

Eternally Damned: Chapter 3

Maven

“Do you want me to go with you?” Pa asks, looking too comfy in his recliner. He seems a bit pale and green around the gills. It’s been a hell of a day. The auction went by quicker than I thought it would. It’s all a blur.

Honestly, it feels like more of a dream than anything. If it weren’t for the heavy, centuries aged key in my hand that allows me onto the estate, I wouldn’t believe it. There is a faded orange gem in the middle of the weighted iron. The key is gorgeous, and I have a feeling it has experienced so much in its life. I wish I could know.

On the car ride home yesterday, I cried, thanking Pa over and over until I hiccupped, and my throat hurt. My eyes are still puffy from all the tears.

“No, I think you should rest. I need to do this alone.” I sit down on the well-seasoned couch he refuses to get rid of and play with the key in my hand. It’s large, nearly taking up my entire palm. “Pa...” I furrow my brows as I think, letting the rust and bumps in the iron key scratch my skin. It’s as if I have found the key to my restless heart and I’m finally able to open it to give it the rest it deserves but there is one question burning the back of my mind. “How did you get that money? I thought we were strapped. I’m confused.”

He coughs, the sound is wet and unhealthy. “We are, but I never once thought about going into my safe to give you your inheritance.” He holds up his finger and presses the leg lift of the recliner down to stand.

“Inheritance? Pa, I don’t expect a thing like that. Use that money for you.” I get to my feet and help steady him.

“Fireball, I don’t need it. I want to take care of you when I’m gone, and this is my way to do it. Follow me.” He shuffles his feet across the floor and Whiskey grunts as he

follows Pa down the hallway to his bedroom. His chocolate brown fur looks like a floating rug as he sticks against Pa's legs.

I follow behind, trying my best to keep a clear head. I've never thought of the day where I'd have to be without Pa, but it's going to happen. He won't live forever and somehow, that enrages me. I can't be without Pa. My heart can't take the pain it will bring.

The bedroom door groans open, and I crinkle my nose as I enter. The musky smell of an elderly man and stale air overwhelms my senses even though Pa has always been a clean man. The bed is in the middle of the room, crisp white sheets and a wrinkle free blue blanket lies on the bed, the pillows perfectly fluffed.

On the left side where the nightstand is, a picture sits of my grandma in her wedding dress. It's been there for as long as I can remember. Nothing has changed in this room over the years.

Not even the lace curtains hanging over the windows that have turned yellow over time.

He grabs each side of a pretty painting of Salem, then takes it off the wall. My eyes round when I see a vault. A round circular black notch clicks as he turns it. "Now, I know it's hard to accept, Fireball, but I won't be around forever. It's going to hurt and upset you, but just know I'll always be with you. This is my way of always being with you, okay?"

"Pa, I don't like this. I don't like how you're talking." Tears begin to brew, overflowing like a boiling cauldron over a fire.

"I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. I'm just letting you know, okay?" A louder click sounds, and he swings open the vault. "Now, in my will, it says not to give this to you until I die, but I think now is a good time. You need it." His arms reach inside the vault, and he pulls out stacks of twenty-dollar bills.

“Pa!” I gasp and turn to look over my shoulder to make sure we’re alone. We’re always alone. “What is this? Did you rob a bank?”

He snorts. “I’m not a criminal, just a smart businessman.” He snags a bag from beside the bed and stashes the cash inside the red duffel. “I’ve saved for years. I started the moment your mother was born, but when she left and I had you, I knew this money would go to you and you’ll do well with it. You’ll be smart. You’ll make it last. And you’ll make your dreams come true, just like this Monreaux Estate. This allows me to help you in the only way I can. My bones aren’t built like they used to be, so I can’t help you build, but I can help you pay for someone who will bring your visions to life. Add this money to your bank account, the one you’ve put all your savings in.” He empties the vault besides one stack of cash, then zips the duffel bag shut. “That’s about seven-hundred thousand dollars, Fireball. It’s everything I’ve ever saved for you. I hope this helps create a home you can live in forever.”

He tries to hand me the bag and I stare at it. I can tell it’s heavy since the material is stretched and the zipper looks like it’s about to burst.

“I can’t take this,” I say breathlessly, the air leaving my lungs in one full whoosh.

He takes my hand and closes my fingers around the black handles. “You can and you will. I want you to. I want you to make this home everything you’ve ever dreamed about since you were a little girl. This is for you. Either take it now while I’m alive or accept this money when I’m dead.”

