

The anonymous light became a candle in the window of a tiny croft—a low-lying cottage made of flinty Lake District stone. This one had a wooden lean-to appended to it.

Despite the snowy oblivion around him, Callum recognized the ancient, ruined structure. Somehow he'd strayed from the path and had ended up by his childhood playground.

His horse stumbled, pitching forward.

Callum flew through the air, landing face down. Blinking away snow, he tried to rise, his arms sinking into drifts to his shoulders. Groaning, he extricated himself from the icy depths and rolled to his feet. His horse stood with its head hanging.

He pushed through the snow to the animal, the edges of dangerous exhaustion encroaching with every step. Callum remembered that his mount had been favoring his left front leg. He checked it, smoothing a hand down its length. Nothing broken, but clearly his horse had gone lame.

Cursing, he gathered the reins and headed for the croft, fighting through knee-deep drifts. They had to get to shelter fast, or freeze.

He fell, the reins slipping from his hands. Callum raised his head, looking through frosted eyelashes at the ancient cottage barely twenty feet away. He sank back to the ground, his leather-gloved fists relaxing into stillness.

* * *

Sophie examined the dimming fire. She'd used almost all the wood and didn't relish the thought of having to fetch more. It served her right for getting caught in this tiny hut so far from home with the weather turning ugly.

Yet she so treasured these days of snatched retreats. Even more so since her sweetheart had returned from the war against Napoleon and broken her heart. He had shunned her, indeed, shunned everyone before

RESTRAINED HEARTS

leaving again. He had forgotten her, it seemed, and their shared lifetime growing up. She had been little more than a child when he had left—and he barely a young man—but she had loved him then. Even now, through her pain at his betrayal, she loved him still.

If only she could have shown him her feelings when he'd first come back from war. Instead, she'd been so confused by his aloof behavior, she'd concealed her emotions behind the cool grace she'd learned from her mother. She'd flirted outrageously during the festivities held in the neighborhood to celebrate his return.

He would never know how much she hurt.

A gale wailed outside, sneaking through the gaps between wood and stone. She opened the door, bracing herself as the wind blew in drifts of fresh snow. Shivering, she wrapped her cloak tighter and felt her way along the outside wall to the lean-to and dry wood. Half-blinded by the ice, she gathered logs from the pile's center and turned to go back inside.

Sophie blinked, catching something unusual out of the corner of her eye. Shifting her load of wood, she shielded her eyes against the glare.

A horse stood, its head lowered. Squinting, she made out a dark form under the beast.

She gasped and dropped the wood, hitching her skirts and stumbling through the drifts toward the two figures. By the time she reached the horse, her legs were numb. The beast obligingly shifted out of the way as she knelt and rolled the man onto his back.

"Oh Lord," she gasped, her breath clouding in the cold air. It was him. Her beloved.

Callum Craythorne.

What was he doing here?

"Callum!" She slapped his face. Small puffs of warm air rose from his blue-tinged lips. "Wake up!" Shaking his shoulders, she realized she couldn't get him to the croft without his assistance. He was too big, too heavy. "Wake up!"

RESTRAINED HEARTS

His eyelashes fluttered, opened. Grunting, he shifted his weight to his elbows. With her arm under him, she got him to his feet. He slumped against her, his solid weight giving force to the realization that he was no mirage.

Even with the bulky layers of clothing between them, she couldn't help but notice his sheer physicality. His shoulders seemed broader, his muscles harder than the young man she had known. She sensed his strength as he struggled anew to fight against a wintry death.

"So cold," he muttered between chattering teeth. His eyes didn't focus on her.

"Let's get you inside." She anchored his arm around her shoulders, sure he didn't recognize her.

"Can't feel my feet."

She understood his concern. They were both District born and bred. They knew the dangers of winter. "You have to move. We have to get you inside."

They shuffled toward the croft, his horse limping behind them. Once inside, she guided him to the narrow bed, where he collapsed.

She slipped out to retrieve her discarded wood and stable his horse next to her own in the lean-to. She gave the animal a quick rubdown, knowing her first priority was to get Callum warm.

After hurrying inside, she stoked the fire, put a kettle over the cheerful flames and surveyed Callum's slumped figure. *Where to start?* She needed to check for frostbite. Fingers shaking, she heaved off his boots and peeled away his stockings. His feet were red with the cold, but she didn't spot any ominous white patches.

She glanced at his face and that glance became an outright stare. Aside from seeing him at a distance when he returned from the war, and her moment of recognition minutes earlier, she hadn't looked upon him in a long time. More handsome than she remembered, he had grown into a man, the hardships of war sculpting planes from a boyish face, leaving harsh lines only slightly softened in repose.

RESTRAINED HEARTS

Sophie bathed his feet in the warm water and massaged them. Then, she rested a hand on his knee. He was really here, with her. He felt cold, and wet too, but she recognized the power of his muscular thigh, even in rest. His waterproofed coat had kept out the worst of the snow, his body heat drying the rest. But his collapse had allowed snow to melt against him and find its icy way through cuffs and gaps in clothing.

Raising her chin in determination, she resolved to get him out of his wet garments. She had no idea how to do it without his assistance, but she had to try. He couldn't sicken and die. She wouldn't lose him.

Not now.

It took some serious, unladylike heaving and tugging, but she managed to strip him. Though she tried not to look, she couldn't help stealing glances. His skin lightened to near white below the hips. He reminded her of Elgin's Marbles, the smooth curve of muscle given warmth by a fading suntan. She flung a blanket over him.

With Callum covered, Sophie cast off her cloak and hung it by the door. Edging close to the fire, she removed her gloves and sighed as heat began to penetrate.

Steam rose from her skirts. She fingered the sopping worsted wool. She needed to change too, but into what? She hadn't come prepared for an overnight stay.

Sophie retreated to the far corner of the croft and removed her gown, petticoat and shift. Shivering, she wrapped another blanket around herself, then returned to the fire and sank onto a chair.

She watched the reflection of flames flicker across Callum's still face. Thick eyelashes fluttered over dark circles under his eyes, but he didn't wake.

She took off her boots, wiggling her toes in the warmth. Choosing the driest section of her shift, she used the cotton to dry and warm her legs, aware that Callum could wake at any time and find her exposed.

Curling her legs under her, she reached for her reticule and a comb. Her blanket slipped and she clutched at it, frightened that he'd choose

RESTRAINED HEARTS

that moment to wake and see her.

He slept on.

Comb retrieved and blanket secured, she unbraided her hair. Long auburn curls tangled down her back, and she set to work with her comb, humming under her breath.

Sophie imagined being married to Callum, sitting in their bedroom as she combed out her hair for him. Before he had gone to war, he'd often braided her locks, the two of them sitting on the steep hillside looking at the lake far below them, the sunlight warming her cheeks.

Darkness began to settle. The storm passed, bringing night. She shifted in the wooden chair and gazed at the narrow bed where Callum slept.

