

Creatures of Time

A Forever Young Novel
by
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“...at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim,
and a flaming sword which turned every way,
to guard the way to the Tree of Life.”
Genesis 3:22

“A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.”
—From *The Second Coming*,
William Butler Yeats, 1919

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche

PART ONE

Current day

I don't know much for certain anymore.

Except that hindsight is a bitch.

On bad nights (I don't sleep much) I torture myself with the idea that had I been more attuned to the forces around me, maybe, just maybe, I could have avoided what happened altogether.

But on the worst nights, I know there's no way I could have. Let's just say I don't believe in choice or free will. Not anymore. Everything – and I mean everything – is fated, connected, has a precedent, has happened before and will happen again. Over and over again like an ouroboros, that circular snake-dragon creature eating its own tail, representing the circle of Time. No clear beginning, no end. Just the certainty that the sins and mistakes of previous generations will repeat and reverberate, turning and turning in a widening gyre.

Biting those who follow in the ass, if you will.

That being said, how and where does this story begin? Logic says it should start with the serpent's head, with the actions of my grandmother and her friends when they weren't much older than I was when I started college on the same ivy-draped campus tucked into the rolling Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia half a century later.

For now, though, let's begin closer to the tail, when I am suddenly dragged into it, unaware of all that has happened. And completely unprepared for all that is to come.

Chapter One

I carry my friend's broken body across the nightmare-quiet campus, bearing the weight and the horror of it somehow, the pristine beauty of the new snow behind us marred by my heavy boot tracks and an overlay of black-red drops, like gory breadcrumbs in a twisted fairy tale.

All those wrong angles and blue-white bones poking through torn flesh and clothing. All that blood. She is either dead or very near it.

Hold on, *I will her*. We will find it and I will end this.

I will end Her.

Please, just hold on.

Eastmore College, Virginia, September 11, 1985

I looked up from my book with a start. I'd been so engrossed that a soft scratch, scratch, scraaatch on the door almost made me fall off the bed.

I glanced at the clock across the room. Eleven thirty.

I shook my head, clearing the cobwebs. The noise and late-timing were signature Kat, my new friend, a wild child California girl, nee Katarina French, who after only a couple weeks of college was already making me color gloriously outside the lines.

"Hold on," I said as loudly as I dared, hoping not to wake my roommate Sid, aka Sidney Dumont, an honor student who had early morning classes every day. I hopped down from my top bunk, blanket in tow, relieved to see her reading by flashlight too, her normally spiked purple hair covered by a black do-rag, her long, awkward limbs tangled up in her sheet. I mouthed a "sorry," but she just grinned and shrugged, her eyes owlish and kind behind her incongruously conservative horn-rimmed glasses. At close to six feet tall and with a bravado that came with her southside-Chicago upbringing, I thanked God she was so much nicer than she looked.

I opened the door. "What's up?" I tried for confident nonchalance, but the words came out in an awkward squeak. As usual.

Kat, who never had to try for cool, was too lit up and jittery to notice my awkwardness, her sun-streaked, copper hair a sexy mess, her tight t-shirt and short shorts doing absolutely nothing to hide her ample curves and dancer's legs as she skipped in place. Instead, she said, "You gotta' come see this, Mads! All these weird-ass freaks, who look like dead priestess vampires or ghosts or something, wandering around campus, moaning and chanting. It is so effed up!"

She was so over-animated and flushed that I wondered fleetingly if Kat might be on something. Coke, maybe? I quickly shrugged it off. She was simply having fun and I was the new me, up for anything, even if I was still a little thrown by my nightmare. So I quickly dug up flip flops and a sweatshirt to throw over my not-ready-for-prime-time holey t-shirt and baggy boxer ensemble.

"Sid, you wanna come?" I asked, already knowing her answer. She was on academic scholarship and couldn't afford this place without it.

"Nope, I'm gonna' catch some zees. Gotta be awake for that first class tomorrow at 8 ayem."

We hurried out, and Kat galloped down the brightly-lit hall like a five-year-old pretending to ride a horse.

"The weirdos are coming! The weirdos are coming!" she cried, getting louder and louder as we approached the heavy wooden front doors.

"Shhh," I said, snorting with laughter, "you'll wake the whole school!"

But as soon as we got outside, I joined right in, our voices ringing out across the sleepy campus. We veered left toward the library and the oldest part of the school. There were about 20 other girls in their

bathrobes and pajamas headed the same way, and a few we knew joined us, forming a giggling, galloping herd.

But the giddy merriment drained from our group when we saw them: a single-file line of what looked like hooded monks, heads down, each carrying a candle as they slowly floated under the skyway between Main Hall and the library down the hill toward the Shell. It wasn't just seeing them that silenced us. It was that chilling moaning, somewhere between a Gregorian chant and misery.

"What did I tell you!?" Kat's cat-green eyes shone, her pupils huge in the half-light, "Let's go mess with 'em!"

This didn't seem like a great idea based on the little I'd learned about certain secret societies on campus, Eastmore College's answer to and replacement for sororities in an all-women's school.

"Kat!" I hissed, to no avail, "Cut it out! Let's not and say we did!"

I tried to tell myself there was no reason to fear them. These were girls we already saw every day in the dining hall, brushed our teeth next to in the bathroom, not otherworldly demons after all. As we got closer, I even caught bright flashes of white Reeboks and Chuck Taylors peeking from under their robes.

But they were still creepy.

"We who are about to die salute you," Kat said, then literally saluted our wide-eyed group and skipped toward the hooded line.

I followed Kat several paces behind, trying to look innocuous.

"Hi, y'all!," Kat shouted, doing her Southern Cal best to imitate Southern Belle-ese. "How y'all doin' tonight? I just ha-ad to tell y'all that your outfits ah simply STUNNING! Whe-ah on earth did you get such adooooorable ensembles? Hmmm?"

Their eerie howling increased in intensity.

"Mah, mah, mah," she continued, "Seems y'all don't want to give away your hab-er-dash-er-y secrets! Okay, I'll guess... Talbot's? No? Thalheimer's?"

Someone touched my shoulder and I jumped.

"It's just me." I turned to see D, her slim frame wrapped in a lush, white monogrammed bathrobe, her minky, sleep-tousled bob falling in loose waves - as stunning as ever despite the frown line between her dark brown eyes leading to a patrician nose and rosebud lips. "What is she doing?"

"Heck if I know," I said to my new friend. In the few weeks the three of us had known each other, Kat's ability to make anything fun had only been entertaining and charming. But tonight she really did seem different, almost manic. I wondered again about drugs, but decided against saying anything to D about it.

"Well, on her head be it if she doesn't stop," D grumbled. "I think those are the Wailers, and I hear they don't like being messed with." D, or Daniela Cross, was from an incredibly old, incredibly wealthy, Main Line Philadelphia family, and it was an understatement to say she wasn't as charmed by Kat's unpredictable, anti-establishment wildness as I was.

"I know," I said. "She wouldn't listen to me. But," I said, sudden inspiration lightening my mood, "I have an idea."

I took a couple steps towards Kat, shaking my finger at her. "Sally-Bob, I have been lookin' all over fer you! Your daddy and me is worried sick. Now you'd best git your behind back on this here horse and git to bed, or there's gonna' be a whoopin' tonight!"

Kat snorted, and I took her by the arm, starting the gallop back to the dorms. Even D laughed as we put some distance between us and the hooded group, believing our fun was harmless and all was right with the world.