

Chapter One

Revenge was not sweet.

It burned in his mouth and gut like acid. It seared his throat and lungs.

Long ago, the need for it had charred his heart.

Raphael Vounó stood in front of the business that harbored his foes. The business he now owned, as well as the crumbling building it was housed in. London's icy rain slanted against the skin of his cheek and jaw. The chill did nothing to lessen the burn inside.

Time to settle the score. Finally.

He pushed open the hotel's battered steel door and strode in. The foyer was empty, but the low sound of a radio slid under the door behind the lobby desk. He didn't glance around. He knew exactly where everything was in this cramped excuse of a building. His investigation had been thorough. Nothing was left to chance. Not this time.

Striding past the front counter, he didn't hesitate. His hand slapped open the office door.

There he was. The first of his two enemies.

The man had aged during the last ten years. Yet he still lived, unlike Raphael's father. Loukas Vounó had not been as lucky as this old man.

Whose luck had just run out.

The old man lifted his head from the papers strewn across his desk. His gaze was blurry and tired. His skin drooped in grey flaps along his jaw. The years had not been kind, and today this enemy would find out his remaining years would be even worse. "Who are you?" he muttered.

Leaning against the doorway, he gave the older man a mocking smile. "You don't recognize me, Drakos?"

The hazy eyes slowly cleared. The man straightened. Then, the curses flowed.

Raphael ignored them all. There was nothing this man could do or say that would hurt him. Not any longer. He'd spent the last ten years planning and plotting for this moment. Unlike his father, he took nothing for chance, trusted no one. He'd purposefully built a wall of protection around himself, his family, and his business. No one, certainly not Haimon Drakos, could ever touch him or his again.

“You’re not welcome here.” The old man glared at him. “Get out.”

He laughed and prowled toward the desk. “No.”

“I will call the police and have you thrown out.” Drakos's words were edged with forced bravado as he uneasily reached for the ancient phone.

“The police are now your friends?”

The seated man gripped the phone in his shaking hand. “They will come and enforce my property rights. I own this place and I demand you leave.”

“Demand?” Raphael slid his leg onto the wobbly wooden desk. Crossing his arms, he smiled. “You will no longer be making demands. Not here. Not anywhere.”

“What do you mean?” Drakos’ voice quivered.

Bending forward to stare into the man's eyes, he delivered the first blow. “I own Viper Enterprises.”

The old eyes widened in horror. “No!”

“What’s going on?” The voice came from the open doorway. The familiar lilt, the unique slur at the end of the words, the husky edge to the vowels...all unmistakably her.

Enemy number two.

Rafe forced a deep breath into his lungs. Finding his formidable control, he turned to confront the girl who’d cut out his naïve heart with her betrayal. “Tamsin.”

She was no longer a girl.

Her bright-blond hair had turned golden, impossibly more beautiful than before. Her green eyes no longer flashed with innocent joy; instead they had darkened into mist and mystery. Her body, the body he’d hugged in his arms when she laughed and clutched to his chest when she cried, the body no longer was a young girl’s.

His reaction to her was the same.

His skin heated, his muscles tightened, and his groin stirred. Precisely as it had in the past, in that long-ago summer when he’d thought he’d found his soul mate. Thought he’d found his love. Over the years, when he’d allowed a thought of her to cross his mind, he’d shrugged off his reaction to her as youthful folly. He labeled it for what it must have been—merely a young man’s

hormones. In the last ten years, he'd had women when he needed them. None of them had elicited more than a night's interest.

None of them had made him sweat.

He twitched his shoulders and felt the trickle slide down his spine. The bitterness inside him churned into anger at himself. Lusting after an enemy wasn't part of the agenda.

"Raphael?" Her eyes went wide, her arms wrapping around her in useless defense.

Dóxa to Theó. His enemy didn't sense the lust running through him. The element of surprise, the element he'd planned so carefully for this situation, saved him from revealing anything she could use against him.

"*Nai.*" *Yes. Oh, yes. Tamsin. Did you think I would forget? Forgive?* He stood with a jerk, ignoring the old man's snarl behind him. "It's me."

"I can't—"

"I'm here." He stared right into her eyes so she would know. Know what was in store for her. "Did you think I would forget you and your family, *kardiá mou?*"

She flinched.

An exultant flare of acid triumph whipped through him. She remembered. She remembered what he'd called her. Which meant she remembered everything. The loving nickname. Her betrayal. His anger at the very end.

My heart.

What a foolish, stupid boy he'd been to give her those words. To give her any power over him at all. Now, though, she would know everything was different.

Her hands dropped to her sides and her jaw tightened. A familiar glint of defiance flashed in her green gaze. "What are you doing here?"

