

When Christakos Meets His Match (Blood Brothers)

By Abby Green

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Let the games begin!

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Sidonie is meant to be sorting out her life, not starting an affair with a Greek tycoon! But Alexio is the ultimate distraction…until he learns of her strained finances and, to her horror, accuses her of wanting more than just his body! But Sidonie's innocence masks a backbone of steel, and she won't take his accusation lying down….

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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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''Cara…do you have to leave so soon?'

The voice oozed sultry sex appeal. Alexio stalled for a second in the act of buttoning up his shirt-not because he was tempted to stay but because, if anything, he felt even more eager to leave.

He schooled his features and turned to face the woman in the bed. She was all honeyed limbs and artfully tumbled glossy brown hair. Huge dark eyes, a pouting mouth and the absence of a sheet were doing little to help Alexio forget why he'd chosen to take her to his hotel suite in Milan after his brother Rafaele's wedding reception last night.

She was stunning. Perfect.

Even so, he felt no resurgence of desire. And Alexio didn't like to acknowledge the fact that the sex had been wholly underwhelming. On the surface it had been fine; but on some deeper level it had left him cold. He switched on the charm he was famed for, though, and smiled.

'Sorry, *bellissima, I* have to fly to Paris this morning for work.'

The woman, whose name he all of a sudden wasn't entirely sure of-Carmela?-leant back and stretched seductively, displaying her perfectly cosmetically enhanced naked breasts to their best advantage, and pouted even more. 'You have to leave *right now?''*

Alexio kept his smile in place and when he'd finished dressing bent down and pressed a light kiss to her mouth, escaping before she could twine her arms around his neck. Claustrophobia was rising within him.

'We had fun, cara…I'll call you.'

Now the seductive pout was gone, and the woman's real nature shone through as her eyes turned hard. She knew when she was being blown off and clearly did not like it when the man in question was as sought-after as Alexio Christakos.

She stood up from the bed naked and flounced off to the bathroom, issuing a stream of Italian petulance. Alexio winced slightly but let out a sigh of relief as soon as she'd disappeared behind a slamming door.

He shook his head as he made his way out of the suite and towards the lobby of the plush hotel in the private lift reserved for VIP guests. *Women.* He loved them, but he loved them at a distance. In his bed when it suited him and then out of it for as long as he cared to indulge them-which invariably wasn't for long.

After years of witnessing his mother's cold behaviour towards his father, who had remained in slavish thrall to her beauty and eternal elusiveness, Alexio had developed a very keen sense of self-protection around women. He could handle cold and aloof because he was used to that, and he preferred it.

His father, thwarted by his emotionally unavailable wife, had turned to his son, making him the centre of his world. It had been too much. From an early age Alexio had chafed against the claustrophobia of his father's over-attention. And now when anyone-especially a woman-became even remotely over-emotional, or expected too much, he shut down inside.

Brief encounters were his forte. Witnessing his half-brother's wedding the day before had inevitably brought up questions of his own destiny, but Alexio, at the age of thirty, felt no compelling need to settle down yet.

He did envisage a wife and family at some stage…far in the future. When the time came his wife would be perfect. Beautiful, accommodating. Undemanding of Alexio's emotions. Above all, Alexio would not fall into the same trap as his father: tortured for life because he'd coveted a woman who didn't covet him. He'd been disabused at an early age of the notion that love might be involved.

He thought of his older brother turning up at his mother's funeral and all the accompanying unwelcome emotions he'd felt that day: shock, anger, hurt, betrayal.

Used to blocking out emotions, Alexio had relegated the incident to the back of his mind. He hadn't sought Cesar da Silva out, hadn't mentioned it again to Rafaele-even though he knew Rafaele had invited their half-brother to his wedding. Predictably enough, after that first and last terse meeting, he hadn't turned up.

Emotions were messy, unpredictable. They tripped you up. Look at Rafaele! His life had just been turned upside down by a woman who had kept his son from him for four years. And yet two months after meeting her again he was getting married, looking foolishly in love and blithely forgetting the lessons his own father had taught him about the fickle nature of women.

As far as Alexio was concerned-even if Rafaele appeared to be happily embarking on wedded bliss, and no matter how cute his three-and-a-half-year-old nephew was-his brother had been played for a fool by his new wife. Why *wouldn't* she now want to marry Rafaele Falcone, *wunderkind* of the worldwide automobile industry, with an estimated wealth running into the billions? Especially if she had a son to support?

