



Awakened by Her Desert Captor (Harlequin Presents)

By Abby Green

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Now Arkim wants revenge on the sinful seductress who cost him the respectable reputation he needs.

Luring Sylvie to his luxurious palace in the desert, he'll get her out of his system once and for all. But with her sass and sequins stripped away, Sylvie is surprisingly vulnerable—and there's one last secret Arkim's not prepared for...her innocence!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Abby Green spent her teens reading Mills & Boon romances. She then spent many years working in the Film and TV industry as an Assistant Director. One day while standing outside an actor's trailer in the rain, she thought: *there has to be more than this*. So she sent off a partial to Harlequin Mills & Boon. After many rewrites, they accepted her first book and an author was born. She lives in Dublin, Ireland and you can find out more here: www.abby-green.com

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Six months previously...

Sylvie Devereux steeled herself for what was undoubtedly to be another bruising encounter with her father and stepmother. She reminded herself as she walked up the stately drive that she was only making an appearance for her half-sister's sake. The one person in the world she would do anything for.

Lights spilled from the enormous Richmond house, and soft classic jazz came from the live band in the back garden, where a marquee was just visible. Grant Lewis's midsummer party was an annual fixture on the London social scene, presided over each year by his smiling piranha of a wife, Catherine Lewis—Sylvie's stepmother and mother to her younger half-sister, Sophie.

A shape appeared at the front door and an excited squeal presaged a blur of blonde as Sophie Lewis launched herself at her older sister. Sylvie dropped her bag and clung on, struggling to remain upright, huffing a chuckle into her sister's soft, silky hair.

'I guess that means you're pleased to see me, Soph?'

Sophie, younger by six years, pulled back with a grimace on her pretty face. 'You have *no* idea. Mother is even worse than usual—literally throwing me into the arms of every eligible man—and Father is holed up in his study with some sheikh dude who is probably the grimmest guy I've ever seen, but also the most gorgeous—pity it's wasted on—'

"There you are, Sophie—"

The voice broke off as Sylvie's stepmother realised who her sister's companion was. They were almost at the front door now, and the lights backlit Catherine Lewis's slender Chanel-clad figure and blonde hair, coiffed to within an inch of its life.

Her mouth tightened with distaste. 'Oh, it's you. We didn't think you'd make it.'

You mean you'd hoped I wouldn't make it, Sylvie desisted from saying. She forced a bright smile and pushed down the hurt that had no place here any more. She should be over this by now, at the grand age of twenty-eight. 'Delighted as ever to see you, Catherine.'

Her sister squeezed her arm in silent support. Catherine stepped back minutely, clearly reluctant to admit Sylvie into her own family home. 'Your father is having a meeting with a guest. He should be free shortly.'

Then her stepmother frowned under the bright lights, taking in what Sylvie was wearing. Sylvie felt a fleeting sense of satisfaction at the expected wave of disapproval. But then she also felt incredibly weary...tired of this constant battle she fought.

'You're welcome to change in Sophie's room if you wish. Clearly you've come straight from one of your...er...shows in Paris.'

She had actually. A matinée show. But she'd left work dressed in jeans and a perfectly respectable T-shirt. She'd changed on the train on the way. And suddenly her weariness fled.

She stuck a hand on her hip and cocked it out. 'It was a gift from a fan,' she purred. 'I know how much you like your guests to dress up.'

The dress really belonged to her flatmate, the far more glamorous Giselle, who was a couple of bra sizes smaller than her. Sylvie had borrowed it, knowing full well the effect it would have. She knew it was childish to feel this urge to shock constantly, but right now it was worth it.

Just then there was movement nearby, and Sylvie followed her stepmother's look to see her father standing outside his office, which was just off the main entrance hall. She barely registered him, though. He was with a man—a tall, very broad, very dark man. The most arresting-looking man she'd ever seen. His face was all sculpted lean lines, not a hint of softness anywhere. Dark slashing brows. Grim indeed, if this was who Sophie had been talking about.

Power and charisma was a tangible force around him. And a very sexual magnetism. He was dressed in a light grey three-piece suit. Dark tie. Pristine. The white of his shirt made the darkness of his skin stand out even more. His hair was inky black, and short. His eyes were equally dark, and totally unreadable. She shivered slightly.

The two men were looking at her, and Sylvie didn't even have to see her father's face to know what his expression would be: a mix of old grief, disappointment and wariness.

'Ah, Sylvie, glad you could make it.'

She finally managed to drag her mesmerised gaze from the stranger to look at her father. She forced a bright smile and moved forward. 'Father—good to see you.'

