



FREE
CHAPTER
SAMPLER

IN THE
COMPANY
OF
Killers

ELORA COOK

IN THE
COMPANY
OF
Killers



IN THE
COMPANY
OF
Killers

ELORA COOK



First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Hodder Children's Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Elora Cook, 2025

Cover art copyright © Elena Masci, 2025

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly
in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to
real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without
the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published
and without a similar condition including this condition being
imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 44497 934 3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The paper and board used in this book
are made from wood from responsible sources.



Hodder Children's Books
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

The authorised representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland, 8 Castlecourt Centre,
Castleknock Road, Castleknock, Dublin 15, D15 YF6A, Ireland

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

*To my parents, for giving me a name and a voice
that helped me soar*



CHAPTER ONE

Tasha

THE LIGHTS FROM THE CHANDELIERS GLIMMERED ABOVE MY party guests, illuminating every whispered secret and haute couture gown. Popping one more caviar-spread cracker into my mouth, I turned to survey the glamor. Every student at Scarsdale Country Day milled around my home. Elaborate satin and chiffon dresses in intoxicating colors grazed the polished floors while their tux counterparts were smoothed to perfection.

I'd made it clear in the invites that anyone dressed less than perfect wouldn't be allowed in. From all the beauty surrounding me, it was clear my influence hadn't faltered over the summer. Thank God for that. It was always a hassle to remind my peers who was in charge around here when their minds were so mutable, ready to change their opinions and support with the shift of the tide. But with everyone already following my lead, tonight's fourth and final Return to Scarsdale Soirée was destined to go well.

It *had* to. Or else.

The serpent-green satin of my custom Vivienne Westwood gown moved with the shape of my legs as I headed into the thick of the party,

the crowd parting to let me through. Anyone worthy enough to get an invite to a Nicastro event knew better than to stand in our way.

“Look at them, lapping it all up,” I said, sliding next to my older sister, Amelia. She stood alone by the grand piano, as the pianist played *Primavera* by Ludovico Einaudi. “And you said the extra food stations and aerial performers would be too much.”

As per tradition, the first half of the party was when everyone floated around the room indulging in the caviar or oyster stations and taking pictures by the custom floral installations. The second half was when the DJ arrived and phones were locked away so the next round of fun could begin.

Amelia sipped her champagne, each bubble like a perfect diamond to enjoy. Her warm caramel-brown curls fell down her shoulders, accentuating the lavender purple in her Chloé dress and soft beige skin. We both inherited most of our looks from our father, but only I got his midnight-black hair and “excitable temperament” as our mother used to put it before she packed only a carry-on to Milan and never returned.

Please. I wore my bitch badge with pride. There was nothing excitable about it.

“I never doubted you’d make this a showstopper of a party,” Amelia replied. “I’m only surprised Dad let you blow the budget more than last year.”

I shrugged, grabbing a glass of the Dom Perignon being passed around.

“He knows how necessary my soirée is for the school year.”

My sister delicately laughed. “Please, Tasha. It’s because he’d do anything for you.”

I smiled in return and found my gaze wandering out of our oversize living room to the closed office door down the hall. Our father wasn’t in his personal office right now—he made a point of going down to our Upper East Side penthouse tonight—but his presence still hovered

throughout the wings of our home and really, anywhere else he went. We might rule over this town and all of Westchester as a family, but it was my father who wore the crown. The adoration and respect I got from my Scarsdale Country Day classmates was child's play compared to the level he received from every person he met.

I nudged her in the side. "You make it sound like I'm the only one."

Amelia sighed, then opened her mouth again to say something else when the doorbell chimed through the rooms. Her attention caught on the sound immediately, because only one person in our circle rang the bell.

"What's Julian doing here?" I couldn't help but scrunch my face up.

Amelia turned to me, her hazel eyes apologetic. She grabbed my hand, giving it a squeeze, and I relished in the softness of it... save for the hard, ugly band nestled on her ring finger. "He's taking me to Midtown for dinner."

"But what about my *soirée*?" I asked, gesturing around. "You never miss it."

"I'm sorry, Tasha." My sister let go of my hand. "You always make sure I have a good time, but I'm twenty-three and engaged now. This isn't a party I can enjoy anymore."

I followed Amelia to the front doors, a knife twisting deeper in my stomach when her face beamed bright as she revealed her fiancé. It was bad enough Julian stole our father's attention every time he could. He had to rip Amelia away, too.

Julian's sharp cheekbones and flimsy arms pulled Amelia in for a kiss. "There you are, my darling," he said. He presented a small box in a mint-green tint with the name of a French patisserie embossed on it. "I brought you an opera cake. But only the one—wouldn't want that beautiful dress to tighten."

Amelia smirked as she took the gift while it took all *my* willpower not to shove him and his Armani suit back down the stairs he'd walked up.

How she found him charming I would never know. The Henderson

family owned a global hotel chain, but all the top positions to run a major enterprise like that were taken by his siblings when it became clear Julian would rather trash their Presidential Suites and get caught in one scandalous situation after another than take their family empire seriously. So his little head decided the next best plan was to get cozy with my sister and kiss my father's ass to try to take over our empire. The worst part was our father adored him for it.

I glanced at the box and then to him. He didn't deserve the suit. He didn't deserve a lot of things in this house. "If you're so concerned about her dress, why don't you do us all a favor and stuff the cake into that wide, gaping mouth of yours instead?"

My sister threw me a glare and I inwardly rolled my eyes. She hated when I dug a wedge between my future brother-in-law and me. But I didn't care what he thought of me. The chance that I would ever like him was as possible as drinking beer out of a dirty funnel.

As in, never happening.

"We'll be going now," Amelia said pointedly, grabbing Julian's hand and stepping out into the cooling night air.

As usual, our house manager, Charles, appeared like a puff of smoke, holding Amelia's favorite light jacket out to her.

"If it gets cold, Miss Nicastro," he said.

Amelia took her coat, smiling at Charles, before bringing her attention back to me. "Be good. And don't embarrass the poor freshmen too much this year."

Right. With my sister making an abrupt exit, I'd gotten off track.

"Won't make any promises," I replied, but Amelia had already turned away.

"Tasha!"

From the crowd, my life preserver emerged in Dior and Versace. I exchanged grins with Val, success already glinting in her eyes. If I could rely on anyone to keep me focused, it was my best friend.

"I've picked our contestants out." Val frowned. "What happened to Amelia?"

I waved her question off, moving back to the thick of the party. "Julian happened."

Val flicked her cat-lined eyes over to the dance floor, each movement she made showing new shades in her ombre gown. We'd gone to the same private schools since kindergarten, growing closer with each grade we graduated to. It was easy to stay close when her father, Richard Costa, worked as the chief legal officer of Nicastro Developments.