No, Alexio was steering well clear of similar scenarios and he would never allow himself to be caught as his brother had been. He would never forgive a woman who kept a child from him. Still, a sliver of unease went down his spine. His brother, whom he'd considered to share a similar philosophy, had managed to get caught.

Alexio's mouth firmed and he pushed such rogue notions down deep. He put on a pair of shades as his driver brought the car around to the front entrance and was oblivious to the double-take stares of a group of women as they walked into the hotel.

As soon as the car pulled away Alexio was already focusing on the next thing on his agenda, the introspection his brother's wedding had precipitated along with his recent unsatisfactory bed partner already relegated to the back of his mind.

Sidonie Fitzgerald buckled her seatbelt on the plane and took a deep breath. But she was unable to shift the ball of tension sitting in her belly. For once her habitual fear of flying was being eclipsed by something else, and Sidonie couldn't even really enjoy that fact.

All she could see in her mind's eye was her beloved Tante Josephine's round, eternally childish and worried face and hear her quavering voice: *'Sidonie, what does it mean? Will they take my home from me? All these bills…where did they come from?'*

Sidonie's aunt was fifty-four and had spent a lifetime locked in a world of innocence. She'd been deprived of oxygen as a baby and as a result had been mildly braindamaged. She'd always functioned at a slightly lesser and slower level than everyone around her, but had managed to get through school and find a job. She still worked in the grocer's shop around the corner from where she'd lived for years, giving her precious independence.

Sidonie pursed her lips. She had loved her self-absorbed and endlessly vain mother, who had passed away only a couple of months before, but how could her mother have done this to her sweet and innocent younger sister?

The never forgotten sting of shame reminded Sidonie all too uncomfortably of *exactly* how her mother could have done such a thing-as if she could ever really forget. Ruthlessly she quashed it.

When Sidonie's father had died a few years before, their comfortable lives had crashed around their ears, leaving them with nothing. Sidonie had been forced to leave her university degree before the start of her final year in order to find work and save money to go back.

Moving to Paris to live with Tante Josephine had been her mother Cecile's only option to avoid becoming homeless or-even worse-having to find *work.* Cecile had not been happy. She'd been used to a life of comfort, relative luxury and security, courtesy of her hard-working husband who had wanted nothing more than to make his wife happy.

It would appear now, though, as if Sidonie's mother's selfish ways had risen to the fore again. She'd encouraged her sister to take out a mortgage on the apartment that had been bought and paid for by her husband because he'd cared for his vulnerable sister-in-law's welfare. Cecile had used this fact as leverage to persuade Tante Josephine to agree to the remortgage. She'd then used that money, and credit cards in both their names, to spend a small fortune. Tante Josephine now found herself liable for the astronomical bills as the remaining living account-holder.

Sidonie had to figure out the best way forward to help her aunt-she had no intention of leaving her to fend for herself. The start of the process had been taking on the burden of the debts into her own name. She hadn't thought twice about doing it-ever since her childhood innocence had been ripped away Sidonie had developed a wellingrained instinct to cover up for her mother-even now, when she was gone.

Sidonie was facing the prospect of moving to Paris to help her aunt get out of this crisis. She staved off the sense of panic. She was young and healthy. Surely she could get work? Even if it was menial?

In a sick way events had conspired to help her-she'd lost her waitressing job in Dublin just before she'd left for Paris to meet with a solicitor to discuss her aunt's situation. Her restaurant boss had explained miserably that they had gone into liquidation, like so many others. Sidonie was going back to Dublin now-just to tie up loose ends and collect the deposit owed to her on her flat when she moved out.

Her hands clenched into fists at the thought of how her mother had only ever thought about herself, oblivious to the repercussions of her-

'Here is your seat, sir.'

'Thank you.'

Sidonie's thoughts scattered as she heard the exchange above her head, and she looked up and saw a man. She blinked. And blinked again. He was very tall and broad. Slim hips at her eye level. He was taking off an overcoat and folding it up to place it in the overheard locker, revealing a lean, muscular build under a fine silk shirt and jacket. Sidonie was vaguely aware of the way the air hostess was hovering attentively.

The man said in English, with a seductive foreign accent, 'I've got it, thank you.'

The air hostess looked comically deflated and turned away. The man was now taking off his suit jacket, and Sidonie realised she was staring-no better than the gaping air hostess. Quickly she averted her head and looked out of the window, seeing nothing of the pewter-grey Parisian spring skies and the fluorescent-jacket-clad ground staff preparing the plane for take-off.

His image was burned onto her brain. It didn't help when she felt him take the seat beside her and all the air around them seemed to disappear. And it *really* didn't help when his scent teased her nostrils; musky and masculine.

