

Chapter One

He had the perfect wife.

Aetos Zenos smiled into the mirror as he straightened his tie. Today was going to be one of the best days of his life and he had his wife to thank for it. Without her presence in his life, old man Tucker would never have agreed to the deal he'd proposed. A deal worth millions.

Nai. His wife deserved a hell of a lot of credit.

He turned around to his walk-in closet and chose the steel-blue Armani jacket that matched his pants. Slipping it on, he adjusted the sleeves and the gold, eagle-encrusted cufflinks. He smiled at his image once more, a sly twinkle in his eye.

Not only had his perfect wife secured this contract for him, she also had many other sterling qualities to admire. She never nagged. She never quarreled.

She was never disappointed in him, demanding of him.

She didn't require his time or emotions or attention.

She never spent a penny of his vast fortune.

What more could a man want in a woman?

There was the issue of sex. In this one area, she fell short. Not that he cared. He'd found other avenues to take care of that particular need. He didn't blame his wife for not providing him satisfaction. He knew going into the marriage sex wasn't in the cards. She wasn't capable of it. And really, what was the saying?

Variety was the spice of life.

He chuckled. Looking down at his left hand, he eyed the plain gold band on his ring finger. He hadn't taken it off since he'd put it on two years ago. The ring had saved him countless hassles. When confronted by a determined woman, all he had to do was wave the thing in her face and tell her no. He liked variety, true, but he was the one to choose and chase. When he did indicate interest, each woman he picked invariably came to his bed.

The ring was never mentioned. Neither was marriage or commitment.

A wife was very useful to have in many situations.

Glancing at his watch, he walked out of his bedroom, across the Persian rugs blanketing the long hall, and down the wide stairs to the foyer of his elegant, Upper East Side brownstone.

He'd purchased the property right before his marriage. No longer had he wanted to project the image of a man-about-town. The image had been fine and well when he'd first started building his business seventeen years ago. It had garnered him attention, brought him connections, solidified his presence as a mover and shaker. The image the world saw had served his purpose as he rose in stature.

But two years ago? Well, let's just say Tucker had been only one catalyst for his marriage. The existence of a wife had been important to show he was a solid, established citizen. However, the marriage had provided him more than a business deal.

The marriage had provided him cover.

Slipping on his black leather jacket while opening the front door, he nodded to his chauffeur. "Let's go."

He spent the ride into Manhattan fielding several calls from his PA. Scrolling through a dozen text messages and emails from his bond traders in London and Singapore, he jotted down a couple of notes on new acquisitions. Not until he was mere minutes from his meeting with the old man did he have a chance to open his laptop and review his final proposal. The review truly wasn't needed. The proposal had played in his head for years.

He knew what he had to do. He always did.

The limo door opened and Aetos stepped out into a biting November wind. Looking at the imposing stone building he was about to acquire, he smiled one more time. Who would have dreamed a young kid from Athens would ever accomplish so much and come so far? Who could have imagined that one Aetos Zenos—a nobody, a nothing—with not a penny to his name when he landed on America's shores, would soon own one of the best properties in New York City? Who would have predicted the rejected heir of one of Greece's most prominent families would now be the proud owner of more businesses, land, and power than the Zenos clan had accumulated over hundreds of years?

Certainly not his father. Certainly none of the aristocratic Zenos family.

They'd been wrong. All wrong.

He'd dreamed of this at the tender age of nine when he'd been discarded. He'd imagined this when he'd left his father's home at the age of fifteen. This need for success had been branded into him with every sneer and every putdown.

Now, here he was. Making it all come true.

Nodding to the doorman, he walked through the open door into his future.

The future his wife had helped him obtain.

His perfect, pretend wife.

* * *

Natalie Globenko sat in the darkest corner of the bar. She'd chosen the place specifically because it was in the Upper East Side, far from her own Brooklyn neighborhood, as far as one could get without falling off Manhattan Island. The place was as shadowy and nondescript as a person could hope. The dusky oak paneling and dark-red paint created a sense of safety. A cave cocooning her in its dark embrace.