"Her loss." She handed me a small stack of flash cards and a microphone. "Now it's showtime. Remember, I expect only the best performance from you."

I chuckled, pulling a few of my short locks behind my ear and shaking my bangs from my eyes. Maybe it was excitement—and nerves—making me laugh. I *was* about to put myself on display to the hundreds of students in attendance for the final time.

I winked at her. "Enjoy the show."

With a flick of my wrist, I silenced the pianist and moved toward the dance floor, ready to take this song to its crescendo.

"It's that time, everyone!" I exclaimed, thrusting my hand in the air as I strutted onto the black-and-gold dance floor. A grin spread wide across my face when the crowd cheered and whooped. "I'm happy to see so many of you are as excited as I am. As you should all know, and if you *don't*, you'll soon find out, each year during my Return to Scarsdale Soirée, a cluster of freshmen are plucked from the crowd and called upon to answer some crucial questions before they can be properly welcomed into our school. And if they don't answer correctly?" I cocked a brow, a thrill running through my veins when the crowd shouted out the answer. "Exactly. One item off. Without further ado, these are the freshmen I want on the dance floor with me."

I listed off the names of thirteen students Val had randomly chosen

and caught sight of them immediately from the way their shoulders went as rigid as an overstuffed sales rack.

“Hurry, hurry,” I cooed into the microphone. Finally, the thirteen of them made their way toward me. “The questions are easy, I promise.”

Not, but they’d figure that out soon enough.

“Now,” I continued, “any question you answer correctly means all of you are in the clear. Any wrong answers mean you discard something you’re wearing into this basket over here. Are we clear?” When the crowd cheered in response, I exclaimed, “Then let’s get started!”

I strutted around the room, letting everyone get a good look at the work I’d put into my legs over the summer, and grinned wickedly at the first three questions on the card. There was no way these freshmen would have a clue what the answers were.

“Our first question of the night”—I spun around to face the chosen freshmen like a lioness spotting her next meal—“has to do with my older sister, Amelia. In her junior year at Scarsdale Country Day, what designer did she wear to homecom—”

Boom. Boom. Boom.

I paused as every head in the room turned toward the front doors. Anyone who was fashionably late already arrived over an hour ago. So who the hell was banging on my door?

Charles materialized right away and opened the door to inspect the guest. Before he could greet them, the person shoved the door fully open and stormed in.

Oh, for the love of—

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, curling my lip up.

Scarlett Green flipped her blond blowout over her tanned shoulder and sneered at me as her friends pushed in after her. “To enjoy the party, obviously. And look, we’re just in time for your little Scarsdale hazing ceremony to make you feel relevant. Perfect.”

Flames licked at the insides of my chest, ready to unleash all over her

baby face. Everyone from Scarsdale Country Day was invited to my soiree, *except* for Scarlett and her group of cancerous cells she called friends. That tradition started after they torched the kitchen trying to make flaming cocktails during my first party. Scarlett spent the rest of freshman year trying to humiliate me for kicking her out.

“Oooh, so mean. How will I ever survive such a burn,” I replied. “Does it hurt your feelings that you weren’t invited again?”

At one time, we had actually been friends. But the memories felt like a fabrication, something I’d dreamt up that my mind tricked me into thinking were real.

Scarlett let out a sharp laugh. “Not at all. I would never be caught dead at this party and your pathetic attempt to be liked. But a certain *someone* came home from boarding school for his senior year, and I thought, *What a perfect opportunity for a reunion with everyone already here.*”

My stomach dropped as I lowered the microphone. I didn’t ask who she was referring to, because there was only one person she could bring here that would rattle me.

I was desperate to be wrong.

But then he stepped through the door.

“How’s everyone doing tonight?” He hollered, throwing his arms high and wide and showing off the large bottle of champagne he held at the neck. “The one and only Leonardo Danesi is *back*, baby!”

Leo’s cocky grin spread wide when the room roared with excitement.

Even after four years away, he could still get everyone who knew him to think he was some god descended from the heavens.

“Get out.” Venom laced itself in every word. When he didn’t notice—or listen to—me, I screamed, “*Get out of my house!*”

Leo’s honey-brown eyes cut to me. The intensity in them could make another girl weak in the knees, but I stood my ground.

I hadn’t seen him since I was thirteen years old. Since that day we stood in my old riding stable and he tore my heart in two.

Almost every piece of his boyish self then was peeled away and the body of a near man had been stitched over him. His dark roots were now sun-kissed from his time in California, swept back in the messy style of a guy who barely put in any effort, yet somehow looked good anyway. The first three buttons on his black dress shirt were undone, showing off bits of his smooth skin while he stretched his neck. The only thing I still recognized was the faint dimple on his chin. Everything else about him was different. New.

And I still hated every bit of it.

"Hello to you, too, Nicaastro," he said.

"I know you heard what I said." I stayed locked in place, shoulders rigid and ready to fight. "Get out of my house and out of Scarsdale before I have security throw you out. And it won't be pretty." Tilting my head to the side, I purred, "Though it would be fun to see."

Leo barely hesitated before he moved closer. Enough to smell his rich, peppery cologne as he stared down at me. He held the champagne out. "But I brought you a special gift. Scarlett told me how much you like to drink now."

I glared at Scarlett. "Did she?"

A glint danced in his horrible eyes. "I'd hate to start off senior year in the great Natasha Nicaastro's bad books."

Others might have believed his act of sincerity. Maybe I would've, too, if it weren't for the smirk stretched wide across his face.

This champagne wasn't an olive branch. It was a test to see how easily I could fall for his lies.

If I gave in now, I'd be throwing a grenade at my carefully formed reputation. All anyone would see at school and beyond was a Nicaastro bending at the first pretty word out of a Danesi's mouth despite the hatred our families had shot at one another since his father's death.

No. I wouldn't accept Leo's fake peace offering.

But I could twist it in my favor.

I clicked my heels along the dance floor, leaving no distance between us. It was the only sound now that the party had gone silent. “May I?”

Leo studied me. After a few tense seconds, he complied and handed the champagne over.

The bottle was dense, weighed down by the amber liquid encased in thick glass with a gold seal wrapped around the neck. The size of it could easily fill half the empty glasses in this room. “It’s lovely. How much?”

Leo flexed his arms as he propped them behind his head. “Just shy of six grand.”

I nodded.

Then hurled it to the floor.

Champagne and glass splattered across the black-and-gold tiles and onto my shoes. A rupture of gasps rippled through the crowd, but I kept my composure and gaze leveled on Leo.

“Oops.”

Leo stayed completely still. No heat in his face, no spluttering or angry words thrown at me. I wanted him to lash out. To make a scene. That was easier to navigate than a masked face whose moves I couldn’t predict. If this was the way he’d always react when I tried to put him in his place, I had no idea what to expect for the rest of the school year.

