

# PROTECTING HER PRIDE

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CHAPTER 1

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## DAPHNI

“IF I CAN’T HAVE you, NO ONE CAN.”

My eyes dart back and forth, scanning the bright letters on the stark white piece of paper. The cut-out magazine letters and the vague, overdone threat were almost too cliché. If it wasn’t for the four detectives staring down at me and the concerned, furrowed brow of my assistant, I might almost be convinced this was some elaborate prank lazily copied from an episode of *Law and Order*.

“Daphni?”

At the mention of my name, I drag my eyes away and look up. While I normally quite enjoy being the center of attention, this is most definitely not the kind of attention I want.

“Yes?” I ask, wearily.

“Are you okay?” Melissa asks me, her voice laced with concern.

I paste on a smile almost as fake as my hot-pink, acrylic nails. “Of course, I’m okay, Mel.” I hand back the plastic-covered note to one of the detectives and stand up from my seat. “I’m not going to let some creepy basement dweller

freak me out.” I wave my arm around the room past the four detectives, all solemn as they scribble on their tiny notepads. “Besides, this is a whole hell of a lot of hoopla over a silly letter.”

The minute the words leave my mouth, I catch the flash of guilt cross over Melissa’s face. For eight years, Melissa has loyally remained at my side, and I have learned every single one of her looks and gestures. That quick second of guilt, coupled with the uncomfortable glances currently being shared between the four detectives, has me narrowing my eyes at her in my most intimidating glare.

Propping my hands on my hips, I stare her down. Though I’m only five foot three and not wearing my characteristic six-inch heels, I know the power of my glare, and how my emerald eyes can transform into an intimidating dark, mossy green in mere seconds. That perfected glare, among other things, has earned me the title of “diva,” but unlike others, I welcome the label. It means I get what I want and don’t take any bullshit. And as much as I love Melissa, I’m not going to let her get a pass on this.

“Mel, what are you not telling me?”

Melissa lets out a defeated sigh and drops down onto an overstuffed chair. “This isn’t the first letter,” she confesses after a long moment.

A cold tremor runs through my body as I watch Melissa’s face break and her upper lip begin to quiver. I pivot to look at the lead detective and despite his tall frame and wide build, he shrinks beneath my assessment. “Please explain what she means.”

“Uh, ma’am, we have reason to believe these letters may be tied to the break-in of your home last week,” he stammers.

“Wait, ‘letters’? As in, more than one?” I ask.

The detective shifts his weight uncomfortably before clearing his throat. “Uh, yes ma’am. This is the fourth letter that has come to your residence.”

“Fourth?”

“Daphni, we didn’t want to worry you. You were doing so well on the tour, and we didn’t want to distract you,” Melissa quickly explains.

“Hold up,” I order, holding up my hand. “My tour ended three months ago. How long have these letters been arriving?”

The detective clears his throat again before answering. “We received the first one back in New York. On the first night of the tour.”

I nod, biting back the swell of anger. “And you’re only telling me this now?”

“Daphni—” Melissa starts.

“No, I will deal with you later,” I snip at Melissa before facing the detective. “Explain to me how these letters are tied to the break-in.”

Last week, I was at a party in Hollywood and had come back home to find my front door wide open. Luckily, I had a few friends with me, so we had called the police right away. Everything in the house had been untouched: none of my jewelry, Grammys, or electronics were missing. A few pictures were gone, but that was it, so we dismissed it as a crazy fan and had all the locks changed the next day.

The officer reaches into a brown paper bag and pulls out a plastic bag with the words EVIDENCE printed in bold, bright red lettering. Inside are a single pair of bright blue lace panties. I feel my heart thump in my chest as a sliver of fear rushes through my body.

“Oh my God, those are my panties,” I whisper. The other

detectives scribble in their notebooks as I take a moment to take a reassuring breath. “How did you get my panties?”

He clears his throat again, avoiding eye contact. “Those undergarments came with the letter, which leads us to believe that the letters and the break-in are related.”

I nod along, digesting his words. I press down nonexistent wrinkles in my dress as I will my body to stop trembling. Once I take another deep breath, I look up at the detective, forcing a tightlipped smile to my face.

“Well, I’m sure you can test the letter and my, um, undergarments for DNA, right? You can catch this freak?” I ask, hoping he doesn’t hear the slight shakiness of my voice.

The detective reluctantly shakes his head. “The guy is good. We weren’t able to find any trace DNA.”

I feel my shoulders drop and a heavy weight sink on top of me. I nod weakly, not knowing how to respond.

Sensing my defeat, the detective closes his notepad and slips it into his breast pocket. “But rest assured, we will catch him, ma’am. In the meantime, we are recommending that you implement twenty-four-hour security and beef up your team. No harm in being overly cautious.”

I nod again, not knowing what else to say. Melissa jumps up from her seat and shakes each of the detectives’ hands, thanking them for responding so quickly. As she shows them to the door, I collapse onto the leather couch and suck in a large breath. Instinctively, I reach for my phone and dial my boyfriend, Drizzle, who I’ve been seeing for the last eight months. Though I know he’s away working on his new album, a part of me hopes he’ll be able to offer me a semblance of comfort, or at the very least, a distraction from this insanity.