Of course, this was an illusion.

Danger lurked and waited.

She held her cup with shaking hands. The warmth of the coffee had long ago dissipated and the waitress hadn't come back with a refill. But this was the least of her worries.

She was in deep trouble.

How could Nathan have done such a thing? How had she not realized her brother was neck-deep in a scam that would eventually lead to his death? Eventually leave her holding the bag?

The familiar tightness in her throat welled. At least the tears no longer came. During the past three months, she'd cried every single tear she had. They hadn't done any good. The tears hadn't brought her kid brother back from the grave. And they hadn't miraculously solved all her problems, either. Especially her one gigantic problem.

Fifty thousand dollars.

How was she going to find fifty thousand dollars?

The front door of the bar flew open, bringing a strong gust of cold wind and two men into the room. Natalie shrunk back into her seat. As she eyed them, though, she relaxed. The wintery

sun shone behind them making it hard to see any details, yet she knew. She knew the hulking outlines of those who pursued her. These men weren't looking for her. They weren't the men she feared.

One of the men, the taller one, laughed as he patted the other's shoulder. "We did it, Hank."

"You did it." The balding man looked around and then indicated the empty booth next to hers. "Come on. I'll buy the first round."

Her gaze moved over the men with disinterest. Since she now realized they weren't a threat, she had no use for them. She had no use for men in general, but the situation she found herself in had banished everything from her concentration other than survival.

The tall man smiled as he slipped into the booth. The dim light caught the gold of his hair, the flash of straight white teeth. "I'll take you up on the offer."

She watched with grim amusement as the waitress made a beeline for the men. There were only two other patrons seated at the long wooden bar and they were being served by the bartender. The waitress couldn't be bothered with refilling her coffee, but she showed a lively interest in the new customers. Within a few seconds, with much cooing and batting of eyelashes, the men had their beers and shots. Natalie watched as the woman reluctantly took her leave.

"Cheers."

"*Yiamas.*"

"The Greek consistently comes out in you when you've achieved another goal."

"I am American." The deep voice took on an edge.

"Yes, I know." Nervousness tinged the response.

"Never forget that, my friend."

The sudden tension eased between the men as they continued to talk. She absently listened as they heartily congratulated themselves about some business deal. Her mind swirled around her problem and her stomach churned. She needed a hideout. Somewhere they couldn't find her for a few weeks. This might give her enough time to put in place a plan to get the money they demanded. The money Nathan owed them when he died.

The money they thought she had.

Her brother had told the mob about the sale of their mother's home after she died. Had let the gang's boss believe there was inherited money. Nathan had intimated that his older sister held the keys to the treasure and when Natalie had received the first threatening phone call, she'd realized exactly where her younger brother had left her.

In a hellhole she couldn't get out of.

There'd been little left after burying her mother. Certainly not fifty thousand dollars.

How could she have not seen the signs her brother had fallen into the same trouble her father and uncles had fallen into years ago? What was it about the Globenko men and their avid need for money and power? Even more, how could Nathan have compounded this travesty by taking one step farther down the rathole by embezzling? She'd thought the family troubles were in the distant past. Put to rest along with her father's and uncles' bodies.

Her brother's body now lay beside them. And if she didn't find the cash soon, her own body might well be the next one in the ground.

A shiver of fear ran down her spine.

"To Aetos Zenos and his growing empire."

The name caught her attention. In her previous life, before hell had broken loose three months ago, she'd spent her days copy-editing the pages of the *New York News*. Aetos Zenos was a name she'd seen many times. A business dynamo. A ladies' man.

The kind of man she despised.

"I have to tell you, I didn't think you'd ever get old man Tucker to sign the contract."

"My patience is infinite when the goal is worth achieving."

"What's it been? Two years since you first approached him?"

