

# Captured Heart

By

Sage Delouise

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Published by Blushing Books®,  
a subsidiary of  
ABCD Graphics and Design  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901  
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Delouise, Sage  
Captured Heart

eBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-024-9  
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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# Chapter One

“You telling me you’re not going to marry the Rankin boy?”

Cornered in the kitchen, alcohol fumes blowing in her face, Clara stayed focused on the nasty looking pitchfork her dad held. This wasn’t the sober, loving dad she’d grown up with, but instead, her dad since her mom had died. He was swaying, his eyes were bloodshot, and she didn’t know what he was capable of in this state.

“Dad,” she tried, “Put down the pitchfork. You don’t mean that. Fitz Rankin is thirty years older than me.”

He held the tool up, vicious looking tines pointed at her middle. “You’re twenty-one, a grown woman, should be starting a brood of your own. And you’re gonna do that with Rankin.”

There was no reasoning with him right now; she just needed to get away from him until he’d slept it off. A quick side step should have taken her out of range of the pitchfork, but her dad mirrored her movement and brought the tool closer. “Dad, I’m going outside.”

“You’re not going anywhere until you’re good and hitched with Rankin. That card counting ace-up-his sleeve crook was back tonight. Cheated me out of another twenty acres, and the only way to get it back is you marrying him.”

There was no point in asking him why he played cards with a man he thought was cheating. Not tonight. “You know I can’t marry Fitz Rankin. He’s not the Rankin boy any more, he’s older than you.”

“You can, and you will, and don’t think that because you’re female, I won’t use this on you.” He fell toward her, fork tines pointed at her belly.

She lunged to the right, hauled open the door, and heard the thump as the pitchfork slammed into the kitchen wall. She ran, grateful for her years of being a high school athlete. *Wait it out*, she told herself, *and try talking to him in the morning*. He wouldn’t start drinking again before sundown tomorrow, but once he did, he could do a lot of damage. He’d been losing the farm by acres. If she left him to fend for himself, he’d end up with nothing, a drunken wreck, the way he was going. She knew she needed to leave, to save herself, but she couldn’t abandon him.

Even in the cool fall night, the barn was warm enough. She'd grown up playing, and occasionally sleeping in here with the smells of hay, and cows, raw wood, and night air. Tomorrow, after a night's sleep, she could find out how deeply her dad was in debt, and how he could get out of the mess he'd gotten into. Without her marrying Fitz Rankin.

At the top of the ladder, the old sleeping bag from her childhood, spending nights up in the loft when it was too hot to be inside the house, waited. Tonight, in the early October chill, she wrapped up in it, grateful for the cover and the padding of hay. With no one around for at least thirty acres on all sides of the house and barn, there was nothing else she could do except stay out of her dad's reach.

Years ago, when her dad thundered, Clara hid. He didn't anger easily, and it was rare, but when he did, his rage had been focused on her kid brother, Danny. He was the mouthy one. Even in her room with the door closed, the sounds that came from the shed outside had been horrible. Now she was scared, but saddened by his drinking and gambling.

Danny was twenty, only a year younger than her, and if he were here to see their dad's drunken rages, he'd fight back. In most ways she'd taken care of her younger brother since their mom had died of cancer, four years ago. But now that he was big enough, he would protect her. However, he was away at university, and she would never interrupt the future he deserved by telling him how their dad had fallen apart in the last year.

It was habit to roll herself up in the sleeping bag and tuck the edges under her. With only the sounds of the cows shuffling and munching below her, she was safe.

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"I thought I'd find you out here. You weren't in the house, your pop and I looked."

In the grey morning light, Fitz loomed over her. She must have slept deeply; she hadn't heard the ladder creak.

Wrapped in the sleeping bag, she couldn't move until she found the edge she'd tucked beneath her side, and rolled off it. Fitz got there first, reaching around and pulling the bag open. She scrambled to get her feet under her, but Fitz placed his hands on her shoulders. It was like being held down by a ten ton truck. Unable to straighten her legs, Clara was forced to stay on her knees, facing his crotch.

"No need to rise on my account," he said. "Let's you and me have a little practice run for when we're married." He dropped heavily to his knees, his red face inches from hers.

“Take your hands off me, I’m not marrying you.”

