



Harlequin Romance

Rude Awakening

Elizabeth Power





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**“Fleur, I can’t let
you leave here.”**

There was a threatening conclusiveness in Elliot’s words, and Fleur stared at him, fear pressing like a rock against her windpipe.

“That’s abduction,” she whispered, a pulse beating furiously at her temple. “You could get a prison sentence for that.”

“Maybe,” he grated, his breathing shallow, “but don’t imagine that Steadman’s isn’t worth it. It is.” He bent toward her, one hand on the arm of the settee, the other just above her shoulder, imprisoning her there. In a hazy panic, she noticed the full sensuality of his cruel mouth, the dangerous gleam in his eyes, and she shrank back, sensing his determination.

“You’ve no power to keep me here against my will,” she said desperately, but fear raced through her like wildfire as she realized that he could.

Elizabeth Power was once a legal secretary, but when the compulsion to write became too strong, she abandoned affidavits, wills and conveyances in favor of a literary career. Her husband, she says, is her best critic. And he's a good cook, too—often readily taking over the preparation of meals when her writing is in full flow. They live in a three-hundred-year-old English country estate cottage, surrounded by woodlands and wildlife. Who wouldn't be inspired to write?

***Rude
Awakening
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CHAPTER ONE

EVERYONE had gone home at last. From the sixth floor of Steadman International, Fleur Galaway watched the blur of stationary red lights in the darkness below her window, grimacing at the rain streaming down the outside of the pane. London's evening rush hour was already heralding its peak with the usual blare of car horns and tonight, a torrential downpour! she thought wryly, her attention suddenly caught by the lazy whine of a lift descending at the far end of the corridor.

She turned her blonde head towards the door and the warm cocoon of dark offices beyond it and listened. Nothing. Good. Now she could get the information David had asked for.

With a purposeful stride she moved across to the computer, her high-heeled shoes making no sound on the carpeted floor, long hair draped like a platinum curtain over her shoulder as she studied the slip of paper she took out of her desk.

Phoenix. At the computer her fingers sought the relevant keys for the code name necessary to retrieve the privileged information and her thoughts went back to what David had said that afternoon.

'Use absolute discretion. Wait until the others have gone,' she remembered him advising her. Well he'd meant simply Stacey and June, she reflected, glancing across at the covered typewriters and closed accounts files, but she couldn't get any more discreet than this. The whole sixth floor was as deserted as a ghost ship!

Or was it? She paused, ears straining, every nerve alert, her fingers suddenly freezing over the keys.

Someone was standing in the doorway—watching her! And quickly she looked up, her startled eyes meeting the questioning grey of the man's in the shadowy aperture.

'Working late, Fleur?'

Tall, dark, and with that unmistakable air of command, Elliot Steadman strode in wearing a curious half smile, the kind that had been raising female temperatures over the past two months from junior level to personnel, but Fleur's heart plummeted. David had particularly requested that she didn't let Elliot know what she was doing for him, but the chairman was going to find out for himself if he came any closer. It was crazy, but she felt like a criminal!

'I-I thought you were away?' she stammered. Office rumour had it that he had taken a few days off to move house, so what was he doing here? she thought, swallowing hard. Why didn't he stay where he was?

But he walked straight over to the computer, thick brows knit as he scanned the visual display unit, and something frightening leapt in his eyes as he digested the information on the sheet of paper beside it.

'Obviously,' he said tersely, answering her. He picked up the note David had dictated to her earlier and despite her sinking heart she noticed how long and well-tapered his hands were, and tanned, too, against the crisp whiteness of his shirt cuff. 'What the hell do you think you're doing with this?' The accusation in his voice cut sharply into her thoughts. His eyes were hard beneath his thick, dark eyebrows, and a muscle tightened in the strong jaw. 'This is confidential information. How the hell did you get hold of it?'

Fleur gulped, Elliot's mood rendering her speechless. David had warned her that the chairman would be angry if he found out what she was doing for him, because he'd been lax—let things slide again—she thought, exasperatedly, failing to brief himself with this information when

he was supposed to. Was that why Elliot was so annoyed? Because his top sales executive hadn't done his homework—*again*?

'I'm waiting, Fleur.' The deep voice assured her he would go on waiting—and all night—if he had to. Well, Elliot Steadman was just going to have to work it out for himself. Couldn't he simply accept that it was David who had given her the information—he must have guessed by now—without forcing her to admit the younger man's increasing inefficiency? That would be like telling tales out of school.