She'd given him this same bold scowl when they'd met for the first time. Sure, he'd been a cocky twenty-one-year-old, full of himself, surly about having to spend time with his younger sisters and a girl too young to be of any interest. All because his father had business with Drakos and wanted the families to know each other. He'd slouched into the unfamiliar house, knowing he'd be bored out of his mind. And then it had happened.

He'd gazed into these green eyes and fallen.

Completely and utterly fallen.

Did she think she merely had to give him a defiant look and he'd be a fool once more?

"I'm here," he forced himself to stroll to her and stare into those dangerous eyes, "because I now own this place."

His claim slammed into her. He could see it in the taut, tense thrust of her jaw. See it in the way her head went back, as if slapped. He tried to focus on these telling details which told of his victory, but...

But the effort was futile.

These eyes. *Theós*. He'd truly forgotten. Her eyes had always reminded him of the laurel leaves his mother used in her cooking, the green glistening pure and clear in the heated water. There was no hint of blue or brown to lessen the impact of flawless color. In his fanciful youth, he'd dreamed her gaze had shone with a perfect love, with a belief in his ability to make all his dreams, and hers, come true. He'd fallen asleep in his lonely bed knowing someday these green eyes would look at him as he slept, watch over him and caress him and bless him with the crown of her love.

What a complete and utter fool he'd been.

The fringe of her blonde eyelashes whisked across her fair skin as she blinked. When she opened her eyes once more, they no longer reminded him of his lovesick days. They reminded him of the last time he'd stared at her. Then the green had turned dark and dirty, dulling into dismissal.

Exactly as they did now.

"We own this building." Her mouth twisted, turning the lushness of her lips into a rejecting curl. "We have for years."

The old man rustled some papers behind him. The noise shot through Raphael like a poisoned arrow. As soon as this woman had entered the room, he'd forgotten. He'd forgotten the old man. His plans. His revenge. He'd forgotten everything but her.

Damn her.

Turning around, he glared at the old man. "Tell her, Drakos."

The skin under the man's eyes looked like splotches of tar compared to the pale sickliness of the rest of his face. The scent of fear mixed with alcohol wafted off his fat body as he slouched down into the creaking hull of the plastic chair, still cradling the phone. The last puff of smoke rose from the chewed cigar lying in the ashtray among the waste of paper.

Theós. The realization struck Rafe. He'd come just in time.

How cruel would fate have been if he'd left his revenge too late, moved too slow, let this man escape into death before being punished? He could not have lived with himself if he'd not fulfilled the pledge he'd made over his father's dead body. He could not have looked at himself in the mirror if this final revenge had not been delivered.

Yet luck and fate had been with him all through these past ten years.

The man before him still lived and would still suffer.

"Tell her," he demanded once more.

Rafe felt her behind him. She didn't move, didn't make a sound. Still, he felt her. Like a burn in his blood, like a venomous snake sliding on his skin. He sensed her zigzagging thoughts. He tasted her growing unease. He knew what was inside of her. Just as he'd known the moment he'd first seen her.

The fact this connection still existed between them stunned him. He'd thought his reaction to her would be entirely one of bitter anger and harsh judgment.

He didn't like this trace of lust in his blood.

He didn't like this connection, this *feeling* of her.

However, he couldn't deny both were there inside him.

Haimon Drakos glanced at his stepdaughter. His eyes said everything his mouth would not say. Defeated. Dead. Two black holes of despair.

"What have you done?" Her whisper, soft and stark, sifted through the hushed silence.

The scent of her sudden fear wrapped around Rafe and he reveled in it. His impulse was to turn. Turn to see the fear in the green, green of her gaze. But he didn't want to stare into those dangerous eyes and chance losing his focus. Right now, he wanted to stare at this man before him who had tricked and scorned his father.

He glared at the old man who'd caused his father's death.

“Tell her.”

* * *

Raphael.

Here.

Close enough to touch.

The reality was so intolerably unreal, Tamsin could barely breathe. She'd dreamed so many dreams of this moment. Dreams of ecstatic cries of love. Dreams of walking into his strong arms and crying out the years of pain and misery. Dreams that followed her from her bed every morning and swirled around in her head throughout the day.

Raphael.

He was so *him* and yet so very different.

He no longer had the lanky posture of youth. Years ago, he'd seemed more legs and arms, had always walked and moved as if he still were learning how to handle the growth spurt into six-foot-plus of male. Now his shoulders were no longer bony and lean. They were heavy with muscle. His body moved with fluid masculine grace, confident in its supremacy, filling the tiny, dingy room with its power.

Raphael.

She stared at his broad back, turned against her. Then her gaze took in the way he held his head. The proud tilt told her he no longer had any of the shy charm she'd found so irresistible when she'd been sixteen. His hair had been longer too, a mass of ebony curls. Curls that had clung to her fingers as they lay together in the sunlit vineyards of her stepfather's Greek estate. Curls that had given him a boyish beauty she'd fallen for within seconds of meeting him. Now those curls were ruthlessly suppressed, the cut emphasizing the symmetry of his ears, the elegance of his jaw line.

