

Eternally Damned: Chapter 1

Maven

Present Day 2021

Salem, Massachusetts

My life has been simple and there is nothing wrong with simple. There's a beauty to it, a calmness, a silence.

Simplicity can be a gift, but after living with it for so long, I'm tired. You know what else comes with silence?

Loneliness.

Not that I'd ever complain because my life with my Pa is everything I could ever want. It's been me and him since the day I was born. My mom, his daughter, gave birth to me when she was fifteen and wanted to give me up for adoption. He stepped up and said he'd take care of me.

My Mom, Meredith, didn't wait for him to change his mind. She handed me over and never looked back. She left town that day and we haven't seen her since. I never found out who my father is and when I ask Pa, he just shrugs his shoulders. He says, "I never knew your mom was dating."

Unlike some kids, I didn't continue to ask about my mom or dad. I asked once and when I got my answer, I moved on. I don't need them. I have my Pa and, as long as I have him, I have everything I need.

My grandma died when I was two years old, so I don't remember her, but Pa has pictures hanging around the house of her holding me, smiling wide while I drooled on her like babies do.

Love surrounds me. I know that and it's enough. Everything else in question, all the what ifs and maybes, they can go straight to hell.

Nothing is better than the family I have.

“Maven, come get this dang cat. It’s ruining my couch,” Pa shouts from the living room.

I grin and toss the blue covers off. “You mean the couch that’s already ruined?” I tease, slipping on a tattered grey robe that has seen better days.

“I’m not getting rid of this couch! It’s just now worn in. Sits me just right,” he huffs.

I roll my eyes and head out of my bedroom door, gathering my long red hair from where it is trapped between the material of the robe and my body.

“It sits you because your ass has left an indent in the cushion, Pa.” I slide my hand down the worn wooden rail that leads downstairs and the steps creak from my weight.

“And that’s what makes it perfect.” He greets me at the bottom of the staircase, his gray hair wild and in need of a good brushing. His shirt is buttoned wrong making the lengths uneven, but his smile is always the same: bright and cheerful. He gives me a kiss on the cheek like he does every morning. “How did you sleep, Fireball?” He rustles my flame red hair.

“Good. How about you?” I ask, waiting for him to lie to me again. Something has been going on with him, I don’t know what because he won’t tell me. The dark circles under his eyes tell me he didn’t sleep again though.

He waves me off. “Don’t worry about me. These old bones have gotten plenty of rest. Come on, I made us breakfast.”

I bend down and pick up Barney, the menace cat that usually stays outside because he wrecks everything. He hisses at me, jumps out of my arms, and lands on Whiskey, my Pa’s Newfoundland.

He lets out a grunt and Barney hisses again before making a beeline out the door, Whiskey doesn’t move. He won’t until Pa cracks open a bottle of whiskey.

He's Pa's companion, best bud, ride or die, partner in lazy crime.

I pat his head. "Morning Whiskey." His fur is as soft as a blanket right out of the dryer.

"Come on, now. Before breakfast gets cold." Pa ushers me into the kitchen and pulls out a chair for me. It scrapes against the ancient wooden floors. There are grooves in the floorboards from how many times he has pulled this chair out over the years.

The scent of bacon fills the small kitchen causing my stomach to grumble. "Thanks, Pa. It looks delicious." The first thing I go for is the cup of coffee, black, just how I like it.

Bitter like my soul.

While I take a sip and let the warmth sink into my palms, I watch Pa for a minute. He scoots around the kitchen, cleaning up the mess he left on the stove, and I look around the small space. This house, it isn't much. It's a two bedroom, two bath old country home. Everything is original. Pa hasn't updated a thing. The oven is black and white, the left burner doesn't work, and the sink is this ugly yellow color.

Everything creaks and groans and when it's windy, everything shakes. Pa never had a lot of money and since he retired from the steel factory, money has been a little tighter, but we do okay.

I work too, but from home since no one in town will hire me. All because my last name is Wildes, like the "witch" who burned at the Salem Witch Trials. Stupid town and its paranoia.

I don't have a magical bone in my body, and I'm not even related to her. Luckily, in today's world, working from home is accepted. I'm a bookkeeper for a fancy law firm. They pay decent but not enough.

