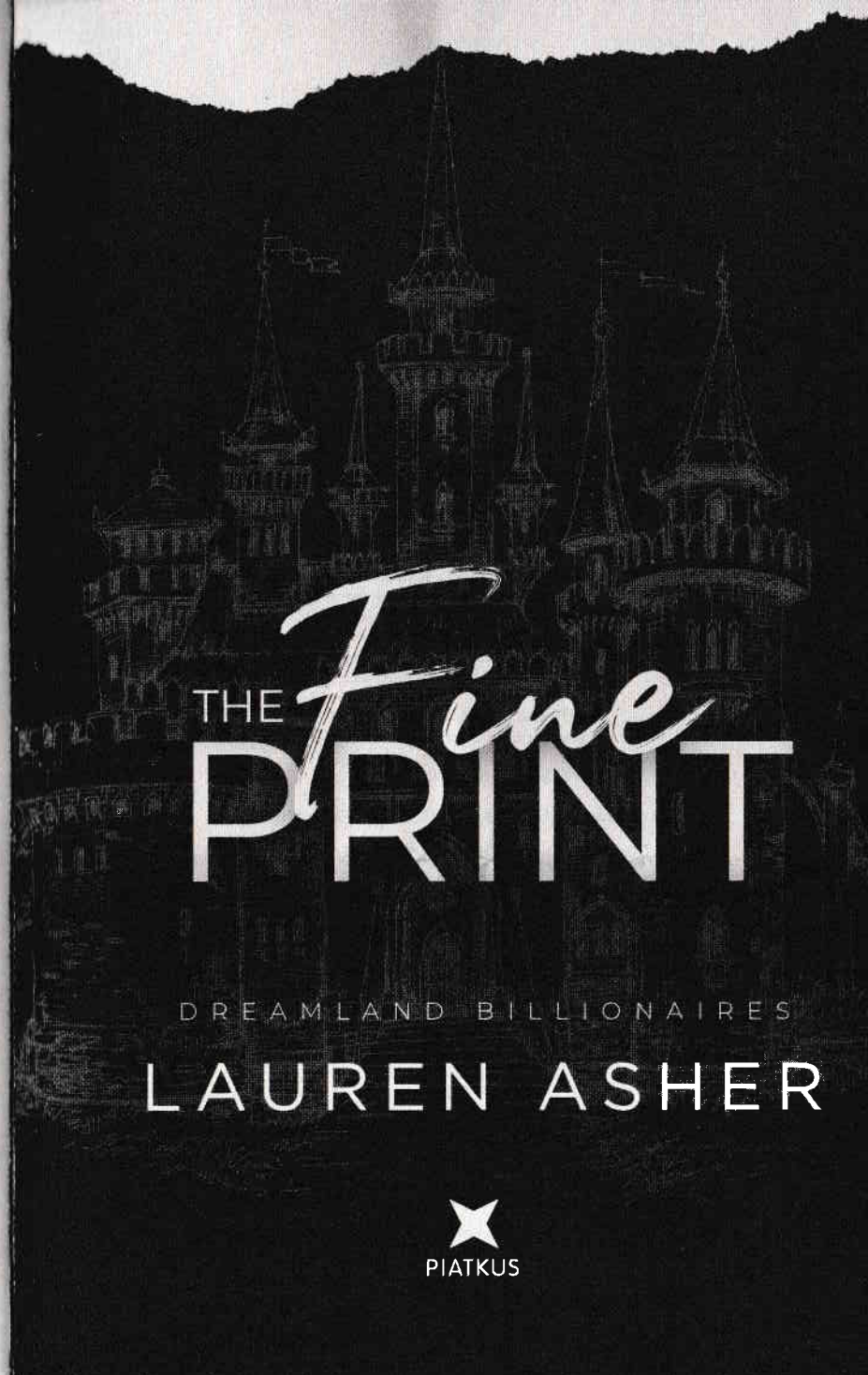


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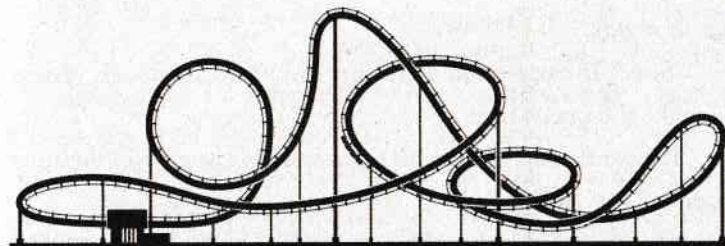
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CHAPTER ONE

Rowan



The last time I attended a funeral, I ended up with a broken arm. The story made headlines after I threw myself into my mother's open grave. It's been over two decades since that day, and while I've completely changed as a person, my aversion to mourning hasn't. But due to my responsibilities as my late grandfather's youngest relative, I'm expected to stand tall and unbothered during his wake. It's nearly impossible, with my skin itching like I'm wearing a cheap polyester suit.