“Drizzle?” I ask once I hear someone pick up the phone after the fifth ring.

He doesn't respond, and I can hear the dull, thumping sound of music coupled with a woman's voice giggling in the background.

"Babe?" I shout into the phone. The noise is all muted and I can hear someone shouting, followed by laughter. Eventually I realize he's either too drunk to answer, or he accidentally accepted my call. Annoyed, I hang up the phone and throw it onto the empty seat cushion next to me.

Melissa cautiously reenters the room, taking the seat next to me on the couch.

"Daphni—" she starts.

"Just stop, Mel. Don't even bother," I say, not able to hide the anger in my voice.

Melissa presses her palms down against her knees. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Daphni. I didn't want to worry you. You had enough on your plate with your mom, and the tour finishing up."

She is referring to the death of my mom eight months ago. Though we didn't have the typical mother-daughter relationship, she had been a constant figure in my life and career. Knowing that she was no longer around impacted me more than I would ever admit. Truthfully, my mother had been a catastrophe up until her last minute: she had passed just two days before the tour for my last album had started. I wasn't self-centered enough to think that she up and died to completely screw with me before the start of the most important tour of my life, but let's just say she definitely had the last word.

That tour had been difficult. The year before had been riddled with a series of very public meltdowns and rumors that made me a leper in Hollywood. My label had called in a disaster recovery team who had shipped me off to a private island where they did a piss-poor job of trying to detox me

and get me to record a new album. They finally figured out that they couldn't have both, so they gave up on the sobriety and my "Renegade Love" album was born. While it had been received well, and my fans had eaten up three million records, I can't even remember recording the damn thing. My only memory from the time is of Julius, my best friend for those two months, who was my very reliable Jose Cuervo supplier.

For all her flaws, if there was anything that I had learned from my deceased mother, it was that everyone wanted something from you. And that was especially true if you could make them money. And I made a lot of people very, very rich. In return, they would clean up as best they could after any indiscretion or trashed hotel room. We entered into a silent pact: as long as I could be discrete, keep my gin masked in a water bottle, slap an extra layer of concealer over my dark circles, and sing the damn song on cue, then we were square. And luckily the tour had gone off without too many hitches. There was that whole incident where I kicked that little shit Jordan James off my tour after he leaked pictures of my sister to the press and bragged that he popped her cherry. But instead of that hurting my image, it made me look like a supportive big sister and I gained a ton of new fans—the icing on an otherwise shit cake.

I let out a long sigh and reluctantly nod. I can't stay mad at Melissa. Next to my brother and sister, she is the closest thing to family I have. "Fine, Mel. But from now on, no more secrets. Okay?"

Melissa nods. "Agreed."

I fall back against the cushion and kick my legs up onto the coffee table. "Okay, so tell me about these letters."

Melissa pauses, twirling a loose curl of her flaming red hair in her finger. When I glare down at her, my jaw tight

with frustration, she lets out a long sigh. “They started at the beginning of the tour, around mid-June. The first six arrived at different hotels where we’d stayed. Then the seventh came to your home about a month before the break-in, but we were able to intercept it before you could see it,” she explains.

“And I’m assuming they all pretty much have the same message?” I involuntarily shudder at the question and Melissa reaches out and places her hand on my knee, but I quickly jerk away. “Mel, I’m fine,” I snap, even though I’m not fine and I know Melissa can read me like a damn book. Almost a decade of spending every day with someone can lead to that. But she also knows better than to push it, so she just nods, a sad look on her face. I know she’s worried about me.

She pauses a moment before continuing. “Daphni, we need to talk about security.”

“What about it?” I ask, not wanting to dwell on this depressing topic any longer. I hate this feeling of not having control, of feeling like someone’s prey.

“Well, the detectives were right. Your security is severely lacking. I mean, you had a guard on duty while your house was being broken into! We need to think about bringing on someone you can trust. Since Liam left, there’s no one you really know, and I think it’s even more important now to have someone you trust.”

She’s referring to Liam, my bodyguard during my summer tour. Though he had only been with me for about five months, he had grown to become one of the few people in this world I trusted. He did his best to always be serious and stern with me, but he quickly dropped the act once he saw that his big muscles and tattoos wouldn’t scare me. Instead, he did something very few people in the world ever

do: he talked to me like a human. He didn't let me get away with acting like a bitch, and he always called me on my bullshit.

“Well, Liam is definitely not going to come back now that he's in college and obsessively in love with Gabby.” I try my best not to sound bitter, but I'm sure a little jealousy sneaks its way through.

After all, the poor bastard had fallen in love with my sister, Gabby, and quit on me to pursue his college degree and play house with her up at Stanford. I mean, I can't blame the guy. My little sister is one of the most beautiful, most genuine, smartest, sweetest people in this world.

