

# Desire Under the Elms

## Chapter wise Summary

### Part I

It is 1850, the setting a New England farmhouse. Two huge elms droop on either side of the house, maternal but oppressive.

### Scene I

Eben Cabot, a 25 year-old man, looks at the sky. He is handsome but scowling, filled with a rough energy. His two older half brothers, Simeon and Peter, more squat and practical, bowed with hard work, join him. Simeon recollects how his love, Jenn, died eighteen years ago.

The two brothers muse about gold found in California. It is like Solomon's mines, just waiting to be picked up off the ground. They complain of how much and how hard they've worked in their lives, wondering when their father, who has been gone for two months without a word, will die. The old man married Eben's mother thirty years ago, but she is dead now.

Eben says in a surly tone that he wishes their father had died. The smell of bacon draws them inside.

### Scene II

The kitchen is neat a clean but looks more like "a men's camp kitchen rather than that of a home" (9).

Simeon and Peter chide Eben for saying that about their paw. Eben retorts that he is not his, and that he is not like him. All three reminisce about how good Eben's maw was to them. Eben growls that Paw worked her to death.

He then asks how they will get to California, but says they won't leave because they will wait until Paw comes home to get their share of the farm. They say two thirds of it is theirs, but Eben disagrees and says it all belongs to his maw, and is thus his. He asks why they never stepped in to help when their paw drove his maw to death working, and they reply that they were busy working too; there was no time to meddle.

They ask why Eben never did anything, and he defensively replies that he had chores to do. They all agree she never complained.

Eben announces that when Paw returns he will finally meddle, and yell at the top of his lungs.

Peter wonders where he went. Simeon says they don't know—one day he just drove off in his buggy, telling them not to run away until he came back. He claims he would have stopped him, but Eben scoffs that they are both afraid of the strong old man.

Eben then announces he is going out to see Minnie, who Peter jests is the Scarlet Woman. Simeon teases him that “a new coat o' paint'll make a heifer out of forty” (14) but Eben says she is not that old. He gets angry, though, and promises to smash her face in. The brothers watch him leave and laugh that he is the spitting image of Paw.

On the road Eben wonders if he might kiss Min, and ruminates on how warm she is. He does not care about her being a prostitute.

### Scene III

Eben enters the house and bangs on his brothers' door. He announces their father has married again, to a thirty-five year old woman. He heard it from the preacher.

The brothers are stunned and realize everything will go to her. They decide to head for California now. Eben looks at them shrewdly and says he will give them three hundred dollars if they sign away their rights to the farm. This will give them money to take a boat to California.

They are surprised, and Eben explains it is his [Maw](#)'s money, hidden away. They demur, and ask Eben about Minnie. He is defensive, and says he simply took her. She used to be his father's, and she is his. He says his father's new wife is probably an old cow. Simeon asks if he might not try to take her too, and he laughs in disgust and leaves.

Simeon and Peter decide that they will wait and see if Paw is really married, and they won't work at all until this happens and they will then consider signing the paper. They are excited to “play rich fur a change” (19).

### Part I Scene 4

The three brothers are eating breakfast. Eben looks glum and says he can feel their father approaching. He gets up to go work, but the other two remain, and stick to

their plan to not work. Eben is excited that they are considering his offer, exulting that the farm will be his again.

[Simeon](#) and [Peter](#) drink a bit, and realize they want fresh air. Simeon looks at the ground and muses at his “blood an’ bone an’ sweat-rotted away – fertilizin’ yer-richin’ yer soul” (23). They can’t resist, and decide they should work just a little bit to help out.

Eben runs toward them and breathlessly says the old mule and his bride are on their way.

Simeon tells Peter they should get ready to go now, as he never wants to step inside the house once the old man is back.

They go upstairs and Eben lifts a strip of flooring near the stove to get his money out. When the brothers return with their carpetbags he counts out their money and they sign. They awkwardly say goodbye and walk out to the gate.

