
CAPTIVE HEART

Club Risqué Book Six

POPPY FLYNN



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

The bitter wind enshrouded her with a bone deep cold while tiny shards of icy hail bit cruelly into her bruised body. Her fingers and toes had long since turned numb, and she had to wonder if the stinging pelt of the mostly frozen sleet against her bare skin was actually managing to aid her sluggish circulation. One thing was certain, if she didn't find a way to shelter and warmth, then she wouldn't need to worry whether or not the next beating might kill her because the biting cold surely would.

It went against everything that had been ingrained within her to defy her Master, but even after all this time, after the loss of all hope, the will to live still beat strong within her heart.

He hadn't chained her this time. The weather was so foul that he hadn't wished to leave the comfort of the house in order to do so. Instead, he had ordered her outside, stark naked, and commanded that she sit on the bench at the end of the garden where he could see her from the window.

He had watched for a while as her buttocks had numbed and ached with the pain from the cold and her last whipping, while her breath had sent white plumes into the frigid air and her teeth

had gone way past the chattering stage. But she hadn't seen him peer out at her for long minutes now. Was he watching from another window? Waiting to pounce, the moment she defied him. Dear lord, did she even care anymore? Whether he killed her or the cold did, at least she would finally be free from the torment.

Except that fragile filament of enduring, abiding survival instinct refused to let her out of its grasp.

She wiggled her toes then beat the soles of her feet against the frozen ground, simultaneously jamming her arms around her torso and her fingers into her arm pits. Trying to keep warm was an exercise in futility, and she knew beyond a doubt that if she left it very much longer, then the chance to function would be stripped from her by the effects of the slithering, devouring cold as surely as her clothing had been stripped from her by the beast she was forced to call Master.

She looked toward the house once more and tried to think past the cold that seemed to be seeping into her very soul, to catalogue what she knew about her shadowy surroundings. She wasn't allowed out very often, so it wasn't much, but if she was even going to entertain the thought of getting away, of staying alive, then she needed a plan.

Cold—such an ineffectual word for the depth of frozen chill she was feeling as it iced her veins. She was beyond cold and wondered if the freeze was beginning to affect her thought processes.

No, she was lucid enough to know that she needed to do something...soon. If she wanted a chance at life.

Rocking backward and forward, she tried to clear her mind of the present discomfort and concentrate on what she needed to do, on an effective escape plan. Master might kill her if he caught her, and she might end up just as dead by staying outside at the mercy of the wintry elements, but she had no doubt that

he'd take great pleasure in making sure it was the most painful torment imaginable before she got to that final relief of demise.

There was a shed to the right of the bench where she huddled. Did she dare to try to investigate inside? There was no lock that she could see, but the latch was high. Higher than she would easily be able to reach.

No, it would be too dangerous, take too long, and was too much in sight of the house. One glance, and Master would know what she was about. There was a log pile in a shadowed corner, also close to the house, but out of the line of sight of any windows. Atop the logs, was a tarpaulin that might offer her a meagre bit of shelter and a modicum of decency for her naked body. There were neighbours either side of the property. Not close. Master would never chance anyone hearing her screams of agony, but she didn't think she would trust going to any place in the immediate vicinity. She didn't know who his cronies were, but she wouldn't be surprised if they lived nearby.

There were high, wooden fences without any gaps all the way around the boundary line. She would never be able to scale one of those, but at the very back of the grounds, close to the log pile, was a dense, thorny hedge which backed onto farmland and open fields. The vast open space would bestow its own dangers, since there would be nowhere to hide. On the other hand, there was no street lighting, either. Of course, once she cleared the illumination of the house, she would barely be able to see where she was heading, and she had no idea what was out there. It couldn't be any worse than what she endured here, though; that was for certain.