She gnawed at her lip. "The bed is big enough for two of us," she whispered, trying to convince herself that she could dare be so intimate. After all, she would be wrapped in her blanket and she could provide extra heat for him. He needed all the warmth he could get. That he hadn't awakened, disturbed her, but she didn't know what else she could do for him.

The thought of lying with him... She flushed, tugging the blanket tight around her. To keep warm, she had no choice but to do so.

Sophie crossed to the bed and eased down, slipping over him to lie farthest from the flames. The bed felt cool beneath her fire-heated skin. Turning her back to Callum, she pressed against him and tried to sleep.

* * *

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RESTRAINED HEARTS

Unsure what to do, she lay still. She should take some action. If Callum woke to find his hand holding...she didn't want to think of the embarrassment.

He stirred.

Perhaps he'll roll over.

His fingers contracted then relaxed. She bit back a gasp. His damnably intimate touch felt good. Too good.

He shifted, murmuring something incomprehensible. His hand flexed, gently massaging her breast. His lips pressed against the back of her neck. "Soph," he breathed.

Her name. Had he known she'd rescued him, after all?

She blushed redder than her hair. She had to extricate herself from this.

Now.

Each time she pried a finger from its possessive clasp upon her breast, it stubbornly returned.

"Callum," she whispered, shocked, almost begging. She rolled onto her back, hoping to escape that way.

His hand slid under the blanket to her waist. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Could it get any worse?* She held her breath, wishing he would move.

"Soph," he moaned, his head rising from the pillow. His lips sought out hers, enveloping her mouth in a sleepy, sensuous kiss.

For a heart-pounding instant, Sophie lay stock still, stunned. Was he awake? Or did he dream of her? If he had regained his senses, he wouldn't be kissing her like this. She should push him away, stop this nonsense before...before...

She'd never been kissed with such soft intimacy. And certainly not by Callum Craythorne. She struggled to maintain her defenses under his sweet assault, her mind churning. She remembered how he'd refused to see her when he first returned from the Peninsular War. *He can't be aware of what he's doing. He can't.*

RESTRAINED HEARTS

She sucked in a breath. This could be her only chance to relive the love they had once shared. She had missed his kisses, but his touch...oh, his touch had never been like this. He had just awakened something within her, something to be avoided, something liberating. She wanted more.

Her arms wound around his neck, her mouth opening beneath his. Their kiss deepened, tongues twining.

The pressure on her mouth lightened and broke away, his tongue flicking over her lips. Blinking, she looked up at him, his face in red shadows from the banked fire.

He surrounded her, an arm braced on each side of her head. He looked down, those curiously colored hazel eyes full of unspoken passion and concern. "Sophie," he murmured huskily.

He *was* awake. He *did* recognize her.

She was undone. Ruined.

"Callum," she breathed.

"I'm dreaming." His thumb brushed her cheek.

She wished he was. Touching his temple, she found it hot. If he ran a fever, perhaps she could make him believe he *was* dreaming...

Sophie placed a hand on either side of his face and drew him down again. "Yes, you are," she murmured, a breath away from kissing him again.

Their lips met in a tender union. She could barely draw air with the awe of it. At last she had him, even if only for a night. Even if he didn't believe this dream-like state and she was ruined and alone at the end of it, she would have this night to remember forever.

With a gentle ferocity, he coaxed deeper kisses out of her. Her hands slid from his face and coiled in his hair.

It didn't matter any more. Ruin or not, the wild heat demanded she give her all.

His mouth slid away from hers to nuzzle at her neck. She tipped back her head, granting access to that vulnerable area. His tender

RESTRAINED HEARTS

caresses felt heavenly against her sensitive skin.

Callum's head dipped lower until it found an exposed breast. She gasped.

He licked and kissed his way around the white expanse, slowly coming ever closer to its charged peak. She bit back a moan. If he dreamt still, she didn't want to wake him.

He flicked at her nipple with his tongue before closing his mouth over it. She arched her back, offering herself to him. She couldn't help it. His lips, tongue and teeth caused her nipple to grow taut. How could she have thought his kisses against her neck heavenly when compared to this ecstasy!

Fire burned at the back of Callum's head. Flames flicked through his veins. He glowed within and without.

He opened his eyes. Beneath him lay the white skin of a woman, her hair a fiery mass about blurred features. The flames burst into a firestorm.

She lay soft, warm and pliable beneath him. And willing, he soon discovered, although he couldn't make his eyes focus. She reminded him of Sophie, but that proper little miss would never lose sight of her reputation to lie with a man. And certainly not with him. He had to be dreaming.

Groping through the blankets, he found her other breast, and began massaging and tweaking it to bring it to the same aroused state as its twin. Oh yes, she desired him, but he wanted her as wild for him as he was for her. He moved his mouth away from one nipple to the other, teasing and tugging.

Callum paused in his ministrations. "You're beautiful," he whispered, his throat dry and hoarse, "so beautiful."

He shifted his weight, continuing to make love to her breasts. In his mind's eye, he imagined them trapped within a demure bodice, concealed by a translucent chemise. Now he had them. He had her.

RESTRAINED HEARTS

Or someone who looked like Sophie. Perhaps a succubus who had captured him in his dreams.

Only in this way, could he slake the desire he'd longed to share with Sophie since his return from the war. His heated passion was no longer encased in ice. He cast off the blankets that lay between them. His knee nudged between her legs and she spread them willingly. Oh God, she wanted him so badly. Like he wanted, no, *needed* her.

He persisted in teasing her breasts, alternating hand and mouth, tasting her, smelling her soft womanly fragrance. He slid up against her to kiss her mouth, finding his kisses eagerly and breathlessly returned.

Her skin felt cool to his fevered touch, a balm, yet it was like casting oil upon fire. He wanted more of her. Oh, yes. Much more.

Sophie felt something hot and hard slide against her inner thigh. Eyes wide, she felt her body thrum with desire even as her mind belatedly woke and screamed a warning.

She silenced the protests of her conscience. They would do this and Callum would never know. Or she would deny it.

Both his hands were at her breasts, her nipples rolled between thumb and finger. The warnings submerged beneath the molten lava coating her senses.

"Callum!" she gasped between sighs and moans she couldn't prevent from escaping. She clutched at his back. "Callum! Oh, please!" she begged, needing release but unsure how to achieve it.

"You sure?" Callum's deep voice aroused her on its own.

"Yes!" she replied, wondering why he asked now, of all times. Hadn't she shown her willingness, her wantonness for this very moment she knew lay just beyond her grasp? She arched her back toward him, their torsos pressing, sliding together. "Very sure."

His deep kiss claimed her, possessed her. His hand snaked down her waist and over her belly before slipping between her legs and discovering an abundance of wetness. He skimmed over her slickness

RESTRAINED HEARTS

and a delicious spasm wracked her frame. She wanted him to do that again. And again.

