

SACRIFICE

Blood fills my mouth. Fire sears my veins. I choke back
a howl. The silver knife slips—the choice is mine.

I am death or life. I am salvation or destruction.
Angel or demon.

I am grace.

I plunge in the knife.

This is my sacrifice—

I *am* the monster.



Chapter One

PRODIGAL

AFTER LUNCH

“Grace! You have *got* to see the new guy.” April bounded up to me in the junior hallway. Sometimes she reminded me of the cocker spaniel I used to own—she trembled in excitement over just about anything.

“Hottest guy ever?” I almost dropped my backpack. Stupid combination locker.

“No way. This guy is totally nasty. He got kicked out of his last two schools, *and* Brett Johnson says he’s on parole.” April grinned. “Besides, everybody knows Jude is the hottest guy ever.” She jabbed me in the side.

I did drop my backpack. My box of pastels dumped out at my feet. “*I* wouldn’t know.” I grumbled and squatted to pick up my shattered pastels. “Jude’s my brother, remember?”

April rolled her eyes. “He did ask about me at lunch, right?”

“Yeah”—I picked through the chalk bits—“he said, ‘How’s April,’ and I said, ‘She’s fine,’ and then he gave me half of his turkey sandwich.” I swear, if she had a disloyal bone in her body, I’d worry April was only my friend to get close to my brother—like half the other girls in this school.

“Hurry up,” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

“You could help.” I waved a broken pastel at her. “I just bought these on my way back from the café.”

April crouched and picked up a blue one. “What’s with these anyway? I thought you were working with charcoal.”

“I can’t get it to look right.” I plucked the piece of chalk from her fingers and stuck it back in the box. “I’m starting over.”

“But it’s due tomorrow.”

“I can’t turn it in if it isn’t right.”

“I don’t think it looks that bad,” April said. “Besides, the new guy seems to like it.”

“What?”

April bounced up. She grabbed my arm. “Come on. You have to see this.” She sprang toward the art room, pulling me with her.

I clung to my pastels. “You are so weird.”

April laughed and quickened her pace.

“Here she comes,” Lynn Bishop called as we rounded the corner to the art department. A group of students congregated in front of the doorway. They parted to

either side as we approached. Jenny Wilson glanced at me and whispered something to Lynn.

“What’s the big deal?” I asked.

April pointed. “That is.”

I stopped and stared at him. This guy more than pushed the limits of Holy Trinity’s dress code in a holey Wolfsbane T-shirt and black, dingy jeans, shredded at the knees. His shaggy, dyed-black hair hid his face, and he held a large sheet of paper in his pale white hands. It was *my* charcoal drawing, and he was sitting in my seat.

I left the group of bystanders and strode up to the table. “Excuse me, you’re in my spot.”

“Then you must be Grace,” he said without looking up. Something about his raspy voice made my arm hairs stand on end.

I stepped back. “How’d you know my name?”

He pointed at the masking tape name tag on the supply bucket I’d left out during lunch. “Grace Divine.” He snorted. “Your parents must have some God complex. I bet your dad is a minister.”

“Pastor. But that’s none of your business.”

He held my drawing in front of him. “Grace Divine. They must expect great things from you.”

“They do. Now move.”

“This drawing is anything but great,” he said. “You’ve got these branches all wrong, and that knot should be turned up, not down.” He picked up one of

my charcoals between his thin fingers and drew on the paper.

I was ticked off by his audacity, but what I couldn't believe was the ease with which he wove thick and thin black lines into striking charcoal branches. The same tree I'd been agonizing over all week came to life on the paper. He used the side of his pinky to smudge the coal on the trunk—a major “don't” in Barlow's class, but the rough blending had just the right effect for the tree's bark. I watched him shade along the bottom of the branches, but then he began to fix the knot in the lowest one. How could he have known what that knot was supposed to look like?

“Stop it,” I said. “That's mine. Give it back.” I grabbed at the paper but he pulled it away. “Hand it over!”