“How you talk. Guess your daddy didn’t tell you about our arrangement.” He shifted his grip from her shoulders to her head, pulling her face closer. His breath was foul from years of drinking and something with onions he’d had that morning, and his darkly veined nose touched hers as he closed in for a kiss.

With a twist, she escaped the kiss, and his wet mouth landed on her jaw line.

“You coulda broke your neck, twisting when I had a grip on your lovely face. Lucky for you, I like them spirited. Now you listen up, Missy. Your daddy lost so much of this farm last night; the only reason I haven’t thrown him off it yet is because he told me I could have you. Said you’d never let him end up on the street, worthless drunk that he is, and that you’d marry me to keep your home in the family. When I showed up this morning, he hadn’t changed his tune. He’s well into the sauce already, and he told me to come out here and get you. So what’s it gonna be?” He held up his hands as if weighing the possibilities. “You and your pop out on the street, or you stay here as a well-to-do farmer’s wife?”

Clara shot to her feet and sprang for the ladder, running down, jumping the last few feet, and flying out the door. She disappeared into the bushes as she had as a child when she didn’t want to go in for dinner, found the opening to the road, and ran, the way she had at school marathons. Her dad was in deeper than she’d ever thought possible. Her dad was already drinking, and she couldn’t take the chance of going back to the house now.

At the entrance to the highway, she kept running on the shoulder. Cars honked, she ignored them. Her dad was in no shape to help her now, and as hard as she’d tried, she hadn’t been able to save him from himself. If she stuck close by and got her own place, she could keep her job and survive. But she wouldn’t stand by and watch her dad end up on the street. Also, Fitz would be lying in wait for her, everywhere she went. He’d never stop forcing himself on her. And as much as she hated to think it, she’d run out of ideas for helping her dad; he was becoming dangerous to her.

She ran tirelessly to the next exit, but as an experienced runner, she knew she had to pace herself. If she didn’t take a break now, she’d have to stop soon. Exhaustion would impair her balance, and she couldn’t risk that happening on the edge of the highway. The exit ramp was lined with a strip of concrete that formed a narrow curb on the outside. A jogging pace took her to the street at the bottom, and then landed her in front of a gas station and convenience store.

Thirst had been growing in her, and her stomach growled loudly, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since dinner last night.

Dry mouthed and ravenous, she walked toward the entrance to the store, already picturing the cold drinks, cheese, bread and fruit they carried. Between gas pumps, a few feet from the store, out of habit, she felt for her purse. Of course, no strap across her shoulder. She'd fled with nothing. No wallet, no money, no credit card. Her phone was probably still sitting beside her bed where she'd last used it. What had she been thinking?

Fitz and his enormous hands and strength, her dad already drunk. That had been her reality. There hadn't been time to think. If she'd run for the house to grab the essentials, Fitz might have caught up with her, her dad, already drunk again, and desperate, would have helped to keep her there. She couldn't have fought them both off.

Where was she going? She had no idea.

A movement to her left made her look up at the man approaching her from the gas station driveway. She couldn't see his eyes behind his mirrored sunglasses, under his baseball hat, but he was walking toward her, fast.

"Excuse me," he said, holding up one hand as if to stop traffic at an intersection. "Could I trouble you to pick up a couple of items from the store?" He nodded toward the convenience store entrance.

Clara raised both hands, preparing to explain that she had no money.

He held out a bill. She didn't look at it, but her peripheral vision told her it was a large one, she saw that much. "I'm not asking for a handout," he said. His voice was deep, husky, and self-assured. She believed him. No one with a no nonsense voice like that would beg for anything. "I can see you're not carrying a purse, or a fanny pack, and your jeans pockets are flat. So, no wallet, it's chilly, and you don't have a jacket."

*What was he doing making observations about her?* "And your point?" He was probably six inches taller than her medium height, but built compactly with muscular arms and shoulders that bulged and shifted under a snug tee shirt. She'd be a fool to tell him she did have money, a stranger who'd approached her from out of nowhere and kept his eyes hidden.

He stepped closer, positioning himself between her and the store. "My point," he said, "is that I can do something for you, and you can help me out. And it will require some trust on both our parts."

