



CREATUS ANIMUS

*If we allow enmity
in our hearts,
war is inevitable...*

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If we allow enmity in our hearts, war is inevitable...

For four thousand years, creatus have concealed themselves from the humans who hunted them almost to extinction. Now, one rogue faction plans to retaliate by ridding the world of humankind.

Only one division of creatus, with the strength and numbers to fight the sinister sect, stands between humanity and a new world order.

What they discover, however, might prove the truth about the creatus myths, and why humans started hunting them so many thousands of years ago.

Maybe humans were right...

Chapter One

Michael gasped for air as he stared into his brother's fathomless dark orbs. *If looks could kill, I'd be dead*, he thought.

Not that Derrick's gaze needed to do the killing, his massive hands were doing a fine job of squeezing the life out of him on their own.

"Did you know?" Derrick seethed, a rare occurrence for him. Derrick was the embodiment of calm ninety-nine percent of the time, the reason the family had chosen him as the overseer. "God, tell me you didn't know, Michael!" he continued, pinning him up against one of the thick beams in their barn, which doubled as Michael's office when he was in Harvard and, of course, where the family gathered when there was a meeting or event.

Michael stared at his brother's eyes, which were bloodshot with fury, his knuckles white where he squeezed his neck. "Of ... course ... not ... Derrick," Michael pushed out one word at a time. It wasn't easy to speak without having any air left in his lungs, but he had to convince his brother that he didn't know anything about their uncle's involvement in the murder of Janelle Heskin.

Michael didn't try to shove his brother off him, though. Not that he could have anyway. At six-foot-six and two-forty, he had about two inches and twenty pounds on his older brother, but Derrick had always been stronger. And Michael wouldn't fight him. The last time he'd challenged him for real was the night that Janelle had been murdered. Michael had to live with the guilt that if he hadn't delayed him, she might still be alive.

Derrick bit down on his lip so hard that the scent of blood permeated the little bit of air that Michael sucked in. Michael would have thought that Derrick's self-inflicted pain would have lessened his grip on him, but still, his brother held firmly. "How can I believe you?"

Derrick's raven-colored hair—the same color as his own, except for the fact that Michael had a hint of bronze and a slight wave from their Irish mother's side of the family—was wet from sweat. Another rarity for Derrick. Nothing unnerved him.

Obviously realizing that he was killing him, Derrick released his hands just a fraction, but continued to hold Michael off the ground.

Michael gasped in a breath so he could speak. "I know you can't ever forgive me for that day, but you have to believe me. I would never do anything to hurt you. Damn, man, I'm your brother. How could you even think?"

"And *Matthew*," Derrick said his name as though it were an oath, "is our uncle. I never would have guessed that he was behind everything ... and having Janelle killed. Why?" Derrick finally released him completely, but then dropped his head into his hands. "I told him ... all of them. I'd never planned to have a relationship with Janelle. We were just friends. How in the hell am I going to tell Kristina that Janelle died because of me?"

Michael rubbed his neck. "Why would you tell Kristina anything about that?"

Derrick looked up from his hands. "See, Michael, you're forty-five and yet, you still act like a child." His brother shook his head. "No ... not like a child. Like a man who's never been in a relationship, a man who doesn't realize that when you love someone, you tell them everything."

"You're right, Derrick. I don't understand. Why would you tell your wife something that would hurt her, when it'd only serve to make you feel better?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Derrick seethed, stepping toward him again.

Not wanting to be trapped by his brother's deadly hands after he'd just released him, Michael stepped out of his reach. "You're upset. With good reason. But telling Kristina that Janelle was murdered fourteen years ago because of our uncle won't change Kristina's past. It'll only get the guilt you're feeling off your chest."

"Wrong again, Bro," Derrick said as he licked the blood off his lip. "I'll never lose the guilt. Every challenge Kristina has to deal with because she's part of our family is my fault, because I befriended a human. I'll never be able to forgive myself. At least up to this point, I thought I'd saved Kristina from the life she'd been living after Janelle died, but now I find out that I started the chain of events. If I'd never spoken to Janelle, Kristina never would have watched her die, wouldn't have lived in foster homes, almost been raped ... almost murdered ..." Derrick dropped his head again.

This time, Michael stepped forward and rested his hand on his brother's shoulder. "You can't possibly blame yourself for all of that." Now, Michael wished Derrick *would* blame him for delaying him the night Janelle had been murdered. The thought that his brother could blame himself for everything that had happened to Kristina for the last fourteen years pained him.

Derrick shoved Michael away and straightened upright, then made a pace around the barn. "Well, I do."