"Almost three, actually."

"At first he wouldn't even give you the time of day."

Zenos chuckled. "He told me to my face I wasn't the kind of man he'd do business with."

She could sympathize with old man Tucker's point of view. Watching her dad and his brothers destroy their lives trying to play the money game had taught her well. Money corrupted. Money turned men into cheaters and con-men. Money destroyed families. She'd assumed Nathan had learned the same hard lesson.

She'd been wrong.

“So you went about changing his perceptions.”

“It took several years, but I succeeded.”

“Your marriage to Natalie was a brilliant stroke.”

Poor woman. She had a bit more sympathy than usual, if only because they shared the same name. Who would want to marry such a man? A man consumed with getting ahead. A man who surely cheated to climb the ladder of success so quickly. He was what? She frowned. If she remembered correctly, he couldn't be much over thirty-five years of age. To rise so fast, he had to have cut corners, lied, deceived. Hell, look at her own father. He hadn't succeeded until he'd swindled and stolen. Lived a life that ultimately killed him and his family.

Poor Natalie Zenos. Married to such a man would destroy her sooner or later.

Exactly as it had destroyed Elina Globenko, her own mother.

“The best thing I ever did was take the trip to Las Vegas. My marriage let Tucker know I was a settled man. A man he could now do business with.”

She'd read about this, too, as she thought back. The surprise marriage in Las Vegas. The reclusive bride who never wanted her picture taken. The newly purchased estate in the Connecticut countryside, complete with a pool and tennis courts, where the wife lived. While the husband spent most of his time in New York City.

Right. Definitely. The man cheated. In more than one way. She'd lay money on it.

If she had any.

“I was honored to be your best man.”

Both men roared with laughter.

What was the joke? She'd missed something. Natalie cocked her head in confusion while the men kept laughing.

“You're the man who gave me the idea, Hank. It was only right you were there when I went ahead with it.”

“Someone had to be there. You couldn't be alone when you got married. Plus, Jill was happy to stand in for the blushing bride.”

The men chortled. The waitress sashayed over to them and they ordered another round.

Who was Jill? And what did they mean by standing in?

Nat shook herself. What did it matter? She had far bigger problems than trying to figure out what had happened at a Las Vegas marriage two years ago. Sipping the last dregs of her coffee, she pulled her mind back to her other problem. Another very big problem.

Where was she going to stay tonight?

She'd stored her few remaining possessions in a locker at Grand Central Station since she had to check out of the grimy hotel she'd been staying in. She had precisely fifty bucks left to her name. She couldn't use her credit cards and chance them tracing her location. She no longer had a cell to call any friends; she'd ditched the phone as soon as she suspected they were using it to find her. Any contact with her remaining relatives was problematic. Years had gone by since she'd seen her aunts and cousins, plus she couldn't risk the thugs going after them, too, for the family debt.

"I have to recommend marriage to you, Hank."

"Not a chance."

"You only have to find the perfect wife like I did."

The other man snorted.

"Really," Zenos continued. "There are many perks. For example, family members lay off you completely. A wife provides an excellent cover for any demands to marry a nice Greek girl from home."

"Your grandparents were rather persistent, weren't they?"

"*Nai.*"

She found it hard to envision this man having relatives. He'd seemed to have come out of nowhere onto the New York City scene. One day no one knew he existed. The next day, he was buying every building he could find, his picture was plastered on every gossip page, and his name opened every door.

"You can't imagine the amount of money I still spend on the collect calls from Greece."

"At least they won't arrive on your doorstep."

"That would be inconvenient."

The men chuckled again.

Weren't we the cheerful crowd.

She grimaced at her cynicism. Usually, she was cheerful herself. It was only because she was in a situation that was no laughing matter. Hearing others laugh only made it seem worse.

“But the chances of any visits are remote, aren't they? Your grandparents are what—?”
Hank's voice echoed in the nearly empty bar. “In their seventies?”