She should run, as fast and as far as she could. But she still hadn't answered her own question about where she was going. She'd left everything, her home, and her job as a vet's assistant. As much as she loved her work, the animals, and the two vets she worked with, it would be impossible to return to it without her dad and Fitz tracking her down and making her life hell. The black hole of her present life yawned before her. If she couldn't trust her own father, or Fitz, who she'd once thought of as an old family friend, what did she have to lose by finding out what this man standing in front of her wanted?

With one hand, he lifted his sunglasses from his face. Grey eyes, pearly silver in the early sun, stared into hers. "I know you're curious," he said, crossing his arms, mirrored shades dangling from his finger and thumb.

"I'm not agreeing to anything." She took a step back and crossed her arms the way he had.

He didn't move toward her. "I can't go into that store," he said. "I'm not telling you why, so don't ask. I need supplies, I have money. You don't. If you pick up a couple of things for me, and get whatever you want for yourself, we'll both come out ahead."

"I'm not in the habit of opening up to strangers." She uncrossed her arms and shoved her hands in her pockets. "But this is a strange and new experience for me. I've never met you before, but what you just said actually makes sense. So I'll take you up on it. We both need supplies, so I'll go in and get what you want. And some food for myself."

"Good." He nodded. "I need some kind of canned soda drink, a twelve pack will do, bread, today's paper, sandwich meat, cheese, two toothbrushes, cereal, and milk." The list sounded like a challenge, like he was daring her to remember his requested items. He held out the bill again. It was a hundred.

Wordlessly, she took it and headed for the store entrance without looking back.

With a bag in each hand, one with her own groceries, and one holding his, she left the store and looked around the gas station. Now that she wasn't running, the cool air hit her skin, raising goose bumps. The stranger wasn't visible in any direction. She walked around behind the store and then back to the pumps in the front. Two vehicles were parked there, and three waited on the street. Somehow, she guessed he wouldn't be at the gas station. He seemed like the type to want to be able to leave easily.



On the street in front of the gas station, through the window of the third car in the row, she saw one man in the driver's seat. He sat behind the wheel of a nondescript, beige, older model compact. An ordinary looking car for such a mysterious man. He must have been watching for her, because, as she approached the car, he jumped out, wearing his sunglasses again, and reached for both bags.

"Why are you taking both?" She held onto hers.

"Why not?" he said. "Where have you got to take yours? You looked pretty rough when I first saw you, running along the highway."

"You saw me running?"

"Passed you," he said. "I was coming off to stock up. You're an experienced runner," he said.

That pleased her more than it should have, coming from someone she'd met a few minutes ago.

"But, you didn't look like you were running for pleasure. Partly because we're in the country, and why would you choose to run in car fumes with all this open land around? I think you're running from something. Or someone."

He looked quickly around, and back to her. "We've established that you're not carrying any money. I think you're in trouble, and if you had a place to go, you'd be heading there, not buying groceries for a stranger. You don't have to tell me about it, but if I'm right, you can come with me. I have a motel room a few miles from here."

She must be crazy to hand over her groceries, but she did. And she opened the passenger door of his car, and got in.

The motel was a mid-price one, clean, advertising a pool, but nothing fancy. His room was around the back. He unlocked the door and she followed him in. "Two beds," he motioned toward them, "nothing for you to worry about on that score. You need to eat now?"

If she didn't, she would pass out. "Yes." Her bag held a beef sandwich, juice, a granola bar, and a banana. In the strip of a kitchen, she unwrapped the sandwich with shaking fingers and crammed the triangle point into her mouth.

"Here, here, sit down." She was holding on to her sandwich and juice as he pulled her by the wrist to one of the two kitchen chairs placed at a small table. He walked away, and came back with two paper plates, cellophane wrapped napkins, the newspaper folded under one arm,

and the makings of a sandwich for himself. He brought a coke back to the table, popped the tab, and took a deep drink.

She couldn't get the food into her system fast enough, and her sandwich stuck in her throat. She washed it down with peach-orange juice, watching him unfold the newspaper on the table, and read the contents as if she weren't there.

"I don't even know your name," she said.

"No, you don't." He opened the paper, spread it out in front of him and turned the first page.

She washed down a mouthful of sandwich. "I'm Clara."