Michael gave up trying to keep stride with Derrick, who looked like a caged lion. Back and forth, he paced across the thick planks of tight-grained oak. But like the king of the jungle, each step his brother took was ghostly silent. Even the hand-wrought nails that had been face-nailed into the floor joists didn't squeak as they did when Michael walked across them.

Taking his chances, Michael stepped into Derrick's path again. "You know, Derrick, you probably won't believe this, but I have a feeling that you would have ended up with Kristina no matter what. I know you cared for Janelle, but you never looked at her the way you look at Kristina. And Janelle would have died fifty or sixty years before you ... it was never meant to be. And

knowing Kristina, she would have probably gotten into just as much trouble if Janelle had raised her. Maybe even more.”

One side of Derrick’s cheeks actually inched up. “That’s probably true.”

“But look at Kristina now,” Michael quickly continued while he had Derrick’s attention, “she’s back in school, she doesn’t drink or do drugs anymore, and ...”

Derrick narrowed his eyes. “And, what?”

“You know *what* ... dude, I saw you at dinner. Heard you ask her if she’d felt something.”

Knowing someone could be listening, Michael mouthed his next words, *She’s pregnant, isn’t she?*

This time, Derrick couldn’t hide his smile. “Yeah.”

“Congratulations,” Michael whispered. “You’re happy, right?”

“Of course, I’m happy. Kristina’s just so small. Mom isn’t a petite woman, and she had a difficult time. I can’t imagine Kristina giving birth to a creatus child. I was eleven pounds, almost double the size of an average newborn human.”

“But your baby is half of Kristina. When the time comes, if it’s too large, we’ll do a C-section. You’re worrying about something you have no control over.”

Derrick ran his hands through his damp hair. “I know. I can’t help it. As much as I love Kristina, as much as I can’t imagine living life without her, I’ll always worry. And now I have to wonder what might have—”

Michael stepped forward again. “Brother, this isn’t you. Things happen. You know that. And there’s nothing we can do to change the past. Look at Mom. Through tragedy often comes hope. As much as I hate what those *men* did to mom, neither you nor I would have been born.”

Derrick blew out a breath. “True. Since when did you become the old wise one?”

Michael laughed. “I’ve told you for years that I’m smarter than you. You just need to start listening to me.” Exhaling a long breath, Michael rested his hands on his brother’s shoulders. “I

know you said you have, but once and for all, would you please forgive me? There's no way I could have known."

Derrick usually controlled his bodily functions, but his heart rate suddenly spiked, as if he'd perceived a threat. "On one condition ... make them suffer — all of them."

As much as Michael wanted his brother's forgiveness, he shook his head. "I can't promise that, Derrick, you know that. I have to abide by our laws, as will you."

Derrick's eyes turned several shades darker than normal, and his cheeks filled with blood. "I won't. I'm stepping down as overseer, Mike. I can't remain impartial, and I won't allow Jonas or Matt to get away with this."

"Think of Kristina, man. What do you think this will do to her?"

The massive double oak doors of the barn swung open, the hand-forged strap hinges screeching in protest. Their father trudged across the old slats toward them. "Think of what it would do to your mother ... to the family. The day we start acting like animals will be the day humans start hunting us again. We have to stick together, son," Lyn said. "We can't start a war among our own kind. Jonas will stand trial, and when I find my brother — which *I* will — he'll stand trial too."

Through everything that had happened, Michael hadn't thought about how all of this had affected their father. Yes, Michael had been upset when he discovered Matt's treasonous acts. But what if Derrick had committed crimes against the family ... against him? Would he have been able to exact punishment on his own brother? How would his father be able to follow their laws when it came to sentencing his own flesh and blood?

Derrick gnawed at his already swollen lip. "I'm sorry, Dad. That was callous of me. I wasn't thinking."

For the first time Michael could ever remember, his father looked old. Lyn Ashton was only a hundred, which in human years was about fifty, but today he looked like a timeworn fifty-year-old human man, who had seen too much in his lifetime.

Lyn rubbed his hand over his mouth. “Understandable, Derrick. Believe me, not a day has gone by that I haven’t wanted to kill the men who murdered your mother’s family. But two wrongs don’t make a right. We are civilized, and therefore, we will hold a trial.”

“Yes, sir,” Derrick agreed, although hesitantly.

“And I won’t allow you or your brother to step down from your positions. The family needs you now more than ever. If the Canadians have teamed up with Matt, we might not be able to conceal our existence for much longer. If they start a war with humans, we might get caught in the middle. Of course, I can’t imagine that Marcus *or* Matthew are okay with rogue kills. Marcus banished Tag years ago for his crimes against humans, and my brother has always been different, always stayed on the fringe, but he’s never been a killer.”

