- vows are made to be broken -



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THE PROTECTOR Book1

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Chapter One

PRESENT Raven

I'm lying down on my front, my forehead is stuck to the cold surface of the floor, and I press my shaking hands to my head. The crackle of the automatic weapon hits painfully against my eardrum, and the sharp pieces of smashed glass are scattered all over the shop. My instinct says, *Get up and run!* Yet, I don't listen to it. Instead, I gather all my courage, draw my head up between my shoulders, and cautiously crawl towards the cellar steps. I know if I let panic fully take control instead of acting reasonably, it might cost my life. Back when we were young, my father and my uncle prepared my cousins and me for what we are to do in a situation like this if we want to live. *Keep to the floor, get out of the line of fire, look for shelter, wait for reinforcement.* How I hoped I would never have to recall these instructions, but the gunfire hitting against the wall of my party service shop brutally yanks me back onto the ground of reality. Some people are seeking to harm me again, there is raging chaos all around me, and I can't do anything about it.

"Sue! Jason! On the floor. Get down!" I shout at the top of my lungs. Behind my back, the gigantic, representative bottle of chardonnay – a gift from my uncle when I opened this shop full of hope, two years ago – explodes with a huge blast. I helplessly watch as the glass cabinet packed with delicacies falls to a myriad pieces with a deafening crash, but I don't turn back. Determined, I crawl on forward towards the cellar steps, overcoming the splitting pain caused by the pieces of glass piercing my lower arms. I don't want to die. I don't intend to be the next victim of this mindless war which has already cost too much blood. Even my parents' – the painful thought flashes through my brain as I reach the cellar door. I can't even bear to think how many have sacrificed their lives on the altar of family loyalty: relatives, friends, or those who were in some way or another linked to the Bertone clan.

The desperate cry of Sue, my confectioner can even be heard through the noise of the gunfire.

"Stay down. This way!" I mouth to them, and vehemently point to the cellar steps. Seeing the pale faces of my two employees shivering on the floor, my heart sinks and the recognition hits me hard like a sharp bard: this chapter of my life has come to an end. Even if we survive the gunfire, nothing will remain the same. I will have to flee once again, leaving behind all that I've managed to build up so far. I can't even say how often I've had to fear for my life.

3.5

With my back against the wall, I sit crouched on the tiles of the cellar. Beside me, Jason stares in front of himself with a pale face, in shock. Sue, our otherwise funny and cheerful confectioner sits on the only chair available, grabbing its rim with both hands, her whole body shaking. I quieted them as soon as I locked the door behind us, and now we all wait in an awe-struck silence, to see what will happen. The noise of gunfire upstairs died a while back, and we no longer hear footsteps either, but I still won't open the door. It might be just a trick as they wait for us to crawl back out of our hiding place. It's much safer if we wait for Uncle Emilio's people. Because they will come, I'm dead certain about it. Exhausted, I close my eyes, and lean my head against the wall with a sigh. I'm unspeakably tired of the whole matter. Two years of hard work has just come to nothing, in the course of a few minutes, yet, it's not the finances I'm worried about. Money has never been an issue in the Bertone family. My Uncle Emilio would sponsor the rebuilding of the shop, or he'd simply buy me another one. Of course, I would never let him do that, and then he would sulk for a while about my stubbornness. It filled me with endless joy that I built my party service shop with my own funds, without his financial support. Emilio Bertone likes to believe that he can solve any problem with money, and he can shut every mouth with a few crispy bank notes.

What worries me much more is what the significance of this raid might be. It was an open proclamation of war on Uncle Emilio, who, by the look of it, is once again at war with one of the rival mafia families, or maybe with even more. The armed attack was a warning that his enemies are not scared of anything, and they are ready to go all the way, even to harm his family.

The outrage does not only result in the destruction of my shop, but also that I have to give up on the existence I have worked so hard to build up. What's more, the peace of mind that I have fought so much for, is also ruined altogether.

With a serene stare, I study my employees' faces scared to death. Employees, who have become my friends in the past two years, but with whom now I have to break contact. I know my uncle will generously take care of them for their silence in return, and they will probably have nothing to worry about financially until they find new work – but this is only one aspect of the issue. I'm on the edge of crying at the thought we might never meet again, and I can only hope in time they will manage to get over the spiritual side of the trauma as well.