“That’s what I get for coming all this way?” he finally replied. “And here I thought we might finally get along again.”

I picked up the top of the broken bottle, wanting nothing more than to plunge it into his chest. How *dare* he say that after what he said to me, what he did. “You and I both know that’ll never happen, Danesi.”

Saying his family’s name coated my tongue with a vile taste, but the gaze of hundreds of eyes rippled like electricity down my skin. I had them all. Now they waited for the final act.

Grabbing Leo’s hand, I slapped the bottle neck into his open palm. “Now for the last time, take your discount friends and get out of here.”

Leo stared me down for a long, breathless moment. I hadn't held his attention like this for years. I put up a fortress of steel walls after our last encounter, promising to keep him out for good. But the longer he looked at me now, the harder those walls shook, wanting to bring me right back to that naïve thirteen-year-old girl I used to be.

Finally, he closed his fingers around the glass, his gaze never leaving mine. "Fine, Nicastro. You win."

I smiled, pride draping over me like a warm mink coat. Of course I won. It was what I did best.

Turning away, Leo gestured for his friends to follow him back to the foyer. Scarlett's scowl sent an adrenaline rush through me that was sweeter than any gold-coated treat. If she hated this, it could only have gone perfectly.

The household staff stepped in armed with mops and brooms to quickly clean up the mess. I moved out of the way and onto dry ground, catching Val's approving eye.

"You really do shine when all eyes are on you," she said. "Especially when you're humiliating Leo."

I fluffed my dress. "It's a natural instinct."

Scarlett and the others hurried out, but Leo paused at the doors and glanced back at me. Our eyes locked through the crowd and held on to each other.

"Miss?" A server appeared, offering a fresh glass of bubbling champagne.

I accepted and raised it to Leo. A smile played on my lips as he scowled, but it vanished once he slipped out into the night.

Four years away. Four years of silence. Of hatred. And he waltzes back in here, into my life, as if nothing happened.

I wanted to be disgusted by it, but really, I was at the edge of a skyscraper, wondering if I was one push away from ruin.



CHAPTER TWO

Tasha

MY BONES STILL HUMMED WITH THE SUCCESS OF MY PARTY two days later. I'd put on a fantastic *soirée*, positioning myself as Scarsdale Country Day's queen for the last, and most important, year of my high school life. All while stomping a much-desired foot into Leo's cocky scheme. Nothing was coming between me and my power over this school.

I packed up my things when the last bell rang and texted Val, telling her to meet me in the Donor Lounge.

Students quickly moved out of the way like weeds bowing to the wind as I walked by with my chin held high. No one had the nerve to look me in the eye—just the way I liked it. All day, I'd heard whispers of gossip about what happened at my *soirée*. Thankfully, the conversations were in my favor. Leo Danesi thought he could humiliate me in front of our whole school, and I'd gladly served him up a large platter of it instead.

The freshly buffed DONOR LOUNGE sign came into view a few minutes later. It was reserved for students with families who supported the

school aside from tuition fees, the Donor Students as we were called. The room was designed so we had a view of the courtyard and weren't too far from any of our classrooms. We had our own bathrooms, constant refreshments, plush couches . . .

And the best part of it? The mark of exclusivity.

Although everyone paid hefty fees to get into the school, Scarsdale Country Day needed far more money to keep it well maintained. The main building was built like a miniature castle nearly a century ago with three expansive levels and sprawling east and west wings. Every floor and room had been renovated to fit modern needs with only the best materials and staff to keep it running. Students had access to every type of sport imaginable, and they were all available on the school's property. With tennis, lacrosse, and polo being our specialties.

At the farthest edge of campus was the Scarsdale Polo Club—one of the nicest in New York—and definitely the nicest for a private school. The twenty-stall stable sat like an elegant swan watching over the field where the team practiced and held games. It was one of the most difficult clubs in school to join.

Obviously, that was the one I was part of.

I scanned my key card against the Donor Lounge's door and opened it when the light turned green.

Five students relaxed on the dark emerald couches. Three girls, two guys. One of them sat with his back to me while two of the girls stretched their exposed legs across his lap. Non-donor students weren't allowed in the lounge. But naturally the lure to bring some in anyway and piss off the other Donor Students was too strong of an urge for some.

I crossed my arms. "Danesi."

Resting his toned arm on the back of the couch, Leo craned his neck around. His hooded eyes did a bored sweep of me. "Yes?"

I cocked a brow at the girls lounging with him. One of them, of course, was Scarlett. When the feud between my family and Leo's started, the

Greens quickly became the Danesis' lapdogs, desperate to raise Evergreen Pharmaceutical's stock price by establishing stores in all the real estate the Danesis owned when my father refused to partner with them.

The second guy among their group was a donor, Jonathan Bakker, but the two extra girls were not. "I see you're already back to breaking the rules," I said to Leo.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." A grin stretched across Leo's lips as he turned to his friends. I could've slapped it off his face.

"This is our space, too." Scarlett leaned against the couch, rubbing her smooth leg against Leo's thighs. "We can do anything—and invite anyone—we want. You don't have any power in here."

My mouth itched to snap a few choice names I had for both of them, but I thought of what my father had engrained in me. A Nicastro didn't show all their cards, even if those cards held enough power to throw someone to their knees.

Leo looked back at me again. "If you're done now, we'd like to get back to relaxing in peace and not listening to your dull bitching."

My brows shot up my forehead. Oh, that was *it*. I'd remember my father's words starting tomorrow.

"Look, you little shit," I hissed, stepping closer.

I was ready to tear his throat out and eat it raw when the door clicked open and a familiar voice spoke.

"What's going on?"

I turned, my breath hitching, as I looked up at a boy with gel-smoothed hair, silky olive skin, and full lips on a face I knew far too well. It was a face I'd kissed and dumped not two weeks ago on the final day of his family's trip to St. Barts.

Ravi Ferreira. My ex-boyfriend.

He swept one look over the scene, his quiet, dominating energy expanding through the room, before he looked down at me. "Are they bothering you, Tasha?"

“Who the fuck cares if we are?” Jonathan replied like a fool.

Nerves rattled in my windpipe. I couldn't keep my gaze on Ravi's and instead stared at a photograph hanging on the wall. I'd broken his heart, yet here he was protecting me like nothing had changed between us. And here *I* was getting the same fluttering anxiety in my chest when he was around, quelling the fire roaring inside.

“It's not anything you need to worry about.”

“Yeah, listen to her, Ferreira,” Jonathan said. “She's not your bitch to take care of anymore.”

The girls gasped on my behalf. That comment was welcoming a world of pain from my fist, but I stayed quiet with Ravi here. In the three years we dated, he was the one who jumped to my defense before I could say anything. It was an easy habit to fall into—apparently even after we broke up.

Ravi stalked over to Jonathan; his glare strong enough to melt skin. “Speak to her like that again, Bakker,” he growled, “and this will be your last day at this school.”