Derrick shook his head. “None of this makes sense, Dad. What could Matt be thinking?”

Mike sat on the edge of his desk. This was a question he could answer. After all, he’d been the first person Matt had told about his plans to run for a political office within the US government. “Power. Matt wants power. My guess is that he’ll continue to run for State Attorney General. From there, who knows? But if he gets elected, he’ll surround himself with like-minded creatus. Not to mention make sure that creatus are in every law-enforcement precinct in the state. If that happens, God help humankind.”

Chapter Two

Jonas whipped his head back and forth, as if doing so might enable him to see something other than gray shadows.

“Lyn told you to stop doing that,” Victoria chided in a whisper. “Giving yourself whiplash won’t help you get your sight back.”

“You can leave, Vic,” Jonas groaned. “You don’t have to guard me night and day. Where would I go? It’s not like I can see even an inch in front of me.”

Victoria sighed. “I’m not here to watch you, Jonas. I’m here to protect you.”

“As if I care ... What good am I now? Meghan deserves better. Just let Derrick kill me already.”

“I heard that,” Meghan’s sweet country voice muttered. “I don’t want *better* or anyone else, Jonas. I want the man I married.”

Jonas shuffled his way across the basement floor, to where he knew the bed was. He felt like an invalid. “I’m sorry, lovely. I thought you were still sleeping.”

His wife’s warm slender hands touched his face. “I was. But your whining woke me up.” He could hear the smile in her voice, but he couldn’t force himself to feel even a moment of joy. Not when he knew he had such a short time left.

He edged his body down next to her, wishing he could really lie with her, but Lyn had the two of them under twenty-four-hour surveillance. At least with Vic here, he didn’t feel the animosity that rolled off Reece Buckley. As though he’d fallen for the NSC agent’s daughter on purpose. The last thing Jonas had planned was to fall for a part-human, part-creatus girl while he was trying to make

the world a better place for creatus. Besides, if Reece hadn't come into the picture, he was pretty sure that Vic and he would have fallen for each other.

But, just like love, he couldn't choose whom he fell for. And now he loved Meghan more than life itself. He also loved her so much that if somehow the council didn't sentence him to a death penalty, he didn't want to condemn her to a life with a blind man. He was certain that with the fraction of creatus blood that ran through her veins she'd be able to fall again. If Derrick had his way, Jonas probably wouldn't live through the week anyway.

Death by lethal injection was certainly in his near future. Not that he'd killed anyone with his own hands, but his mission of freeing the creatus people had enticed his brother, Ry, and others in their faction to kill humans. The creatus government didn't tolerate murder, and there was no such thing as a life sentence. If a creatus was convicted of homicide, the penalty was death.

According to Victoria, Lyn had sent the word out to all creatus that would come. Lyn Ashton had said that it wouldn't be fair that only the creatus family in New England voted. Instead, he had opened up the trial to creatus everywhere.

The only problem with that, though, was that most of the creatus who were on his side wouldn't show, in fear that it was a trap to arrest them all. Tag *definitely* wouldn't show. Especially not after trying to kill him, not to mention his crimes against humans. He wondered if Tag's father, Marcus Beaumont, would be holding a trial for his son.

Meghan draped her arm over him, pulling him closer. "Stop worrying, Jonas. Everything's gonna be all right."

"I sure wish I could be as positive, darlin'."

The hatch above the basement door screeched open and seconds later, footfalls creaked on the worn wooden steps.

Jonas waited for a familiar voice, wondering if it was time to go. Instead of someone talking, he heard just a wisp of lips as they touched each other. The sound of a kiss. So then it must be Reece. Jonas closed his eyes, hoping the man would think he was sleeping. Maybe Victoria and Meghan wouldn't tell him otherwise. The longer he could stay with Meghan the better. It was easy to think that you would rather die than live, it was a totally other thing to be able to handle it. He just hoped that when the time came, he could be the man that Meghan had married, not a sniveling coward.

"Hi, Dad," Meghan said, obviously not being able to read his mind that he wanted to stay quiet.

"Hey, baby," Reece drawled back. "You sleep okay?"

The warmth of his wife's arm disappeared as Meghan sat up. "As best as I could, considering we're being held prisoner in someone's basement."

"I understand," Reece continued. "This isn't a good situation for any of us. I'd much rather be in some tropical locale, soaking up some rays."

The bed creaked as Meghan must have stood. "Did you call Gran?"

"Yeah, she's pretty upset. You need to call her."