My family is to be blamed for everything. All the bitterness I've had to go through in the past ten years was brought about by the Bertones' underworld activities. Oh, how many times I wished I had been born into a normal family! In the midst of people who may not have so much money, but what they do have, does not come from illegal trade or car business, the operation of clubs, drugs and weapon-smuggling. To be born into a family where there is no need for a bodyguard to visit the opera house. Where cars are not pulled off the road by gangsters, and parents do not leave their thirteen-year-old daughter an orphan, or, fearing the revenge of rivals, uncles do not keep their niece under lock and key in an estate that could pass for a bunker.

Crying my heart out after a critical event like this, I always reach the point where my beloved cousins, Alessandro and Christiano come to my mind, who do love me. Sandro is four years my senior, Chris is one year older than me, and they are indeed like brothers to me. As a matter of fact, they do treat me like their little sister, with all positive and negative aspects considered. And of course, I remember my cool Aunt Claire, once my mum's confidante, who has filled the role of a second mother in my life

since the death of my real mum. And there's also my Uncle Emilio Bertone, the *Boss*. A dedicated and caring father, loving husband, successful businessman, and otherwise the most influential mafia don of the East Coast. Uncle Emilio doesn't have a daughter, so he adores me, spoils and protects me as if I was his own. And I, no matter how hard I try to hate the mafia boss, can never hold grudges against him too long. I don't call him my father, but I do consider him that in my heart.

And, of course, there's my boyfriend Johnny, whom I met through a party service job half a year ago, and I feel devoted to him because he has nothing to do with the mafia world. We go out together, have a lot of fun, and in time this might turn into something serious. My romance with Johnny is not exactly like the eruption of a volcano, there's no overwhelming passion involved, but it has potential. And, I know it from bitter experience that not even overwhelming passion guarantees things will turn out good between a man and a woman.

These people are my family. So, by the time I reach this point in my gloomy musings, I always realize that I'd never change them for anything else, and I'd miss them terribly if they disappeared from my life. I don't need any more painful goodbyes, and I no longer want to cry over the coffin of a loved one. I hate the family's underworld activities, but I do love the family itself. In spirit, I'm unable to separate the bloody-handed mafia boss from Uncle Emilio, who used to entertain us under the Christmas tree playing his violin, fooling around. I'm fully aware how schizophrenic the whole situation is, but this is the Bertone clan, and I, whether I want it or not, am a part of this whole madness.

The sound of footsteps hits my ear, which at once drags me out of my torturing thoughts. The noise comes from closer and closer, then there is a muted knock from the other side of the thick concrete door. Terrified, we look at each other, and I'm sure Sue is only a hair's breath from fainting. I quietly place a finger to my mouth, and getting up on my knees, I crawl to Sue's chair, who stares with eyes open wide and holds her breath as I reach under her chair and pull at something. The metal body of the pistol obediently slides into my palm as I draw back my hand. I stand up and lift my finger warningly, once again to silence the other two. With the 9mm Baby Glock in my hand, I tiptoe to the door. In the meantime, a memory comes to my mind — it was at the opening of the shop that Uncle Emilio

called my attention to this unique "gift" which he then planted in the cellar. For special occasions, he said, putting emphasis on the words, but at the time I didn't want to ascribe any significance to the gesture. I hoped I would never need it, and I forgot about the whole thing. Until now. There could never be a more special occasion – the bitter thought crosses my mind as I pause in front of the door and try to listen.

"Raven? Are you in there? It's me, Enrico."

A gigantic sigh breaks from my chest as I recognize the voice of Enrico, my uncle's most loyal man. This means we are saved. For now, at least. Emilio Bertone has sent Enrico in person for me, which tells me that I'm deeper in shit than I have thought. The 6.4 tall, bald muscle man is only a few years younger than my uncle, but he is considered one of the oldest hands in the family. He is the so-called consigliere. Emilio Bertone's right hand, trustee, advisor and the one who manages his most delicate affairs.