They wonder if they should wait and see their new maw. Simeon comments that all he wants to do is laugh because for once in his life he is finally free. They ebulliently jest and laugh.

[Ephraim Cabot](#) and [Abbie Putnam](#) come near. He is seventy-five, tall and strong but wizened. Abbie is thirty-five, buxom and languorous, stubborn and untamed. Cabot announces that they are arrived, and Abbie gloats that this is all hers now. Cabot sees his sons and wonders why they are not working.

Drawing near, Simeon and Peter look at Abbie contemptuously. Abbie goes inside, and the brothers tell Cabot that Eben is just like him, and that he’ll eat him and spit him out. They boldly criticize Abbie and Cabot is amazed. They laugh that they are free and heading for the gold fields.

Laughing and whooping, the brothers dance around. Cabot backs up, shaking his head that they are lured by the “sinful, easy gold o’California,” which has made them mad (29). Cabot finally grows angry and threatens to put them in an insane asylum.

They gambol away and pick up rocks, throwing them and breaking glass of the parlor window. Cabot rages that he will beat them. They head down the road, singing a merry tune.

Abbie looks out the window and down to Cabot, asking if this is her room. He replies that it is their room.

Abbie goes downstairs and enters the kitchen, where she sees Eben before he notices her; she is filled with desire for him. She seductively tells him she is his new maw, and he explodes that she is not. She says she wants to be friends, that she understands why he is upset, that she is not the worst and he will grow to like her.

He derisively says his father bought her like a harlot and that the farm is his. She scornfully laughs and says they will see; she can have Eben driven off the land. She softly tells him they ought to be friends, and for a moment he is confused, torn by his anger and his desire. He snaps out of his confusion and yells that she is a witch and he hates her. He leaves in frenzy.

Abbie smiles to herself and washes dishes.

Outside, Eben approaches his father, who is talking to God. He mocks the old man, who retorts that he ought to be working.

The brothers' song is heard in the distance.

## **Part II Scenes 1&2**

### **Scene I**

It is two months later. Abbie is sitting outside, dressed in her best, bored. She senses Eben above her in the farmhouse and eagerly seeks him out. When he comes out their eyes meet and he turns away angrily. He is also dressed up, and heads off the porch to the path.

She laughs at how spruced-up he is. The desire between them is obvious, permeating the air. She languidly says how she knows he thinks she is pretty, and how warm it is outside. Eben scoffs that his father would not want to hear her talking like this. She retorts that it is easier now that she has made Ephraim softer, but Eben replies that he will fight them both for [Maw](#)'s land.

He turns to head out the road. She asks if he is going to see Min, which makes her upset. She spits out how Min has seen every man, but Eben laughs that she is better than her -at least she did not whore herself out for this farm which will never be hers.

She screams at him to get along, that the land will never be his. She glowers after him, filled with hate.

Cabot comes up from the barn. He appears dreamy, but not less strong. He asks if she was fighting with Eben again, and she says bitterly that he is the spitting image of Cabot. She says Cabot is too soft now, but he simply looks at the sky and says it is pretty. Abbie cannot agree.

He says he is getting old and would like his own place up there in the sky. He is tired of being cold, and he feels resigned. When he says how he has grown to appreciate Eben, Abbie asks suddenly why he is so taken with him all of a sudden. She asks if she is not his wife.

He grabs her hand and covers it with kisses, speaking words of love that she does not seem to notice. She asks if he is giving the farm to Eben and he replies he is not giving it to anyone. He adds that he wishes he could just set fire to the whole thing and watch it burn, but he would set the cows free. At her prompting he says he would set her free too.

Abbie turns the conversation back to Eben, saying he is taking up with that harlot Min and that he even demonstrated lust towards Abbie. When he hears this, Cabot flies into a rage and says he will kill Eben. Abbie is startled and tries to calm him down, saying she did not mean it and he needs Eben's help on the farm. Cabot calms down.