Scrutinising the hedge, she looked for a place where she might be able to wiggle through. If she pulled the tarp around her, it might shield her from some of the wicked looking thorns at least, but, if nothing else, she knew she would have no trouble enduring a little pain. Not if it meant exchanging it for freedom

from the certain death that loomed ahead of her, beckoning her into its gaping black maw.

She shook her head with renewed urgency. The cold was starting to get to her; she needed to make her move.

Right behind the wood pile, was an area that appeared thinner than the rest of the hedge, as if the logs had impeded the growth of the bushes. That was her best bet for escape, although it meant having to scale the log pile in her bare feet. Looking around, she noted that the hard slabs of the patio area were wet rather than snowy, the sleety hail still too damp to stick, so at least she wouldn't leave foot prints. That might buy her some time if he came looking.

Rubbing and stamping and jiggling in a vain effort to nurture her beleaguered circulation, she psyched herself up to make a move. Then, suddenly, all the lights went out and the garden was plunged into an inky darkness.

For a moment, she was frozen by shock rather than cold, until her sluggish mind realised that Master had turned off the outside lights, no doubt in an attempt to deepen her punishment. In fact, what he had handed her was the perfect opportunity. She had her escape plan. It might not be much of one, but it was at least a tiny germ of purpose and hope, and now she had the cover of darkness to shield her actions further.

She waited scant seconds to allow her eyes to grow accustomed to the night then moved as swiftly as she could in the direction she needed to go. It wasn't quickly enough. Her limbs were stiff and lethargic, her feet so cold and numb that it felt like she was dragging lumps of ice on the end of her legs. She almost had to will them into movement with sheer determination.

But determination, she suddenly had plenty of. Fuelled by a sudden rush of adrenaline, she momentarily forgot the cold and the pain, and her mind zeroed in on the next small step of her plan. She tugged on the tarpaulin, dislodging it from the edges of the wood pile where it was tethered. One of the logs toppled and

the noise sounded magnified in the quiet of the frosty night. She didn't dare stop to see if it had caught Master's attention; time was of the essence. She had scant minutes to break free of the boundary line. If he decided to switch on the lights or check on her or, God forbid, if he had an attack of conscience and decided to bring her in before she froze to death, then all would be lost. The tarp was caught under logs at the edges to stop it from blowing away, she realised. Moving them would take longer but would be quieter. She decided less noise was the better option, but only until she had dislodged enough to allow her to easily pull it free of its confines. The plastic material was stiff from the cold and the crinkling sound it made sounded almost as loud as when the log had toppled. Plus, it was freezing against her already chilled skin as she pulled it around her, but at least it cut out the wind and provided a little protection.

She made to scramble over the wood pile, but her legs didn't want to cooperate. *Come on*, she beseeched her leaden, frozen feet. She hadn't come this far just to fall at the first hurdle. Sheer force of will had her moving her numbed limbs in the direction she needed them to go. It was taking too long. She was too slow. Panic started to set in.

Oh, God! Oh, God! She needed to be quicker; she needed to hurry. He might come out at any second. She had to clear the boundary, or there would be no chance at all.

There were sharp splinters in the wood; she knew that, logically, even though she couldn't feel them. Maybe that was a blessing; she wasn't sure.

Sheer willpower alone got her to the edge of the hedge line where it appeared the thinnest, and winding the tarp close around her slight frame, she pushed through the thorny thicket. Vicious spikes still skewered through the plastic, scoring her skin, but it was no match for some of the things she had endured at the hands of her Master, so she simply ignored them and continued to shove through.

A particularly sharp barb flicked dangerously close to her eye and she pulled her head back in the nick of time, feeling it lacerate her cheek instead. She drew in a sharp breath, but she didn't allow it to slow her down. She was nearly there; just a few more inches, and the worst of the underbrush would give out.

As she finally cleared the other side, the prickles seemed to claw at her as if they were trying to draw her back or prevent her from leaving. A product of her overwrought, fanciful mind, no doubt, but the very idea filled her with enough anger to shake herself free and set off running across the barren expanse of the field.