"We're here, Enrico," I answer with some relief.

"Who's in there with you?" he yells from the other side.

"It's just Sue and Jason. Just us three in here."

"Okay, girl. The coast is clear out here. You can open the door."

I put the pistol down the belt on my jeans, take a deep breath and insert the key into the lock.

"Are you sure? What... what if..." I hear the worried question behind my back. I turn around.

Jason is gazing at me with pupils open wide and a pale white face. That's when it dawns on me that my employees know nothing about Enrico, the mafia and the complicated details of my family background. I have never revealed the whole truth to them, it would have made no sense. When it comes to private issues, I present the same routine version since I was thirteen: my parents died in a tragic car accident and I was raised by my uncle and aunt, who are entrepreneurs. To my colleagues I'm just a twenty-six-year-old young woman who runs a party service, and who wants to help children with speech defects after earning her degree in special education and speech therapy. In their interest, it's best if I let them go on thinking so. Our shared work, in the light of today's events, is now history – I think with resignation.

"All good, Jas. We're safe now."

After Enrico makes sure that I don't have a bullet wound, he gives me a fatherly embrace, and entrusts Sue and Jason to his men's care. I have no doubt that he'll try to leave the scene before the police arrive, so I don't have a chance to exchange even just a few words with my colleagues in peace. Hurriedly, Enrico pushes me towards the armoured Mercedes with the tinted windows, parked at the back exit of the shop. Hardly do we sit into it, we can already hear the sirens of the approaching police cars. Enrico gives the order to the driver, and the car leaves behind the side street with screeching tyres, to make its way to the Bertone estate.

I can clearly see the relief on Enrico's face at my getting away with the attack alive. If Emilio is like a father to me, then it's fair to say that I see Enrico as an uncle. He has known me since my birth, knew my parents, his wife knitted dresses for me when I was a kid, and a long time back I played with his children in the garden of the family residence. Enrico is not a man of words, he keeps quiet even now, but his tense expression gives away the rage inside him. It's for a reason that his nickname is "Fist" in the underworld circles.

He fishes the first aid kit out of the compartment under the seat, pours some disinfectant on a piece of cotton, and with his thick fingers, he clumsily begins to clean the wounds on my lower arm. I gratefully put my hand on his, but choose to take the cotton and continue the cleaning myself.

"Have you talked to the Boss? I know he tried to get a hold of you yesterday," Enrico asks after a while, with a voice full of dejection.

"No," I sigh. "We haven't talked, but I was going to call him back after we've delivered the Chandler engagement order."

I feel nauseous as I think about Chandler and all the other disappointed customers whose orders now I have to cancel and whom I have to inform that they need to find another party service, because *Delivered Delights* has ceased to exist. It's been shot to bits. Crushed to pieces, just like Raven Bertone's bona fide plans for the future.

I painfully glance to the side.

"Did my uncle suspect anything? Is that why he wanted to speak to me?" Enrico worriedly scratches his forehead.

"I'm afraid, he did. He wanted to warn you to be careful, but none of us expected things to get that rough so soon. We've fucked up big time," the words break from his mouth with anger, then he sends me an apologetic

look at once, as if I was still an innocent little girl. "We've let those bastards strike on us," he punches the front seat's back. It looks like he sees these events as his own personal failure, so I gently squeeze his huge, chapped hand. It's pointless for him to blame himself. He glances to the side and speaks again, with a bittersweet smile on his face.

"You did really good, girl. Your quick reaction saved all of your lives. I'm proud of you."

I snort with dejection. What do I say to that? Practice makes perfect, I think bitterly. As I lay back in the comfortable leather seat, the 9mm is pressed against me. I reach behind me and pull the Baby Glock out of my belt. Enrico takes it at once.

"I somehow felt that this baby would once again be needed," he adds with a wry smile.

I don't comment on this. Instead, I close my eyes tiredly. After the attack, it's obviously out of the question that we go to my place. I know the procedure all too well. They take me to my uncle's house that is protected like a fort, and his people will get my personal stuff from my house, and bring it all here for me. Breathing deeply, I try to calm myself and prepare in spirit for all that awaits, but frustration forms a lump in my throat. Feelings of disappointment and anger are unstoppably filling my whole body.