“Eighties.”

“I suppose one of your thousands of cousins could stop by.”

“Unlikely.” The accented voice turned sarcastic. “None of them wish to leave the blessed homeland.”

“Which works in your favor.”

“Correct. I would hate to disappoint and shock my family.”

Was his wife truly disappointing in some way? Nat struggled to remember. There'd been some photos. A few fuzzy ones. There hadn't appeared to be anything wrong with the woman. She couldn't be ugly. No man like Zenos would marry an ugly woman. As soon as her father had achieved even a minor level of success, he'd found plenty of pretty women. She'd never told her mother what she'd seen; it would have destroyed Elina. The knowledge of her husband's illegal business activities had been enough to send her into decline. His infidelity would have sent her mother to her grave immediately. Instead, she'd lingered for years with her memories and her dreams somewhat intact.

Why was she thinking about Aetos Zenos and his wife when she would shortly be sleeping on the streets somewhere, easy pickings for her trackers?

She straightened against the hard wood of the booth. The red leather padding on the seat had provided some cushioning, but after two hours of sitting on it, her butt ached. Yet it was far better than walking out the bar's door into the danger. Soon though, when the after-work crowd started strolling in, she'd be required to buy something more than coffee to keep her seat.

Fifty bucks. The only money she had.

Fifty thousand dollars. The money she needed to find.

“Your family and old man Tucker would certainly be shocked to find your wife nowhere to be seen.”

Perhaps his wife had gotten a clue and left him. Nat relished the thought for a moment. Only a moment. Her brain then went back to her reality—a reality where she needed to find a way to make her puny funds grow by a thousand percent.

“A wife who is unseen and unheard is a treasure,” Zenos said, mirth dripping off every word. “You should try it.”

With unwilling interest, she yanked her attention back to the men’s conversation. What a jerk. No man would be chuckling and laughing into his beer if his wife had left him. Apparently, the woman was a doormat. She couldn’t imagine being with such a conceited man. A man who genuinely liked the fact his wife was a doormat.

A man exactly like her father.

Maybe she was a fool to ever hope for another kind of man. In her experience, all men were like this Zenos guy. Arrogant jerks. She was stupid to keep hanging onto her fantasies.

Why was she thinking of fantasies when she was in the middle of a nightmare?

“There is the lack of sex with such a wife, Aetos. You must admit that.”

Both men gave another hearty laugh.

She couldn’t help her odd fascination with this unfolding conversation. Even in the face of her near-disaster of a life. What could this mean? She couldn’t conceive of this guy not having sex. The man had run through such a long list of beauties over the years, he’d even managed to trump The Trump. Miss Universes had competed with runway models and starlets for his company. She remembered all the stories. Vaguely. But she remembered.

However, then...she frowned...yes, she was sure of it. After his marriage, there’d been no more movie stars or beauty queens. At the time, she hadn’t spent one moment thinking about it. She’d had enough to cope with dealing with her mother slowly fading away and her brother slowly withdrawing. Now that she thought about it, though, she remembered there had no longer been the frenzied press about Zenos and his private life, only the dull roar of endless coverage about his business success.

Had the man honestly been celibate?

“I’ve had no problem in that area, as you know.” Zenos’ voice oozed satisfaction. “I have been more secretive, to honor my wife. Still, there are always women.”

“I have no doubt.”

“And my wife has provided me with the ultimate excuse when women become too possessive. I am already married. They have no hope.”

Obviously he hadn't been celibate. What was she thinking?

Honor his wife. What crap!

Her spine stiffened in revulsion, but not surprise. After all, look at her father. Her fantasy of a steadfast man, a man who could be trusted was just that. Pure and complete fantasy.

Natalie. Focus on your disaster.

Right. The disaster of being homeless and on the run from the Ukrainian mob.

“You know,” the egotistical jerk continued, “I planned on announcing a divorce as soon as the papers were signed with Tucker. Now I'm not sure.”