His welcome was only slightly warmer than her stepmother's. A dry kiss on her cheek, avoiding her eyes. Old wounds smarted again, but Sylvie pushed them all down to erect the *don't care* façade she'd honed over years.

She looked up at the man and fluttered her eyelashes, flirting shamelessly. 'And who do we have *here!*'

With evident reluctance, Grant Lewis said, 'I'd like you to meet Arkim Al-Sahid. We're discussing a mutual business venture.'

The name rang a dim bell, but Sylvie couldn't focus on how she knew it. She put out her hand. 'Pleasure, I'm sure. But don't you find discussing business at a party so *dull?*'

She could almost feel the snap of her stepmother's censure from behind her, and heard something that

sounded like a strangled snort from her sister. The man's expression had a faint sneer of disapproval now, and suddenly something deep inside Sylvie erupted to life.

It goaded her into moving even closer to the man, when every instinct urged her to turn and run fast. Her hand was still held out and his nostrils flared as he finally deigned to acknowledge her. His much bigger hand swallowed hers, and she was surprised to feel that his skin was slightly calloused as long fingers wrapped around hers.

Everything suddenly became muffled. As if a membrane had been dropped around the two of them. A pulse throbbed violently between her legs and a series of out-of-control reactions gripped her so fast she couldn't make sense of them. Heat, and a weakness in her lower belly and limbs. A melting sensation. An urge to move even closer and wind her arms around his neck, press herself against him, along with that urge to run, which was even stronger now.

Then he broke the connection with an abrupt move, extricating his hand from hers. Sylvie almost stumbled backwards, confused by what had happened. Not liking it at all.

'Pleasure, indeed.'

The man's voice was deep, with a slight American accent, and his tone said that it was anything but a pleasure. The sensual lines of his mouth were flat. That dark gaze glanced over her, dismissing her.

Immediately Sylvie felt cheaper than she'd ever felt in her life. She was very aware of how short her gold dress was—skimming the tops of her thighs. Her light jacket didn't provide much coverage. She was too voluptuous for the dress, and she felt every exposed inch of it now. She was also aware of the fall of her unruly hair, its natural red hue effortlessly loud and attention-seeking.

She made a living from wearing not much at all. And she'd grown a thick skin to hide her innate shyness. Yet right now this man's dismissal had blasted away that carefully built-up wall. Within mere seconds of meeting him—a total stranger.

Aghast to note that she was feeling a sense of rejection, when she'd developed an inbuilt defence mechanism against ever experiencing it again, Sylvie backed away.

Relief surged through her when her sister appeared, slid an arm through their father's and said with forced brightness, 'Come on, Daddy, your guests will be wondering where you are.'

She watched as her father, stepmother and sister walked off—along with the disturbing stranger who sent her barely a glance of acknowledgement.

On legs that felt absurdly shaky Sylvie finally followed the group outside and determined to stay out of that man's dangerous orbit, sticking close to Sophie and her group of friends.

A few hours later, though, she found herself craving a moment's peace—away from people getting progressively drunker, and away from the censorious gaze of her stepmother and the tension emanating from her father.

She found a quiet spot near the gazebo, where a river ran at the end of the garden. After sitting down on the grass and taking off her shoes she put her feet in the cool rushing water and breathed out a sigh.

It was only after she'd tipped her head back and had been contemplating the full moon, low in the sky, for a few seconds that she felt a nerve-tingling awareness that she wasn't alone.

She looked around just as a tall, dark shape moved in the shadows of a nearby tree. Stifling a scream, Sylvie sat up straight, heart pounding, and asked, 'Who's there?'

The shadow detached itself, revealing the other reason for her need to escape: so she could find an opportunity to dwell on why she'd had such a confusing and forcible reaction to the enigmatic stranger.

'You know exactly who's here,' came the arrogant response.

Sylvie could make out the glitter of those dark eyes. Feeling seriously at a disadvantage, sitting down, she stood again and shoved her feet back into her shoes, her heels sinking into the soft earth, making her wobble.

'How much have you had to drink?' He sounded disgusted.

Anger at the unjust question had Sylvie putting her hands on her hips. 'A magnum of champagne—is that what you expect to hear?'

She'd actually had nothing to drink, because she was still on antibiotics to clear up a nagging out-of-season chest infection. Not that she was about to furnish *him* with that little domestic detail.

'For your information,' she said, 'I came here because I believed I'd be alone. So I'll leave you to your arrogant assumptions and get out of your way.'

