

GUARDING HER HEART

CHAPTER ONE

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GABBY

I FINISH TAPING THE BOX, pulling a marker out of the pile of unruly hair I had thrown into a bun atop my head, and label SWEATERS on the side. Everything officially organized into neat piles, I look around the room and survey the mountains of boxes, suitcases, and trash bags surrounding me. So, this is what four years of life looks like?

Plopping down onto a large box storing all the college textbooks I couldn't bear to part with, I decide to call it a day and celebrate my packing feat with a big glass of Pinot. Or rather, an elegant Evian bottle of Pinot, since all my glasses are packed. As I summon the energy to navigate my way through the maze of boxes to the kitchenette, the unmistakable chime of my Nokia phone pulls me back to reality. I mutter out a curse as I twirl around, trying to locate the source of the ringing noise. I rarely ever use my phone, and only a handful of people even have the number, so it has a bad habit of getting lost on a daily basis.

I hop over another large box, squeeze through a heaping tower of taped-up bankers boxes, and push aside a pile of overstuffed black trash bags, following the noise. At the last

ring, I locate my phone sticking out of the purse I'd haphazardly tossed onto the floor earlier.

I pick up the phone and instinctively let out a groan as I recognize my father's office number among my missed calls. I feel my stomach clench in anticipation. Lawrence Monroe, the billionaire CEO of Monroe Industries, never calls. Communication, of any kind, is not my family's greatest strength. Thankfully most Monroes have public-relations teams and assistants to take care of that burden. My father's preferred medium for communicating with his progeny are two-line emails and his secretary, June. In fact, calls are reserved for only the most severe of situations: chastisement for anything related to embarrassing the family name in public, delivery of orders that immediately must be followed, and for passing along terrible news.

Growing up, I never saw my father much. He was bred for work, like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him. My great, great, great-grandfather, the original Lawrence Osmolt Monroe, had started a small newspaper publication in California when he was twenty-four years old. At his death, he had acquired over half the newspaper publications in the west. His son, my great, great-grandfather, Lawrence Osmolt Monroe II, would go on to acquire the rest. Through the generations, the Monroe interests diversified and the wealth continued grow until my father, Lawrence V, was born: a billionaire out of the womb.

Right, yes, billionaire with a "B". And before you get any ideas about me, let's get one thing straight: if you call me an "heiress" like the tabloids love to do, or ask me about the ponies I had growing up, I will hate you forever. And you will never know it. Because like most of the sociopaths you see on shows like *Criminal Minds*, I keep every emotion of mine locked up like Fort Knox. Sure, I'll smile and perhaps

even laugh at your jokes about country clubs and private jets, but I will harbor an unyielding, simmering resentment for years. I'm sure that sounds absolutely terrifying coming from me, who on my good days, with a high enough heel, can clear about five foot eight, and whose only weapons are the awesome retorts for passive-aggressive insults I craft in my head three days later, in the shower, where all my best thoughts are born. So, yeah, I'm not the most formidable person you've ever met. And I'm also not a sociopath, because I assume most sociopaths could not care less about the gossip that spreads about them or their family. They don't cringe when someone jokes about the fact that you grew up with your only friends being forty-year-old Russian nannies and ex-Marine bodyguards. And sociopaths definitely don't spend Friday nights alone, eating ice cream out of the carton while they sob hysterically to *Mansfield Park*.

So instead of politely biting my tongue whenever someone would offer me some thinly-veiled insult or laugh at a gossip rag mocking my family, I decided that when I went off to college, clear across the country, I would shed my previous identity and become someone new. Someone who had a "normal" life, filled with overbearing parents, curfews, and minivans. I took on my mother's maiden name, became Gabby instead of Gabriella, and whenever asked why I never went home during school breaks, I would craft excuses about my parents being busy at work, or go on school trips to build houses in Guatemala. I never got close enough to anyone to have someone question my lame excuses, connect the dots, and realize all the little lies I had been weaving all along never amounted to much.

Even if I do my best to hide who I really am, I also know there is no way I would have the opportunities I have now without my family, its connections, and its wealth. I was able

to attend Georgetown University and live in an apartment off campus, grab lattes each day before class, pick up a new pair of shoes when I needed, all of it without ever having to check my bank account. That was not reality for ninety-nine percent of the people in the world. And as much as I would love to cue up the tiny violins and feel sorry for myself, I can't. Because as much as I try to hide from it, I can't deny my privilege and all the doors it has flung open for me.