He had stayed married only to secure a business deal? She made a face at the other side of her booth, imagining the disgusted look slicing through the wood and right into the man's back. How unbelievably cynical. The poor woman. Stuck in Connecticut, alone, waiting, while this ass pranced around New York, bedding whoever and making deals using his wife as a shield.

At least she's safe. At least she has money.

Her heart fell. True. Very true. Natalie Zenos might have a husband worth less than nothing, yet at least she had a home. An extremely nice home, if memory served. Natalie Globenko was not as lucky.

“You're thinking of keeping the ring on?”

What an odd way to ask the question. This conversation was incredibly bizarre.

“*Nai.*”

“I suppose if you divorce, your family will be on you again to come home and marry one of the endless Greek beauties waiting for you.”

“True. But the demands to come home with my non-existent wife keep escalating.”

What? *What?* Non-existent?

Nat sucked in a breath, sure she'd heard this wrong.

“Those demands do pose a problem.” Hank chuckled. “I suppose you could hire someone to play the part.”

Play the part?

“I wouldn’t trust a woman not to divulge the truth to the press.” The accent thickened, his voice reeking with brutal antipathy.

She froze as the soft, harsh words drifted over her. There was hatred there. Unadulterated hate. The man might bed women, yet he hated them.

Hank’s laugh was forced. “They’re not all bad. Look at my sister, Jill. In two years, she’s never whispered a thing to anyone.”

Jill was Hank’s sister? Her brain unfroze enough to take in the strange words she’d heard before the harsh putdown of all women.

Non-existent. Play the part.

Jill in the wedding pictures? Not Natalie?

“True. Though the fact she received a new home and you still have a job with me might explain her silence.” Rich contempt sliced through every word.

The man held an extreme antipathy for women. She didn’t begrudge him the feeling. In the end, it matched her thoughts about men. Nevertheless, to treat his friend with this kind of condescension was despicable. Apparently, he despised everyone around him to a varying degree. Did he think he was so superb compared to other humans that he could treat a person with such contempt? Her sour distaste and disgust turned into outright antagonism.

Hank gave a nervous laugh.

“But I will always be thankful to your sister for standing in for my bride.” Zenos’ voice switched to calm containment. “The pictures of us at the altar were needed to satisfy the press and my grandmother.”

“Jill was thrilled to make the tabloids. Even if only her back was shown.”

Both men chuckled once more.

Scrunching her face, Nat tried to remember. A vague memory of a candlelit room, a fuzzy, well-covered bride with a long veil. A smiling groom. That had been Hank’s sister at the altar? Not the real Natalie?

The non-existent Natalie.

The pieces came together to paint a completely insane picture. It couldn’t possibly be—

“My grandmother, however, is not satisfied with some pictures. She demands to meet my blushing bride.” The pompous ass sighed, a mocking sound. “I believe I will have to leave married bliss behind, since I am unable to comply with my *giagiá*’s request.”

“The Greek girls will be delighted.”

“And I will be too devastated by the loss of my wife to contemplate loving another woman anytime soon.”

Hank sniggered.

“The only thing that will console me is my wife will want none of my wealth or possessions.”

“What would a pretend wife need with wealth and possessions?”

Both men roared with laughter.

She sat. Stunned. The picture was insane and completely accurate.

There was no wife. No Natalie Zenos.

This conceited crook had fooled a man into a business deal using a pretend wife. He’d lied to his family for two years. Hell, he’d lied to the entire world to get ahead.

A blunt-fingered hand waved to the waitress. She glided across the room with the bill.

“I will leave the business in your capable hands, Hank, for the next two weeks.”

“You’ll be visiting every one of the Tuckermarkets?”