He gathered her into his arms, shifting until he lay between her parted legs. His cock rubbed against her, probing. She gasped, arching her hips, as the touch of his thick flesh against her most intimate parts scoured her senses raw. She wanted more.

Nibbling at her neck, he pushed into her. Sophie's tight entrance squeezed around him. He groaned, burying his face in her luxuriant red hair and thrust all the way inside.

She cried out in pain and delight. He stilled, looking down at her. "Did I hurt you?" he murmured.

His voice sounded clear, lucid. *Oh God, had her cry awakened him?* Her voice wobbled. "It's just...I never..." How would he ever forgive her for deceiving him like this?

He leaned his forehead against her shoulder. She felt his pain, his betrayal. Although he throbbed inside her, she wrapped her arms around him, holding him close, offering him what little comfort she could.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, starting to withdraw.

No. She couldn't lose him now. She wrapped her legs about him. "Don't be," she whispered raggedly. "Please..." She sensed his hesitation. "I'm sure, Callum. We have gone this far..."

She wished she could see his face in the dim firelight, instead of guessing at the expression hidden by shadows. What was he thinking?

Callum couldn't believe it. It *was* Sophie beneath him. He'd sullied his neighbor's daughter, ruined her. He could feel her wet heat clutching his cock. She wanted more? There was only so much a man could bear.

He gathered her into his arms, pressing into her. He bit back a moan noticing Sophie had no inhibitions about vocally expressing her appreciation. He made love to her slowly, tenderly, aware he held no

RESTRAINED HEARTS

succubus, but a gentlewoman of breeding. He kissed the sides of her neck, her lips, her face, moving rhythmically in and out of her.

He couldn't deny it. She felt fantastic. He sensed his climax building, hardening and lengthening his cock as he delved into her sweet depths.

Sophie grasped his shoulders, pulling him deeper. Her hips bucked, and he knew she wanted it faster. The release she desired was approaching, and he saw the heat flush her face and neck. It was as if her whole body was aflame.

Callum obliged, matching her need with his, his moans mingling with hers. It was so hard to hold back. He felt her muscles clench around him.

Sophie teetered on the edge of a mountain of sensation. She felt pinned to the bed, ready to burst into flight, a flight into the brilliant unknown.

At last, his thrusting drove her over the edge. She cried out, clutching him to her, her fingers digging into his back. Her soul soared, swooping with her scream, mingling with Callum's cry.

Her orgasm squeezed his cock. There was no holding back, now. He thrust into her quickly, filling her with his seed, crying out as the release washed over him. In that white-out eclipse, he fancied he felt her joined to him, flying with him.

He subsided, panting. Catching some of his breath, Callum raised himself on his elbows. He wanted to see her face, but the darkness masked it. The firelight only set her auburn hair aflame.

In the dim light, he sought out her mouth with his own. His lips brushed hers, melding in one last, sweet kiss before he relieved her of his weight, spooning her form to his.

Sophie stared into the night, wondering what she had done and, heaven help her, when she could do it again.

* * *

RESTRAINED HEARTS

Morning found them curled about each other like innocents. The fire had died down to white-hot ashes.

Sophie stirred, her senses testing her strange surroundings. This was not her bedchamber, and a strange weight lay upon her.

Callum.

His head used her shoulder as a pillow and his arm wound around her waist as he slept on. His forehead felt hot and dry to the touch. She should rise, see what she could do about his fever.

Holding her breath, she couldn't move. She didn't dare.

Callum snuggled against his pillow. What a night. Had he dreamt the whole thing? He didn't remember making it to the croft, but here he was. He knew it without opening his eyes.

His nostrils flared. He wondered if he was holding a pillow, after all. No pillow smelled like that, felt like that. Had he made love to a pillow in his dreams last night?

His brain fogged. He had a vague recollection of seeing a siren comb hair of fire, sitting by his bed. That couldn't have been real.

Callum opened his eyes. A lock of auburn hair came into view. He'd dreamt of making love to a redhead last night. To Sophie.

His fingers curled, fitting about the curve of a woman's breast. He tried to sit up, but didn't have the strength to lift his head. "Morning," he rasped, feeling like he'd swallowed sand.

He felt her quick intake of breath.

"Good morning," she murmured.

He winced, closing his eyes. Making love to Sophie had been no fantasy. It had been real.

"What," he drawled, his tongue feeling thick, "are you doing in my bed?"

She didn't answer, wriggling out from beneath him.

He blinked, trying to focus on her face so close to his.

Oh God. It was her. What had he done? She would have

RESTRAINED HEARTS

expectations now. And he couldn't deliver.

"Are you mad?" he hissed. "Climbing into bed naked with me?"

"It was cold." She clambered over him as she got out of bed.

He buried the need to pull her warmth to him and take her again. That could never happen.

"My clothes were wet, as were yours. What else could I do?"

"You undressed me?" he squeaked, pulling the blankets to his chin.

Sophie folded her arms, covering her bare bosom. "I couldn't let you die of cold."

She looked utterly magnificent in the morning light. In spite of everything, Callum felt his groin react.

"And the fuck?" He flung the crude word into her face, as much as he hated to. If there were a child, he'd do the honorable thing and marry her, but if not, best to exorcise those demons of desire now. She couldn't possibly want him.

She flinched. "If you are referring to our lovemaking, you were the one who started it."

He shook his head, his equilibrium yawning wildly. He waited until the dizziness passed. "Who seduced whom? I do not remember starting anything." Callum allowed his gaze to travel the length of her naked form. Blushing, she dashed for her gown and concealed herself behind it.

He still had tantalizing glimpses of her rounded hips. "Shall I set you up here?" he taunted. "Shall you be my mistress of this little croft?"

"Mistress?"

He uttered a low laugh, hating himself even as he did it. "You didn't expect me to marry you, did you? It wouldn't surprise me if half the district has sampled your charms in this little croft. It was our childhood playhouse, after all. Why wouldn't you want to convert it to adult pleasures?"

Her face had turned dark red. Almost as dark as her auburn hair.

RESTRAINED HEARTS

“How dare you!” Still clutching her gown with one arm, she grabbed something by the fireplace and flung it at him.

He remembered no more.

Sophie stood, frozen. The kettle she’d thrown at him lay by his head. *Oh God. Did I kill him?*

She tiptoed closer. A welt rose on his temple. She searched for a pulse and felt the rise and fall of his chest.

Sagging into a chair, relief washed over her. She hadn’t killed him. She just had to hope he wouldn’t kill her when he woke up.

Sophie examined his prone form. Blinking, she noted an erection sinking from sight. He’d been aroused when he had abused her so? She’d show him.

* * *

Callum’s head throbbed like the tail end of a vicious hangover. He groaned. He tried to move his hand, grunting when it wouldn’t budge.

He turned his head toward it, but couldn’t see. *Had he lost his sight?* He took a deep breath and sensed fabric binding his head, blindfolding him.