Suddenly Abbie says maybe God will give them a son. Cabot is thrilled with this idea. Abbie seems grimly resolved, and says they *will* have one. She asks if there is a son if Cabot will give the farm to her. He says he would do anything, trembling with happiness and hope. He leans his head to pray.

## Scene II

There is a wall dividing Eben's room from Cabot and Abbie's room. Eben appears desperate, Cabot wildly excited about having a son. Cabot says gleefully that he and the farm are begetting a son. Abbie tells him to go to sleep, and says glumly that she does not understand him.

Eben and Abbie seem to lock eyes through the wall. He stretches out and she rises. He flings himself on his bed and she relaxes.

Cabot raises his head and looks at Abbie, asking plaintively if anyone will ever know him. He explains how he came here fifty years ago and there was nothing there; he plowed the fields of stones even when people said it could not be done. They are not laughing now: some went west; some died. He grew hard. God is not easy, he knew, and he piled the stones into walls and grew harder; "yen kin read the years o' my life in them walls" (44). He was lonesome, and took a wife. She

had [Simeon](#) and [Peter](#), and died. She was a good woman and worked hard but never knew him. The farm grew and it was all his, and he took another wife and had Eben. She was pretty and soft and did not know him either. They hated each other, and they wanted the farm but did not know what that meant. He was bitter. She died too, and then he heard a call from God in the wilderness. He went out and found her, his Rose of Sharon.

She looks at him blankly and he asks her if she understands him. She seems confused, and he becomes angry.

She says she might have second sight and promises him he will have a son. He shivers and says he believes her, but is cold and is going down to sleep in the barn where it is warm.

Abbie is a bit concerned and asks if he is ailing. He says he is just getting old, and goes downstairs.

Eben sits up. He meets Abbie's glance through the wall. Both sigh. Eben opens the door and Abbie meets him. She kisses him furiously but then he becomes angry and pushes her off in a rage. They stand panting.

Abbie moans that she would make him happy, but he says she could not and that her kiss was like poison. They argue about Min for a bit, and Abbie says Eben is a dog and she only wants him for her own purpose.

Eben threatens her that she must leave his room. Abbie laughs at the lust she can see in him, and that one day this whole house will be hers. She tells him to come court her in the parlor downstairs.

He is fixated on her, helpless. After she leaves, he thinks about the parlor and says aloud, "Maw! Whar air yew?" (48.)

## **Part II Scenes 3&4**

### **Scene III**

The interior of the parlor is like a tomb. Abbie is dressed in her best clothes, but no longer appears confident and wily. Eben enters, and muses how he feels [Maw](#) in here. Abbie feels it too. She says the presence likes her, but Eben says his Maw would hate her for stealing her place.

He adds that Maw bears Cabot a grudge, and Abbie says they all do. Eben starts to talk of her, saying she sang for him and this was her farm and Cabot could not

appreciate her; to all of this, Abbie says *she* will sing for him, *she* will get this farm, and *she* is not appreciated either.

Eben bursts into tears and Abbie embraces him, feverishly telling him she will replace his Maw, will be everything to him. She kisses him. It is restrained at first and then grows wild.

Terrified and trembling he pulls away, then addresses the presence, asking it what it wants. All of a sudden he lights up and says that he knows what Maw is saying – Abbie is the vengeance on Cabot so she can rest in her grave. Abbie is elated, and holds out her arms to him. Eben embraces her gleefully.

#### Scene IV

Eben, handsome and bold and content, walks out to the gate. Abbie opens the window near him and calls to him in a quiet and sultry voice. He comes over and they kiss and exchange flirtatious words. Abbie laughs and says that Cabot will never find out. She adds that this is her room –their room.

In a strange tone Eben says he knows his Maw has gone back to her grave to rest in peace. Abbie chides him not to say sad things, not after their night of love.