Tuckermarket. Her brain whirred. *Old man Tucker*. Sam Tucker’s trading empire was vast and impressive. She’d often strolled through the gargantuan store occupying the last privately-owned Vanderbilt mansion in New York City, the store stuffed with exotic oriental scarves, golden images of gods, and spices from the Maluku Islands. Once, she’d even been greeted by Sam Tucker himself. The beaming man had taken her hand and shown her around the store, glowing with pleasure when she’d found the best gift for her mother’s birthday.

The old man had been a delight.

The old man whom Zenos had fooled.

A tight rage filled her, weaving and winding around her growing antagonism towards this overconfident thief. The rage flushed her skin. This bandit had fooled a lovely old man and his own old, needy grandparents. Along with his entire family. As well as all of New York City.

All for a deal. For money. For power.

“Only the main markets. I will take a more extensive tour later, after the holidays.” The arrogant man stood, flipping a large bill at the waitress, who beamed in apparent surprise.

Nat glared at his outline. In the dim light, the only thing she could make out were his broad shoulders covered in some kind of sleek suit and his rugged profile with its prominent nose. Yet it was enough to give her a sense of his complete arrogance. His absolute assurance. He truly believed lying to an old man, to his family, to everyone was his right. He felt not a slip of guilt in what he'd done.

Zenos was worse than her father and her uncles. Even her brother.

His friend slid out of the booth to join him. “Do you want me to check on the house?”

The house. The brownstone. The memory of the purchase came back to her. All the press had been agog at playboy Zenos purchasing such a sedate property while selling his trendy Greenwich Village penthouse. Soon after, the announcement of the engagement had come. Then the press release of the marriage.

She knew exactly where that brownstone was. She'd strolled by it during a lunchtime walk. The townhouse stood mere blocks from where she currently sat.

“Not needed.” The playboy jerk strode toward the door, Hank lumbering behind. “I have given the main staff a holiday, but a skeleton staff will remain.”

The door banged shut on his last words.

The glare slipped off her face.

But her turbulent disgust continued. Someone should take the man down a notch. Someone should teach him a lesson. A person of courage should confront him and expose him.

Someone who had a journalism degree and could write an explosive story.

Someone like her.

Her hands clutched the coffee cup until her knuckles turned white. Could this be her way out of imminent disaster? She no longer had any access to a computer, still, she could hightail it down to her old offices and tell the tale and make a deal.

She'd be seen. She'd be caught.

Her breath whispered in and out of her mouth. A zillion thoughts and plans and schemes whistled in her brain.

Would anyone believe her?

She'd left her work without giving notice. Her boss had been angry. He'd told her she'd lost her last chance at the paper as she'd hastily packed her things and escaped before the trackers got her. Would he believe her when she told this outrageous story?

Would anyone believe her?

Zenos had power. And prestige. And pots of money.

Would anyone believe insignificant, on-the-run Natalie Globenko instead of the masterful, godlike Aetos Zenos?

No.

She slumped in the corner of the booth, her hopes sagging.

Even if she got someone to believe, *The New York News* wouldn't pay the astronomical sum of fifty thousand dollars. The odds that any other tabloid would believe and pay with no proof other than her word was unlikely. She'd risk capture with no sure assurance she'd have enough money to pay off the debt.

The risk was too great.

"Do you want anything else, miss?" The waitress walked to her table and smacked the bill in front of her without letting her respond. "We'll be getting busy soon and this booth will be needed."

"I understand." The slick slap of panic slid down her spine. "I'll be only a minute more."

The waitress grunted her disapproval as she left.

What was she going to do? Where was she going to go?

The idea flashed in her head like a neon light. A bright blast of pure folly.

Gone for two weeks. Skeleton staff.

Pretend wife.

Natalie Zenos. Natalie Globenko.

A way to pay an arrogant man back. A way to make him sweat. If only for a few days after he came back from his trip and heard his pretend wife had made an appearance and then disappeared.

A hideout. Two weeks to buy some time to think and plan.

Her husky bark of laughter caused the bartender to eye her as if she'd gone crazy.

She had. Quite possibly she had.

But why not? What did she have to lose?