And the truth is, I am beyond happy for her. A long time ago, in another life, I knew exactly the kind of love she had with Liam. But I had been an idiot and thrown it all away. She had been so scared to let Liam in. And with parents like ours, who could blame her? Our parents' marriage had been a train wreck plagued by infidelity, lies, and broken promises. Our mother had raised us with the lesson that love was a contract aimed at mutually benefitting both parties. From her humble beginnings as a “featured dancer” at the Thorny Cactus in Arizona, to life as the wife of a blue-blood billionaire, it was clear what her motivations were for marrying our father. And my father's rebellious spirit, coupled with his insatiable appetite for bottled blondes with large breasts, explained what he got out of their “contract.” Love, in our family, was an inconvenience that always ended in disaster. And for Gabby, it wasn't just her parents who showed her that lesson. No, our older brother Lawrence's failed relationship—which resulted in a baby at twenty-four years old and a runaway baby momma—also clearly highlighted that we had inherited our parents' inclination for making piss-poor decisions about love. At least he

had a beautiful daughter to show for it. My laughably long string of failed romances has only yielded me an endless parade of tabloid covers and a man-eater reputation.

Melissa bites down on her lip and fiddles with her thumbs, avoiding my stare. When she doesn't speak, I throw my hands up in frustration. "God, Melissa, just spit it out already!"

Squaring her shoulders, Melissa looks at me straight on. "Jerry."

A twinge of regret and shame pierces me. Of course, Jerry. Jerry: my first bodyguard, who had been like a father to me. He had been with me since I was sixteen years old and naïve to all the darkness in this world. He had fearlessly guided me, protected me, and really loved me in a way that my own father had never been able to. And then I'd betrayed him.

There is no way I can even consider Jerry, not after what I had done to him. I shake my head fiercely at Melissa's suggestion. "No. Absolutely not."

"Daphni. This is serious. We need Jerry." Her voice softens. "Just call him. Apologize. He'll forgive you."

I feel a lump rise in my throat and quickly push it back, refusing to let Melissa see me crack. "No, he won't," I whisper.

Melissa rubs my knee reassuringly, and this time I don't pull away. "You made a mistake. He will understand. He loves you."

I look at Melissa, hoping my eyes don't reveal too much emotion. I don't want her to know how deeply I regret how I treated Jerry. How much I hate myself for what I did. "What if he doesn't forgive me?"

"Daphni, he loves you. He will forgive you." Her words are so matter-of-fact and I wonder, for the briefest of

seconds, if I can believe them. I want them to be true. I want to believe that he could be able to forgive me. But how could you forgive someone who had betrayed you so easily?

I feel her hand leave my knee and the couch shift as she stands. She plants a quick kiss on the crown of my head and slips out of the room. After I hear her click the front door closed, I gather my composure and walk to the door, checking to ensure it's locked. I hate to admit how freaked out I am but my racing heart and still shaking hands confirm that even I am not immune to the fear that an anonymous psycho stalker might pop on over and kill me. Pulling back the curtains, I peek out the window to see the private security detail I hired in his car outside. When I see his shadow sitting in the car, I want to feel relief, but I really can't. Melissa is right. I need to have someone around me who I trust, and the nameless figure sitting outside in his car is not that person.

What I need right now is a distraction. I don't want to bother my brother, Lawrence, who has enough on his plate already. Gabby is probably studying and the last thing I want is to worry her. The only option that makes the most sense right now is Drizzle. And while I doubt he'll really be able to provide me with any comfort or make me feel safe, I can count on him to distract me and at least momentarily make me forget about all this craziness.

I make my way back to the couch and grab my phone. I type out a quick text to Drizzle. *Can you call me? Something happened today and I'm kinda freaked out.*

A few moments later, a response comes back. *Sry babe. In the studio laying out some sick tracks and can't talk.*

I'm surprised to find myself not even minimally annoyed that I know he's lying. From my phone call to him a mere twenty minutes ago, I could tell he was at some club. But if

I'm being honest with myself, the relationship I have with Drizzle is more a crutch than anything. I keep him around to ward off the loneliness. It's a pathetic attempt at filling some of the hollow parts inside of me that, in the safety of the darkness of my room late at night, I can admit I know will never be whole again. And the saddest part is, I don't even care anymore how pathetic it all sounds. I've grown too apathetic to care about much beyond my next drink.

*Don't bother. I'm going to bed.* I quickly shoot out the text, too annoyed to bother anymore.

This time, it takes him less than ten seconds to type out a reply. *You wearing something sexy?*

I groan in frustration at his response and choose to ignore him in favor of my bed, a half empty bottle of Ciroc, and a queue of *CSI* lined up on my Netflix. When I reach my empty room, I turn on all the lights and double check the bathroom before rushing into the bed and drawing the sheets up to my chin. I know the last thing I should be doing is watching a TV show about creepy criminals and getting drunk in bed, but even as terrible as it sounds, it still beats the alternative: actually acknowledging that in this big house—with over six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a wine cellar, media room, and two Jacuzzis—I am completely and utterly alone. So I take a long swallow, letting the vodka burn a trail down my throat, then another and another until I feel my eyes close and the empty bottle fall to the floor at my side.



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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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