Jonathan had the decency to show a hint of concern. As he should. The Ferreriras weren't just another wealthy family. They were tech billionaires who held more power in the influential people they knew than they did in cash. No one was immune from their wrath, especially not a loudmouth like Jonathan.

“Whoa, man, no need to get so harsh,” Jonathan replied, raising his hands in front of him. “It was a stupid joke. No one here thinks it's true.”

We all knew he was full of it, but Ravi let him get away with his insult. This time.

He pulled back, cutting his dark gaze to the last person I wanted him to notice.

“You look familiar,” Ravi said to Leo. “Have we met before?”

Leo rubbed his chin, keeping his expression wiped free of emotion. “Nah, man. Can't say I've ever seen your face.”

“Come on, Leo, you’ve heard of Ravi Ferreira,” Scarlett replied, swatting him playfully on the arm. “His family owns Aurora Technology.”

He held his focus on Ravi, still with that blank look on his face. “Oh yeah. I think I’ve heard of you.”

“What an honor,” Ravi replied dryly. He moved back to stand beside me, and his hand brushed briefly against mine. I knew it was deliberate. Apparently, so did Leo. His gaze caught the movement and went down to our hands before he looked back up, staring straight at me.

I went warm all over against my will. I didn’t need to explain anything to him. He shoved his way out of my life long ago.

“It’s best if you and your friends find another area to occupy,” Ravi continued.

Leo didn’t look away from me. “Does he always speak for you, Nicastro?”

Of course not, caught on the edge of my lips and hovered there—taunting me. I glared at him, willing myself to answer.

“Only when she needs me to,” Ravi replied.

A ghost of a look passed over Leo’s face. Quick enough that I could’ve missed it. I wished I had. The last thing I needed was for *him* to show an ounce of judgment.

I crossed my arms, digging my nails into my palms to distract from the anger coursing through my bloodstream.

“So?” Ravi asked. “Are you going to make this more difficult for yourself or not?”

Silence passed. The stereo played. The mini fridge hummed. Muffled chatter swelled from other students in the hall. I held my breath through it all. I never would’ve expected Leo Danesi to have a power standoff with my ex-boyfriend. Guess God could have a bad sense of humor, too.

Finally though, Leo slowly rose from the couch, prompting his friends to follow suit.

"Fine, Ferreira," he said. "You win. Enjoy your alone time with Nicastro."

I held myself together, raising my chin at him instead. "Welcome back, Danesi."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as he brushed past me before he disappeared out into the hall.

Once they were all gone, I cleared my throat and faced Ravi. "Thanks for your help, but I could've handled it myself."

"You know I can't stand by when you need protecting." His eyes, the color of summer's green grass, softened. "No matter where we stand."

My jaw clenched. "When did you get back from Brasília?"

"Late last night," he replied. "My mother wanted me to stay home a few nights longer after what . . . happened in St. Barts."

I nodded, not quite meeting his eye. Three years ago, Ravi had only ever visited New York as a tourist. Now he lived nearby in Bedford Corners. The Ferreiros bought an estate there so his oldest sister could work for a distinguished New York law firm known for their pro bono work for vulnerable women and children. Ravi followed her to go to private school in the States, fatefully making us meet on the first day of freshman year.

He'd set his sights on me immediately, and I'd gladly accepted his pursuit. Throughout our relationship, I'd stayed wrapped in his arms. Until things . . . shifted.

I started feeling fidgety when we were together, a sensation I couldn't push away. It didn't help that my father, drinking up our relationship like it were his own, started musing over me *marrying* Ravi. Like it was an inevitability, a choice already made for me. On the Ferreiros' recent family trip, Mrs. Ferreira started showing me photos of engagement rings. That was it. I broke things off, needing to think, to *breathe*, and it was the only way I would get it. Even if it meant hurting Ravi in the process.

I had no interest in making small talk with him, but he made no move to leave, and from the look on his face, he had a reason to stay. I glanced at the closed door, willing my best friend to materialize. What was taking Val so damn long?

“Can we talk?” Ravi asked.

And there it was.

I stepped back from him, shaking my head weakly. “Ravi, I still need more time.”

“Ignore what our families think,” he replied, closing the distance between us and grasping my hands before I had a chance to hide them. “We don’t need to take the next step in our relationship right away. All I want to do is make you happy, and it’s killing me that you think being apart is the way you can get that.”

“It’s *not* the only way I can be happy,” I said. “But it’s what I need right now as I figure things out.”

Ravi pressed his lips into a thin line, looking ready to continue this argument, but I was saved when the lounge door opened with a flourish and Val finally strutted into the room.

She halted when she saw us. Her long highlighted brown hair hung over her shoulders and a soft blush accentuated her high cheekbones, complimenting the natural tan she got from summering in Santorini. “Hello?”

“Val!” I exclaimed, pulling my hands free of Ravi’s. “There you are.” I hurried over and linked arms with her before turning to Ravi. “We need to get going. But I’ll see you later, okay?”

Ravi rubbed his mouth, giving a solemn nod. “I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk.”

My ears immediately burned, but I forced a smile to keep him happy and guided the two of us down the hall—fast.

“What the hell did I walk in on?” Val said when we were far from the lounge. “Are you two getting back together? Knew it.”

“Nothing happened, and no, we’re not. Where were you?”

“I was handling some last-minute stuff for my trip to Scottsdale with Mom,” she replied as we made our way to the donors’ parking lot where her silver Mercedes waited for us. “She wants to leave Friday morning now.”

I groaned. “I really wish you weren’t. Who’s going to be my buffer on Saturday?”

My father was throwing one last hurrah to celebrate Amelia and Julian’s engagement before the wedding next month. Everyone connected to our family was invited to see his enthusiasm for the nuptials. Julian’s family wasn’t coming until the big day, but one Henderson was plenty to deal with. I thought I would have Val to keep me from making a scene and embarrassing Amelia, but then she had to go and accept a girls’ weekend to Arizona with her mother instead.

Usually, I loved parties, but this one was going to test that.

“You’ll be fine,” Val replied as she unlocked her car. “Latte before I drop you home?”

I shook my head and climbed in the passenger seat. “Can’t. I’ve got a date with the shooting range.”



The blast vibrated through my arms, rattling every nerve inside me. I didn’t waste any time hanging on my perfect shot when the next target swept by faster, pulling the trigger and firing the bullet right into the bullseye again.

Bang, bang, bitch.

The target machine groaned before coming to a halt. Victor pulled his hand away from the switch, lips puckered and nodding.

He was my trainer, but also my father’s best friend and right hand in the family business. Knowing him all my life, Victor fit into the uncle

role with ease since my actual extended family couldn't be bothered. Or had died in Uncle Luca's case.

"Nice work. I knew that extra practice would pay off."