She had no idea what to expect from here on in.

The horizon spread before her in shades of dark grey and deeper black and a haze of freezing fog. At least that would provide another layer of cover if nothing else. She decided to head straight for the far hedge line of the next field rather than left or right, where she knew the neighbouring houses stood. There wasn't enough trust for her to approach anybody this close to Master's property. She had no doubt, he would surround himself with like minds. She needed to get as far away as she could manage under the cover of darkness, then, maybe, when the first steaks of daylight dawned, she could find a shed or a barn to shelter in and maybe get a little sleep...if the freezing temperatures didn't kill her first.

Her body had started to warm from the physical exertion of running, an exercise she wasn't used to. Her legs cramped, and she could feel a fine sheen of sweat starting to cover her skin. The exercise might be warming her a little, but she knew that when the sweat cooled, it could be just as much of a killer. Still, there was no choice right now, just the lesser of two evils, and at least this was one of her own choosing.

Now that the circulation to her feet and hands had started to be restored, she was plagued with the most agonisingly painful pins and needles, but she had known discomfort for as long as she

could remember—she couldn't recall when there had ever been anything else—so she just powered through it to the best of her ability.

She was about three quarters of the way across the generously sized field when she became aware of the light behind her. As she whirled around, she stumbled and lost her balance, falling into a heap on the frozen ground and jarring her knees painfully, but the sob that was ripped from her throat was one of frustration rather than pain. No! It was too soon; he couldn't have found her yet!

Scrabbling to look around, she finally realised that Master had simply switched the outside lights of the property back on. He wasn't coming after her—yet!

As she climbed back to her feet, the renewed bolt of adrenaline was exactly what she needed to speed her to the tree line that was looming on the horizon. If she could just put one more boundary between them, she would have a decent chance of obscurity. He wouldn't know which way she had gone if he didn't catch sight of her movement. The temptation was strong to drop down on the ground and shroud herself with the green coloured tarpaulin, which might offer a small amount of camouflage in the expanse of the field, but she didn't dare stop, not yet. As much as she thought she felt his eyes upon her, harsh, evil and threatening, she knew that was just an unfounded, irrational fear. Her mind was playing tricks on her. For now, at least.

"Get in here, bitch!" She heard the loud booming roar of Master's voice carried on the air of the silent night. Soon, he would go looking for her, and it wouldn't be very long after that before he realised she was gone. How much more time did she have before he investigated the only real option for escape?

If she was lucky, he'd have to find a coat and shoes before he ventured outside. Then he'd surely check the garden to see if she'd sheltered, maybe the shed. Logic told her he'd head for the gate first to see if it was still locked; that would all buy her

precious minutes to make it to the relative safety of the next boundary line. It would all depend on whether or not he noticed the tarp was missing from the log pile sooner...or later.

She prayed for later.

Her feet found an added spurt of speed as she heard him shout some more.

"Where the fuck are you, bitch? Just wait till I get my hands on you, you little slut, you'll regret messing me around like this!"

She could hear the anger in his voice and couldn't help the whimper that fell from her lips at the thought of him catching her. Please, God, no! She'd never survive if he managed to get her back.

Vaguely, she wondered if his shouting might alert the neighbours, but it didn't seem to deter him, so obviously, he wasn't too worried. It added to her belief that she was right not to trust them.

She sped across the silent grass, oblivious to the cold and pain in the soles of her feet, her only focus now on managing to successfully get away. Her breath sawed in and out of constricted lungs, part exertion, part fear, and she thanked the Lord for the haze of mist which obscured the white puffs of her breath that decorated the air around her.

She was almost there, just a few more metres.

"Slave!" the thunderous bellow seemed to reverberate all around her.

Oh, God! Was he closer? She didn't dare look; the trees were clearer through the tendrils of the dark, now that she was close up, so instead, she searched for the best way through.