He tugged at what he assumed was rope holding his hand stationary above and to the left of his head. His other hand was likewise pinioned. His feet were bound, as well. “What the—”

A soft, feminine voice hushed him. “You are awake.” She sounded unfamiliar. And relieved. “Everything will be all right now.”

“Everything is not all right!” Callum exploded. “Sophie! Untie me this instant!”

“Sophie? Is she the redhead who stormed out of here a while ago?” the woman’s voice cooed.

Callum swallowed. Sophie had gone? The breathy, baby girl voice didn’t sound like her. Not that he could tell over his pounding head.

“And the poor man is all tied up?” The creature giggled.

“It’s not funny!” Callum growled. “Now stop playing your silly

RESTRAINED HEARTS

games and untie me, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" the woman murmured, laughter still in her voice. It had to be Sophie. She wouldn't have left him for dead, would she? Perhaps he'd given her too much of a scare.

Callum felt the lightest of pressure against his satin-lined vest. He frowned. He'd been naked, the last he recalled. Hadn't he?

Her hand slid to the edge of his vest and onto his chest. Callum inhaled sharply. He was almost naked! What was going on?

"Where's my shirt?"

The woman's laughter sounded soft and throaty. "You may as well ask, 'Where are my pants?'"

His mouth worked but nothing came out as he swallowed his soldier's expletives. He couldn't afford to alienate this woman, Sophie or not. He had to get out of here.

"Who are you?" he asked through gritted teeth, trying to reduce his anger.

"You ask too many questions." Her words were crisp, not spoken in the manner of one from the lower classes. If not Sophie, then he addressed some other gentlewoman who knew him.

Her fingertips caressed his cheek. He jerked his head away.

"Now, now," she admonished. "Do not be disagreeable."

"People will start looking for me soon," he warned. "If you had any idea who you were dealing with—"

"I know. I also know they were not expecting your return." Her fingertips returned to his chest, buzzing by the curly hair. "There's no need for concern. You will be safely returned to your family home." He sensed her bending over him, felt the whisper of lips against his cheek. "Just relax and enjoy yourself."

"Relax? How can I relax when you've got me shackled and hobbled!" She jerked away, the action giving him a certain satisfaction.

"Hobbled? Shackled?" For the first time, Callum heard anger in her voice. "I have known men to describe matrimony that way. It is so

RESTRAINED HEARTS

much easier to take a mistress, is it not? And to have casual intercourse?”

Callum muffled a grin. It had to be Sophie. He must convince her to release him.

When she spoke again, her voice had resumed its sensual tone. “But matrimony would be no fun for either you or me.”

She didn't want to marry him? What did she want? He swallowed. Good grief. Had his earlier accusations hit a little too close to home? Is that why she brained him? “Listen, miss whoever-you-are. I don't think this is a good idea.”

“Oh really? That's not what your little redhead seemed to think.”

“Sophie?” His lip curled. “Now I know you are bluffing. She would never tie me up. She's too proper.” Sophie hadn't always been so, that was true. But over the years, she had matured. Oh, how she had matured! He forced himself to focus. “How about you untie me? I promise no harm will come to you. I swear it.”

“A big brawny man like you? Loose? I think not.” Her fingertips tweaked his nipple, her thumb and finger gently rolling it back and forth.

He tensed.

“Relax,” she murmured. “Enjoy.” He heard the distinct whisper of clothing dropping to the floor.

He gulped. She could not be serious, could she? He had to stop her. “Sophie....” he warned.

She sat beside him on the bed and Callum felt the smoothness of her bare hip against his side. “Your Sophie is not here. There is no use in calling for her.”

He swallowed, raising his chin, his body preparing for her next move. Callum Craythorne wasn't a man to be taken advantage of. Ever.

She bent over him and pressed her lips against his chest, scattering feather-light kisses over his upper torso. Once again, her hands slid under his vest, which proved to be scanty protection against the

RESTRAINED HEARTS

onslaught.

She pushed back one side of the garment, her mouth bending to capture a nipple. Her tongue teased it—like he had teased her sweet breasts—before relinquishing it.

He felt the cool air and shivered.

The tip of her tongue lapped its way across his chest to the far side. She pressed the warm softness of her bosom against him, taut buds marking her excitement.

Before long, her weight shifted and her tender kisses trailed back to the center of his chest. Her nose brushed through the dark curls there. By God, if she kept this up, he would not be answerable for what came next.

Her mouth descended, chasing the flow of blood to his genitals. He felt light-headed, his groin growing tight with need. The gentle touch of her hands preceded her lips, smoothing over his belly and down the top of his thigh.

Her tongue swirled around his belly button and he sensed his member respond. “No,” he groaned. “Please...you do not know what you are doing...”

The woman chuckled, her amusement muffled by her mouth pressed against his stomach. Her unbound hair brushed against his pubes, almost touched his needy cock.

His thigh muscle tensed as a few of her unseen kisses landed there. Would she dare kiss his cock next? Had Miss Sophie Ingram become that depraved in his absence? He might have expected this of a married woman in London, but not from an inexperienced girl in these deserted reaches. Damned Lake poets, seducing women with their words. He wondered which of them had been her downfall.

He felt cold air stir in place of her warmth. Something liquid and cool pooled on his chest. “What—”

“Hush,” she soothed. Her hands moved in circles on his chest, spreading the liquid. “It’s just oil.”

RESTRAINED HEARTS

It warmed with the friction of her hands moving languorously against his skin. He sighed. He could enjoy this...

Her hands disappeared, but he still tingled from her touch. He waited, patient now, and sure of the conclusion to this liaison. He didn't know what would come after, except that he would secure his release, somehow.

Kisses peppered his thighs and continuing downward, a slow excursion to his ankle, curving around to the underside of his knee.

For some reason, she balked at kissing his feet, and Callum could not blame her. He'd spent many days in his favorite old boots as he'd crossed the countryside to get here. She moved from his right ankle to his left, her tongue licking and teasing the round swell of ankle bone before ascending to his calf.

Callum groaned, feeling that she was spending an inordinate amount of time kissing and tasting his thigh. Although disappointed that his Sophie had become as shallow and loose as the women in London, he still wanted her. Her kisses drove him wild. He wanted to plow into her, spend his seed. Perhaps then, she would be done and he could start the process of forgetting.

"Oh my!" she breathed.

With a twitch of a muscle, his manhood bobbed a hello.

She giggled.

Callum hid a surprised smile. He hadn't expected the visible evidence of his arousal to be such a novelty to her.

Her mouth brushed the tip of his member. He gasped. Fresh-moistened lips covered the head and Callum bit back a moan. Again, she surprised him. Her oral attentions, while wanton, seemed inexperienced, more exploratory. When this was over, he would have to have words with her. Whoever had awakened her sexuality and left her unmarried, would pay.

His hips bucked, his arms twisted, but movement was hampered by the rope binding him. Her mouth drove him wild.

RESTRAINED HEARTS

She released him and her hands ran up his oiled chest. “Steady,” she murmured. “You will hurt yourself.”