I give Pa money for bills and then I put the rest into my Monreaux account. If someone goes into my checking account, that's what they will see it labeled as.

I'm obsessed.

Ever since I was a little girl, there has been this property on the outskirts of Salem called the Monreaux Estate. It's abandoned, half crumbled, and needs a ton of work, but I've been saving for it ever since I saw it when I was ten years old. I don't know what it is about it. Maybe it is the fact that there is a mystery surrounding the place. There are rumors, but nothing evident.

People in town say a cult used to live there. Others say it belonged to witches and that's where they would hide, hoping the Salem Witch Trials would end soon. I've heard werewolves and vampires, which always makes me laugh, but I'm not dumb enough to rule it out.

I think anything is possible and I keep an open mind.

It's been for sale all these years, and no one has bought it because apparently the energy on the property is malevolent.

I have only ever felt welcomed when I'm there.

I've worked my entire life, saving every penny I can in hopes I can buy it one day and make it mine. Just the thought makes my heart race. It's where I am meant to be. I know it.

But money doesn't grow on trees and I'm thousands of dollars away from making my dreams come true.

The dream gets further away every year.

From putting a dollar into my piggy bank after walking the neighbor's dog, to putting a hundred aside as an adult with a real job, I'm no closer than I was when I first started this crazy plan to save. I have a good chunk of cash. I could buy a new house for me and my Pa, and then we could have a better life.

Maybe it's time I give up my dream.

"Hey." My Pa's fingers grip my chin and turn my head. His eyes wrinkle on the sides and his silver stubble glistens in the morning light peeking through the windows.

"What's going on in that head of yours?"

I know better than to lie. Taking one last sip of my coffee, I put the mug down on the table and grab the fork, pushing my eggs around the white plate. "I think it's time I stop saving for the Monreaux Estate, Pa. I could work for the rest of my life and I still won't have enough. I can buy us a house or upgrade this one with how much I have saved. I think it's time to move on." Even the words break my heart and I have to stop myself from saying anything else. My eyes water, and I clear my throat. "It was a stupid dream to have."

Pa grips my chair and yanks me closer to him, the wooden legs grind against the floor once more. He takes my hand in his and his lips are flat as he ponders. When his aged brown eyes meet mine, I know he's going to give me an earful.

Never once has Pa belittled me for wanting that Monreaux house. He is a firm believer in what is meant to be will be. He's always cheered me on, encouraged me, and tries to help in any way he can for me to have my dreams. He wants this for me.

He opens his mouth, then closes it, his teeth clanking together. Standing, he wipes his mouth on a napkin and tosses it on the table. "Come on, we're leaving."

I look down to remind him what I'm wearing. "Leaving?"

"Yep. You don't have to get all dolled up to go where we are going." He grabs the keys to the 1960 Ford truck that was passed down from his father. He walks away and I'm still sitting there not knowing what to do. "Well, come on. We don't have all day."

I snag a bite of bacon and run after him, the savory sweetness bursting over my tongue as I slip on my boots by the front door. Good thing I'm not trying to impress anybody.

We step outside and the wind kicks up. Autumn is in full blast as the yellow, red, and brown leaves drift across the lawn. The tire swing sways, and the wind chimes sing as the rods bump against one another.

I love it here.

And hate it.

I love it because it is what I know.

I hate it because it's all I've known.

Tucking the bottom of my robe in my boots so the hem doesn't drag on the ground, I go to head down the steps when Whiskey barks, scaring the life out of me. I hold my hand to my chest and take a deep breath. "Jesus, Whiskey. You gave me a heart attack." I open the door and he bolt, jumping over the steps to catch up with Pa. He jumps into the bed of the truck and the entire frame bounces from his weight.

"Fat ass," Pa grumbles as he opens the passenger side door for me.

Always a gentleman and setting the bar really high for the men I date.

Which is laughable.

Dating.

I've never even been on a date but there is hope, that fickle bitch.

I run across the yard, my boots slapping against the mud since it rained last night and stop right before I get into the truck. "Where are we going?"

"Don't worry about it," he mumbles.