"What would I say, Dad? I'd have to lie. She doesn't know I was kidnapped against my will by your supervisor at the National Security Council of all people. She thinks I ran away. And how can I tell her that I got married ... but that I might not ever be able to introduce her to my husband? It's not ... fair."

Meghan's voice broke on her words, so Jonas carefully rolled out of bed and made his way toward her voice.

"Right here, babe." Meghan's hand touched his, and Jonas pulled her into his arms.

"I'm so sorry," Jonas whispered into her ear. Please don't cry. You're right. I don't know how, but everything will be all right. I was such a fool. We should have left town when you asked me to."

Meghan squeezed her arms around him, and Jonas wished beyond all hope that his words could somehow be true. If he could change anything in his life, he never would have agreed to go to that apartment building for Matt Ashton.

And that was saying a lot. Many instances in his life he'd love to do over: jumping off the roof in front of his father, which eventually caused his mother to break his father's neck to protect him and Ry. The death of his brother, then his mother ... But if he were honest, if he could only pick one instance, if he could only turn back the hands of time once, he'd change whatever act would keep him with Meghan.

Jonas continued to caress his wife's hair, but looked in the direction where he knew Victoria and Reece were sitting. "Has Lyn called? Have they set a time for the trial?"

Reece licked his lips. "Tomorrow night, eight o'clock at the Ashton's."

Jonas shook his head. "Didn't think they'd waste any time. Too much of a chance that someone might spring me." He laughed without humor. "Don't suppose I could convince the two of you into letting me and Meghan leave?"

Reece gulped. It was unnerving to Jonas how sharp the rest of his senses had become because of his loss of sight. His hearing had always been superb. All creatures had advanced eardrums that vibrated four receptor cells, but what really made their hearing stand out was their ability to detect low and high frequencies from twenty to three hundred kilohertz.

Victoria released a long shaky breath. "You know I would if I could ... I'm sorry, Jonas. I really am sorry. You know you've always been a good friend of mine. I just can't believe —"

Not wanting to hear Victoria cry, Jonas cut her off, "It's okay, honey, I made my choices." He'd never heard her cry. Not once in the thirty-some years they'd known each other. They'd been friends since grade school, since his mother had brought Ry and him to Boston. He'd tried forever to get her attention, but as she'd said, they'd always just been friends.

Meghan pulled her head back from his fingers. “Dad ... since we only have one day left, could you please give Jonas and me some privacy?”

“I —” Reece started, but Victoria must have pressed her fingers over his lips, because he stopped speaking.

“It’s okay, Reece,” Victoria said. “Just because you were able to break out of here, doesn’t mean that they will be able to. Even if they could, we’d hear them.”

“It’s not them breaking out of here that I’m worried about,” Reece continued. “What if that Tag guy ... or one of his goons tries to get to Meghan. You heard all the stuff she told us.”

Jonas furrowed his brow as he listened, as if that would help him. He missed not being able to decipher someone’s comment from their body language and facial clues. Right now he’d like to see the expression on his wife’s face. Would like to know why she hadn’t told him about whatever Reece was referring to. He’d told Meghan plain and simple that if anyone ever hurt her again, he’d kill him.

And blind or not, no one would be able to stop him, especially not Tag.

Chapter Three

The night and day had soared by for Meghan, and it was now time to go, her father had told her. He'd said that Jonas and she could have a few extra minutes alone before they left, though.

Somehow, she knew deep down in her soul that her father never would have allowed them to sentence her to death, so how could he allow them to sentence her husband, knowing that it might actually kill her? Creatus could die of a broken heart.

She'd tried to be brave all night, but as soon as Jonas had fallen asleep, she'd cried out practically every drop of water in her body, giving herself a piercing migraine. The pain had finally become so unbearable that she'd gone up the stairs and had asked Victoria to give her some medicine. Victoria had given her four Xanax and a Motrin, which helped curb the headache, but nothing took away the pain in her gut.

She'd lost Jonas once, so she knew what that loss felt like. The only thing that had kept her sane before was revenge. If the family sentenced Jonas to death, she'd demand that she be sentenced too. Otherwise, she'd have to take revenge on everyone who would cast a vote sealing her husband to a fate he didn't deserve. Yes, he'd broken the law and deserved to be punished, but he hadn't killed anyone with premeditation, never ordered anyone to kill someone ... He didn't deserve to be put to death.

Jonas cupped her face in his large hands, but he didn't kiss her as she thought he would. "You're too quiet, lovely. What's going on in that beautiful mind of yours?"

Without warning, the tears she'd been holding back all day broke through. He couldn't see her, so she'd tried everything she could to hold back her audible cries, but now her tears rolled over his thumbs as he tried to brush them away.