“Let me go,” Callum growled.

In response, she straddled him, his cock trapped between their two naked bodies. He felt her heat, her wetness against him. She rubbed across him, coating him with her female juices, claiming him for her own. As she moved up and back slightly, her hand guided him inside her.

Callum moaned as she enveloped him. God, it was sweetness itself. She rocked her hips against him, the friction building the pent-up desire to explosive proportions.

He heard her heavy breathing. Soft moans escaped her lips. Her arousal drove him on, her muscles clenching around his manhood. With a cry, he spilled his seed into her.

After brief moments, she convulsed around him, her cry joining his. Panting, she leaned forward and pressed her mouth against his. He welcomed her kiss, returning it. She broke it off, although her hot breath still rasped against his ear.

“Who are you?” Callum cried.

“You really want to know?” Her voice held the same half-sated desire as his.

He couldn’t wait to turn the tables on her. He wondered if she’d be amenable. But if she were Sophie, he could do none of those things. His jaw tightened.

She gently turned his head and untied the cloth that kept him in darkness. He blinked a couple of times, adjusting to the light and looked up at the woman who had seduced him.

Her auburn hair hung in a curtain about her face. Her lips were swollen with his kisses, her skin, a translucent pink flush of desire.

“Sophie,” he gasped, his breath stolen by this revealing of her sensual beauty, “when did this happen to you?”

She reached over his head to unfasten his wrists. “Last night.” She

RESTRAINED HEARTS

didn't look at him.

"Last night?" he repeated, stunned. "But—but you were so bold."

She rose from the bed, his cock slipping free of her.

He missed the connection at once. Sitting up, he rubbed his wrists. *Why didn't she answer?* "Sophie?"

She folded her arms. When she responded, her voice sounded dead, empty. "So you do think I'm a whore. I have loved nobody but you, Callum Craythorne. And I have made love to nobody but you. But if that's what you choose to think—" She choked on a sob. "I can hardly blame you." Sophie pulled her gown over her head.

Realizing she planned to make her escape, Callum reached for the knots binding his feet.

But she hadn't finished with him. "Callum, I won't hold you to what happened last night. Or...or today. It wouldn't be fair to either you or me."

"But, I am responsible!" Stunned, he stared at her. She'd said there wasn't another, so why would she not accept him as hers? Did she sense the black emptiness within him?

Now dressed, she sat next to him, taking his hand in hers. "I am responsible, also. If a child comes of...what happened...then we will deal with it."

He couldn't believe what he heard. Any sane woman would want them married and her future secure before the heir apparent made it a necessity. "Is...is there another?"

"Another!" She flung herself away from him, reaching for her cloak. "Callum Craythorne, haven't you heard a single word I've said?"

She ran outside, leaving him fumbling to free his bonds.

By the time he pulled on some clothing and followed her, she was long gone. He retreated to the croft. The tiny cottage seemed empty.

Callum sat before the fire and contemplated his next steps. First, he would make discreet inquiries about Miss Sophie Ingram, though in his heart, he knew he didn't need to. Last night, he'd deflowered her and

RESTRAINED HEARTS

awakened her. There had been no other man.

He could leave it at that. Callum was not husband material. Not since the Peninsular War.

He shuddered, the cold shaft of memory stabbing him. After witnessing death and destruction in Spain and Portugal, he'd learned that no life was sacred. Not a wife's, a mother's, or a newborn babe's. He couldn't stand to witness that loss again.

CHAPTER 2

Sophie dismounted from her mare and hastened toward the croft. The note she'd received that morning hinted at her ruin. How had someone found out about her spending the night with Callum? Why approach her now, a week later, and demand a meeting?

A wiser head would warn her to ignore the note's demand. But she had to confront the author, and send that person packing.

After all, Callum had honored her intention not to marry her. She hadn't seen him since their night together.

Her heart felt cold. She didn't want a forced marriage and for him to hate her for the rest of their days. Although she suspected he already did.

Her father had accepted her tale about her enforced overnight stay, merely warning her to be more careful in the future. That Callum had not come to call had her father's quiet sympathy, but no more was said on the matter. It was common knowledge that Callum Craythorne was not the same man who had left for the Peninsular Campaign some years

RESTRAINED HEARTS

ago.

Sophie stepped inside the croft and found herself in pitch darkness. The croft's heavy curtains had been drawn at the windows. She opened them, hooking the soft fabric around the large nail embedded in the plastered wall.

"Hello, Sophie." An all-too-familiar voice sounded behind her.

She spun, her hand going to the scarf about her throat. "Callum!"

"You seem surprised to see me." He leaned against the doorway, impeccable in tight, new-fangled trousers, snowy white linen and a coat cut to show off his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

Sophie doubted one iota of buckram bulked his coat. She remembered those broad, muscular shoulders too well.

"I—" She hadn't expected to see him again. Hadn't he made his dislike of her clear? Confused, she stepped toward the door.

He didn't move, blocking her only means of escape. "Leaving already?" He raised his expressive black eyebrows.

"Let me pass, Callum." She cursed the desperate sound in her voice.

"Now why should I do that?" He unfolded his arms, striding toward her. "When there are other things I want to do." He raised his arms.

He's going to strangle me. She stepped back in fear, raising her hands in defense.

His large hands went nowhere near her neck. Instead, he pulled her into a fierce embrace.

Her hands trapped against his chest, she could offer no resistance. She gazed up at him, intending to beseech him to free her.

Callum's mouth covered hers, kissing her senseless and dismissing any protest she might have made. She had wanted this. Had he given her the chance she'd have denied it, but his searing kiss enflamed her and ignited a delicious feeling in the pit of her belly. She succumbed, allowing him to plunder her mouth.

Just as suddenly as the kiss had begun, it was over.

She opened her eyes to see him glaring down at her. "Dammit,

RESTRAINED HEARTS

Sophie,” he growled.

His anger sparked her own. She pushed him away. “*You* kissed *me*!” she shot back, her hands balling into fists. “Why are you here?”

Callum no longer appeared merely sardonic, but angry. Angry as he had been when... She tried to push away the memory.

“Oh, no.” He pulled her even closer. “I’m going to get what I came for.”

Callum took another look at her dewy, aroused expression and silently cursed. He’d brought her here to have quiet converse, not to....

Ah, hell.

He lifted her in his arms, depositing her on the narrow bed. Breathless, she looked up at him.

God, she was beautiful. Talking could wait.

Sophie attempted to rise, hampered by her skirts. He pushed her back, her head bouncing off the soft pillow. Straddling her, his broad hands slid up her arms, guiding them over her head.

She said nothing, not even struggling when he tied her hands to the bedposts. Her calm, expectant gaze goaded him.

“What? No screaming or shrieking?”

She smirked. “Not yet.”

“Not—” He shook his head and pulled at his cravat, unwinding the length of linen from around his neck. His eyes feasted on her, and he noticed she didn’t appear shy about looking back.

Sophie wanted him. Her desire was plain in her expression, in the very line of her body.