He was quite simply the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen in her life. Dark olive complexion, high cheekbones, strong jaw. Short dark brown hair. Firmly sculpted masculine mouth. He should have been pretty. But Sidonie's impression was not of *pretty.* It was of hard and uncompromising sexuality. *Heat.* The last kind of person she'd have expected to sit in an economy seat beside her.

And then he spoke. 'Excuse me.'

His voice was so deep that she felt it reverberate in the pit of her belly. She swallowed and told herself she was being ridiculous-he couldn't possibly be *that* gorgeous. She turned her head and her heart stopped. His face was inches away. He was…that gorgeous. And more. He looked vaguely familiar and she wondered if he was a famous male model. Or a French movie star?

Something funny was happening to Sidonie's brain and body. They didn't seem to be connected any more. She felt a hysterical giggle rise up and had to stifle it. She didn't giggle. What was wrong with her?

One dark brow moved upwards over the most startling pair of green eyes she'd ever seen. Gold and green. Like a lion. She had green eyes too, but they were more blue than green.

'I think you're sitting on my seatbelt?'

It took a few seconds for the words to compute, and when they did Sidonie jumped up as if scalded, hands flapping. 'I'm so sorry… Excuse me… Just let me… It must be here somewhere.'

Sounding irritated, the man said, 'Stay still and I'll get it.'

Sidonie closed her eyes in mortification, her hands gripping the seat-back in front of her, and she hovered, contorted in the small space, as the man coolly retrieved his seatbelt and buckled it.

Sidonie sat down again and attended to her own belt. Feeling breathless, and avoiding looking at him again,

she said, 'I'm sorry. I-'

He cut her off. 'It's fine, don't worry about it.'

A flare of something hot lanced Sidonie's belly. Did he *have* to sound so curt? And why was she suddenly so aware of the fact that her hair was scraped up into a messy bun, that she had no make-up on, that she was wearing jeans that were so worn there was a frayed hole at her knee and an equally worn university sweatshirt. And her glasses. If Central Casting had been looking for 'messy grunge student type' she would have been hired on the spot.

She was disgusted at herself for letting a man-albeit a man as gorgeous as this one-make her feel so self-conscious. She forced herself to take a deep breath and looked resolutely forward. Out of the corner of her eye, though, she was aware of big, strong-looking hands opening up a tablet computer. Her belly clenched.

The seconds stretched to minutes and she heard him sigh volubly when the plane still wasn't moving. His arm nearest to her reached up to push something, and she realised it must have been the call button when the stewardess arrived with indecent haste.

'Yes, sir?'

Sidonie heard the irritation in his voice. 'Is there a reason why we're not moving yet?'

She looked over and saw only his strong profile and jaw, and even though she couldn't see it she could imagine the kind of expression he'd be using: imperious. She glanced at the woman and felt sorry for her because she looked so embarrassed.

'I'm not sure, sir. I'll check right away.' She rushed off again.

Sidonie let out a faint snort of derision. Even the stewardess was treating him as if he was some sort of overlord.

He looked at her then. 'I'm sorry… Did you say something?'

Sidonie tried not to be affected by his overwhelming presence. She shrugged minutely. 'I'm sure we're just waiting in line to take our slot on the runway.'

He turned to face her more fully and Sidonie cursed herself. The last thing she needed was his undivided attention on her.

'Oh, really? And what if I have an important meeting to attend in London?'

Something hot flashed into Sidonie's veins and she told herself it was anger at his insufferable arrogance. She crossed her arms in an unconsciously defensive move and said in a low voice, 'Well, in case it's escaped your attention, there are approximately two hundred people on this plane. I'm sure more than one other person has a meeting to make, and I don't see them complaining.'

His eyes flashed and momentarily stopped her breath. They were so unusual and stark against his dark skin. He was like a specimen from some exotic planet.

'There's two hundred and ten, actually, and I don't doubt that there are many others who have important appointments lined up-which makes my question even more relevant.'

Sidonie barely registered the fact that he knew exactly how many were on board and bristled at the way his eyes had done that quick sweep up and down her body, clearly deducing that she *wasn't* on her way to an important meeting.

'For your information,' she said frigidly, 'I have a connecting flight to Dublin from London and I'll be very inconvenienced if we're late. But that's just life, isn't it?'

He leant back a little and looked at her. 'I wondered where your accent was from. It's intriguing.'

Sidonie wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not, so she clamped her mouth shut. Just then someone dressed in uniform with a cap came alongside their seats and coughed slightly to get the man's attention.

Users Review

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