Rafe.

“Tell her.”

His voice was different too. No longer warm and fun and full of laughter. Of love. Now his voice slashed into her like a cold slice of steel. His voice hacked through all her old memories and yearnings and brought her back to the reality of what stood before her.

A threat.

She had no doubt of this. None. She'd heard the voices and known immediately something was terribly wrong. Haimon rarely had anyone visit him anymore. He did all his dirty business by phone and she ignored what was going on because she couldn't do anything about it. As long as he left everything else alone, she was content to let him play his games from his seedy, shabby office.

"Don't involve the boys," she'd warned him.

"Of course not," he'd assured her, puffing on his ever-present cigar.

She'd chosen to believe him because she'd had no other choice.

Yet when she'd heard the voices today, she'd known with gut certainty this wasn't one of Haimon's customers surprising him in his office. This was worse. This was far worse. But not even her usually keen instincts had prepared her for what she saw as she walked into disaster.

Her past walking into her present.

No longer a ghost of regret and pain. No longer a memory she'd hidden in her heart all these years as she'd lived with her choice and her sacrifice. No, her ghost of past love now stood before her. And as soon as she'd seen his expression, she'd known.

He was a threat.

To Haimon, surely. Maybe with some justification. But not only to him.

To her home. To her.

To the boys.

"What have you done?" She managed to push out the words through the horror leaching into her belly. Her stepfather had promised her, promised he wouldn't touch what she'd created here. He'd assured her this place she'd hobbled together to make a home for the boys would stay safe. Stay apart from his dirty games.

Raphael Vounó suddenly threw his head back and laughed.

The sound clashed and jarred her. So different, so different and sad and horribly wrong compared to how he used to laugh. How many memories had she stored inside her soul, memories of the joy of his laughter as he'd swung her around in his arms? Memories that had sustained her through her terrible decision and the ugly aftermath.

This laugh told her everything about him.

A lethal, deathly threat to everything she held dear.

With a swift jerk, he turned to face her one more time. The grief for all she'd lost and he'd lost swept through her again as she stared into his black, pitiless eyes. The eyes that had once danced with a bright glow. As a girl, she'd never been able to describe in her journal the way his black eyes were not dark but light. Not deep but open. She couldn't communicate in words how the very blackness of his gaze highlighted how brilliant the love shining from them was.

Yet now, like everything about him, the black had changed.

"He's too much of a coward," he snarled. "So I have the pleasure of informing you, *kardiá mou*."

The nickname was too much. "Don't call me that."

The black gaze blazed, flared with unholy delight. "You don't appreciate irony, Tamsin?"

She tried to wrestle her brain into working order, tried to find her way out of this nightmare, but it was no use. His presence and hate swallowed her whole. His terrible, treacherous threat. What could be worse than this? What could be worse than confronting all her old dreams arising from the ashes of her past as a menace?

But she'd absorbed a hard, bitter lesson at sixteen. One she'd learned again and again over the years. There was no way to win when confronted with disaster. The only thing a person could do was survive. "Tell me."

"Your loving father..." His drawl elongated the words, edging them with icy contempt.

Haimon wasn't her father. Once, when she'd been little, she'd hoped. Hoped he'd take the place of a father who'd abruptly disappeared from her life. However, her new stepfather wasn't the paternal type and she'd quickly accepted she was nothing more than a piece of her mother's baggage.

Raphael knew this.

He'd listened to her wistful dreams about her real father. He'd held her in his arms as she cried about some insult Haimon had thrown at her.

He knew. Too much.

“No more games.” Tam reminded herself of what she’d become. She ran this hotel. She managed the small staff. She paid the bills. Moreover, she’d successfully raised the twins for the last ten years. Two rambunctious, challenging, amazingly wonderful boys. She could handle anything.

She had to for the boys.

“Games?” Raphael’s mouth turned grim. “I’m not playing a game.”

“Then stop beating about the bush. Say what you have to say and leave.”

His gaze sharpened. Was he surprised she challenged him? Didn’t he realize she was different, too? She was not the loving, giving girl he’d known years ago. Her sacrifice to protect everyone, including him, had changed her forever.

“I’m not leaving,” he stated. “You and your father are.”

She didn’t waste her breath denying Haimon as a father. Because she only had breath enough to deny his demand, deny a reality too horrible to contemplate. “We aren’t going anywhere.”

“*Nai*, Tamsin, you are going. Out onto the street.” A confident smirk crossed his face. “I own this place, and I’m evicting you and your father.”

This building wasn’t merely a building. It didn’t only house the cheap hotel rooms and struggling businesses which paid for the little they had. This building was their home. The top floor was where she and the boys slept, played, dreamed. This building was the only thing they had.