This is a dream that wouldn’t have come true without him. I drop the bag and throw my arms around his neck, tucking my face against his shoulder while squeezing him tight. The key digs into my palm as I hold onto him. He smells like his room and I’m finding that scent more comforting than ever right now.

“You’ve always taken care of me,” I manage to whisper through the tightness in my throat.

He hugs me in return. “I will always take care of you, for as long as I’m breathing, Fireball. You can count on that.” Pa leans away and brushes the tears off my face.

“Now, go see your home. I’m going to kick back and relax. Go to the bank first,” he suggests with a stern tone warning me I better listen to his suggestion.

I snicker. “You can count on that. I’m not walking around with this much money.” I wipe under my lower lash line to gather the rest of the tears. “Are you sure about this? This is so much, Pa.”

“I’ve never been surer about anything in all my years. Now, go on. I’m tired of the mushy stuff and I want to nap.”

Whiskey barks in agreement, then yawns as if that was too much work.

I stand on my tiptoes and give Pa a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll never be able to repay you.”

“You’ve repaid me just by being you, Fireball. Go on, before it gets too dark out, maybe take a few candles just in case.”

Oh, yeah. That’s a good idea since the Monreaux Estate doesn’t have electricity. “I’ll grab a lantern instead,” I tell him, thinking about the lantern in the garage that hasn’t been lit in years. It’s sitting there next to the mower.

“Be careful. Call me with updates and let me know if it’s haunted. Oooooo,” he mimics a ghost wiggling his fingers at me.

I roll my eyes at the silly thought. “I can’t wait to call you with no exciting news.” I tuck the key in my back pocket, then grunt as I lift the duffle in my hands, the cash feels as heavy as bricks.

“I wouldn’t be too sure,” he says under his breath and it has me kicking up a brow at him.

Salem has always been a paranoid city, filled with myths and what ifs. Everyone believes in witchcraft and paranormal creatures, or at least fear the *possibility* of them. Me, I don’t know what I believe. I’m good either way.

The world could use a little excitement and so could my soul.

I decide to drag the duffle across the floor, making my way to the living room. The end of the rug curls as the money stuffed bag slides over it. The door is open so I'm able to push the handle of the screen door with my butt and open it. As I go down the steps of the porch, the bag thumps heavily.

I begin to sweat.

Who knew dragging so much cash could be such a workout?

Whewie.

The dead grass crunches under my feet and when I get to the truck, I open the passenger side door. Remembering to lift with my legs, I toss the money into the seat, then lean against the side for a breather.

This cannot be happening. I can't suddenly be rich.

It doesn't feel real.

Once my arms stop shaking, I push off the truck and run into the garage to grab the lantern and the matchbox.

"Alright, Pa. I'm going to the bank, then the estate. I love you!"

"Love you, Fireball. Be safe."

I grin, feeling better than I have in a long time. There's hope. Something big is on the horizon and I'm going to grab it. My entire life is about to change.

I run to the driver's side, and with a smile on my face, my journey to the bank seems like the final stretch to all the hope I've ever held onto.

Cranking the lever against the door, the window rolls down and the evening breeze flutters into the cab. I rest my elbow against the side and take a quick look at the bag sitting in the passenger side seat.

Time moves so fast when I'm not ready for it to, yet so slow when I'm waiting for it to speed up.

I think about everything I want to do to the estate. I definitely want to clean up the property and the inside probably needs to be completely gutted.

Oh, I know.

I really want sparkly paint, maybe an accent wall in the kitchen. A pretty light mint green that glistens when the sun comes through the window.

I'm so fucking excited! I can do whatever I want, but I also want to find pictures of the property to keep its originality.

I'm so lost in thought; I don't even remember pulling into the parking lot at the local bank. When I park, I lace my arms over the steering wheel.

Everything is changing. I close my eyes to take a moment to myself when blue eyes sear my mind. Gasping, I snap them open and look around, wondering what just happened. Confused, I jump out of the truck and try to think of someone I know with blue eyes.

There's Dottie, but I wouldn't be thinking about her, would I?

That stops me in my tracks, my hand sliding over the warm hood of the truck and then I begin to laugh. My cackles bring attention, but I don't care. It isn't Dottie I'm thinking of.

Gathering my wits about me, I lace the duffle bag handles through my arms and carry it like a backpack since I can't lift it the other way. The straps dig into my shoulders and bites into my skin.