Chapter Two

13 YEARS AGO Raven

I am so excited, I can hardly help myself. I wait on tenterhooks for my parents to finally leave for the opera. Not that I don't like being with them, but this evening is special. Since my parents' will be late, they've agreed I can sleep at my friend, Ariana's place. Ariana's dad, Enrico works for Uncle Emilio, and they also live in the same neighbourhood. Not in the same house, but Ariana's house is also located on the Bertone estate.

Since my parents and I moved from the estate and I was put into a different school, I hardly see my cousins, Sandro and Chris. Strangely, I miss them. True, when we still lived together, they often drove me crazy, but lately I've been thinking a lot about them. Chris is fourteen, Sandro is seventeen, and we often used to fight, especially Chris and me. These days, though, I really miss them, and not only them, but my uncle and my aunt too. I had to beg my mum a lot until she agreed that after a long time I could sleep on the Bertone estate once again, so I can't wait for us to leave.

Things have been quite strange recently, anyhow. Something has changed between my parents and my uncle. In the old days the family used to be together all the time. We ate together at the huge dinner table, played together, did our homework and celebrated in each other's company. I was happy on the estate, and enjoyed the constant buzz, the coming and going in the house. I never understood why I sometimes found my mother in tears. I didn't have the foggiest what her problem was, as everything was so super cool at home. In moments like that I pushed myself into her lap, cuddled up to her, kissed her and teased her until we both burst into laughter.

This, of course, was a long time back, because after we moved from the estate, many things changed. Our new house wasn't as huge as the old one, but we didn't need it to be, as just the three of us live in it. Dad is at home more often with us, and doesn't disappear strangely in the evenings as he

used to, when a mysterious phone call told him so. Mum began to blossom and she smiles a lot again.

When I asked if Dad was angry with Granny Bertone, Uncle Emilio and Aunt Claire, and whether that was the reason we had moved from the estate, my parents were shocked and looked embarrassed. They said that they were not angry, it's just that Dad had found a new job, and he no longer worked with Uncle Emilio. To avoid having to travel so long to his new work place, they found it smart to move into a house of our own. This sounds logical, although if I'd had a say, I would rather not have changed school. Since we moved, Mum still keeps meeting Aunt Claire, and she often takes me with her, but we never go to the estate. We always meet up somewhere in the city.

Mum wasn't fond of the idea, but I begged and begged until she agreed that while they're at the opera, I get to sleep at the estate with Ariana. I can't wait!

I pull the zip on my pink wheeled suitcase, I pocket the bracelet I've prepared for Ariana, and start for the steps. As I walk past my parents' bedroom, I hear voices and slow down. I hear them mention my name, so I pull closer to the door left ajar, and start to listen.

"I always feel so apprehensive when she goes there," I hear Mum's worried sigh.

"You have nothing to worry about, Jane. The estate is like a fort. There's no place where she could be safer."

"You're right. It's not that, but somehow... I have a bad feeling about this."

"You shouldn't make such an issue of it."

"But that phone call the other day. It scared me to death."

"It won't happen again, I promise. Emilio's already taken things into his hands..."

"See, this is what worries me even more."

"Come here, sweetheart," Dad says, and the conversation suddenly dies off. I draw back a little, as I don't want them to catch me eavesdropping, but I don't hear any footsteps, which gives me the idea that they must be kissing. Again! I roll my eyes.

It's no secret that Dad is absolutely daft for Mum. He keeps hugging her and they keep kissing, no matter if they are being seen or not. It's so

embarrassing. I told them that this is not very cool, but Dad just laughs about it, while Mum keeps quite with a blush on her cheeks.

Then I hear the conversation continuing inside, and I try to listen more closely.

"I promised to do all I can, right?" Dad asks. "But certain things don't happen overnight. Certain people don't understand or realize that I'm no longer in the business."

"I'm not complaining, Matteo," I hear my mum's placating voice.

"Give me some time, dear. It's going to be okay."

The sound of sniggering and clothes rustling are heard from the room. Then my dad speaks again.