My patience wanes as the hours go on, with hundreds of Kane employees and business partners offering their condolences. If there's anything I hate more than funerals, it's talking to people. There are only a few individuals I tolerate, and my grandfather was one of them.

And now he's gone.

The burning sensation in my chest intensifies. I don't know

why it bothers me as much as it does. I've had time to prepare while he was in *a coma* yet the strange sensation above my rib cage returns with a vengeance whenever I think of him.

I run a hand through my dark hair to give myself something to do.

"I'm sorry for your loss, son." A nameless attendee interrupts my thoughts.

"Son?" The one word leaves my mouth with enough venom to make the man wince.

The gentleman centers his tie across his chest with fumbling hands. "I'm—well—uh."

"Excuse my brother. He's struggling with his grief." Cal places a hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. His vodka and mint-coated breath hits my face, making me scowl. My middle brother might look dressed to the nines in a pressed suit and perfectly styled blond hair, but his red-rimmed eyes tell a completely different story.

The man mumbles a few words I don't bother listening to before heading for the nearest exit.

"Struggling with my grief?" Although I don't like the idea of my grandfather's passing, I'm not *struggling* with anything but uncomfortable heartburn today.

"Relax. That's the kind of thing people say at funerals." Two blond brows pull together as Cal stares me down.

"I don't need an excuse for my behavior."

"No, but you need a reason for scaring off our biggest Shanghai hotel investor."

"Fuck." There's a reason I prefer solitude. Small talk requires far too much effort and diplomacy for my taste.

"Can you *try* to be nicer for one more hour? At least until all the important people leave?"

"This *is* me trying." My left eye twitches as I press my lips together.

"Well, do better. For him." Cal tilts his head toward the picture above the fireplace.

I let out a shaky breath. The photograph was taken during a family trip to Dreamland when my brothers and I were kids. Grandpa smiles into the lens despite my tiny arms wrapped around his neck in a chokehold. Declan stands by Grandpa's side, caught in the middle of an eye roll while Cal raises two fingers behind his head. My father shows a rare sober smile as he wraps an arm around Grandpa's shoulder. If I try hard enough, I can imagine Mom's laugh as she snapped the photo. While the memory of her face is fuzzy, I can make out her smile if I think hard enough.

A weird scratchiness in my throat makes it difficult to swallow.

Residual allergies from spring in the city. That's all.

I clear my irritated throat. "He would have hated this kind of show." Although Grandpa was in *the* entertainment business, he disliked being the center of attention. The idea of all these people driving out to the edge of Chicago for him would have made his eyes roll if he was still here.

Cal shrugs. "He of all people knew what was expected of him."

"A networking event disguised as a funeral?"

The side of Cal's lips lifts into a small smile before falling back into a flat line. "You're right. Grandpa would be horrified because he always said Sunday was a day of rest."

"There's no rest for the wicked."

"And even less for the wealthy." Declan stops by my other side. He stares at the crowd of people with an unrelenting scowl. My oldest brother has intimidating people down to a science, with everyone avoiding his pitch-black stare. His suit matches his dark hair, which only adds to his cloak and dagger look.

I'm somewhat jealous of Declan since people typically talk to me first, mistaking me as the nicest child because I happen to be the youngest. I might have been born last, but I most certainly wasn't born yesterday. The only reason guests take the time to speak to us is because they want to stay within our good graces. That kind of fake treatment is to be expected. Especially when all the people we associate with have a moral compass pointed permanently toward hell.

An unknown couple walks up to the three of us. A woman pulls out a tissue from her purse to dab her dry eyes while her counterpart offers us his hand to shake. I look down at it like he might transfer a disease.

His cheeks flush as he tucks his hand back into his pocket. "I wanted to offer my condolences. I'm very sorry for your loss. Your grandfather—"

I tune him out with a nod. This is going to be one hell of a long night.

This one's for you, Grandpa.



I STARE DOWN at the white envelope. My name is written across the front in my grandpa's elegant cursive. I flip it over, finding it untampered with his signature Dreamland's Princess

Cara's Castle wax seal.

The lawyer finishes passing out the other letters to my two brothers. "You're required to read his individual letters prior to me reviewing Mr. Kane's final will and testament."

My throat tightens as I break the seal and pull out my letter. It's dated exactly a week before Grandpa's accident three years ago that led to his *coma*.

To my sweet little Rowan,

I choke back on a laugh. *Sweet* and *little* are the last words I'd use to describe myself since I'm as tall as an NBA player with the emotional range of a rock, but Grandpa was blissfully ignorant. It was the best thing about him and the absolute worst depending on the situation.

Although you're a man now, you'll always be the same little lad in my eyes. I still remember the day your mother gave birth to you like it was yesterday. You were the largest of the three, with these fat cheeks and a head full of dark hair that I was sadly jealous of. You sure had a pair of lungs in you and you wouldn't stop crying until they handed you over to your mom. It was like everything was right in the world when you were in her arms.