“Meghan, my love, please don't let our last minutes together be like this. Please don't cry. It makes me want to kill someone, and that won't help my case.”

A wail burst out of her from the depths of her soul. “Jonas ... I can't ... I can't lose you. I don't want to live —”

Jonas pressed his lips to hers, backing her up to the leather couch. He felt to the side, his hand brushing the arm of the sofa, then he gently coaxed her to sit while he lowered himself in front of her, his lips still pressed tightly to hers.

He viciously pawed at his eyes. “Dammit! I just want to see you. As if this isn't enough punishment for my crimes.” He ran his hands over her face again. “Promise me you won't do anything stupid, Meghan.”

She tried to shake her head, but his hands had a firm grip on her.

“I can't,” she choked out. “I didn't want to live before I met you, so how in the world am I going to live without you?”

“Promise me!” he demanded. “If you don't promise me right here and now, I swear I won't even give them a chance to sentence me. I won't have your death on my soul too. Promise me, dammit!”

More tears rushed down her face, but she nodded, knowing that even if she didn't do something to cause her death, she'd probably die anyway. She certainly wouldn't go to any great lengths to protect her life.

“Thank you,” Jonas said, wiping away tears on his own face. “This isn't the end, Meghan. We have eternity, my love. We aren't soulless creatures as the world believes. We have a heart and we

have a soul, and I know that more than ever right now, because I...I feel...I feel everything when I'm with you. So you have to go on no matter what. For me.”

Meghan bit down on her lip to stop her mouth from quivering. She needed to be strong, for Jonas. She owed him that much.

The hatch opened, and Jonas pulled her toward the stairs.

Her father held his hand out to Jonas, leading him up, while her hand remained latched inside her husband's hand. Thankfully, Jonas wasn't forbidding her to come. He'd tried, but she'd reminded him that he needed every vote.

“Thank you,” Reece whispered as he squeezed Jonas on the shoulder.

Meghan cocked her head, wondering what Reece could be thanking Jonas for, since he'd been so cold to him the last few days. Then she realized there was only one reason why her father would have thanked Jonas: for making her promise not to kill herself. At least he understood that the love of a father wouldn't be enough to keep her alive, as much as she wished it could be.

Reece drove while Victoria sat in the front passenger seat of the SUV that Jonas had purchased, the one her father had confiscated the night the building had exploded.

Jonas kept his hand wrapped around hers, and Meghan wondered for a second if they could somehow escape. She had enough money to get out of town. And Jonas could get more out of his savings once they got to a safe place. They had enough to live off of the rest of their lives, he'd told her.

Meghan worried her lip, thinking how she could do it. Her heart rate increased as she thought of the different scenarios.

Victoria turned and looked at her, her eyes narrowing. “You okay, Meghan?”

Meghan sighed. Damn creatus ... Why did they have to be able to hear a heartbeat?

Jonas leaned closer, his hand finding her ear. “Whatever you’re thinking, forget it. Just stand beside me today, okay?”

She nodded again, blowing out a deep sigh. How could she help him if he wasn’t willing to help himself?

The ride only took five minutes and they were already turning down a road with a no-outlet sign. If she’d known that, she wouldn’t have even thought about trying to escape. A search party of creatus would be impossible to elude. For some reason, she just assumed that even though Victoria and Reece had been holding them in the basement of a large country farmhouse in Harvard, that they’d be returning to Boston.

Would she ever have any luck? Even if she wanted to plan an escape, she didn’t have enough time.

Reece pulled into a driveway at the end of the road. Another farmhouse. In front of this house, though, looked like the parking lot at the mall. Rows and rows of cars, trucks, and crossovers were parked ten-deep. How many creatus had made this trek from driving distance, she wondered? And how many more had been dropped off by taxis?

Was this a good sign, or a bad sign? Would this many creatus come out to cast a guilty vote, or had they come out to support a brother-in-arms?

“Jonas,” Victoria gasped, tears choking her throat. “Hundreds ... So many came ...”

“What?” Jonas asked. “What’s happening?”

“There are hundreds of cars, Jonas,” Meghan told him. “Hundreds!” *How many people came in each car?* she wondered. This had to be a good sign. Victoria felt it too, or she wouldn’t have said it as a good thing.

“This is good, right, Vic?” Meghan asked, not being able to control herself from allowing her hope to surge.

“I don’t know,” Victoria answered. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Certainly, this many creatus wouldn’t come just to make sure that Jonas was declared guilty.

But then Meghan remembered watching the old westerns her father used to like. How when there was a lynching, the entire town showed up, even the kids.

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