When she spied a gap, she veered in that direction, stubbing her bare toes on a fallen branch and taking a sprawling dive in her haste. She dragged herself up, only vaguely aware that she had damaged her foot. She didn't care. It didn't matter. She just needed to make it through the fence line and into the relative

safety of the next field, where she would be out of his line of sight at least, if nothing else.

She continued on with a staggering gait, limping badly, but oblivious of anything except the beacon of survival that shone brightly in her mind. A few more feet, and she'd cleared the trees.

A ragged sob of relief was torn from her throat and she squeaked a little at how loud it sounded in the quiet silence of the dense night, before clamping a hand across her mouth in automatic response.

Her lungs hurt, and her foot throbbed with new pain on top of the old pains of cold and scrapes from the stones and thistles she'd encountered in the otherwise blessedly grass field, but she didn't dare to stop, not even to catch her breath and take stock of her surroundings. There was another boundary, closer this time, and she could hear the tell-tale spew of a rain swollen stream. Dear God! She dared not take a dip in any frigid water. That truly would be the death of her, and she didn't have enough time or light to investigate another way across. A yellow glow in the distance seemed to signal to her. She didn't want to risk finding people, but, at least, where there was a property, there would be a way around the river, so she headed in that direction and prayed it was late enough not to disturb anyone.

The shouting from behind her had diminished, thank goodness, and she slowed her pace just a little, allowing her laboured breath to subside and quieten and easing the pressure on her damaged foot.

She regained a little of her equilibrium and tried for stealth as the property came into view. It was surrounded by blessedly shielding trees and she stayed within their shadowy protection as she looked around.

As she searched the dark, she could see no evidence of outside lights, and the only illumination on this side of the house came from a frosted glass window on the upper level, which she

guessed might be the bathroom. It gave off just enough radiance to cast a little pool of light around the front of the house and to show a gate in the shadows off to the far right. That was where she needed to be heading, she decided. If she stayed within the cover of the trees, she'd remain out of sight, and that was exactly what she planned to do, until unholy temptation caught her eye.

There, on the porch, was a pair of Wellington boots. She stood there, her eyes glued to them while her legs shook with the cold, and the throbbing ache in her feet seemed to become more pronounced, the longer she considered the footwear.

She swallowed and realised tears were stinging at the back of her eyes. She had never stolen anything in her entire life, but she was so desperate and so very cold.

Could she do it?

Could she bring herself to take them?

Steal them?

Except...how much further would she get if she didn't find some kind of protection from the elements? Already, the adrenaline which had brought her this far was beginning to wane and the bite of the harsh chill was taking its toll on her body. Her extremities were numbing once again. Faster, this time, because of the sweat that slicked her body.

Was a life or death situation a reasonable excuse for theft?

She came to the eventual hard-won conclusion that, actually, it was.

As she looked all around her, once more, she psyched herself up to dart across the clearing in front of the cottage. She took deep breaths as she tried to rationalise her actions, even while tears of guilt and self-loathing prickled behind her eyes.

As she made it to the other side and pressed herself up against the shadows of the front wall, she became aware that she was trembling almost uncontrollably; however, it wasn't through cold this time, but fear. She knew she was crying still, because she

could feel the tears chilling on her cheeks after first warming them.

Giving herself a mental slap, she crept to the porch, darting out her hand to grab the boots. She was about to spin away again, when her gaze lit on a long, thick scarf draped over a peg. She stared at it for the length of a heartbeat.

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. She wept some more as her heart broke just a little at what she was about to do. But needs first, and she snagged the scarf as well before sneaking away with her ill-gotten haul and sprinting for the gateway she had spied.

"I'm sorry; I'm so sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise!"

She kept up the murmured litany under her breath as she ran away from the dimming pool of light around the perimeter and didn't stop until she had cleared the other side, taken stock of her situation, and pinpointed a new target to head for.

