

VOICES

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Chapter 1

For this brief moment in time, Tasha was a teen celebrity supermodel. She stepped out of the guest room of her parent's posh mansion with firm catwalk strides; her heels clacking on the floor with musical regularity. With her chin lifted and face deadpan, the rustic Italian marble floor of the living room became her runway and her mother perched on the arm of their L-shaped cream leather sofa, her lone audience.

The dainty teal dress she wore was simple yet sophisticated and gave her, her most elegant look ever. With one hand professionally draped on her hips, she slid to a stop smoothly in front of the massive mirror near the staircase.

Swaying her shoulders back and forth, she put on a pout, leaned forward and tested for what could be a best camera pose.

Without warning, she relaxed and giggled.

"Wow! I've never looked so blazing hot," she said, to her mum through the mirror.

Her mother, Nektar had followed her every move with proud attention. She shook her head slowly, barely concealing a smile. "You know I don't like that word *hot*. Cool sounds so much better and nicer."

Tasha giggled again, made a face, and was about to speak when Nektar put a finger across her lips.

"Shh. Don't even say a word... I am not, old school!"

Tasha chuckled, louder this time. Then she turned on her hips, twice, and was back facing the mirror. Her eyes danced as she imagined the final transformation of what eye-catching make up and complimentary jewelry would do to complete her look.

"I'm beginning to fall in love with teal, it's so alive and ... so pretty. Thanks mum for the dress, it's just adorable."

Quickly, she dropped her acting garb and closed the gap between them. She collapsed on the sofa and sealed her appreciation with a hug and a firm kiss on her mother's chubby cheek.

Her fourteenth birthday was on Saturday, in just four days; and Tasha couldn't wait to experience the most fun-filled day of her life. It hadn't been easy, but they had been able to convince her father – Devin, to invite Prince Duke; the young trending music sensation, to sing at her party. So far she had kept his coming an absolute secret; none of her friends knew. She could only imagine the awe and hysteria his unexpected appearance would create. And, he was going to perform his hit track – *Frosty Lover*. Tasha knew she must have contributed significantly to the 10 million views of the video on YouTube but still, watching him live would be the most surreal experience of her life. And who knows maybe they could become friends afterwards. The fact that he was fourteen too, made the desire just perfect.

"Stand and turn round; let me see how the back fits," her mother said, breaking into her thoughts.

In a dramatic mischievous moment, Tasha stood and

pulled her mother up; lifting her hand high before twirling on her toes.

Nektar's face brimmed with admiration. She blew her daughter a sucked kiss. "Perfect! No princess ever looked so stunning."

Tasha stopped and stared ahead. "I'm sure the news of my party will be on all the school blogs and I can just picture the headers - *Prince Duke storms Princess Tasha's party.*"

A well of love pooled over Tasha eyes as she realized this woman would do absolutely anything to make her happy. She stepped up to her again, put both arms around her neck and nestled her head on her shoulder.

The deep sound of a clearing throat interrupted the moment.

Devin, her Dad; back from work and they hadn't heard him come in. He stood holding his jacket over his shoulder in the crook of his finger. She smiled broadly and stepped away to face him, arms akimbo, hoping he would like her dress.

He was still, surveying them both with narrowed slits.

Tasha dropped her arms.

"What exactly is the meaning of this display of infantile foolishness?" he said. Each word came out too slowly for Tasha's liking. "Did someone win a lottery? Please can we get some serious work done in this house?"

Tasha turned to look at her mother. Nektar was paying him no attention, just like he wasn't even there. Tasha stared at her harder.

No you can't do that; not when he is in this mood.

Nektar ignored her glare, turned and bent over, digging into her shopping bag. She brought out a box and opened it, revealing drop earrings and a simple teal and silver bead

necklace. The silver had a dramatic shimmer and twinkled under the lights.

The jewelry was simply gorgeous but Tasha swallowed a rising squeal of delight. Her eyes immediately shifted from the beads back to Devin's face; obviously she couldn't ignore him as her Mum was doing.