"You look so hot. They won't even let you into the opera house. You'll take people's eyes off the performance."

"Oh, you charmer!" Mum laughs. "Stop! Matteo, you put wrinkles on my dress," I hear her cackling, and I'm sure those two can't help themselves again.

"Don't be so ruthless, my beauty," Dad says, but then I quickly pull away from the door. Giggling to myself, I drag my suitcase on towards the steps. Luckily, its wheels roll noiselessly on the soft carpet.

Regarding the praise, my Dad didn't exaggerate. My mum comes from Northern Ireland, and she's a very beautiful woman. She has long, thick, light brown hair and bluish green eyes. I've only got the colour of her eyes, otherwise I look like the dark-haired, creole-skinned Bertone side. It's quite obvious that my parents have got the hots for each other. Not that my dad would try to conceal it. My mum left behind England and her family at the time, just to be with my dad, the charming albeit notorious Matteo Bertone. Mum doesn't like to talk about her own parents, because they cut all contact with her when she married my father against their advice. She only keeps in touch with Nola, her younger sister. When I sometimes ask her about England and want to know if she misses her relatives from there, she only tells me that although she does miss them, she's never regretted her decision for a moment, and she'd never do anything different if she could start again.

Mum says goodbye to me in a longer and more emotional way than usual when they drop me off at the estate. Dad gives me a kiss and ruffles my hair playfully, which annoys me as hell. He does it on purpose, as if I was still a toddler. It's a good thing, though, that I've begged them to let me stay until lunch the next day, and it wasn't easy, but they consented. We agreed that they would only pick me up after lunch.

Dad opens the door for Mum, and courteously ushers her into the black hatchback Audi. Ariana and I just laugh at his exaggerated moves. He acts like some medieval knight. When he lifts the edge of Mum's long evening dress through the car's threshold, he turns to the side and winks at us. "See you tomorrow, Bella," he says, and stepping up to me, kisses my forehead. He beckons to Aunt Claire, gets into the car and starts the engine. Under the Audi's wheels the white, tiny rocks are screeching as they drive off from the steps in front of the house. Mum turns back to wave to me as the car disappears behind the row of sycamore trees leading up to the exit. Ariana and I join hands and excitedly run into the house. We can't wait to finally start the pyjama party.

Yesterday was the last time I saw my parents alive. Although the wreckage of the Audi which had fallen into the ravine and my parents' bodies were found at night, I was only told at noon about what had happened. On this summer day, my childhood has come to an end. Too suddenly and too brutally, but I feel like I've become an adult. I'm thirteen years old.

PRESENT

No sooner has the car stopped in front of the Bertone villa's entrance, I can already see my aunt approaching with arms open wide and teary eyes. Claire pries the car door open and embraces me, sobbing wildly.

"Good heavens! My girl. My girl! What happened? Are you wounded?" she stutters between sobs, not even giving me a chance to respond. Then she pushes me away slightly, and visibly looks for traces of injury on my body.

"I'm all right," I answer powerlessly. "We were lucky."

She looks at me with tearful eyes, and grabbing me by the lower arm, draws me to herself again for a hug. I hiss with pain, which makes her jump back with a terrified look.

"You said you aren't wounded," she says, covering her mouth with a hand, then casts Enrico a reprimanding look as if he was to blame for the incident.

Enrico is about to say something, but I interrupt him.

"It's nothing serious, Aunty. Just a few scratches on my arm. Not a big deal. Just the glass..."

"Madonna!" she shouts out with hands raised to the sky, then leans close to have a better look at my injuries. "These look pretty nasty, dear. We have to sanitize them. Enrico, call the doctor at once!" she orders. Enrico murmurs a *Yes, Mrs. Bertone*, nods in my direction, and takes out his phone to call the family's trustee doctor. I'm not even trying to protest or talk my aunt out of her plan. I know it wouldn't work. The sooner I let her do what she thinks is best for me, the better. Exhausted, I drop my arm next to me, and heave a deep sigh. "Oh God. My dear girl!" my aunt says with a weak voice, and this time with much care, she pulls me close to her. "Everything will be okay, sweetie. You'll see, everything will be all right," she repeats reassuringly, stroking my hair, exactly as if I was still that lost, terrified child who cried for her mum at night and whom she took in thirteen years ago.