I grinned and pulled my earmuffs off. "I aim to please."

Victor gave me a rough pat on the back, revealing the fresh river of bruises running along his left bicep and down to his knuckles. Unease went through me as I glanced at them again. He wore bruises and scars like his tattoos, new ones popping up every week and overlapping with the ones still fading. I wasn't allowed to ask where he got them, and he never explained.

"Then you can go bench-press for me, too."

The grin fell from my face. I shouldn't have said anything. I could do the other weights, but the bench press was the worst. Victor turned into a sadist when I used it, not letting me stop until I leaked sweat like a fountain.

Our personal gym held regular equipment, but our father insisted years ago that Amelia and I train with Victor in combat fighting and learn how to shoot. He always promised us we were safe with our security dutifully around, but he wanted the extra peace of mind in knowing his daughters could take care of themselves, if necessary. According to him, operating in the one percent meant we had to stay constantly vigilant.

I dragged myself into the weights room and straddled the bench. "Forty pounds. No more."

Victor scratched the gray stubble on his chin, cutting me a look that said otherwise. "Sure." He added the weights and stepped behind my head to spot me, his T-shirt barely containing the years of muscle he'd built to make up for his lack of height.

When I heaved the cold metal rod off its stand though, I swore. Should've known. "I said *forty*. Not *fifty-five*."

Victor arched a brow. "Are you admitting you can't handle the pressure?"

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes.

I jerked my chin at the two-and-a-half-pound weights nearby. "Add another five."

Victor smirked as I set the bar down and lifted myself to a sitting position. While he secured the extra two and a half pounds to each side of my bar, I fidgeted with my gloves, ignoring the dull ache in my muscles from weight lifting over the weekend, too.

"I've always been impressed by how often you push past your comfort level," a steady voice said.

I spooked, whipping around to look at my father.

He stood by the open doorway in an impeccable suit, one hand resting easy in his jacket pocket. When people saw my father, they hurried to say hello, charming their way into his good graces. It was an easy thing to want when he was a man who could make nearly any wish come true. We'd held influence in New York for decades, ever since we brought the family business, Nicastrro Developments, to the States three generations ago.

All I cared about though was the sly smile playing on his weathered, handsome face. A smile as rare as a black pearl and one that he only let his daughters see.

"Dad!" I slid off the bench press and stood. My first instinct was to rush over and give him a hug, but the large sweat patch on my tank top from my earlier cardio stopped me. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to see you're getting much better at your marksmanship. Though there is one habit you still haven't broken."

I stayed quiet as he headed over to the shooting range and picked up one of the handguns with ease. After flicking the machine back on, he raised the weapon and sent four bullets flying to the same target before it had moved into center frame.

"You're still twisting your wrist too much to the right when you

fire.” He faced me, demonstrating what he was referring to. “You need to tighten it to keep your aim true. Understand?”

I nodded, hoping he didn’t notice the flush in my skin. He was one of the best shooters I knew. The easiest way to make him proud was to get just as good as him.

“Trying to show me up, Gabriel?” Victor asked.

“I’d never dream of it,” he replied, strolling over and slapping his friend playfully on the back. “Except for every time I do.”

Their grins would look feral to an outsider, but to me they were endearing.

“Are you here to watch the rest of my training?” I asked, already knowing the answer was no. He hadn’t done anything spontaneous in years, putting everything in his life into a schedule. Including family time with Amelia and me.

My father tipped his chin to me. “I wanted to talk to you. It’s about Saturday’s party.”

I cut my attention to Victor when he grunted softly. Whatever this was, he already knew about it.

“I’ll go grab us some fresh water,” Victor said, already en route to the exit.

I frowned as he closed the door behind him and turned back to my father. “I’m getting the feeling I should be concerned.”

He chuckled, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I’ve updated the guest list. I’m telling you this so you won’t be thrown off when they arrive on Saturday.”

My heart quickened like my body already knew what name he would say before my mind could catch up. “Who?”

His gaze was unwavering. “The Danesis.”

“*What?*” I ripped away from his touch. He hated when someone raised their voice, but it was impossible in a moment like this. “Why would you *ever* do that? Sloane Danesi tried to ruin your name!”

The Danesis used to be our closest family friends. My father and Angelo Danesi were always full of roaring laughter and flowing wine whenever we got together. But after Angelo died in a head-on collision, everything changed.

My father wouldn't let us see them. With the things Leo said to me before he stormed out of my life . . . I understood why. The Danesis were looking for someone to throw their anger at, to drag down with them, so they chose us. I'd never seen my father so stressed trying to weather that storm and come out the other side with our reputation still intact. Thankfully, we'd made it through, but not without first losing my mother to Milan and then later Uncle Luca to a boating accident.

All that pain and loss was too much for a thirteen-year-old to experience, and yet, somehow, I made it through alive.

"Because I've invited many powerful families to celebrate my first daughter's upcoming wedding," he replied. "Families that are friends and those who are in debt to me from the times I've saved them from their own greed and stupidity. Just because we've had our share of issues with the Danesis doesn't mean they should sit out from such a joy-filled celebration. Sloane has known Amelia since she was a toddler."

I stared blankly at him. There had to be more to it. I could hear the instinct whispering in my ear, nudging me to probe his explanation further. "Dad, it sounds like you're using Amelia as a pawn in some game. Don't you care how she'll feel about this?"

He scoffed, folding his hands tight enough to make the knuckles go white. "She's far from a pawn. Amelia has plenty on her mind right now that I doubt she'll notice their presence. There will be a lot more security on the night, too."

My eyes widened. "Is something going on?"

"For now, let's be on a need-to-know basis." He took a few steps back and shot me a discerning look. "And remember our rules about the Danesis. My invite does not mean you're welcome to drop your guard

around them. Specifically when it comes to Leo. I know you two were close, but we still need them at arm's length. Can you promise me that?"

"That's an easy promise to make," I replied.

My father nodded, rolling his shoulders back. "Good to hear."

"What if I were your extra eyes for the night?" I asked. "Everyone will be so focused on you and Amelia, no one will notice me. I can watch the Danesis . . . or anyone else."

But really, I meant *only* the Danesis. If Leo was stepping into my house a second time in a week, I needed to make sure he didn't touch anything other than what the caterers brought in. I didn't trust that family not to use this party as an opportunity to humiliate us in some way.

My father's dark eyes searched my face, his a fortress I couldn't decipher. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

I crossed my arms. "Do you think I'm not capable?"

"The opposite." He came closer to me, cupping my cheek in his warm hand. "I've known how capable you are for a long time."

My brows pulled close while I leaned into his touch. "Why do I feel like there's more to this?"

He chuckled and let his hand fall back to his side. "What do you think about the family business?"

"It's given us the life we have, so I'd say I'm a fan." My eyes tightened. "Why?"