"Ms. Wildes?"

I turn to look over my shoulder and grin when I see the familiar face of the handsome security guard. "Hi? I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name at city hall." I gather my hair from under the bag and it tumbles down my shoulders. His brown eyes slide down my body and the security guard doesn't bother to hide his desire before meeting my face.

“Hall. Brenden Hall.” He holds out his hand for me to shake. He has a friendly smile, the kind that can charm a woman right out of her panties, but my panties are very secure.

I shake his hand and inhale a sharp breath when I envision blood and death. I let go quickly and take a step back. My mind must be fucking with me.

His grin fades, but something else lurks in his features. “Is everything okay? I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Sorry. I haven’t been sleeping well,” I lie, feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden.

Run, My Sweet. Run.

A voice whispers from the depths of my mind and I shake my head, insanity gripping hold. What the hell is wrong with me?

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m glad I caught you. I heard you won the bid on the Monreaux property.” He fishes out his brown leather wallet and hands me a card.

“Congratulations. I think it’s an amazing piece of land. It needs some work and I also happen to own a lumber and construction company.”

Don’t you dare take that card.

“I know what you’re thinking. What is a security guard doing owning a lumber company?”

I wasn’t wondering that at all.

“I’m a part time security guard and I’m transitioning to my new company. I’d love a chance to work on this estate. Selfishly, it would be great for me considering the historical value of it, but I swear, I’ll make your dreams come true.” He smiles then releases a deep breath after his speech.

Why do I feel like there is more to that last sentence?

I take it because my subconscious is suddenly a sexy male voice screaming superstition. I need all the help I can get. Making sure not to brush against his fingers, I snag the card from him, then stare at the matte black cardstock with gold letters.

“I’d love to help you restore it. It would be great for my business and you. So, call me some time.” He gives a sideways smirk and scratches the back of his head, the light catching the amber flakes in his brown eyes. “For anything.”

A growl snarls next, rumbling lose my ability to think.

I’m a crazy person.

Yep.

That’s what is happening.

“You know, I might take you up on that.” I tuck the card in my pocket “Well, I have to go deposit a check. It was nice to meet you Brenden.” My converse scuff against the sidewalk as I hold onto the straps of the bag.

“I look forward to hearing from you, Maven,” he shouts.

I give a friendly smile and wave before opening the door.

“Welcome to Salem Credit Union. How can I help you?” A teller with puffy brown hair and smudged lipstick on her teeth asks.

“I need a private room to deposit a large sum of money,” I say, feeling more uncomfortable by the second. They are going to think I sacrificed a life for this money.

“Absolutely, right this way.” The big haired woman saunters around the counter. Her skirt hits her knees, and her purple blouse is tucked in with a rhinestone belt that wraps around her waist.

She walks with her hands up, wrists back, and fingers curled, sashaying her hips quickly while her heels kiss the black tile floor.

I hurry after her and when we enter the room, I drag the straps off my shoulders and the bag hits the floor with a hard thud.

“I’d like to deposit seven-hundred thousand dollars.”

She grins, unzipping the duffle to begin placing the money in a counting machine. That’s when I notice the wrinkles on her face. She hides her age well with her young-dressed appearance and makeup.

I expect her to say something sly and rude to me like everyone else, but besides a few curious glances, she doesn’t say a word to me while she counts the money.

I shiver and give a tight smile while she blows a bubble with her gum. We remain in silence for the rest of the time, and I decide to put most of the cash in my savings account with a large chunk in checking, then I might invest in some stocks to be safe.

“Have a great, *non-witchy* day, Maven.”

Ah, there it is.

I don’t even know this woman’s name. My eyes flick to her nametag. “I’ll think about it, *Beth*.” With an empty bag, I hurry to the truck.

When I push out the door, the sun has set and an eerie feeling wash over me, as if I’m being watched.

Come home. Come to me, where you will be safe.

“Losing my goddamn mind,” I grumble under my breath before hopping in the truck.

I tap my fingers against the wheel, glancing around. Someone is watching me. Not wanting to stick around and find out who, I do what I planned on doing the moment the iron key fell into my hands at the auction, and head home to the Monreaux Estate.

The truck grumbles from the old exhaust and I take a peek in the rearview to make sure I am in the clear.

I'm the only vehicle in the parking lot now. A ghost town is all that's left.