Staring down at the phone in my hands, I'm tempted to call my older brother, Lawrence (the VI, if you're keeping count), or my older sister, Daphni, to see if they might be able to clue me in on why my father has decided to bestow upon me a phone call this late Thursday afternoon. I quickly rule out Lawrence, because there's a slight chance he's with my father and if he sees me calling, he'll just hand the phone right over. Lawrence has taken his place within Monroe Industries as the Chief Operating Officer for North America. It's a big role for someone barely clearing thirty, but he has been able to prove himself. And even though our dad routinely makes his life miserable, Lawrence is loyal to a fault to him, and to Monroe Industries. All three of us Monroes inherited the workaholic Monroe hustle, and Lawrence is the most insane of all of us. He requires about fours of sleep, is able to manage an entire company, and still makes it home to have dinner with his little girl each night. So yeah, while I want to call my older brother for intel, I know he has enough on his plate right now.

And yet, Daphni isn't the greatest option, either. Daphni and I are exact opposites in every way imaginable. The most glaringly obvious example? The fact that she is a world-famous singer who has two Grammys, three American Music Awards, and at least a half dozen MTV Music Awards hanging in her living room back in Calabasas. Daphni

became the newest, hottest “it” girl about six years ago when she signed with MacArthur, the best music producer and label exec in the business. She became a household name overnight. In her short career, she’s already had four sold-out international tours. She also unfortunately lives in a bubble, inside of which she is queen of all. We’d been close growing up, but the years of her touring and flying all over the world while I stuck stateside to go to college pulled us apart. Our daily phone calls turned to weekly ones, then eventually monthly ones, until they faded into infrequent texts. If I ever did get a call from her, it was usually a mistake. She had a terribly obnoxious habit of always managing to butt dial me the night before a final exam.

And, because it’s just clearing one o’clock in the afternoon in California, I automatically rule out calling my mother. She’s usually never up before two, anyways. And who even knows if she’s in the country? My mother is something of a “free spirit” and will frequently disappear for weeks on end, taking an extended cruise on a friend’s yacht or booking a month-long retreat at a spa in Aspen. These elaborate and spontaneous trips would usually be followed by an even longer respite at home, locked away in her bedroom with only her soap operas to entertain her. I also doubt that she would have any idea what my father would be calling about, seeing as I can’t even recall the last time I saw my parents in the same room together.

So, after reviewing all my options, I decide to just suck it up and rip off the Band-Aid. I take a deep breath and redial my father’s number. Unsurprisingly, he answers after the first ring, forgoing any sort of formal greeting and merely uttering a gruff, “Gabriella.”

“Hi, Dad. How are you?” I ask.

“Have you talked with your sister?” He brusquely asks,

ignoring my question. I should have known better than to bother him with formalities.

I take another long breath and lean back against the doorframe behind me. “Not recently,” I admit. It must have been at least two months ago. She was on her way somewhere. Was it Shanghai? Anyway, we only talked for a few minutes before she had to rush off the phone.

“She is starting her tour on Thursday. I want you to meet her in New York and join the tour.”

I exhale a sharp breath before responding. “Dad, I can’t just go and join her on tour. I’m planning on taking the LSATs in September and need the summer to study.”

“You can study on the tour.” His answer is sharp and authoritative—a tone I am all too familiar with.

Letting out a frustrated groan, I ask, “Dad, what is going on?”

Through the phone, I hear my father take a weary breath. “Gabriella, your mother died, and I am worried how Daphni will take the news. This tour is very important for her. I need you to tell her and make sure she is okay and doesn’t screw anything up.”

I feel a rush of air escape my lungs. My knees give out and I fall back against the wall, sliding down to the floor. “Mom’s dead?”

On the other side of the line, I hear my dad let out a soft sigh before responding. “She took a wrong combination of her vitamins. She just...took too many.”

I let the weight of his words hit me. My mouth feels dry and I can feel my pulse thrashing against my neck. My mom is dead?

“We are trying to keep the press out of it, but you need to tell Daphni before she finds out about it online,” he continues.

It takes a minute for me to find my voice and when I do, I meekly protest, “But Dad, I...”

Before I can get another word out, my father interjects. “Gabriella, I need to go, and I am not discussing this further. If you want me to foot the bill for your next three years in law school, then you join your sister on her tour. Here, speak to your brother.”

I hear my father mumble something before passing the phone to my older brother.

I hear my brother take the line, and instantly start in, “Lawrence, what the hell?”

“I know, Gabby. Trust me, I know. But you know how Mom was. You can’t tell me you didn’t know this was coming?” Lawrence’s voice sounds tired and strained, and I feel a pang of guilt for putting him in the middle of this. He has enough on his plate, being a single father, managing a billion-dollar company, and having to put up with Dad’s bullshit on a daily basis.