He paused for a moment before finally replying, "Because I'd like to bring you in. There'd be some . . . cultural hiccups that'd take some time to get used to, but I think you can handle it."

Shock rushed through my body and stole my voice for a few seconds. He'd never hinted at wanting me involved before.

Nicastro Developments acquired and developed real estate across the East Coast. No one could go with a better developer than ours. At one point my family owned nearly all of Lower Manhattan as we created

the city's current real estate. The business had steadily grown since my father took over.

"Have you asked Amelia to work for you, too?"

Although I doubted she'd say yes. My sister loved her job as a curator at the Met.

"No, I don't think that would be a good idea," he replied, the fortress reappearing on his face. "But do you like the sounds of it for yourself?"

I mused over my answer. Until now, I'd been so focused on maintaining power in Scarsdale Country Day, I hadn't considered what I would want afterward. With such a clear invitation from my father though, I had the chance to soar higher than I'd ever imagined. Maybe even shove Julian out of the top spot if I felt like it. I would never know if I didn't dip my toes in.

I nodded, a grin spreading across my face. "I don't see why not. As long as you promise I won't be doing data entry until my fingers bleed. If I had to sit at a laptop all day, I think I'd combust."

My father replicated my grin, grabbing my shoulder and giving it a loving squeeze. "That's my girl. And of course I wouldn't. You're too much like me; I can never sit still for long either."

"What's got you two grinning widely?"

I turned as Amelia walked into the gym with a white Met tote slung over her shoulder and a lush bouquet cradled in her arms like a newborn baby.

"I've let Tasha know Ravi accepted his invitation to the party," our father answered before I could. "We may be back in the Ferreiras good graces before the end of the week. Isn't that wonderful?"

I wasn't sure why he was lying to Amelia about our conversation, but I wasn't going to be foolish enough to contradict him.

"Yes," my sister replied, glancing my way. "Assuming you want to get back together with him, Tasha?"

I stiffly nodded. "I'm thinking about it."

It wasn't a total lie.

"I have to go. I have a meeting with some suppliers in ten minutes." Our father leaned over and kissed my cheek before moving toward the doorway. "I'll see you two at dinnertime."

He stopped when he reached Amelia, kissing her cheek as well. When he pulled away and slipped back down the hall, my sister turned to me.

"Now that he's gone," she came closer, her eyes brightening, "tell me what you two *really* talked about. A boy has never made you grin that widely. Not even Ravi."

I pressed a hand to my mouth to try and hide my smile, but it was pointless. My sister knew me too well.

So I spilled everything to her.



Leo

I SHOULD'VE JUMPED IN THE DAMN OCEAN RATHER THAN come to this place.

The clock on the wall clicked to two thirty in the afternoon, marking two hours since I'd fallen for Mom's strings-attached gift and ended up at Greenwich Country Club for this meeting. She'd offered Dad's black Ferrari in exchange for coming with her instead of going to school. *Just once*, she promised. I regretted that choice the second my sorry ass sat in this chair. I wanted nothing to do with the business Mom and her associates discussed, but I was locked in until she set me free.

Before Dad's death, I used to enjoy coming to the club for rounds of golf or causing trouble with friends. But ever since Mom took over the family business, all visits were hijacked to this private room where a group of wolves dressed like sheep sat around figuring out how to make our empire richer—by whatever means necessary. She didn't want to hold *these* types of meetings at the office near our house in Greenwich, Connecticut. One of our long-standing hangouts had to be seized instead.

I turned to my older brother seated beside me. Carter leaned against his cushioned leather chair, one loafered foot crossed over the other, and held a pen in his hand like a Marlboro. When he noticed my gaze, his ocean-gray eyes jumped to me, and he smirked.

Carter was just as much at fault for this. He'd worked for Mom and the rest of Danesi Properties since he graduated high school two years ago and could've made an excuse to get me out of this.

I'd been home for less than a week and already I was being hauled into the world I ran from. I'd avoided—and tried to forget—a lot of things while I was in California, but Mom made it clear the second I returned, those years were over. All because I got expelled from the Thatcher School for drunkenly brawling with another student on the anniversary of Dad's death.

"I've tried convincing the owners of the land we need in Worcester to sell to us, but they aren't budging," one of the associates said, continuing the conversation they'd had for the past hour over some new casino Mom wanted to build in Massachusetts. "If we can't get them to sell for our expansion, we'll need to rethink this entire location. The city's already made it clear they'll be down our throats if we try to build on our current acreage."

"I'm getting tired of your indifferent attitude, Samson. We have *many* forms of persuasion in our arsenal and yet, all you want to do is roll over and play dead?" Mom stabbed her laptop's keyboard with her red-coated nails. "We're getting that property and that's final. Or do I need to find myself a more competent group?"

Her associates shook their heads aggressively, satisfying Mom—for now. I pissed her off for being a son she couldn't control easily. Dealing with that was brutal enough; I couldn't imagine what it was like to sit at this table staring down her wrath without the protection of familial blood.

My family owned a long list of casinos and racetracks across New

England and a handful in the Midwest with the first opening in the sixties. At one point, Danesi Properties was seen as a true rival of Vegas casinos. But that power and reputation sunk as quickly as our cash flow when Dad died. Mom took over not long after that, trying to claw her way back up to our old status ever since.

“We’ll make it happen, Sloane,” another one of the associates said. “I’ve heard the husband’s an addict. We could plant some shit on them. Go big enough that the property’s seized. I have an in with the Worcester force that could get it in our hands easy.”

Carter scoffed. “Did you start your job yesterday? Might as well wait ‘til they drop dead at that point, and we *don’t* involve any law enforcement. Let’s torch the place so they’re forced to sell when they realize insurance will take forever. We could be breaking ground before the first snowfall—if they make it out alive.”

I rubbed a hand across my forehead, mumbling, “Jesus, Carter.” Unfortunately for me, my brother heard. So did Mom.

He elbowed my side. “Look at that, the second Danesi son *can* speak.”

“Do you have a suggestion you’d like to share, Leo?” Mom asked coolly.

I shifted in my chair. “I’ll pass.”

Mom could drag me to these meetings, make me transport briefcases full of unmarked cash, or whatever else she demanded of me, but she was never going to convince me to be an actual member of our twisted empire. Let alone inherit her position one day and risk dealing with a mess of dead bodies.

“It is a foolish idea though, burning their house down.” She narrowed her eyes at Carter, disdain deepening in the lines around her mouth. “We do things *discreetly*. Not light up our intentions for all to see. Either give me smart ideas or none at all. Or do you need to be demoted a second time?”

My brother cleared his throat, shifting in his seat. “My apologies, boss.”

The room stretched with silence while Mom went back to her laptop, not noticing—or caring—about the discomfort that formed with it.