And the further I get away from bank, the further the headlights burn against the pavement, the darker the night sky gets, the better I feel. This town suffocates me without understanding me. People fear what they don't know and for some reason, that's me. The only place I know where I am accepted is with Pa and at the estate.

The stars are millions in the sky and trees are trying to wrap the constellations in a tight hug as they soar to space. My surroundings get prettier as the buildings diminish, which is just how I want to live.

I flip my blinker on out of habit and turn down the dirt road that leads to the mansion. These overgrown weeds engulfing the driveway led the way to my only dream since I was a little girl.

The brakes squeak as I come to a stop. My nerves shake my hands as I try to grip the wheel. The yellow headlights beam against the black iron that's stopped trespassers for the last one hundred years. The M in the middle of the gate hypnotizes me.

On autopilot, I step out of the truck, and dig into my pocket for the key. I can't get over how heavy it is. My boots crunch against the grass and vines. I stand in front of the gate for a few minutes, that feeling in my soul tugging me home again. As I slip the key through the hole, the metal clanking against iron, I notice the vines seem greener.

Or maybe I'm imagining things, but I swear, they seem more... alive.

"This is it," I whisper, my words a cold cloud in the night. My fingers clutch the handle of the key, the only one out of the original three that has been found, and I forget what to do next.

I need to turn the damn thing, but I'm frozen.

Once I step through these gates, my life changes forever.

The vines creep closer to the lock, as if they have come to life, and I know I am losing my mind because the orange gem in the key begins to glow.

Closing my eyes and taking a much-needed breath, I twist my wrist and the key turns to the stopping point. With a hard shove, the gates swoop open, presenting me to the Monreaux Estate.

I stand in the middle of the headlights, staring as far as they can show me. A few Spanish Oaks line either side of the drive next to the Red Maples and Eastern Red Cedar. The moss hangs down low from the branches, almost dripping to the ground. A few red and yellow leaves scatter, blowing across the tops of my shoes.

I'm home.

Even if it does look a little creepy right now.

I hurry back to the truck and hop in, slamming the door just before I press my foot on the gas. I forget the gate behind me and leave it wide open. It's not like anyone ever comes on this property anyway.

Squealing in excitement, I can't help but turn my head in every direction so I can see every inch of the property I can. It's hard to since it's so dark, but it's gorgeous. The trees go on for 200 acres and one day, I'm going to walk through every single inch of this place and explore.

The moss drags over my windshield, scraping against the top of the truck while my tires dip into a steep pothole which causes the frame to shake.

Another sheet of moss blinds me again and when I pass through it, I slam on the brakes, seeing the front of the house up close for the first time.

I hold my hand over my heart as it jackhammers against my chest. In slow movements, I slip out of the truck and gently close the door, afraid I might wake the dead in the stunning silence around me.

The house itself can't speak, but right now, it's screaming at me to come inside. I reach into the bed of the truck to grab the lantern, the autumn night cool against my skin, the air suddenly still while crickets sing their lullaby into the distance.

An owl hoots and I dart my eyes around to the left to catch a glimpse of the bird. His large orange eyes stare like two glowing embers ready to launch at me. He ruffles his feathers, his long nails dig into the bark of the tree while his wings spread, lifting himself into the air and flying away until he is nothing but another star in the sky.

A moan comes from the house, the beams rotted and barely supporting the roof. I continue to glare inside where a door used to be. All that's left is empty space. The left side of the porch appears burned, but it doesn't look like it reached the house. It must have rained the night it happened for it to have done so little damage. I shiver when I think about the disaster that could have happened if it had reached the rest of the house. Carefully, I climb up the unreliable steps, swirling the key in my left hand before switching it for the matchbook that's in my pocket.

Stopping at the threshold, chains rattle to the right of me and I see an old swing trying to rock, but half of the body grinds against the ground. Placing my palms on either side of the doorframe, the broken paint pinches my skin. I chew my bottom lip, debating if I want to take the final step inside.

If I do, I know my entire life will change, but my life changed the moment the keys were in my hand.

And now I'm here.

I'm too nervous to take the final step after all this time.

I have to.

I'm *meant* to.

With an uneven breath, I take a small step forward and gently set down the lantern. Opening the matchbook, I grab a stick and strike it against the box, the flame but a speck in the void of this house.

I swallow. "You can do this, Maven." I bend down and pick up the lantern, lighting it on the inside. Sparks fly as the wick ignites.

Welcome home, My Sweet.