I reread the paragraph twice. It's strange to hear my grandpa talk about my mother so casually. The subject became taboo in my family until I could barely remember her face or her voice anymore.

I know I've been busy with work and that I didn't spend as much time as I should've with you all. It was easy to blame the company for the physical and emotional distance in my relationships. When your mother died, I wasn't sure what to do or how to help. With your father pushing me away, I devoted myself to my job until I became numb to

everything else. It worked when my wife died and it worked when your mother met a similar passing, but I realize that it set your father up for failure. And in doing that, I failed you all as well. Instead of teaching Seth how to live a life after great loss, I showed him how to hold on to despair, and it only hurt you and your brothers in the end. Your father parented in the only way he knew how, and I'm the one to blame.

Of course Grandpa excuses my father's actions. Grandpa was too busy to pay close enough attention to the real monster his son turned out to be.

As I write this, I'm living in Dreamland, trying to reconnect with myself. Something has been bothering me over the last couple of years and it didn't click until I came here to reevaluate my life. I met someone who opened my eyes to my mistakes. As the company grew, I lost touch with why I started this all. I realized that I've been surrounded by so many happy people, yet I have never felt so alone in my life. And although my name is synonymous with the word "happiness," I feel anything but.

An uncomfortable feeling claws at my chest, begging to be released. There was a dark time in my life when I could relate to his comment. But I shut that part of my brain off once I realized no one could save me but myself.

I shake my head and refocus my attention.

Growing old is a peculiar thing because it puts everything into perspective. This updated will is my way of making amends after my death and fixing my wrongs before it's too late. I don't want this life for you three. Hell, I don't want it for your father either. So Grandpa is here to save the day, in true Dreamland prince fashion (or villain, but that's going to depend on your perspective, not mine).

You each have been given a task to complete to receive your percentage of the company after my death. Do you expect anything less from the man who writes fairy tales for a living? I can't just GIVE you the company. So to you, Rowan, the dreamer who stopped dreaming, I ask you one thing...

Become the Director of Dreamland and bring the magic back.

To receive your 18% of the company, you'll be expected to become the Director and spearhead a unique project for me for six months. I want you to identify Dreamland's weaknesses and develop a renovation plan worthy of my legacy. I know you're the right man for this job because there's no one I trust who loves creating more than you, even though you lost touch with that side of yourself over the years.

I loved creating. Emphasis on the past tense because there's no way I would draw again, let alone willingly work at Dreamland.

An independent party will be contacted and asked to vote on your changes. If they are not approved, then your percentage of the company will be given to your father permanently. No second tries. No buying him out. That's the way the cookie crumbles, little lad. I had to work to make the Kane name what it is today, and it's up to your brothers and you to make sure it lives on forever.

Love you always,

Grandpa

I stare at the ink until the words blur together. It's difficult to concentrate on the lawyer when he discusses the splitting of assets. None of that matters now. These letters put every plan on standby.

Declan shows the lawyer out before returning to the living room.

"This is utter bullshit." I swipe the whiskey bottle from the

coffee table and fill my glass to the top.

“What do you have to do?” Declan takes a seat.

I explain my impending task.

“He can’t demand this of us.” Cal rises from his chair and starts pacing.

Declan runs a hand across his stubble. “You heard the lawyer. We either go along with it, or my ability to become CEO is null and void.”

Cal’s eyes grow wilder with every ragged breath. “Fuck! I can’t do it.”

“What could possibly be worse than losing your percentage of the company?” Declan smooths out his suit jacket.

“Losing my dignity?”

I give him a once-over. “That still exists?”

Cal flips me off.

Declan leans back in his chair as he takes a sip from his tumbler. “If there’s anyone who has a right to be pissed, it’s me. I’m the one who needs to marry someone and impregnate them to become CEO.”

“You know babies are created by having sex, right? Is that something your internal software is capable of learning?” Cal’s pushing for a fight he can never win. Declan prides himself on his reputation as America’s most untouchable bachelor for a reason other than sleeping around.

Declan plucks Cal’s letter from the floor and gives it a bored glance. “Alana? Interesting. Wonder why Grandpa thought it would be a good idea for you both to reunite again.”

Alana? I haven’t heard that name in years. What does Grandpa want Cal to do with her?

I reach out to grab the letter from Declan but Cal rips it out of his hand before I have the chance.

“Fuck off. And don’t speak about her again,” Cal seethes.

“If you want to play with fire, then prepare to be cremated.” Declan tips his glass at Cal. His gaze flickers between the two of us. “Regardless of our personal thoughts on the matter, we don’t have a choice but to proceed with Grandpa’s terms. There’s too much at stake.”

I will never allow our father to obtain our shares of the company. I’ve waited my entire life for the ability to control The Kane Company with my brothers and I don’t plan on losing against my father. Not when we’re fueled by something far stronger than the need for money. Because if there’s one lesson we learned from Seth Kane, it’s that love may come and go, but hate lasts forever.