He should never have kissed her. He felt the tug of her body calling to his in a painfully pleasant way.

Callum wrapped the cravat around her head, covering her eyes, tying the ends near her ear.

Sophie felt him secure her ankles to the bedposts. She tugged at her

RESTRAINED HEARTS

bonds. They were firm enough to hold her in place, but not tight.

Yet no matter how cool her demeanor, she couldn't relax. Her senses reached out to him, feeling his weight across her hips, his soft breathing at the edge of her hearing. His fingers lightly brushed the front of her dress, teasing, promising.

Abruptly, he climbed off her. She heard him stride across the packed earth floor and turned her head toward the sound. Where was he going? "Callum?"

He made no answer. She heard the door grate open. "Callum?" she called, a little more urgently. The door closed. "Callum!"

Had he dared to leave her here, tied up and alone? She sucked in a lungful of air. "Callum!" she screamed.

She tried to calm down, concentrating on steadying her breathing. She must not panic. He'd eventually come back and release her.

He had to.

Sophie focused on catching any hint of sound to indicate his return. She heard nothing but her own breathing. She bit her lip. How long would he make her wait?

She twisted in her bonds. She wasn't going to lie there and wait for him to come back for her! Wincing, she tried to wriggle her hands through the rope. She couldn't even bring her hand close enough to remove her blindfold.

The door creaked.

Sophie ceased struggling, not daring to breathe, let alone speak.

Someone, a man by the heaviness of his step, crossed the earthen floor. She heard the soft drag of one foot. Callum didn't have a bad leg. Was he trying to fool her, the way she fooled him? She bit her lip.

"Well, now," drawled a husky Irish voice. "What do we 'ave 'ere then?"

Sophie felt ill. The voice sounded rough, hard, old. It couldn't be Callum. *Where was he?*

She moistened her lips. "Please, you must release me."

RESTRAINED HEARTS

“And who’s been doin’ this to ye, then?”

She didn’t need eyes to know the Irishman leered at her. Sophie tried to keep her voice even. “That doesn’t matter now. I’ll deal with him when I’m free.”

“Aye, lass, and now I’m not so sure if’n ye’re safe enough to be freed. Ye seem a wee bit dangerous to this laddie.” He sat on the edge of the bed. “An’ if’n I release ye, what will ye do fer me in return?”

“Do?” She frowned, puzzled. “Why, I’ll thank you, of course. I have money—”

“Missy, I’m thinkin’ more in the way o’ somethin’ a little more physical.” His hand covered her belly.

She pretended not to understand. “Sir, I do not have much in the way of money with me, but—”

He snarled. “I don’t want yer money, wench.”

His hands moved to her bodice and he started unfastening the buttons of her spencer. Was there no other way out? Certain that he would take what he wanted anyway and not release her, she let out a convulsive sob. Not even Callum would want her after this. With a catch in her throat, she asked, “You’ll let me go?”

“Aye lass, I’ll release ye.” The Irishman’s voice grew gruff. “I won’t hurt y’ none, lass, I promise ye that. I ain’t had me a woman in a long time. It won’t take long.”

He pushed aside her spencer, revealing the low-cut bodice of her gown. With methodical, almost clinical movements, the Irishman loosened the tapes at her bodice’s neck and proceeded to divest her of the high-waisted walking gown.

Soon, nothing but her thin cotton shift lay between her skin and the cooling air. A fingertip traced the contour of her breast. She shivered, biting her lip. At least with the blindfold on, he couldn’t see her cry.

“Hush now, lass. It’ll be over soon enough.” His hand palmed her breast, sliding over until his thumb passed over her nipple. He rubbed it back and forth, coaxing it to harden.

RESTRAINED HEARTS

She felt cold, cold to the very core of her being. She couldn't have been less aroused than if he'd slapped her with a wet dung pat. "Please, no," she begged.

His hand paused, lying on her breast. His skin felt softer than she expected for a laborer, although there were rough patches.

"Perhaps now if I gave ye a wee kiss, ye'd feel a mite bit better?"

His weight shifted. He leaned forward. His lips were on hers.

She froze.

She knew this kiss, knew the scent of this man. *The son of a—*

She clamped her teeth over his lower lip.

"Ow!" He sat up. "Now why'd ye bite me for, lass?"

She licked her lips, tasting blood, his blood. "Stop with the stupid accent, Callum Craythorne. You think I don't know who you are? How dare you!" She pulled against the ropes. "Release me this instant!"

"Is this fella the one who tied you up? Shame on 'im." The Irish lilt wavered, a strong hint of laughter present in his voice.

"Callum Craythorne! Why you—"

He covered her mouth with his hand. His voice was low, straightforward. "I wanted to give you an idea," he said, all trace of an accent gone, "of what it was like to be seduced by someone you do not know and whom you cannot see. And being helpless to prevent them from doing whatever they want." Callum uncovered her mouth.

"That's a cruel thing to do," she accused.

"And was it any less cruel to seduce a man half-mad with fever?" he retorted. "Sophie, what has gotten into you?"

"You were the one who seduced me!" She sobbed, not caring that her composure had shattered.

His hand smoothed her hair. "Hush now. All will be well."

She tore her head away from his gentle touch. "It isn't, Callum. It isn't! It was wrong of me. I—I've..." She couldn't bring herself to say it. No self-respecting woman would ever confess to desiring a man. That would be wanton.

RESTRAINED HEARTS

“Sophie, listen to me.”

She tried to stop crying and focus on his voice.

“My only excuse is I was not myself when I made love to you that first time. I know it is I who has awakened your sexuality, but—”

She bit her lip. Here came his rejection.

“There is something you have to know.”

She filled in the long silence that followed. “What is it, Callum?”

“Later. I will tell you later.” He expelled a rough sigh. “Sophie, I have not been able to get you out of my mind since that last time. You looked so beautiful, so fiery. I only wish I was worthy of you.”

As he spoke, his fingertip ran over the top of her breasts, and they tingled with renewed sensitivity. He resumed teasing a nipple with finger and thumb until it became a hard little peak. She could hardly think, his actions speaking more than his words. *He wanted her!*

She gasped. “Callum!” She arched her back, offering herself to him. He needed no further coaxing. His mouth fell wet and hot on her right breast, tasting her through her flimsy chemise. His tongue and teeth teased at her nipple until it had also hardened. She moaned. It felt so good; she didn’t want him to stop.

Callum raised his head and tore her dainty chemise, baring her breasts to him. “Beautiful,” he murmured, his hands tracing their contours. “Just beautiful.”

He kissed one peak and then the other. “The image of you above me,” he murmured, his hands sliding down to her waist. “The way you looked at me. That’s what I couldn’t get out of my mind.”

His hands feathered up her sides, cupping her breasts, a thumb flicking across each of them.

Sophie’s insides turned molten. This had been her dream—to have Callum Crathorne make love to her. She had never thought it would happen again. And yet, here they were.

