

CHAPTER 2

Eric stood center stage beneath the bright lights, basking in the applause. “Some call money the root of all evil,” he began, his grin flashing under the lights. “If that’s the case, call me the devil!” The crowd erupted, cheers and applause mixed throughout the room.

“Most of you know me. For those who don’t, you’re about to learn what real success looks like. My name is Eric Stetson, and I am the founder and President of Stetson Real Estate. You may know us as one of the largest real estate investment firms in the world. And the future has never looked brighter!”

The annual spring gala was one of Eric’s favorite events. His piercing eyes swept across the crowd like searchlights, lingering only long enough to keep them hanging on his next word. The crowd leaned forward, captivated. Employees, investors, business rivals, admirers—he fascinated them all the same way. Eric fed off admiration the way most people fed off oxygen.

From just offstage, in the darkness, Jared watched his brother do what he did best. Jared was dressed in his finest suit, picked out by Rachael, Eric’s stylist-turned-assistant. Tom, the CFO, stood next to him. Without turning to face Jared, he began to speak.

“I need to speak with Eric tonight.”

Jared swiftly turned his gaze toward Tom. “I—I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Tom continued to watch Eric. “Good idea or not, he’s got to listen to me.”

“But he’s made it clear he doesn’t want to discuss it. Please don’t talk to him tonight.”

Tom slowly turned his head and focused on Jared. “I have no choice. He has to listen to me.” He stared at Jared intently for a few seconds before walking away.

Jared froze in place, knowing that Tom was determined to bring up the Hamilton property deal, but that Eric was even more determined not to. He took in a long, lingering breath, held it, and then released it. He redirected his focus to his brother, who was savoring the glory like an emperor among men.

Eric’s performance on stage was like an operatic masterpiece. He stood at six-foot-two with dark hair that never seemed out of place. To Jared, Eric looked as if he’d been created for rooms like this. His perfectly straight white smile flashed beneath the lights, effortless and completely natural. Jared had always admired the idea of one person having that much presence. Watching him, Jared sometimes wondered if somewhere along the way, Eric had truly made a deal with the Devil.

Eric paced the stage, speaking into the microphone attached to his earpiece, his hands moving freely for emphasis. “Tonight, I’d like to point out a special guest. Senator Miller has decided to join us, which is interesting because he voted for the Anti-Trickle-Down Act. Which means we all now must find creative loopholes to avoid the higher tax rate. Let’s make sure we let him know how we feel about this.”

The crowd instantly began to boo and hiss in Senator Miller’s direction. A few napkins flew his way.

Jared lowered his head slightly, embarrassed for the senator. Eric could be cruel, but Jared had learned how to live in his shadow. Since childhood, he'd watched him achieve everything he'd wanted in life.

While the crowd applauded, Jared found himself calculating the cost of the evening in his head—venue, catering, security, staff. Eric saw the spotlight. Jared saw numbers. Equations, patterns, and probabilities came naturally, though he kept this to himself.

Listed as the company's COO, Jared held the title in name only. It was well known that his duties were really those of Eric's assistant. He loved his brother for giving him an assistant position and putting up with his mediocre performance.

He had run-of-the-mill looks and a hatred of the spotlight. Jared did not inherit Eric's good looks. Standing at five-foot-nine, with a receding hairline, he wasn't bad-looking, but he knew he blended into the background.

As he watched Eric, he noticed something he hadn't realized before. The stage lights had to make it over a hundred degrees there, yet Eric didn't sweat.

Suddenly, his internal voice began to whisper. Who doesn't sweat onstage? Oh, yeah, Eric, that's who. Stop it! One bad thought could take root and grow into a lifetime of resentment. Jared pushed it away, as he always did.

Although attendance was mandatory for most, Eric thanked the audience and encouraged everyone to reach their full potential at Stetson Real Estate. He held up a glass of champagne, followed by more applause and a few random whistles. He removed his earpiece and made his way across the stage to an entourage of personal assistants, a few yes-men, and Jared.

The music began to play as Eric reached his brother, who handed him a bottle of Evian water, the cap removed. Eric downed the whole bottle and gave it to Jared as he walked backstage toward one of the green rooms, where he could have a drink and a quick cigar before mingling with the commoners.

Eric was always a man on a mission. Jared habitually tried to keep pace with him, but he rarely matched Eric's stride. He always seemed a few steps behind, eternally chasing his brother's pace.

While he raced to keep up, Tom approached Eric.

"I need to speak with you," Tom said with urgency.

Without glancing in Tom's direction, Eric replied, "Not now, Tom. I don't have time for this."

"But—" Tom started.

"I said not now, Tom!"