I flicked my attention back to Carter who had pulled out his phone. A year later, and Mom still hadn't forgiven him for his screw up. I hadn't asked for the details. All I knew was Carter went behind her back and agreed to an under-the-table scheme with a union leader for a hospital-ity group. He didn't like how slow she was to give him responsibility and power within the business.

His grand plan to prove her wrong blew up in his face when that union head ended up working for the FBI and nearly got our entire organization shut down. Whatever ideas she had to groom him for her position erupted that day. Now here I was, the pound of flesh Mom thought she could mold into her perfect heir instead. *Thanks*, Carter.

"I'm getting a call from our supplier for the Boston racetrack," Carter said, pushing to his feet abruptly. "Permission to leave?"

Mom waved a hand at him, already moving on to another topic related to the Worcester casino. I zoned out for too long, not noticing Mom was trying to get my attention until she slapped the table. I jolted back to the room with everyone staring hard at me—most of all my mother.

"Sorry, what?"

Mom gave me a tight smile. "Go check on your brother. Make sure he realizes I expect him back at this meeting and not at the bar."

I nodded, rising from my chair. All *I* wanted to do was hang at the bar, but I kept that comment to myself.

Slipping out into the hall, I moved across the polished hardwood and past the floor-to-ceiling windows that gave an unobstructed view of the club's lush golf course. My brother wasn't right outside the doors, so I kept walking through the seating area and one of the dining rooms. When I was near the entrance, I caught sight of him standing outside talking to someone.

The stranger was a foot taller than Carter with a willowy figure underneath his unassuming collared shirt and navy dress pants. I couldn't make out much other than the profile of his face, but I could see Carter's. The look he gave the man put me on high alert.

Every line on his face was severe as he listened to the stranger speak. About what, I couldn't say. Whatever it was had my brother's full attention—and fury. He glanced around, then yelled something at the man before storming back to the main doors.

I stepped away from the windows right before Carter came back inside. He spooked when he saw me, but quickly recovered, melting back into his usual self.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Mom sent me to look for you."

Carter cocked a brow, stopping to fix his mousy-brown hair in a mirror. "Look at you following orders. And here I thought you'd put up a bigger fight before getting sucked into the family business."

I kept pace with him while walking back to the meeting. My brother swaggered through the club, grinning at a group of pretty girls heading out to the patio like nothing was amiss. Like the guy I saw out front was a mirage.

"Who was that you were talking to?" I asked. "Looked heated."

My brother glanced absently behind us and shrugged. "A guy named Ivan. He's some local antique dealer who's been harassing me for weeks trying to sell rare art to us. I've told him we're not interested, but he's persistent. As you saw."

I tilted my head, studying him closely. "And that's all he's selling? Rare art?"

In my family's world, you could never be sure.

Carter laughed, patting me lightly on the back as we reached the closed doors to the meeting space. "What happened to not caring about the business? Don't worry about it, Leo. That guy won't bother us again."

Not waiting for me to respond, he knocked lightly and opened the door, pulling us right back into the belly of the beast.



The front door closed behind me, echoing throughout the cold interior of home. It was muffled by the scuff of my shoes as I headed upstairs before Mom and Carter arrived, too. The second the meeting was over, I'd sped out of the club, wanting distance between that slog of an afternoon and getting ready for a fun night out with my friends.

I moved through a stark, quiet house. No staff mopping the floors, no sounds of our chef moving around the kitchen. I nearly shouted hello to make sure they all hadn't collectively quit when I stiffened.

One of our guards lay face down at the base of the stairs.

A cold sweat broke out over my skin. The guy wasn't moving and when I trailed my eyes up the rest of the stairs, I caught sight of three more toppled to the ground.

Oh, shit.

I nearly turned and bolted in the other direction if it weren't for one sound that broke through the sharp silence. A choked sob. And from the last person I wanted to hear it from.

With nausea thumping against the base of my throat, I stalked up the stairs, careful not to make any noise or trip over the bodies. I wanted to be wrong, but as I crept down the hall, a new smell hit my senses.

The staff kept the entire house scrubbed with a delicate lavender and jasmine scent Mom was strict about using. But this wasn't floral. It was metallic mixed with a subtle decaying musk.

And it was coming from my little sister's bedroom.

The door was slightly ajar as I approached, and rustling noises of multiple feet came from within. I hovered with my heart in my throat. Whoever was in there was good enough to break in and take down all

our security, and here I was without even a switchblade. What the hell did I do now?

“Okay, I’m done. Let’s take the girl and get out of here.”

I saw red.

Chuckling logic off a cliff, I hurled through the door—and froze.

Blood.

Smearred across her duvet and pillowcases, her bookshelves and wallpaper. All from the broken bodies of a dozen white doves thrown across the room.

But all that gore was irrelevant compared to the horror in front of me.

Two masked men stood in the bedroom with one holding a gun to my sister’s head.

Tears streamed down Sophia’s round cheeks, the nozzle of the gun digging through her golden-brown hair. Her body trembled violently underneath her junior high uniform, and the items in her bag were scattered on the floor.

“If you want her to live, you’ll back the hell off,” the one holding a gun to her head growled.

A storm lashed in my chest. In the moment my little sister needed me the most, I was useless to her.

“Let her go,” I croaked, hating myself for how weak I sounded.

The two men laughed, flashing their yellowed teeth at me through the holes in their masks.

“Yeah, fucking right,” the second one said. “Do you hear this Danesi kid? He’s lucky we don’t mow him down, too.”

“Why don’t you give him a little taste though? Nothing that’ll maim him for life.”

The second man grinned and pointed his gun at me. “I like the way you think.”

I nearly lunged for their guns, ready to push through their bullets to save my sister, when two gunshots fired behind me.

The masked men collapsed instantly. Sophia shrieked and fell to her knees, curling into herself. A shock of panic went through me thinking she was hurt until I realized she wasn't bleeding.

I looked behind me, clocking Mom lowering her handgun with Carter hovering beside her.

Relief cleared my vision, and I took in the two bodies. Their blood leaked out onto the hardwood below, eyes wide and mouths drooped open like they were in awe.

Bile burned in my stomach.

It wasn't my first time seeing freshly dead men, but it hadn't gotten easier. I hoped it never did.

I rushed over to Sophia, holding tight to her as she cried into my arms. This was the first time she had witnessed a murder. And it was one more way our world stripped away someone's innocence without any warning.

"Secure the room," Mom ordered Carter.

He didn't spring into action at first. Instead, Carter stared down at us, his face sheet white, before he snapped out of it and swept through the space, throwing open the ensuite bathroom door.

"Well, here's all the staff," Carter grimaced at the strained whimpers. "Everyone looks to be alive."

Mom stepped into the room and crouched in front of me and Sophia. "Are you hurt, honey?"