For the first time since the attack, I let my tears fall freely. I don't really have faith in things getting back to normal, but it feels good to be loved and cared for. Claire is an energetic, strong-willed woman who loves her family

and supports her husband in everything without as much as a bad word. These are extremely good qualities if you're married to a man like my uncle, and if you're a member of a family like the Bertones. I came to this conclusion several times when I compared my aunt to my own mother, who was obviously made of different stuff. My mother could never take stress too well, which naturally went with my father's activities. As a child, I didn't really understand why, but my mother began to blossom when my dad cut contact with the clan, and we moved away from them. She believed that it was possible to get out of the mafia's embrace and start a new life. She was wrong, and they both had to pay with their life for that. When I compare my aunt and my mum, I also conclude that I wouldn't make a good mafia wife, either. In primary I hated it when Jimmy Calder, a freckled, red-haired boy called me little mafia princess. At the time I had no idea where he took it from, but the rumour about my family's involvement with organized crime was in my wake very early on. The name stuck with me at school, and I hated it. I didn't want to differ from the others. I didn't want them to look at me differently. But of course, you can't choose your parents. You can, however, very much choose your husband! Although I love my family, I decided at a young age that I would never ever get involved with a man who is in any way linked to the underworld.

"Let's go inside," Claire says, and stepping back a bit, she begins to dry the tears from my face with a gloomy expression. She puts an arm around me and gently walks me towards the house. "We were terrified when we heard what had happened. Thank God you're not harmed!"

"It was pretty close. But the shop is ruined," I sob into my tissue that she put into my hand just before.

"Oh, dear. I'm so sorry. What about the others?"

"They're okay. Other than the shock, of course. And the fact that from today, they're unemployed."

"Your uncle will take care of them, don't worry about that."

"He doesn't need to do that, Claire," I say, shaking my head exhaustedly. "That's my job."

"Oh come on, sweetie, that's the least he can do. Besides," she rolls her eyes theatrically, "he'll do it anyway, whether you agree to it or not. You know, it makes him happy when he feels there's something he can do for

you. He felt a little hurt when you didn't accept his help launching your business," she adds, more softly.

"I wanted to do it with my own funds. I didn't want my business to have anything to do with..."

"Say no more. I get you," she waves with a bitter smile. "But you know how your uncle is. He likes to have things in his own hands," she explains. As we reach the living room, she presses me down onto the mocha-coloured leather sofa.

While Claire goes to the cabinet to fix us each a drink, I bury my face into my hands, resting my elbows on my knees. I bitterly admit to myself that my aunt is right. Emilio Bertone is too fond of keeping things in his own hands. Too many things at the same time. Be it an illegal or a half-illegal thing – and that's the very reason why we are now in deep shit, up to our necks. To be correct, I'm the one in trouble, because of some psychopathic, mafia arsehole, who wants get even with my uncle using me. I don't have any illusions. I don't think Emilio has become soft in his old age and took the path of righteousness. The power struggle between individual families rages on in the streets. Band wars, regional conflicts for control over the cocaine market have demanded more lives in the past years than before. Although my uncle has never actually said that he is connected to drug business, I wouldn't hold my breath for the old mafia don. Anyway, I'm not convinced that when it comes to making money, selling weapons is a more ethical way than dealing with drugs.

In the meantime, my aunt sits back to my side, and hands me a glass with some golden liquid in it, but before she would say anything, she takes a sip from her own glass. It doesn't escape my attention that the voice of this otherwise unshakable and cheerful woman is now sad and unusually broken.

"We were so looking forward to seeing you. I know you don't like to come here, that's why I was going to meet you at the shop.

"I'm sorry," I start powerlessly, only to give up with a sigh. What could I say? It's a fact that I try to restrict my contact with the Bertones to a minimum. It's better this way. Safer. We both know that.

"The boys keep mentioning you when we speak," she shrugs, referring to my cousins. "It's such a shame that we have to meet under these circumstances."

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