Callum paid exquisite attention to her breasts with his mouth and fingers. They grew so sensitive; the slightest touch sent delicious

RESTRAINED HEARTS

shocks through her. Unable to control her writhing, she felt wonderfully warm, golden, ready to soar on the sun's rays.

She moaned her encouragement as she felt Callum raise the hem of her shift, his fingertips tickling the inside of her thigh. She felt him brush the hairs on her intimate parts, and was unable to stop trembling.

Probing deeper, he traced the edge of her nether lips. "Oh me darlin', ye're so wet," he murmured in his brogue, nuzzling her neck.

"Enough of the accent." Her chuckle transformed into a soft, yearning cry as he lightly ran a finger along her silken, slickened center. He brushed against her small, fleshy nub and she cried out again. She knew how good it felt when she touched that spot. "Oh there, Callum. There!"

He obliged her for a moment, before his finger meandered lower, swirling around her entrance before slipping in. Her hips rose to meet him, feeling his finger plunge deeper. He kissed her breast, sucking the aroused tip into his mouth.

Sophie felt her face grow hot, and knew it wouldn't be long before sweet release was hers. Her cries grew incoherent, begging Callum to hurry.

His hand slid from her. His mouth left her breast. She felt his weight disappear from the bed. "Callum! Callum, please." How could he leave her now, when she was so close?

"Patience," he murmured, the close proximity of his voice reassuring her. She heard a boot hit the floor, then another. She wriggled slightly, hearing him undress, wishing she could see him.

The bed sagged as he rejoined her. While he shifted position, his leg brushed hers. She gasped at the sensation of his bare, hairy leg against hers. Callum was naked, deliciously naked.

He wasted no more time, nor did she want him to. He shucked her shift up around her waist. His finger dipped inside her. She bent her legs slightly in response, opening herself up to him. Something thick and hard nudged at her entrance, almost sliding in. It slipped away,

RESTRAINED HEARTS

tracing a path up and down, spreading her wetness.

She squirmed beneath him. “Callum, untie me, please,” she begged. “Please, Callum!”

“Not yet, my sweet, not yet,” he replied, his voice husky. He guided himself partway inside her, bending over to kiss her breasts. She raised her hips, wanting more of him.

He plunged all the way in. Her cries mingled with his low groan. He withdrew and thrust again. Every fiber of her being reached out to him.

Sophie felt him arch back, still embedded within her, and thrilled to feel his fingers at her ankles. It took a little work, but he freed her.

Her legs curled around his, holding him inside. She wanted him to stay there forever.

Callum sought out her mouth, their tongues tangling as their hips rhythmically moved together, building to a white-hot crescendo that left them breathless.

Coming to her senses, Sophie reveled at the weight of him collapsed upon her, warm and comforting.

At length, he moved off her. His hands trembled as he untied the blindfold.

Sophie blinked at him, her eyes slowly focusing.

He bent to capture her mouth once more; it was a sweet, languorous kiss that knew no hurry.

“Well,” she said finally. “Aren’t you going to finish untying me?”

He grinned and freed her wrists. She rubbed them, feeling the pins and needles vanish. He took hold of her forearms. Amazed, she watched him lay gentle kisses on each reddened wrist.

Those kisses, alone, could have led to further shared pleasure, but he released her. He sat up, swinging away from her. She noted every play of his muscles—the tensing and release of them—and longed to run her hands over him, but his hunched shoulders stayed her hand.

“Sophie,” he spoke slowly, “we can’t go on meeting here, like this. We cannot continue doing this.”

RESTRAINED HEARTS

She sat up, stretching before leaning against his back, her arms going about his chest. “I know,” she murmured. “For one thing, other people use this croft.”

He turned and gazed at her. His concerned expression submerged beneath a flash of desire. “We need to dress. I cannot talk with you, when you look so...so desirable.”

“Dressing will help?” she quipped, looking for a way to lighten his dark mood. She sensed she wouldn’t like the upcoming conversation.

“It makes you a little less...ah...accessible.” He rose and reached for his trousers. Sophie took the opportunity to admire his taut rear.

Callum gestured toward two chairs by the fireplace. “Then we’ll sit with some distance between us.”

Sophie donned her clothes slowly, lost in thought. She still felt the imprint of his body on hers, recalled the touch and taste of his lips. Fastening the final button of her gown, she settled onto one of the wooden chairs.

Callum leaned against the stone fireplace, shifting a log so it settled deeper into the flames.

Waiting for him to speak, she watched the firelight play across his strong features. There was a sensitivity to his introspection, in spite of the brusque, fierce outer shell.

“I don’t know where to start.” He slumped into the chair opposite her and she held his gaze. “Would you...are you going to comb your hair?”

She gave a little start. *Why had he asked that?* “My hair?”

“The night of the storm, I remember...I remember a woman combing her hair and humming.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

A quicksilver grin flashed across his features. “I thought I was, too.” He stared into the fire. “The tune you hummed... It was pretty.”

She hoped the fire’s glow concealed her blush. But if she could delay the dreaded conversation... She took a deep breath, then softly

RESTRAINED HEARTS

hummed the tune.

He listened for a while. “Ah. Now I recognize it. ‘Greensleeves.’”

She remembered the words of the first verse and they struck her heart. “‘Alas, my love, you do me wrong to cast me off discourteously, for I have loved you so long, delighting in your company.’” She fell silent, abashed at her daring to speak out.

“Does it not end: ‘Come once again and love me’?”

She lifted her head to look at him and found him gazing back at her. *What did he mean by that?*

“Sophie...” He slid from the chair to his knees, leaning forward. Brushing her cheek, his lips were as soft as his touch. His proximity brought comfort and peace. She reveled in the scent of his muscular body, the feel of it against her and knew if she raised her head, she’d feel those soft, sensual lips against her own.

The kiss was exquisite, tender and undemanding.

Callum pulled back first, leaving her with eyes closed, lips puckered for just a moment before she realized he’d gone. She opened them. “Callum,” she murmured.

He saw tears in her eyes and drew her into his arms. Holding her close seemed the most natural thing in the world to do, although he was all too aware of what lay beneath her gown. He hated himself for having turned her world upside down. He had ruined her, utterly and completely, when all he had wanted to do was scare some sense into her. He hadn’t planned on making love to her at all.

Love?

“Sophie,” he said finally. He made her look into his eyes, tilting her chin. “What just happened...it is not something that I normally do.”

“Me either,” she replied, a little breathless.

Callum closed his eyes in agony. Even with her voice alone, she could tie him in knots. “Dammit, Soph. I should never have touched you. I should never have asked you back here. I should have told you

RESTRAINED HEARTS

what I had to say and made you go.”

“And I should have insisted on it.” A tiny frown marred Sophie’s complexion. “What’s happening to us, Callum?”

“I think—” He halted. “I think—” He shook his head. “Soph, I don’t know what to think.” He retreated to his chair.