Cabot is seen walking up the road so Abbie withdraws. Eben joins him and asks if he is stargazing during the day. Cabot nods that the sky is pretty. Eben replies that the farm is pretty, and Cabot corrects him. Eben laughs that his father cannot see that far with his bad eyes.

Cabot becomes suspicious of Eben's jovial behavior. Eben asks if he felt Maw go down to her grave to sleep contentedly, but, confused, Cabot says he slept with the cows, which are teaching him to sleep well.

Laughing, Eben claims to be the boss of the place, and walks away. Cabot scowls that Eben is softheaded like his Maw, and there is no hope for him.

### **Part III Scenes 1-4**

#### Scene I

It is the following year. Eben sits upstairs, conflicted and quiet. In the next room a baby sleeps in its cradle. Downstairs it is festive, with people chattering together in a gossipy way, Cabot becoming drunk, and Abbie sitting alone, her face drawn and lonesome.



She asks offhandedly where Eben is. A young girl and a man tease her but she does not notice. The fiddler jokes that he is offering up prayers because unto him a – he pauses – brother was born. Everyone laughs.

Cabot aggressively steps forward and asks why no one dances. The fiddler says they are waiting for Eben. Cabot snarls that he has a new son now, but then relents and says Eben is a fool but is his blood.

An old farmer wonders at Cabot how he had a son at his age. Cabot grimly says he has a lot in him, and calls for more celebration.

The fiddler plays and people dance. Only Abbie sits alone, morose. The fiddler winks at Cabot and says he is spry, but he does not have good eyesight.

Cabot suddenly darts into the middle of the circle wildly and starts dancing and capering. The fiddler jeers and plays “Pop Goes the Weasel.” Cabot looks ridiculous, whooping and praising himself and calling the younger generation soft and useless.

The fiddler stops playing, protesting he cannot keep up with his dancing. Cabot is pleased and pours a drink while everyone watches him hostilely.

Above, Eben gets up and walks to look at the baby; his face is almost tender. Abbie seems to sense this and gets out to go check on the baby. She tells Cabot not to touch her as she leaves. Sweating, Cabot decides to go outside for fresh air. Inside everyone gossips about them.

Upstairs Abbie whispers to Eben that the baby looks just like him. Eben sighs that he does not like this secret, but Abbie says they are doing their best and they must wait. Eben decides to leave the house on account of the music; they kiss.

Outside Cabot muses that there is something there, something disturbing the peace, and that he wants to rest in the barn. The fiddler plays and everyone dances.

## Scene II

That same evening, Eben is staring up at the sky. Cabot comes toward him with a maniacal grin on his face, and tells him he ought to go in and dance with one of the pretty girls inside. In fact, he ought to think about marrying and find a share of a farm. Eben retorts he already has a farm and that it is right here.



Cabot laughs scornfully and says it is not Eben's farm but it will be his true son's, and he will never get around Abbie because she knows his tricks. He adds that Abbie told him Eben tried to make love to her.

Eben is shocked when he hears this. Cabot gleefully says Abbie told him that she would have a son so Eben would not get the land.

Eben angrily jumps up to confront Abbie, but Cabot stops him and they engage in a violent struggle. Cabot gets the upper hand and is strangling Eben when Abbie sees what is happening and runs out to break up the fight.

Cabot says he was not going to kill Eben; he adds that he will raise his son upstairs to be just like him. He laughs and goes inside.

When Abbie tries to comfort Eben, he pushes her away and begins to sob. Confused and distressed, Abbie asks what is wrong with him and why he is acting like he hates her. He calls her a whore and a liar who made a fool of him and had a son to keep him from getting the farm. Abbie is stunned and tries to convince Eben she really loves him.

Eben announces he will get his [Maw](#) to come and take revenge on them, or that he will tell his father the truth about the baby and then go to California. He will get enough money to buy back the farm. He condemns the baby, who he says is now there to take everything from him.

Abbie brokenly asks if he believes she loved him before the baby and he admits she did, but like a dumb animal. She says she hates the baby too because he tore them apart. Eben scoffs that she loves the baby and will give him the farm.