Michael, another assistant, held out papers for Eric to sign as they walked. A Brown University graduate with an economics degree, he fit perfectly into Eric's world: professional, discreet, and good at keeping secrets. Michael was practically Eric's second shadow.

"Nice shiner." Eric looked at Michael's black eye, poorly covered by makeup.

Michael took the papers from Eric's grip. "Yeah, I tripped over my dog, and I hit the corner of my nightstand."

Eric looked at Michael with suspicion. "You don't have a dog."

Michael didn't respond.

Rachael stopped Eric to straighten his tie and fix his hair.

Jared thought Rachael was exquisite. She was not opposed to keeping Eric on his toes and calling him on his bullshit. Jared felt she was clever that way, as she knew which battles to pick with Eric and which to deflect. Even when calling him out, she remained respectful and caring.

Jared often wondered if that was why Eric appreciated her. Perhaps in her, he had found his equal in someone far more loving. He felt that, whatever the dynamics of their relationship, they worked well together.

Eric sat on the couch in the green room, reaching for the remote. Flower arrangements sat upon tables throughout the room. The air was filled with the aroma of flowers and high-end cologne. Jared, Rachael, Tom, and Michael joined him.

This was his quiet time. His cigar smoking, vodka drinking, and decompressing time. Jared knew Eric needed these moments, or he could easily snap at any unsuspecting victim.

Tom sat next to Eric while Eric changed the channel to the local news and placed the remote on the table. A news anchor reported a car rollover on I-25, a dog found two years after it went missing, and a female body found in Parker.

Jared glanced at Eric as the news announced the murder of a young woman. Eric leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees, and rested his chin in one hand. He studied the anchor as if nothing around him existed. Jared glanced between Eric and the TV.

Suddenly, Tom broke the silence.

“We need to talk about the Hamilton property purchase,” Tom said.

Eric remained silent, expressionless, and focused on the news coverage. Jared quickly reached for the vodka to make Eric a drink. All Jared could think was, Don’t do it, Tom!

“Eric, you can’t keep ignoring me. You’re going to sign the papers soon, and I don’t think you—”

Instantly, Eric broke his gaze from the news report, slammed his fist on the table, and walked away from Tom toward the wet bar. Jared scrambled to put a vodka tonic in Eric’s hand.

“I know what you think, Tom! We’ve been over this a million times. It’s my company. It’s my decision!” Eric grabbed the drink from Jared’s trembling hand.

Jared looked at Rachael as she sat on one of the velvet barstools, awaiting the battle. He watched as she sipped her drink. She gave him a look that was all too familiar—the look of buckle up, buttercup.

“Eric, we have investors. We have a board of directors, all of whom question this venture.” He paused, watching Eric carefully. “Profits are down. The company isn’t doing as well as it had been, and you know this.”

“Oh my God, Tom. If I’d made most of my decisions based on caution, there wouldn’t be a business. I know what I’m doing!” Eric gulped the liquor and slammed the glass down on the bar. “Who the hell are you to question me? Know your place, Tom! Do what I tell you to do and nothing else!”

Tom looked Eric straight in the eye. Usually a passive and agreeable man, he did not appear to be backing down.

“You understand the risks? Do you know that if this venture isn’t astronomically profitable, our company is in jeopardy? We’re not talking about small change, Eric. You’re putting all of us at risk. I know my place, and it’s my job to tell you when you’re threatening this company financially.”

Eric took another large swig of his drink and glared at Tom. “Are you done, Tom?” He scowled at Tom and took another mouthful of his vodka. “I still control the majority of the stock in this company. Who has a greater chance of suffering the consequences than me?”

Defeated, Tom stared at Eric. Jared had witnessed this conversation many times. Tom’s face relaxed. His eyes lowered as he let out a long exhale, revealing the same acceptance Jared had seen many times before. Tom wasn’t going to get through to him.

With the resolve of a man about to jump off the Empire State Building, Tom took a deep breath and headed toward the door.

“You’ve never suffered a consequence a day in your life, Eric!” Tom walked out of the room and slammed the door.

Eric threw his half-filled glass, and it smashed against the door frame.

“Bastard! He doesn’t know what he’s talking about! What the hell have I been doing all these years? How did I build an empire if I didn’t know what I was doing?”

Jared scrambled to make Eric a new vodka tonic. At the same time, Rachael exited the room with as much dignity as anyone could in the situation. Michael followed. Both had remained silent and out of the line of fire.

Eric shot back the vodka, straightened his suit and tie, and walked out the door.

Jared cringed, knowing Eric hadn't even gotten the chance to light a cigar! He took a few swigs straight from the vodka bottle and followed behind.

It was going to be a long night.