“Kiss me,” he said.

I heard April yelp.

“What?” I asked.

He leaned over the drawing. His face was still obscured by his shaggy hair, but a black stone pendant slipped out of his collar. “Kiss me, and I'll give it back.”

I grabbed his hand that held the charcoal. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“So you don't recognize me?” He looked up and pushed his hair out of his face. His cheeks were pale and hollow, but it was his eyes that made me gasp. The

same dark eyes I used to call “mud pies.”

“Daniel?” I let go of his hand. The charcoal pencil plinked onto the table. A million questions slammed against one another in my brain. “Does Jude know you’re here?”

Daniel wrapped his fingers around the black pendant that hung from his neck. His lips parted as if to speak.

Mr. Barlow came up to us, his arms crossed in front of his barrel-like chest. “I told you to report to the counselors’ office before joining this class,” he said to Daniel. “If you cannot respect me, young man, then perhaps you do not belong here.”

“I was just leaving.” Daniel shoved back his chair and slumped past me, his dyed hair veiling his eyes. “See you later, Gracie.”

I looked at the charcoal drawing he left behind. The black lines laced together into the silhouette of a lone, familiar tree. I brushed past Mr. Barlow and the group of students in the doorway. “Daniel!” I shouted. But the hallway was deserted.

Daniel was good at disappearing. It’s what he did best.

DINNER

I listened to forks and knives clinking on plates and dreaded my turn in the infamous Divine family daily ritual—the “so what did you do today?” part of dinner.

Dad went first. He was quite excited about the parish-sponsored charity drive. I'm sure it was a nice change for him. He'd been holed up studying in his private office so much lately that Jude and I joked that he must be trying to start his own religion. Mom told us about her new intern at the clinic, and that Baby James had learned the words *peas*, *apple*, and *turtle*, at day care. Charity reported that she got an A on her science test.

"I got most my friends to donate coats to the clothing drive," Jude announced when he finished cutting Baby James's meat loaf into bite-sized pieces.

I wasn't surprised. Some people in Rose Crest tried to claim that Jude's goodness was just an act, but he really was that kind of person. I mean, who else would give up the freedom of senior year to do independent study at the parish three afternoons a week? Or fail to make the varsity hockey team with all his friends because he wasn't willing to be aggressive enough. Sometimes it was hard being his younger sister, but it was nearly impossible *not* to love Jude.

I hated the thought of what my news might do to him.

"That's great," Dad said to Jude.

"Yeah." He grinned. "Yesterday, I told everyone I was donating a coat and encouraged them to help out."

"Which coat are you giving away?" Mom asked.

"The red one."

“Your North Face? But that one’s practically like new.”

“Because I’ve barely worn it in the last three years. It seems selfish to keep it in my closet when someone else could use it.”

“Jude’s right,” Dad said. “We need good-quality clothing. It’s not even Thanksgiving yet, and they’re already predicting another record-breaking winter.”

“Yes!” Charity cheered. Mom grumbled. She never did understand why Minnesotans *rooted* for record-breaking cold.

I was moving my mashed potatoes around my plate with my fork when Dad turned to me and asked the question I was so not looking forward to. “You’ve been particularly quiet this evening, Grace. How was your day?”

I put down my fork. The hunk of meat loaf in my mouth felt like Styrofoam when I swallowed. “I saw Daniel today.”

Mom glanced up from trying to prevent James from chucking his food across the table. The look that said, *We don’t mention that name in our house*, passed over her eyes.

We discussed just about everything around our kitchen table: death, teen pregnancy, politics, and even religious injustice in the Sudan—but there was one topic we never talked about anymore: Daniel.

Dad wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Grace and

Jude, I could use both of you at the parish tomorrow afternoon. We've had a great response to the charity drive. I can't even get into my office, it's packed so full of canned corn." He gave a slight chuckle.

I cleared my throat. "I talked to him."

Dad's laugh strangled off, almost like he was choking.