Distracted, Abbie says she will kill him before that happens. Eben turns to leave and Abbie grows frantic and clings to him, begging him to stay and asking him if she could prove that she was not trying to steal the farm if he would love her and kiss her again. He says he could but this will never happen because she is not God.

Abbie intensely reminds him that he promised, and Eben wonders if she is crazy. She calls after him that she will prove to him how much she loves him.

### Scene III

Cabot is asleep in the bedroom; Eben is sitting at the kitchen table with his bag packed. Abbie leans over the cradle, terrified but desperate and committed. She leaves the cradle and runs to Eben, flinging her arms around him and telling him it

is done. Eben dully says it does not matter and that he is leaving; Maw will take vengeance for him.

Abbie clings to him and says he does not need to go now because nothing can come between them. Her voice is strange enough that Eben asks what she did, and she says she killed him. Eben thinks she means Cabot, but she corrects him and says it was the baby. She laughs wildly.

He is stunned, and drops to his knees to ask Maw why she did not stop her. Abbie says quietly that Maw is no longer there and has not been since that night. She killed the baby by placing a pillow over his face.

Eben is filled with grief. Abbie explains that she did not want to do it but knew that he stood in their way. Eben yells that this is not what he meant to happen, and Abbie tries to calm him down. Irrate, he says that she probably wants to pin this on him, and that she killed the baby to steal from him again. He announces that he will call the Sheriff and then go to California. Sobbing, he runs out of the house.

Abbie calls after him that she loves him and she does not care what he does as long as he loves her again.

#### Scene IV

Exhausted, Abbie sits at the table. Cabot comes downstairs, talking to her about how the baby is sleeping soundly. He asks her if she has made food and she says no. Cabot responds that she better do so soon because the baby will wake up. Abbie says dully that he is dead.

Cabot is confused and asks if she is crazy. She grows wild and tells him to go look if he does not believe her. He does so, and is utterly flabbergasted. He shakes her and asks why, and she orders him not to touch her. She says the baby is not his, that she hates him, and it was Eben's child.

Cabot looks dazed and bewildered. He felt like he knew this to some degree, and then starts to tear up. He quiets himself and says he needs to be a rock of judgment, and that maybe it is better the baby is gone since the house was so cold.

He plans to go to the Sheriff, and Abbie tells him not to bother because Eben already has. Cabot pauses, and then tells her that if she loved him he would have never told the Sheriff on her. He looks old and tired, and feels terribly lonesome.

Eben enters morosely. Cabot asks him if he told the Sheriff and Eben assents. Cabot praises him as being like his Maw, but then threatens him to get off the farm.

Eben bursts into the room where Abbie is, begging for forgiveness. They embrace ecstatically. He explains how he realized he really loved her and that he wants to share her punishment with her. She shakes her head that this is impossible. He believes himself as guilty as she is; he will tell the Sheriff they planned it together. She cries that she does not want him to suffer. He says he does not care if he goes to prison as long as they are together. They kiss passionately.

Cabot comes in and sees them together, a “slick pair o’ murderin’ turtle doves” (77). He announces he will leave the farm forever –he turned the cows loose and freed them as he will free himself. He will burn the house and let Maw haunt the ashes, and will go find [Simeon](#) and [Peter](#) in California. He sings and pulls up the floorboard. When he sees that there is no money there, he is shocked. Eben tells him what he did, and Cabot sighs that now he knows God did this –God is hard, not easy. God is lonesome. He will stay here and grow old. The Sheriff arrives and Cabot lets him in. Eben says he helped Abbie do it. The Sheriff takes them both. Cabot says goodbye to them.

Abbie and Eben proclaim their love and kiss. Eben points to the sunrise and says it’s pretty. Abbie agrees. The Sheriff looks around the land appreciatively and says it is a lovely farm and he wishes he owned it.