He didn't look up from devouring the news while sipping his drink without looking at it. A few minutes passed. He sighed, and a muscle worked in his jaw as he clenched his fists on the table next to the paper.

When he focused on Clara, he caught her eyeing the loaf of bread. He opened the plastic bag and put four slices on his paper plate. Then he pulled a folding knife from his pocket, cut the end off the package of sliced salami, and freed a couple of cheese slices from their cellophane. He assembled two sandwiches and handed her one.

"Go on," he said, "you're still hungry. There are lots of stores, and there's plenty of salami in the world."

Clara watched his long, dexterous fingers. "I need to know your name. I'm in a motel room with you. I have to call you something."

He looked hard into her eyes, seemed to make a decision, turned the paper to face her and pushed it across the table.

On page two, a photo showed him with a beard, and longer, darker hair, but his eyes were unmistakable. "Rory Powell," the headline read, "still a fugitive."

Rory Powell had vanished from the state prison two days ago, and no trace of him, not one sighting had been reported. In the second paragraph she learned that he'd been arrested at a convenience store hold up. During the robbery, the clerk had been shot. The charges against him were armed robbery. And homicide.

Her mouth dried and adrenaline charged through her system. She jerked her head up to stare at him, and found his eyes waiting for her, his expression seemed to be carefully blank. He

had taken off his billed cap while she was reading about him, and now, she noticed his hair. He was blond, with dark brown roots. He'd done a few things to change his appearance.

"Well," he said. "I know you have some questions. Shoot."

"You're a robber? Do you have a gun now?"

"I wouldn't call myself a robber. I made a mistake," he said. "And yes. I do carry a gun."

"Should I be afraid of you? Are you going to hold up a store? Or rob a bank? Are you still a criminal?" She stopped and put a hand over her mouth. "Wow, when I get on a roll with questions, I can't put the cork back in the bottle."

"It's fine," he said. "You're like a kid with a bellyful of questions. I like this better than the deer in the headlights look you got when you first saw the paper. You're entitled to some answers. You trusted me enough to come with me." He bit off a hunk of his sandwich. "I made some stupid mistakes as a kid. And one more four years ago, the game changer, because I was an adult then." He threw back another long swallow of coke. "Should you be afraid of me? Not unless you threaten my life. And, no, I'm not going to rob a store, or a bank."

His voice was serious, but his eyes sparkled, and she could have sworn the corner of his mouth twitched with a controlled grin.

"Are you going to do anything that would put me in danger?"

"Straight shooter." He nodded at her. "Good survival instincts. You're already in danger, sweetheart, you're hanging out with a convicted felon. Why don't you ask what you really want to know?"

Damn, he was perceptive. He'd guessed so many things about her already, from her lack of money, to the basics of her situation. Now he seemed to know what she was thinking. She was burning with the need to know if he'd really killed a man. If he could kill anyone. But the truth was deeper than the obvious question. It was a question he would not be able to answer. *Was she in danger of becoming so fascinated by him that she might forget to protect herself? To protect her heart?* There was a hypnotic power in his silver eyes. Not to mention the effect his great build had on her senses.

*Focus up*, she told herself. *What was it she needed to know first? Oh yeah. Was he a murderer?* "Did you do it? Did you... kill that clerk?"

"No. I did not. They got the wrong man."

“Yeah, right. Of course. No convicted murderer has ever said that before.” With a snap she could hear, she slammed her mouth shut. *Had she really been that flippant to a man with a gun?*

His plate was empty and he was reaching into the bread bag. He stopped still, placed both hands on the table and stared at her with a stone cold expression she hadn't seen before. “There are three things I hate and that you won't do when you're with me,” he said. “I hate sarcasm. I was a teenager once, and I said, ‘Yeah right’, to just about everything. It was an ugly habit and if you know what's good for you, and I think you do, you will not throw sarcasm at me again.”

A shudder passed through her. He was dead serious. She'd known him for barely a couple of hours, but she knew that he meant it. She chose her next question carefully. “And if I let some sarcasm slip out, what will happen? I've been sarcastic for a lot of years.”

“Another good survival question,” he said. “You want to know the consequences. You watch your tone, and maybe you won't find out. But I'll tell you this much, I promise it won't involve a deadly weapon.”