"Whoa," Charity said, her fork paused halfway to her mouth. "Way to go with the revelations, Grace."

Jude slid back his chair. "May I be excused?" he asked, and put his napkin on the table. He didn't wait for a response and walked out of the kitchen.

I glanced at Mom. *Now look what you did*, her eyes seemed to say.

"Peas!" James shouted. He threw a handful of them at my face.

"I'm sorry," I whispered and left the table.

LATER

I found Jude sitting on the front porch, wrapped in the blue afghan from the couch. His breath made white puffs in front of his face.

"It's freezing, Jude. Come inside."

"I'm fine."

I knew that he wasn't. Few things ever upset Jude. He didn't like the way some girls at school would say cruel stuff and then try to pass it off as "just kidding."

He hated it when people used the Lord's name in vain, and he absolutely couldn't tolerate anyone who claimed the Wild would never win the Stanley Cup. But Jude didn't scream or yell when he was mad. He got real quiet and folded into himself.

I rubbed my arms for warmth and sat next to him on the steps. "I'm sorry I spoke to Daniel. I didn't mean to make you mad."

Jude massaged the parallel scars that scraped across the back of his left hand. It was something he did a lot. I wondered if he was even conscious of it. "I'm not mad," he finally said. "I'm worried."

"About Daniel?"

"About you." Jude looked into my eyes. We had the same Roman nose and dark brown hair, but the resemblance in our violet eyes always felt a bit eerie—especially now, when I saw how much pain was reflected in his gaze. "I know the way you feel about him. . . ."

"Felt. That was more than three years ago. I was just a kid then."

"You're still a child."

I wanted to say something snide, like *So are you*, because he was barely a year older than me. But I knew he wasn't trying to be mean when he said it. I just wished Jude would realize that I was nearly seventeen; I'd been dating and driving for almost a year.

Cold air seeped through my thin cotton sweater. I was about to go inside when Jude took my hand in his.

“Gracie, will you promise me something?”

“What?”

“If you see Daniel again, promise me you won’t talk to him?”

“But—”

“Listen to me,” he said. “Daniel is dangerous. He isn’t the person he used to be. You have to promise to stay away from him.”

I twisted my fingers in the yarn of the blanket.

“I’m serious, Grace. You have to promise.”

“Okay, fine. I will.”

Jude squeezed my hand and looked off into the distance. It seemed like he was staring a million miles away, but I knew his gaze rested on the weathered walnut tree—the one I’d been trying to draw in art class—that separated our yard from the neighbor’s. I wondered if he was thinking about that night, three years ago, when he last saw Daniel—the last time any of us saw him.

“What happened?” I whispered. It had been a long time since I’d had the nerve to ask that question. My family acted like it was nothing. But *nothing* wasn’t bad enough to explain why Charity and I were sent away to our grandparents for three weeks. Families don’t stop talking about something that was *nothing*. *Nothing* didn’t explain the thin white scar—like the ones on his hand—above my brother’s left eye.

“You’re not supposed to say bad things about the dead,” Jude mumbled.

I shook my head. “Daniel isn’t dead.”

“He is to me.” Jude’s face was blank. I’d never heard him talk like that before.

I sucked in a breath of frigid air and stared at him, wishing I could read the thoughts behind his stony eyes. “You know you can tell me anything?”

“No, Gracie. I really can’t.”

His words stung. I pulled my hand out of grasp. I didn’t know how else to respond.

Jude stood up. “Leave it alone,” he said softly as he draped the afghan around my shoulders. He went up the steps, and I heard the screen door click shut. The television’s blue light flickered through the front window.

A large black dog padded across the deserted street. It stopped under the walnut tree and looked up in my direction. The dog’s tongue lolled out in a pant. Its eyes fixed on me, glinting with blue light. My shoulders collapsed with a shiver, and I shifted my gaze up to the tree.