She peered past the horror standing before her and glared into Hamion’s sunken eyes. “You told me you owned this place free and clear.”

“I did.” The shrug of old shoulders tinged the words with defeat. “Once.”

“Not now?” She couldn’t help the wail. What would she do? What would she do with the twins?

“He took out a mortgage a year ago.” Raphael’s voice was quiet, yet intense. “Which I bought.”

“But...but...” None of the thoughts and emotions running through her brain made any sense. She couldn’t seem to nail any of them down and put them in some comprehensible order.

“He’s late with the payments.” The deadly tone marched on.

“Not that late,” Hamion blustered.

“The contract you signed, old man.” The younger man appeared completely at ease, his arms casually crossed, his long legs planted solidly on the floor. The floor he claimed he owned. “Didn’t you read the contract? Were you as foolish as my father was years ago?”

The sharp tang of sheer rage filled the words. Yet she detected something else in the flavor of his voice. A hint of permanent, unbearable grief. All these years, and he still mourned. And exactly like before, she couldn’t comfort him; she couldn’t walk into his arms and hold him. The stark thought brought unwilling, unwanted tears to her eyes.

Raphael glanced her way and smiled. “Tears won’t do you any good, *kardiá mou*. They will not sway me from throwing you out.”

“I’m not—” She stopped. This man was no longer her Raphael. He wouldn’t believe a word she said. She needed to understand right now: he was the enemy. Somehow she had to find a way around this man and his threats in order to protect the boys.

“In fact,” he continued, his smile tight and taut. “Tears will only make this more pleasurable for me. I want both of you to suffer.”

Just as my father did.

He didn’t have to say the words. They lay in his eyes. His dark black eyes.

She stared into those eyes and saw nothing of the boy she’d loved. Clearly, that boy had died ten years ago when his father had ended his life. Tamsin’s grief billowed inside her. She’d thought she’d done the right thing that long ago night. She’d been sure in her young heart she was saving him. But saving him for what? Saving him only for him to lose any trace of humanity?

For a moment, something flashed in those black eyes. His big body flinched; his mouth tightened. And his eyes...For a moment, Tam thought she saw something.

Then it was gone.

Rafe swung back to Hamion. “Since you didn’t read all the fine print, Drakos, I’ll enlighten you. One late payment and this place is mine. One.”

The old man sunk deeper in his chair.

“And you’ve missed three.”

“We live here.” Reality seeped into her skin like an oily claw of futility. “This is our home.”

“Not any longer.” He prowled to the door. “You were served with an eviction notice and today’s the last day you can live here.”

“I never saw any such notice.” Tam clung to a last strand of hope.

Her tormentor stared over at her stepfather. Her gaze followed his and what she saw on Haimon’s face cut any hope right out of her heart. “How could you keep this from me?”

“I have a deal in the works,” he mumbled. “I’ll have the money—”

“Too late.” Leaning on the doorframe, Rafael crossed his arms. “I don’t want your money, Drakos. I’ve got plenty of my own.”

“If you’ll give me some time—”

“I’ll give you nothing.” His words were like steel-edged nails. “I want you both out. If not willingly, then I will be glad to call the bailiffs in.”

Fury and fear mixed inside her, making it hard to think. Only emotion shot through the mess in her mind. “The boys,” she blurted.

“Ah, yes.” He straightened, dropping his hands to his sides.

Her love for her brothers swelled, settling her emotions and letting her think. He remembered the boys. She saw the memories in his black gaze. The times he’d lifted them into the pool and played with them. The picnic they’d had with the twins one day. The fun he’d had, laughing and rolling with them in the fragrant grass by the river. If she had to plead and beg, if she had to use those memories, she would. She would do anything to save their home for them. “The boys live here.”

“The boys.” Sudden fury flashed across his face. “How could I forget?”

“They have a home here.” Why did the memory of her boys make him angry? They’d only been three the last time he’d seen him. They’d done nothing to warrant any anger. She forced herself to continue, trying to find a foothold to negotiate with this man. “I’m...I’m their mother.”

“Actually, you’re not, are you?” The dark gaze pinned her to the floor. “Their mother was a whore, wasn’t she?”

“Don’t say that.” Rage wiped away any impulse to negotiate. “It’s not—”

“I speak only the truth.” The long, elegant fingers of his hands tightened into fists. He glowered at the old man sagging in his chair. “The boys aren’t yours, Drakos. Did you know that?”

The words blasted into the room like torches of fire. Her stepfather jerked in his seat, and if it were possible, his skin whitened even further. “What the hell are you insinuating?”

“I’m not insinuating anything. I’m telling you.”

The fear in her blood raced, roared, and Tamsin thought she might faint. “What are you telling us?”

“The boys.” Rafe looked right at her as he delivered the killing blow. “Are mine.”