'You'd better start explaining yourself.'

Cagily Fleur glanced up at six feet plus of dominant masculinity. His arms were folded across his broad chest and the dark, well-cut suit he was wearing emphasised the narrowness of his waist, the leanness of his hips and the muscular strength of his thighs. 'However you got hold of that information you know you've no right being in possession of it. Now or at any time!' There was a cold, seething anger behind his words and Fleur swallowed again as their true meaning registered itself.

At any time? Suddenly she felt sick. Had David requested data from her knowing full well that she shouldn't have access to it, rather than come in here and get the information he required personally? Had his increasing laxity in the office led him into doing something that could get them both into trouble?

'I'm well aware that it's confidential,' she started, 'but . . .' What could she say? She dropped her hands into her lap, toying with the soft, white wool of her dress. What explanation could she possibly offer him without making things bad for David?

'Only four members of the company knew about that password.' Angrily, Elliot jerked his head towards the visual display. 'Apart from my father and myself. Three of those are away at the moment, which leaves Andrew

Moreton . . . and I think I know him well enough to assume that he wouldn't have leaked this information by accident or any other way . . .' He dropped down to her level, hands flat on the desk, his face so close to hers that she could smell the lemony spice of his aftershave lotion. 'And my father . . . as you very well know, *Miss Galaway*, is dead.' He spoke slowly and deliberately, every deep syllable perfectly pronounced, and Fleur touched her top lip with her tongue, unsettled by the total maleness of him—the condemnation she read in his murky grey eyes.

'So . . .' He straightened, towering and formidable beside her. 'Your ingenuity with computers and your . . . ambitions . . . obviously include dipping into company secrets!'

Blonde hair swished wildly as she swung to face him. 'That's not true!'

'Isn't it?' Elliot thrust the piece of paper he was still holding towards her. 'Then how do you explain this?'

Her throat constricting, Fleur slumped back on her chair. David. He'd given her that password. Told her, when he'd asked for her discretion, that only top level management and executives knew anything about it. Well, he *was* a top level executive, she thought, baffled. But Elliot hadn't mentioned his name just now. So what was going on? And what was so important about Phoenix anyway?

'I think you'd better come with me.'

The deep, male voice intruded unnervingly upon her thoughts and she stared up at him incredulously, her full lips parted in disbelief.

'What?' she whispered.

'I said you'd better come with me,' he repeated, inexorably. And suddenly the seriousness of her predicament struck her.

Elliot was as good as accusing her of being an

industrial spy! And there was no way that she could prove that she wasn't unless she told him that David was responsible for giving her that information. And she couldn't do that. Not yet. Not until she had spoken to him. He was her cousin—no, more than that, she thought, remembering the bond that had once existed between them when they had been as close as brother and sister. He could never be mixed up in anything underhand . . . could he? Colour drained out of her fine-boned cheeks, and she felt her palms growing hot and sweaty. Surely he wouldn't involve her in anything wrong. Not David. Please not David! There had to be some mistake.

'Oh I hope there's been some mistake...' She dropped her face into her hand, her elbow supported by the desk. Her head was beginning to swim in a sickening maelstrom of confusion. 'I-I can't think . . .'

Strong, hard fingers were taking control, gripping her arm, dragging her up from her chair.

'Get your coat,' Elliot ordered roughly, switching off the computer and thrusting her in front of him away from the machine. 'You'll be dealt with no more leniently than you deserve.'

Amber-flecked brown eyes appealed to him with a mixture of torture, anger and bewilderment.

'Where are you taking me?' He couldn't just bundle her off like this. Or perhaps he thought he could.

With a cool courtesy he helped her on with her coat and she shuddered from his threatening nearness as his hands came to rest firmly on her shoulders.

'I think I'm the one entitled to the answers, don't you?'

Fleur spun round, weakening from the dominance of his height. Even at five feet seven, with three inch heels, she barely reached that strong, thrusting jaw.

'Look . . . I know how it looks,' she admitted, her voice shaking. 'But it isn't at all like it seems.' If only she could

have a few minutes alone to use the phone. Talk to her cousin. There had to be a simple explanation to all this. 'I wasn't trying to steal any of the firm's secrets for money or ambition . . . or whatever you're thinking. I obtained that password in complete innocence . . .'