It had snowed before Halloween, but that had all melted away a few days later, and it probably wouldn’t snow again until Christmas. In the meantime, everything in the yard was crusty and brown and yellow, except for the walnut tree, which creaked in the wind. It was white as ash and stood like a wavering ghost in the light of the full moon.

Daniel had been right about my drawing. The

branches *were* all wrong, and the knot in the lowest one should have been turned up. Mr. Barlow had asked us to illustrate something that reminded us of our childhood. All I could see was that old tree when I looked at my piece of paper. But in the past three years, I had made it a point to avert my eyes when I passed it. It hurt to think about it—to think about Daniel. Now, as I sat on the porch, watching that old tree sway in the moonlight, it seemed to stir my memories until I couldn't help remembering.

The afghan slipped off my shoulders as I stood. I glanced back at the front room window and then to the tree. The dog was gone. It may sound weird, but I was glad that dog wasn't watching as I went around to the side of the porch and crouched between the barberry bushes. I braved a nasty scratch on my hand as I felt under the porch for something I wasn't even sure was there anymore. My fingertips brushed something cold. I reached farther in and slid it out.

The metal lunch box felt like an ice block in my bare hands. It was spotted with rust, but I could still make out the faded Mickey Mouse logo as I wiped years' worth of grime off the lid. It came from a time that seemed so long ago. It used to be a treasure box where Jude, Daniel, and I kept our special things like pogs, and baseball cards, and that strange long tooth we found in the woods behind the house. But now it was a small metal coffin—a box that held the memories I wished would die.

I opened the lid and pulled out a tattered leather sketchbook. I flipped through the musty pages until I found the last sketch. It was of a face I had drawn over and over again because I could never get it right. He had hair so blond it was almost white then, not shaggy and black and unwashed. He had a dimple in his chin and a wry, almost devious smile. But it was his eyes that always eluded me. I could never capture their deepness with my simple pencil strokes. His eyes were so dark, so deep. Like the rich mud we used to sink our toes into at the lake—they were mud pie eyes.

MEMORIES

“You want it? Come and get it.” Daniel tucked the bottle of turpentine behind his back and lunged sideways like he was going to run away.

I crossed my arms and leaned against the trunk of the tree. I’d already chased him through the house, across the front yard, and around the walnut tree a couple of times—all because he’d sneaked into the kitchen while I was working and stole my bottle of paint remover without saying a word. “Give it back, now.”

“Kiss me,” Daniel said.

“What?”

“Kiss me, and I’ll give it back.” He fingered the moon-shaped knot in the lowest branch of the tree and flashed me a devious grin. “You know you want to.”

My cheeks flamed. I wanted to kiss him with all the longing in my eleven-and-a-half-year-old heart, and I knew he knew it. Daniel and Jude had been best friends since they were two, and I—only a year younger—had trailed behind them since I was old enough to walk. Jude never minded when I wanted to tag along. Daniel hated it—but then again, only a girl could play Queen Amidala to Daniel’s Anakin and Jude’s Obi-Wan Kenobi. And despite all Daniel’s teasing, he was my first real crush.

“I’ll tell,” I said lamely.

“No, you won’t.” Daniel leaned forward, still grinning. “Now kiss me.”

“DANIEL!” his mother shrieked from the open window of his house. “You better come clean up this paint.”

Daniel shot straight up, his eyes wide with panic. He looked at the bottle in his hand. “Please, Gracie? I need it.”

“You could have asked in the first place.”

“GET IN HERE, BOY!” his father roared out the window.

Daniel’s hands shook. “Please?”

I nodded, and he ran toward his house. I hid behind the tree and listened to his father yell at him. I don’t remember what Daniel’s father said. It wasn’t his words that ripped me open; it was the sound of his voice—getting deeper and more like a vicious snarl as he went on. I sank into the grass, with my knees pulled to my chest, and wished I could do something to help.

* * *

That was almost five and a half years before I saw him in Barlow's class today. It was two years and seven months before he disappeared. But only one year before he came to live with us. One year before he became our brother.