When she pulled her face away from me to shake her head, Mom straightened and went over to the bodies, jerking back their masks to look at their faces. I didn't recognize either man.

I faced my sister. "What happened?"

Sophia's entire upper body shook underneath my grip. She wouldn't

look at me as she replied, “I got home early and th-they must’ve been waiting for me. I screamed and the guards c-came running, but . . .”

A heavy weight settled onto my chest, pressing and pressing and pressing. If Mom and Carter hadn’t shown up, if we were one minute too late . . . Sophia could have been taken from us. Just like the day I watched Dad die. When tires screeched, bullets punctured metal, and my hands covered both eyes while I wondered if I’d ever open them again.

It was the reason I spiraled so much that I needed to redo freshman year.

But I wasn’t that fourteen-year-old kid anymore. Right now, I had to be strong. For Sophia and for myself. “Did they say what they wanted with you?”

A fresh set of tears formed in Sophia’s eyes. She wiped at them, but it did nothing to stop the steady flow. “All they said was something about ‘the boss’ wanting me to be brought in alive.”

Blood pulsed behind my eyes and roared in my ears. I glanced up at Mom and met her murderous gaze. Usually I had to hold myself back from cowering underneath it, but I was grateful for it now.

She jerked her chin to one of the bodies. “Look at this.”

I gently let go of Sophia and moved over to Mom, my skin breaking out in a cold sweat the closer I got to the bodies.

I swore under my breath.

She’d pulled back the sleeves of the dead men. And there, on both of their left forearms, was the tattoo of a lion.

The Nicastros’ symbol.

“They’ve cut through it though,” she said, pointing to a long knife-point scar running diagonally through the tattoos. “It’s fresh, too.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I replied. They could slash through their tattoos a hundred times and it still wouldn’t change the fact that they worked for

Gabriel Nicastro. The man I pictured burning in hell each time I said a prayer at church.

I reached down and grabbed one of the guns laying a few feet away and took out the bullets to verify my suspicions.

Seeing them again didn't make it any easier.

Etched into the side of the bullets was the lion. The one I knew far too well.

All at once, I was fourteen again. Cracking open the back seat door, crawling on the asphalt thinking more gunshots would fire if I rose. Looking ahead so I wouldn't see the bodies lying on the road around me. My bare knees had pressed into one of the bullets. The pain had been so fierce that at first, I'd thought it punctured my skin.

When I'd seen the outline of the lion, I wanted to believe it was another family. That it was a terrible misunderstanding. But it wasn't. It was deliberate. A message. Like this was.

"Take your sister out of here while Carter and I deal with everything," Mom ordered. "Carter, get a team over here *immediately*. Leo, are you listening to me?"

I snapped out of the nightmare and looked over at her. "What?"

Mom snapped her fingers toward Sophia. "Take your sister and leave. *Now*."

Pocketing the bullet, I moved on instinct, helping Sophia to her feet and gently guiding her out of the room. When we eventually made it down to the kitchen, I helped her sit on one of the barstools at the large island. The tea towels still hung out of place; dirty cutlery still sat beside the sink. Nothing was out of the ordinary down here despite how much had changed one floor above us.

"Sophia," I said softly, taking the seat beside her. When she stared off, fading into a husk of herself right in front of my eyes, I grabbed her clenched hands. "Hey, look at me."

She did, her breaths ragged and her face puffy. I pulled her wavy locks behind her ear, brushing my fingertips over her hot cheek. “I swear on my life that I’m going to get to the bottom of this so it won’t happen again.”

She shook her head. “Never swear anything on your life, Leo. Please.”

I nodded, brushing a fresh set of tears off her face.

“What’s going to happen next?” Sophia asked, her voice hoarse and wobbly.

I clutched her hands tighter in mine. The image of the gun pressed against her head was seared in my mind. Right beside the image of Dad dead at the wheel. “I don’t know.”

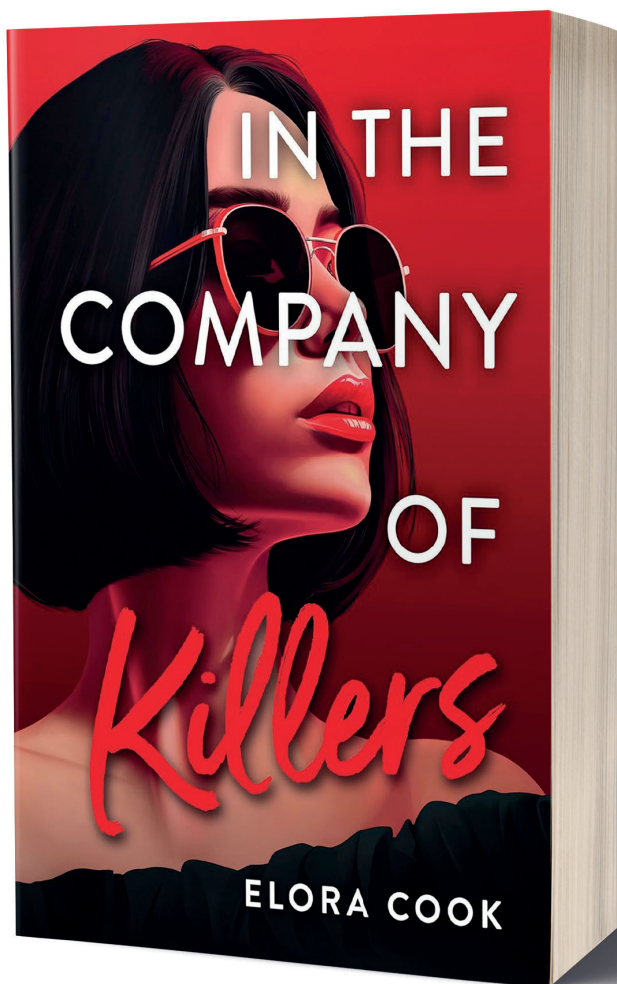
But I did know. Turning my head, I looked across the island to an invite we’d received this morning. The thick paper and gold lettering were too beautiful to be connected to such a nasty family. And yet, now it was the key I needed to protect my sister.

I might reject every attempt Mom made to join her world, but when it came to Sophia, I’d put on the suit and do whatever vile, horrific thing needed to keep her safe. Even if that meant going into the lions’ den and confronting the one person I was supposed to stay far away from.

The girl I once knew better than myself.

Tasha.

Read more in



Not final cover



Scan to pre-order!

Two dangerous families. One forbidden love.

On the glittering streets of New York is the city's worst kept secret: the mob. And teenagers Tasha Nicastro and Leo Danesi are at the centre of it all . . .

Discover this twisty thriller with high stakes, about a teenage mafia heiress who would do anything to avenge her family, even join forces with her handsome enemy.

Publishing March 2025

Uncorrected sampler. Not for resale or quotation.

Cover art copyright © Elena Masci, 2025