



## CHAPTER ONE

# Tasha

THE LIGHTS FROM THE CHANDELIERS GLIMMERED ABOVE MY party guests, illuminating every whispered secret and haute couture gown. Plopping 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 Soiree 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 Chloe 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 soiree 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 Mid-town for dinner."

"But what about my soiree?" 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 scuff 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 Soiree, 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"-! 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 o/-*

"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 □f my house!*"

Leo's honey-brown eyes cur 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, Nicastro," 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 stare off senior year in the great Natasha Nicastro'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 Nicastro 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 cop 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, cake 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.