'And you expect me to believe that?' A hard mouth twisted in cruel disdain. Shivering, Fleur turned up the collar of her trench coat, clasping it tightly in a self-protective gesture as she was ushered out of the office and along the quiet corridor. Of course he didn't believe it! She looked as guilty as sin in his eyes, so much so that she was beginning to feel as if she really had committed a crime!

'It's the truth,' she stressed, with all the conviction of her innocence as they stepped into the waiting lift.

Elliot didn't answer. His expression was implacable as he pressed the button for the ground floor, and from beneath her eyelashes Fleur studied him discreetly.

Thirty-five, that's all he was. Only twelve years older than she was, yet seeming to possess a lifetime's seniority. Dark-haired, strong-featured and striking, that cool exterior of his masked a shrewd brain she'd have given anything rather than to have tangled with. It had given him control of a vast electronics empire, she reflected, shuddering from the sure knowledge that even if Frank Steadman hadn't died two months ago and left everything to his son, Elliot Steadman would have made it to the top solely on the merits of his own forcefulness and determination. There was a hard maturity about him, she thought, her gaze moving unwittingly over his profile, a ruthlessness in the thrust of that jaw, in the rugged cheek embellished by that flat, dark mole, in the cruel, sensual line of his mouth . . .

She started, aware that he was looking at her with cold contempt, but something else too, which made her startingly conscious of a dark and brooding sensuality.

She felt a ridiculous burning in her cheeks—a strange uneasiness at being in such a confined space with him—and agitatedly she tore her gaze away to stare at the lighting panel as the button for the ground floor lit up.

‘Good night, sir.’

An obsequious night-security man touched his cap as they passed through the foyer of the prestigious glass building, his subsequent ‘Night, miss,’ only forthcoming, Fleur guessed, because she was with the most illustrious member of the firm. Normally the man couldn’t be bothered to speak to her.

‘Where are you taking me?’ It was a tremulous demand as they stepped through the revolving doors where, beyond the shelter of the portico, the rain was still coming down in torrents. ‘I have a right to know.’

‘Have you?’ There was a sceptical lift to the thick eyebrow, a harsh denial in his voice, before he said grimly, ‘Somewhere where you can provide me with some answers. Perhaps a strong drink will loosen your tongue.’

Fleur’s first thought was to run. She could get away from him now! Get to a telephone! But he had caught her arm and she was forced to go with him, running like mad through the torrential autumn rain.

Under the lights of the multi-storey car park she could see the heavy raindrops gleaming darkly on Elliot’s jacket, one or two rivulets running down his cheek from his thick, black hair. Her own was soaked already, and a droplet cascaded off and ran down her neck inside her coat, making her shiver. She felt wretched and cold.

‘Get in.’

Seeing the determination in his face, Fleur complied without argument, and settled herself into the passenger side of the black Jaguar XJS. So he was going to make her talk by pouring alcohol down her was he? she thought, as he reversed out of the space marked

'Chairman'. Well if she was guilty of anything perhaps that would work. But she wasn't. And she knew a sudden, overwhelming feeling of panic. Whatever could she say to him that wouldn't blatantly implicate David? She knew he couldn't be guilty of doing anything against the firm. One of the others must have authorised him to get that information legitimately. If only she could get to a phone!

'What were you possibly hoping to gain tonight, Fleur?' They were on the road, the luxurious, powerful car weaving its way through the late traffic, its brilliant lights reflecting on the wet tarmac, and in its dark interior Elliot's voice had taken on a more persuasive note—more intimate—evident from the way he had breathed her name. Perhaps he hoped a more caressing approach might bring him results, she thought, more affected than she cared to admit by the subtle sensuality behind it. 'Were you planning to sell the information to Stover's . . . give them the benefit of Steadman's hard work and knowhow for a nice, fat, personal profit?'

She glanced at him, puzzled. What did he mean? Stover Electronics *was* Steadman's biggest competitor, but what connection did it have with all this? 'I don't know what you're talking about,' she answered, guilelessly.

'Don't you?' Elliot's words came back like gunshot, all persuasion gone. He was looking at her with eyes so steely cold they frightened her. 'A new component. A contract worth millions which Stover's would dearly love to get their hands on. I think you know what I'm talking about, Fleur.' His eyes were back on the road, needing all the concentration he could give on the wet surface. 'Just how much were they offering you for such privileged information?'

Fleur stared across the dark space between them. So that was what it was all about. A new, secret piece of

technology. A big contract. Big money. And he thought she was responsible for trying to sell the deal to the firm's biggest rival! It would have been laughable had his accusation not been such a deadly serious fact.