And even though I am taken aback by my father’s incredibly shitty delivery of the news, Lawrence is right: I cannot deny that I am not entirely surprised. My mother’s struggles with pills and alcohol have been a closely guarded family secret for years. We had grown up watching my mother’s elaborate and convoluted prescription pill regime. Referring to her pills as her “vitamins,” our mother had always required a pomegranate Bellini to wash them down. Year after year, the number of bottles in her medicine cabinet seemed to grow. And, as her collection expanded, the mother we had known as children slowly faded away. Still, I’m shocked and devastated by the news. My mom was not perfect, but she was my mom. And now she’s gone.

“Well, yeah,” I concede. “But why do I have to be the one to tell Daphni?”

“Gabs, you know how she is. And she needs this tour to go well. She just had that public meltdown, and this is her last shot. She needs someone close to her to break the news. If she finds out from Dad, or online, she’ll just freak again.”

Though I am still reeling from the news—and the fact that I have to completely upend my summer plans to follow my older sister around the country—I know my big brother, as usual, is right.

“I haven’t even spoken to her in like two months, Law,” I admit, a bit ashamed of how long it’s actually been. As terrible as Daphni is at staying in touch, I also know there were many times I could have reached out too, but didn’t.

“You’re her sister, Gabs. She needs you now. It’s only three months. Just go, help her through this, study for your LSATs, and celebrate that you just graduated from Georgetown freaking University. Hell, you might even have fun!”

Despite my sour mood, I cannot help but feel a smile spread across my face. Lawrence always had a way of making me feel better instantly. And he was right: Daphni was on the fast track to self-destruction, and though we had drifted apart over the years, the thought of my sister ending up in the same place as my mother makes my stomach sink.

“Law, you know Daphni and I have very differing ideas of what constitutes fun.”

“Maybe she’ll surprise you, Gabby. I already spoke with Melissa, and she is so excited you’re coming. Daphni has been a little...difficult lately.”

I let out a quiet snort. “Daphni the Diva is being difficult? This isn’t really news, Lawrence.”

“Gabby, she needs you.”

The sincerity in Lawrence’s voice gives me pause. When I graduated last week, I had pictured a summer of lobster rolls and studying for my LSATs beachside. Now those

dreams were quickly disappearing and being replaced with images of late nights in overcrowded arenas and hordes of screaming teenage girls shattering my eardrums.

Letting out another exaggerated groan, I finally relent. “All right. I’ll go.”

“Oh, I know. I already emailed you everything an hour ago. I’ll have the D.C. office coordinate finishing packing up your apartment and throwing everything in storage. I got you a train ticket to New York for tomorrow. It leaves at eleven in the morning, so make sure to get your sleep. You’re going to need it.”

A bitter smile tugs at the corners of my lips. Of course, everything has already been arranged. I was not being asked: I was being ordered. I let out a defeated sigh. “Thanks, Lawrence. Good luck over there with dad.”

“All right, Gabs. Keep me updated. Love you.”

I hear the line click and close my ancient flip phone, before discarding it onto a pile of unpacked clothes at my feet.

I fluctuate between wanting to curse and yell or punch a hole into the wall. These past four years away from my family had almost convinced me that I could live a life without the chaos that came from being a Monroe. Today was a harsh reminder that my birthright came with strings attached.

I trudge over to my bed and dramatically fling myself onto the piles of neatly folded clothes. I let out a loud scream into my pillow as I beat the mattress with my fists. I haven’t seen my sister in over seven months and now, not only do I have to deliver the news that our mother has died, but I also have to follow her around the country for three months to make sure she doesn’t have another colossal mental breakdown. The last thing I want is to throw a pity

party for myself, but I can't help but feel so frustrated. I allow myself one final scream into the pillow before rolling over to pull my laptop onto the bed. I pull up my email and find the message from Lawrence waiting, with his promised train ticket attached.

Before discarding my laptop, I open my Internet browser and Google, "Daphni Monroe concert tour dates."

I groan as I scroll through my sister's website. Beside giant stills from her latest music video is the full list of her thirty-city national tour. The last tour date listed is August 30th—exactly two months and twenty-eight days from today, and exactly sixteen days before my LSAT exam. Fantastic.

Taking a deep breath, I close my laptop and let my head fall back onto my pillow. Squeezing my eyes closed, I force myself to take a series of deep breaths in a pathetic attempt to quell the overwhelming sea of anxiety washing over me. More than angry, I feel resigned. Locking away my frustration, I take one final, deep breath and repeat, "I can do this. I can do this," until everything slowly begins to fade to black and I drift off to sleep.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jade Webb is a lover of romance novels that feature strong heroines who know that the loves that may come into their lives are always the icing, and never the cake.

Thanks to her own marriage, Jade has learned that the challenges of life can only help to make love stronger and she is grateful to her partner for embodying all the magic that love can offer.

When she is not writing or dreaming up new love stories, Jade is working in a retirement community outside of Boston that provides her with enough writing material for ten lifetimes.

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