Sylvie started to stalk off, only noticing then how close they were—close enough for Arkim Al-Sahid to reach out and touch her. Which was exactly what he did when her heel got caught in the soft earth again and she pitched forward into thin air with a cry of surprise.

He caught her arm in such a firm grip that she went totally off balance and was swung around directly into his chest, landing against him with a soft *oof*. Her first impression was of how hard he was—like a concrete block.

And how tall.

Sylvie forgot why she'd been leaving. 'Tell me,' she asked, more breathily than she would have liked, 'do you hate everyone on sight, or is it just me?'

She could make out the sensual line of his mouth, twisting in the moonlight.

'I know you. I've seen you... Plastered all over Paris on those posters. For months.'

Sylvie frowned. 'That was a year ago—when the new show opened.' *And that wasn't really me.* She'd been chosen for the photo shoot as she was more voluptuous than the other girls...but in truth she was the one who bared the least of all of them.

She knew she should pull back from this man, but she seemed to be unable to drum up the necessary motor skills to do so—and why wasn't he pushing her away? He was obviously one of those puritans who disapproved of women taking their clothes off in the name of entertainment.

His silent condemnation angered her even more.

She arched a brow. 'So that's it? Seeing me in the flesh has only confirmed your worst suspicions?'

She saw how his gaze dropped down between them, to where she could feel her breasts pressed against him. Her skin grew hot all over.

His voice sounded husky. 'Admittedly, there is a lot of flesh to see.' His gaze rose again and bored into hers. 'But then I guess not half as much as is usually on show.'

That ripped away the illusion of any cocoon. Sylvie tugged herself free of his grip and pushed against him to get away. She was too angry, though, not to give him a piece of her mind before she left.

'People like you make me sick. You judge and condemn and you've no idea what you're talking about.'

She took a step back towards him and stuck a finger in his chest, hating how aware she was of his innate masculinity.

'I'll have you know that the L'Amour revue is one of the most upmarket cabaret acts in the world. We are world-class trained dancers. It's not some seedy strip joint.'

His tone was dry. 'Yet you *do* take off your clothes?'

'Well...' The truth was that Sylvie's act didn't actually require her to strip completely. Her breasts were slightly too large, and Pierre preferred the flatter-chested girls to do the full nudity. It provided a better aesthetic, as far as he was concerned.

Arkim Al-Sahid emitted a sound of disgust. Sylvie wasn't sure if it was directed at her or himself.

And then he said, 'I couldn't care less if you stripped naked and hung upside down on a trapeze in your show. This conversation is over.'

Sylvie refrained from pointing out that that was actually Giselle's act, assuming he wouldn't appreciate it.

He'd turned and was stalking away before she could say anything more anyway, and Sylvie bubbled with futile indignation and hurt pride. And something else—something deeper. A need to not have him judge her so out of hand when his opinion shouldn't matter.

She blurted out the words before she could stop herself—an irritating side effect of her red hair: her temper. She hated being a cliché, but sometimes she couldn't help it.

He halted in his tracks, his broad frame silhouetted by the lights of the party and the house in the distance.

Slowly he turned around, incredulity visible on his face.

For a moment Sylvie had to choke back a semi-hysterical giggle, but then he said in an arctic tone, '*What* did you say?' and any urge to giggle died.

She refused to let herself be intimidated and drew back her shoulders. 'I believe I said that you are an

arrogant, uptight prat.'

Arkim Al-Sahid prowled back towards her. Deep in the garden as they were, he was like a jungle cat, in spite of his still pristine three-piece suit. All predatory and menacing. There was a thrill in her blood that was extremely inappropriate as she found herself backing away... Until her back slammed into something solid. The gazebo.

He loomed over her now...larger than life. Larger than anyone she'd ever known. He caged her in with his hands either side of her head. Suddenly her heart was racing, her skin prickling with anticipation. His scent was exotic and musky. Full of dark promise and danger and wickedness.

'Are you going to apologise?'

Sylvie shook her head. 'No.'

For a long second he said nothing, and then, almost contemplatively, 'You're right, you know...'

Her breath stopped... Was he *apologising*? 'I am?'

He nodded slowly, and as he did so he lifted a hand and trailed one finger down over Sylvie's cheek and jaw to where the bare skin of her shoulder met her dress.

She was breathing so hard now she felt as if she might hyperventilate. Her skin was on fire where he touched her. *She* was on fire. No man had ever had this effect on her. It was overwhelming, and she was helpless to rationalise it.

'Yes,' he said in a low voice. 'I'm very *uptight*. All over. Maybe you could help me with that?'

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