She ran clumsily, lumbering along with her limp, doing her best to clutch the tarpaulin around her while hitching the Wellington boots under her arm. She bundled the scarf up in front of her and desperately tried to avoid dragging it along the wet ground and getting it soaked, but she couldn't bring herself to stop until she was out of sight.

The soft wool already felt warm and somehow comforting under her hand as she headed for the horizon where the land dipped enough to be certain that whatever was beyond remained hidden from the view of the cottage she had just robbed.

When she got to the banked edge of the field, it was steeper than she had imagined. Her tired limbs were having trouble keeping her upright, and the strain of maintaining her balance on the steep slope was more than her beleaguered body could handle. Her feet slid out from beneath her and she landed on her butt. The slick tarp had her slithering down the bank and gaining momentum until all she could do was hold on for dear life, try to

stay upright, and wait until she came to a sprawled halt near the bottom of the hill.

"Well, at least that speeded things up," she groaned as she righted herself and made a grab for the boot she had dropped.

It was so damn tempting to just stay where she was. Her limbs seemed warmer now and her eyes were heavy. The thought of picking herself up and moving on again held little appeal, now the adrenaline was gone. She could just stay right here.

This side of the hill sheltered her from the worst of the wind, or did it? She wondered as a wet gust picked up the edge of the tarp and fluttered it into her face, bringing her to her senses momentarily.

She groaned out loud, that pesky survival instinct blaring a warning bell inside her head. She needed to move. The only reason she would be starting to feel warm would be the onset of hypothermia. She needed to cover up and find some shelter.

When she looked around, she spied what looked like a barn away in the distance. Could she make it that far? Or was it a house? She didn't want to risk going near another house; she still wasn't far enough away. No more than a mile, maybe a tiny bit more...or less. Who knew?

She took a resigned breath and attempted to pull on one of the boots, only to find the opening blocked by something that stopped her getting her foot in. There was next to no light to show her the problem, so she resorted to feel.

Jamming her hand inside, she pulled out some soft, wadded fabric. She peered at it through the dim gloom and realised it was a sock, and the lethargy that had overtaken her changed to excitement as she pulled it over her poor, icy foot. It was long and thick, reaching to her knees, and the warmth it imparted was instant. As she struggled to pull on the bulky Wellington before her lovely surprise got wet, she realised they were considerably too big, but that was better than too small at least. Bolstered by the small comfort, she struggled to her feet and managed to wind

the long scarf around her head and neck. Then, she hitched up the tarpaulin, and since there was no better direction to take, she set off toward the darkened shape of the building and prayed that her eyes weren't playing tricks on her.

As she got closer, she realised that she was approaching a house and not a barn and almost turned away, except...there was something unnatural about the way it sat in the landscape. As she drew close enough to see, she realised it was abandoned and partially ruined. The windows were broken, vines and brush grew in the doorway, and up the brickwork and one wall had been reduced to a large pile of rubble. She wondered if it was safe, wondered if there was any choice but to find out.

She couldn't go on much longer. It was over twenty-four hours since she had eaten the most meagre of meals, and while she was used to being half starved, she wasn't accustomed to running or even stumbling for miles with so little to sustain her. Her physical reserves had been running on empty for some time now, fuelled by adrenalin and survival instinct alone, and she recognised that the cold was affecting her thought processes, too.

As she trudged around the perimeter, she failed to find another door, and she didn't want to disturb the vegetation and make it obvious, to anyone looking, that someone had used the only entrance.

A quick glance at the downstairs windows showed wicked shards of glass from the broken panes sticking out of the rotting woodwork and sprinkled liberally on the ground around the neglected openings. That only left the side of the building that was crumbling. How safe was it? It was difficult to tell in the nearly black of night.

It looked like the rubble was covered in vegetation, too, as if it had been that way for a while, but maybe that was just her own wishful thinking. A darker rectangle in the corner of the ruined wall hinted at a doorway, and beyond that, was a chimney, close to the centre of the house.