'They haven't offered me anything,' she rejoined quickly, 'because I'm not guilty of a thing.'

'No?' His tone strongly implied that he still didn't believe her. The traffic was flowing more freely now and Elliot pressed his foot harder to the floor. 'May I point out,' he said, cuttingly, 'that the law sees only a thin line between what is considered ethically wrong and that which is criminal in industrial duplicity. The authorities might well take the dimmer view in the light of the vast sums of money your . . . ambitions . . . are likely to cost me. Perhaps you'd be more willing to co-operate with them.'

Fleur glanced up at him quickly, his words suddenly sinking in. She knew, she hadn't done anything wrong. But what about David? She turned her anxious gaze towards the windscreen, to the wiperblades coping at dual speed with the heavy rain. Was he guilty of something that could eventually lead him to prison? Her throat felt terribly dry, and she licked her lips, longing for a drink of water. She had to be crazy thinking like this. Of course he hadn't done anything wrong. There had to be a perfectly rational explanation for this gross misunderstanding, as she'd find out if only she could find some way to contact him.

'Obviously you hadn't considered the consequences of being caught.' Elliot's voice filtered through her thoughts and she blinked hard, trying to shake herself out of her daze. In a minute she'd wake up and find that this was all some crazy dream.

'Snap out of it!' His voice came again, stern and authoritative, jerking her back to sensibility. 'I've no inclination to treat you for shock.'

'I'm all right,' she gulped, that statement being anything but true. Nervously, she began toying with her wristwatch. 'Are you taking me to the police?'

'Not yet.' Someone with a coat over his head darted out in front of them, causing Elliot to brake hard, and he cursed under his breath. 'You owe your explanations and apologies to me first and by Heaven I intend to have them.'

His determination was unnerving and Fleur shivered. She had guessed when she had first laid eyes on him only two months before that he could be a hard man to cross; that behind that suave veneer was a man who could build empires or break people with a whiplash of merciless power. Well, now the total potency of his anger was directed against her, and if he wanted explanations she knew without a measure of doubt that he would get them. Just how he might go about it was beginning to scare her silly and suddenly, angry with David for putting her into this predicament, breathlessly she burst out, 'I want to make a phone call.'

'I'll bet you do.' There was cruel mockery in Elliot's tone, but he didn't stop the car. Instead he dropped his foot hard on the accelerator to take the open stretch of dual-carriageway, saying acridly, 'Hoping to find solace in your charming confederate's arms?'

What on earth did he mean by that? Fleur bit down hard on her lower lip until it hurt. How had she ever got into this mess?

'I believe you took a rather exotic holiday back in the summer?' Elliot surprised her by remarking suddenly. 'Something rather extravagant on a computer operator's pay, wouldn't you agree?' He sent her a scathing look. 'Two weeks in Miami, wasn't it?'

Hot colour stole across Fleur's cheeks. That holiday had been the outcome of years of saving—an intended 'thank you' gift to her aunt for bringing her up single-

handed after Fleur's own parents had been killed. And that 'thank you' had been expressed not a day too soon because Agnes Markham had died shortly afterwards. Remembering brought scalding tears to Fleur's eyes. But why should she even try explaining that to Elliot when he had already made up his mind that she was a crook?

'So?' she couldn't help retorting heatedly.

'Yes . . . so. And at my bloody expense!'

'That's not true!' she threw back, swallowing emotion. 'I've never taken anything from you . . . or your precious company!'

'It is a year you've been with us, isn't it?' he asked, surprisingly changing the subject again. She didn't answer. He already knew. And with hurt rebellion in her eyes she watched him swing the powerful car off the dual-carriageway towards the more affluent suburbs. 'Whoever interviewed you was obviously too blinded by that sensuous body of yours to see the character behind the fancy casing. Had I been around to interview you you wouldn't have even made the short list.'

Fresh anger coursed along her veins, mingling with confusion and the pain of injustice. 'Had you been around to interview me I wouldn't even have considered the post!' she retaliated, feeling the pinch of his words, but more the unsettling sensation that those condemning grey eyes had just undressed her with one cursory glance. Absurdly she felt her colour rise and turned to stare out at the rain streaming down the window, trying to regain her equilibrium.

She was being utterly stupid, she thought. Flinging insults at the Chairman of the Board was no way to keep her job. But did she want her job after tonight? More to the point, would the Board even consider her worthy of her position of trust if she were found to have played a part, however innocently, in someone else's attempt to