Nektar took the beads out of the box and handed them to her. "Try them on, let's see."

Devin was staring, narrowed slits becoming dilated pupils, daring her. Tasha couldn't take the beads, her arms ached at her side.

"Mum," she warned softly.

Nektar proceeded to place them around her neck and worked on engaging the clasp.

Tasha stood transfixed as Devin's jacket dropped to the floor and he strode towards them. He smacked Nektar hard on her wrist and the beads fell.

Only then did her mum turn to look at him. Her face was still devoid of emotion. "You had a really bad day?"

"How dare you insult me in front of our daughter?"

Deep trouble brewed and Tasha sincerely wished them to calm down. Devin's eyes were changing, reflecting evolving grades of anger.

"You are daring me." His words were slow and his voice taunt and deliberate, as if it was walking a tight rope. "I've said this before. We are not going to raise a spoilt child."

Nectar rubbed her right wrist. The slap must have caused more pain than she allowed her face to reveal. "What's eating you up, Devin? We both agreed to put together a birthday party for our daughter. So...."

"Yes. But not with this emotional roller coaster day in

day out. By the time you are through, this party is going to undo all I have invested in this child to make her focused and strong willed. So what, if she is going to be 14? It's not even a milestone year."

Nektar folded her arms and stood strong. "Oh, I forgot; you hate emotions. But as the very intelligent man that you claim to be, you should realize that planning and executing a birthday party for a normal teenage girl with normal friends would also include some excitement? Tell me, how do you plan a party without an emotional roller coaster? That should sound strange to anyone." She eyed him from head to toe and then turned back to Tasha, "Sweetheart, go upstairs, change your clothes and hang the dress carefully so it doesn't get rumpled."

"Stay where you are Tasha!" Devin said.

Nektar turned sharply to face him. "Devin, your grouse is obviously with me, leave the girl alone."

"She should stay and listen. She has to grasp the fact that I am serious about not raising an imbecile."

Nektar waved him away. "Stop it there; and you are beginning to sound like a broken record. You should think before you speak, or else, you too could easily be called the father of an imbecile."

He hit her across the cheek with the back of his hand and she collapsed across the sofa, like a sack.

Strangely, even though Devin hadn't touched her, Tasha also fell in tandem, her face landing a few inches away from her mother's.

Tasha was alarmed to see a trickle of blood across her face. Nektar looked dazed. Tasha gently touched the cut and wiped the blood away. "Mum, are you okay?" she whispered.

She sneaked a side glance at Devin's hand. The inner

edge of his adjustable ring band must have caused the cut.

"Tasha, get up, go sit on the dining table," Devin said.

She lifted her head to him. "Her face, it's bleeding." Nektar was still. Tasha got a hold of her shoulder and shook her. She responded and Tasha focused on helping her up.

Nektar very slowly, sat on the sofa, rubbing her neck. She gingerly touched the cut on her cheek, felt its wetness and took a look at her hand. Tasha was still looking at her intently and was relieved to see that it was just a surface wound.

Devin broke through their mutual empathy. "Nektar, it's over now. I've given it a lot of thought and I don't want to live with you anymore."

Tasha had heard that before. He never meant it and she knew it was just a way to get Nektar to submit and let go.

Thankfully Nektar did let go. She stood up slowly. "I'm going to my room."

Devin blocked her. "That wasn't a threat."

"Devin I know you are serious and I have absolutely no intention of stopping you. You can get lost forever, for all I care. This is my home too and you, you are free to go wherever that crazy head of yours leads you. Get out of my way."

She stepped around him but he blocked her again.

"Don't push me," he said.

Nektar's eyes narrowed. "Devin. You just hit me. Everyone knows there is a bolt loose in your head somewhere, but you've never hit me before." She shook her head. "No remorse, no apologies and then this. Did you get high on some terrible drug today?"

His nostrils flared and his breathing became noisy. Tasha worried for everyone's sanity when Devin grabbed Nektar's arm and dragged her forcefully towards the door.