Had she read somewhere, once upon a time, that the chimney breast was the strongest part of a house? She didn't know, really. Maybe her tired, stressed mind was just making excuses. Nevertheless, she picked her way across the debris, toward what she hoped was an opening. She was proved right, but peering through, all she could see was blackness. Did she dare test her luck any further?

She looked up and saw a hole in the roof, and maybe God was on her side, because right at that very moment, a feeble shaft of moonlight shone down between the broken rafters and allowed her enough light to see a door on the other side of a derelict but clear room.

When she hobbled further inside, she found the door of this next room was intact but ajar, and she pushed at it. It didn't want to budge, obviously swollen with damp and decay, which impeded its easy swing, but she pushed again, and it gave a little bit, screeching loudly as it scraped the quarry tiles beneath. Still, it opened far enough, at least, for her to squeeze through to the other side with her tiny frame, and little enough that it might prevent someone bigger from getting through without at least making a noise that would alert her to somebody's presence.

She waited for long minutes on the other side of the door, willing her eyes to adjust to the darkness a little more. She could make out dim shapes which she took to be furniture and, finally, took tentative steps away from the door, hugging the walls to aid her way through the room.

She could hear scratching and scrabbling nearby and knew her presence had certainly disturbed some kind of wildlife. She didn't want to consider what they might be. Instead, she shuffled her feet across the floor and detoured around what felt like a chest of drawers and then a wardrobe.

She cursed when she stubbed the toes of her already damaged foot on something which sounded metallic, but which had been too low for her fingers to connect with. She continued

on, swearing some more when she banged her knee on something else made of metal, but the ensuing squeak made her heart jump. Had that been the sound of old-fashioned bed springs?

As she felt around blindly, she stretched out her arms and leaned lower, only to jump back when her hands came into contact with something soft. She let out a hoarse cry then quietly chastised herself for being so skittish, but the darkness was almost absolute, just a hint of denser shadow on a softer shade of black—the kind of dark where you could barely see your hand, even if you held it right in front of your face. She had never been scared of the dark. It didn't hurt you, and there were many more things in life that did. She had found that out the hard way. But the unknown had her skittish, she had to admit. Things lurked in the unknown and sometimes they were evil. She had found that out the hard way, too.

She leaned down and felt fabric. When she smoothed her hands across a wide expanse, she came into contact with something firm but with a little bit of give. As she pressed down, she heard that same tell-tale sound of creaking springs. It seemed like an old-fashioned kind of bed or maybe some type of chaise longue. It appeared to have an old horse hair mattress, and there was clearly some bedding as well. It felt surprisingly dry, although almost overwhelmingly musty. She felt what seemed to be a dense, but scratchy, wool blanket. She picked it up and gave it a shake, choking on the cloud of dust that billowed up from her actions. Eyes watering, she felt around again and found what she thought was an antique style quilt. It was thick and smelled disgusting, but she shook that out, too.

She stripped the tarpaulin from around her and arranged it as well as she could, in the dark, over the small mattress. Beggars might not be able to be choosers, but better the devil you knew... well, in some cases anyway. Melody threw the blanket haphazardly over the top and sank into its lumpy, squeaky, smelly cradle. She kicked off the wellies and rearranged the scarf around her

head, knowing that's where she'd lose the most heat, but pulled one long end down her spine and back up her front. It was a stupid thing, but covering that place between her legs made her feel slightly more human, gave her back a tiny shred of dignity, despite the fact that she'd already pulled the acrid smelling quilt over the top of herself and burrowed down the best she could.

It was a long time before she got warm. The ancient, makeshift bed was uncomfortable, noisy whenever she moved, and stank of mildew and what was probably stale urine, but she didn't notice any of it. The minute she closed her eyes, she fell into a deep sleep that was, in reality, probably close to semi unconsciousness, and she stayed that way for the next fourteen hours.