Sophie didn’t wait for him to speak again. Time to end this. “What did you want to tell me when you asked me to meet you here?”

He didn’t answer immediately.

She waited, folding her hands in her lap, concealing her sudden trembling. She feared what he had to say.

“There are some things about me you need to know.” His voice was gruff.

“You’re married?” she asked, the magic spell broken. She couldn’t think why a man would make love to her with his body, yet deny her his heart.

“No, no. Not that. It’s...well, I’m not the easiest person to get along with.”

Sophie hid a smile of relief.

“I have a temper.”

“So do I,” she replied.

He scowled at her. “I’m quick to judge.”

“So am I.”

“I can be loud, obnoxious, remote—” He counted off each bad quality on his fingers.

She grabbed the offending hand. “But Callum, I also know that you are good, kind, gentle, loving.”

“That was before the war.”

The raw pain in his voice made her blurt, “What happened?”

He stared into the fire. “War is very unpleasant,” he said at last. “Not just the deaths and the stench of it, but the degradation of it all. You become an animal, just to survive.” He glanced at her. “I do not

RESTRAINED HEARTS

think I will ever be truly human again. I am not a gentleman any more, Sophie. Nothing affects me.”

“That is not true, Callum Craythorne, and you know it.”

“Physical attraction is an animal instinct.” He folded his arms.

“Tenderness is not. You may have taunted me cruelly, but you have shown me great tenderness. You *are* human, Callum. You just have to break down the walls that protect you.”

“I cannot.” Agony made his voice raw.

“Then let me help you.”

She reached out to him. After a long moment, he took her hand.

* * *

Morning found Sophie curled under the blankets. They’d reached an unspoken understanding of sorts during the night’s long, passionate lovemaking. It could no longer be denied that life without the other was impossible.

Callum nudged her and she stretched.

“Tea?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed and offering her a cup. “You look like you could use it.”

Sophie sniffed. “You left out untactful and ungentlemanly from your list of last night.”

Callum grinned at her, unrepentant. “You never let me get that far.”

“I think I let you go too far,” she remonstrated, wagging her finger.

His features shuttered. “You don’t say?” His cold expression belied his light tone.

She leaned forward, covering his hand with hers. “I only meant to tease. I know there are decisions we have to make.”

“Decisions?” He withdrew his hand. “We cannot go on like this, Sophie. I see no other alternative but for you to marry me.”

She regarded him, pulling the blanket up to her chin. “You did not have to put it like that.”

He rubbed his hand across his face. “I didn’t mean to. Sophie, you have given yourself to me, freely, but do you—”

RESTRAINED HEARTS

She covered his lips with her fingertips. "I love you, Callum. I have loved you ever since we were young."

"I'm not that boy, or that young man, any more."

"My love isn't a childish thing. It has matured, grown. Without that love, I would never have—" She broke off, blushing.

"I know." He held her hands, kissing the backs of them. "I can't get you out of my head, Sophie. You possess my mind, my battered heart as surely as you possess my body. Marry me?"

"Yes," she breathed. His mouth swooped down for a kiss and she welcomed him, her arms entwining about his neck. "Shall it be soon?"

To her shock, he pulled away, holding up a hand for silence. She obeyed, her eyes narrowing. How could he be so sweet and then so arrogant with the space of a few heartbeats? She opened her mouth to give him a firm set-down.

Then she, too, heard the sounds. "My father," she whispered, recognizing the voice calling her name.

A thunder of hoof beats approached. Callum rose, tossing Sophie her dress and reaching for his coat.

The door flew open. Her father entered, his worried face transforming into relief. "Sophie! What are you doing here? When you did not come home—"

Callum stepped forward.

Her father frowned. "Mr. Craythorne?"

She watched him take in the fact she was still abed, her gown covering her bosom, while Callum wore neither cravat nor boots. "Papa," she managed, not knowing how to start.

"You seduced my daughter, sir?" He kept his anger leashed.

"Mr. Ingram, I assure you—"

"You will marry my daughter."

She saw Callum's face blanch. "Yes, sir," he got out between stiff lips. "I have already proposed and she has accepted. We will have the banns called on Sunday."

RESTRAINED HEARTS

Her father's fury would not be doused so easily. "Daughter, you shall count yourself lucky you abandoned all sense with Mr. Craythorne and not some worthless wretch. If he abandons you before your marriage, then I shall be doubly shamed to call you 'daughter' and you will marry the first man I choose for you."

"Papa," she gasped, hurt beyond words.

Callum stepped forward, as if to shield her from his harsh words. "Sir, I have no intention of abandoning your daughter. If you fear that, then perhaps we should go to the reverend at once. He should have no problem with the idea of performing a marriage on short notice. After all, he's known us since childhood. Sir, I will have no other but Sophie. We have been intended for each other since our youth. I thought we were no longer suited, but I found that to be untrue. While our union has been unconventional, it is solid, sir, and the bounds shall never break."

He loved her!

His public declaration gave her the strength to speak. "We have done wrong, I know, but it has all worked out in the end. We will be happy, Papa, now and always." She rose, a sheet covering her nakedness, and Callum hugged a protective arm about her bare shoulders.

Her father cleared his throat. "Very well. I seem to have spoken out of turn. My blessings to you both." He managed a tight smile.

Sophie barely noticed, having eyes only for her betrothed, who now gazed down at her in wonder. They had a long road yet to travel, but they would survive whatever life threw at them. Because together, they were whole.

LEANNE SHAWLER

Regency writer Leanne Shawler has long had an affinity for the electronic world, having met her husband of 7 years on the internet. Both fans of science fiction's most romantic couple: Clark Kent and Lois Lane, it seemed natural to leave her home country of Australia and move to Southern California, where dreams come true.

Leanne has written for all of her remembered life: from a short story about a monster eating the bully in her third grade class, to the full-blown and unlikely adventure romances she wrote with her high school gal pals. She then graduated to angst-ridden poetry and erotica, followed by a masters in fanfiction. At last she pulled a Regency manuscript she'd written one summer out of its storage box and decided to "fix" it. She has since completed three other novels (three Regency-based, one contemporary) and is working on her fourth, another Regency with time travel elements. Two of her manuscripts have been finalists in the GOTCHA and Ticket to Write contests. She is also a member of the RWA Regency chapter *The Beau Monde* and her local RWA chapter.

An Anglophile, she first became interested in the Regency period over fifteen years ago and has been researching and visiting England ever since. "I enjoy the mannered wit of the Regency, the bright personalities (Byron, the Duke of Wellington, Jane Austen) and the adventures of the time: wild rides hanging on a bizarre bet, elopements to Scotland, the wars with Napoleon. While they maintained an outward appearance of good society, they are known to have lived life

to the fullest.” Frequently, her research takes her to the seedy underworld of the Regency period.

When she’s not writing, Leanne reads, designs websites and enjoys the theater and good food with her husband.

You can learn more about Leanne by visiting her website:
<http://www.leanneshawler.com>

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