"Let go of me, you crazy devil," Nektar said, raising her voice for the first time.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Tasha had to do something.

She grabbed her mother's other arm, pulling her back. "Leave her alone." Her voice came out too weak for anyone to pay attention. She slipped off her shoes and continued to pull.

Devin snatched the front door open and shoved Nektar out. Nektar stumbled on the concrete steps but managed to maintain her balance. She turned and scrambled to get back in. Devin stretched out his arm quickly to get a hold of the door and shut her out, but before could, Tasha bent over under his arm, ran out of the door and tried to help her mother get back in.

His eyes bore through her. "Get back inside girl." His tone felt as cold as the concrete under her bare feet.

Tasha stretched tall beside her mother. She shook her head. "No. I'm staying with her."

That was an ultimatum, no matter how weak it sounded and she hoped it would help bring him to his senses.

For all of 10 seconds, he remained still, not moving a muscle. And then he said, "What did you just say?"

Hadn't he heard her? Tasha gripped her mother's arm. She didn't feel bold anymore; wished she could retract her threat.

"Come with me," Devin said.

His soft command gave her a little hope; hope that he now realized he had taken this simple matter too far. She left her mother's arm and went to him.

With a firm hand on her left shoulder, he moved her back into the house. Tasha heard Nektar's footsteps trailing

them. She glanced behind her. Her mother looked dazed, but hopefully everything was going to be okay now. When all this was over, she would need to talk to her about how to deal with Devin's anger.

Devin led her to the guest room where she had earlier changed into her birthday dress. She still had it on and hoped by the time all this was over, it wouldn't be damaged for her party.

He opened the door and shoved her inside.

What?

"Dad?"

He drew a chair out from under the mahogany writing table beside the wall and placed it between the table and the bed. "Sit."

She plumped down onto the chair.

He bent over till his face was the same level as hers. "Listen, ... very carefully. You will make absolutely no attempt to get up from here until I tell you to."

She grabbed his hands, lifted them close to her face and squeezed. "Devin *pleaaase*... I'm sorry. Don't send my mum away."

He shrugged her hands off.

"Shh! Hold your lips." For a minute, she wondered what he meant.

"Now!" he shouted.

His voice made her jump. She obeyed.

Her eyes pleaded as she stared into his.

But then for a brief second his pupils dilated and turned smoky black. She couldn't look away and in that moment she completely forgot about her mother. Goose bumps covered her and all she could think of was a strong compulsion to obey.

"If you move, I will," he stood tall, like a tower threatening to collapse and crush her, ".... girl, you don't want to know what I will do to you. So sit there quietly like the pretty little head you are and don't move. Do you understand?"

Her heart raced with a speed that quickly turned to a blur. His eyes remained fixed on her, creating a fear she had never known all her life. She bobbed her head and he nodded in response. Her hand on her lips quivered but she kept it there.

As he turned his back and walked out she had a strong premonition that her life as she knew it now was all over. Today could never end well and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

Devin's voice boomed from the living room. "For the last time, Nektar, out, now."

Passion for her mother's safety replaced her fears but Tasha couldn't move.

"You can't...." Nektar said.

A slap sounded hard, cutting her short.

Her mother whimpered. It was a strange scary sound.

She barely made out what Nektar said next. "I'll go, but Tasha goes with me. I can't leave her to your evil ..."

Another slap stopped her mid-sentence.

The next sound was like the impact of wood on stone. Her mother's cries came softer now, surrendered.

"Help. Somebody help me..... Tasha?"

Tears flooded Tasha's face all at once. Her legs were paralyzed and her fingers remained glued to her lips.

Devin voice filtered into the guest room with clarity. "I gave you the chance to leave, but you refused. Now it's too late. You're finished...."

Thump!

VOICES

“You are gone....

Thump!

Devin’s laugh was shrill and brutish. “Quite appropriate isn’t this; I remember you once said.... Till death do us part.”

The pounding continued.

Nektar became silent.

“Please don’t kill my mum,” Tasha’s heart screamed, from a little body that had turned to stone.