I roll my eyes and slide in, buckling the seatbelt before he tells me to. The hinges of the door squeak as he shuts it, reminding me how old this vehicle is. The truck itself needs a new paint job, but other than that, the engine runs as if it is new. Pa makes sure of it.

The tires spin against the dirt and gravel as we reverse out of the driveway. I glance over at Pa as he puts on his glasses. It makes me wonder if I should be the one driving. He kisses his fingers and places them on the photo of Grandma that's taped to the dash, then puts the truck in drive.

Whiskey barks and I peek into the side mirror to see him perched up and the wind is wobbling his cheeks. I chuckle, witnessing drool flying everywhere.

“Now, I don’t know where this silly notion is coming from to give up on your dreams. I know I never taught you that, so you better stop that nonsense right now. I know Dottie would slap you silly.”

I cringe when I think of my best and *only* friend. She’s brutal with the truth and does not accept self-doubt. Dottie is my other biggest cheerleader, but right now, she’s at school since she’s a teacher. She’s unable to go with me everywhere. Dottie is tough since she teaches high schoolers. She refuses to let them walk all over her, and I don’t know how she handles those hormonal teenagers.

I wouldn’t make it as a teacher. Kids are brats.

“Pa, it isn’t self-doubt. I’m being realistic. There are other ways to be happy. I’m okay with that.” I’m not but sometimes the truth is unsettling, and it hurts.

“I refuse to believe that, Fireball.” He grips the steering wheel hard until his knuckles turn white. “I know I haven’t been able to give you everything and maybe if your mom stuck around—”

I reach for his arm and lie my hand across the old tattoo of an anchor that has lost most of its color. “Don’t. You give me a life that people should be jealous about. I love my life. You have given me everything I could want. This isn’t on you, Pa. Don’t for a second think it is.”

“I just wish I could help more.”

“You help me in all the ways that matter.” I give his arm a reassuring squeeze before looking out the window, watching the red maples and black cherry trees blur as we pass them.

There’s a sign up ahead that says, “Salem 3 Miles” but we are bypassing Salem.

We drive for about twenty minutes, enjoying the gorgeous scenery before we take a left down a dirt road with potholes the size of Texas in it. Overgrown weeds invade the sides of the road. The truck crunches them as we surge forward.

My heart thumps when I realize where he has taken me.

Black iron gates stop us a few yards ahead, the brakes squealing. Something makes me get out of the truck. A pull, a force, I don't know how to explain it, but I listen to it. I climb out of the vintage vehicle, not bothering to shut the door, and my robe snags on a few pieces of long brown grass.

Hypnotized, I move forward until I'm in front of the iron gate. It's locked. No one has been able to get inside since the city locked it up, plus the bad energy always sends people away. Not me. I only ever want to be closer. I feel like my heart is here.

I'm home.

The iron gates circle the entire 200 acres. They are impossible to climb because of the height and the vines that have nearly taken over the metal.

I want inside so bad it physically hurts my chest.

I grip the bars and shake them, but they don't give way. I sigh as I head to the side where a concrete slab is. I break the vines and weeds, moving them out of the way so the black plaque can shine.

Monreaux Estate.

That's all it says, but I reach out and touch the M, tracing it with my finger. The concrete scrapes against my skin and I swear in the distance I hear my name being whispered by a deep, commanding, yet tired voice.

It's all in my head.

I look to the left, the mansion is the size of an ant since it's so far away, but I see it.

"How do you feel?" Pa asks.

I turn around, gasping. I forgot he was there.

"I feel like I'm home," I admit, hoping he doesn't get mad.

"Not a lot of things can give you that feeling, Maven. When you experience that feeling, hold on to it. Remember this moment, remember how you feel, and why.

When things get hard and exhausting and that doubt starts to trickle in, remember why you're doing it. You're working toward your home. That's a beautiful thing. I'm proud that you see the beauty in this estate when everyone else has given up on it. You see things differently, Fireball. It's my favorite thing about you. Dreams are meant to drive the human soul. If we don't have dreams, we don't have anything."

I take a long look at the house in the distance and grip the gate until the vines dig into my palms.

I'll be back.

And I'll finally be where my heart is.