



Chapter 1

THUNDERSTORM!

July 2, 1505

Martin Luther's leggings felt hot and oppressive against his skin in the stagnant heat, and his dark hair slicked wet against his forehead. The Saxon village of Stotternheim sat upon the horizon, a welcome sight after the young man's fifty-mile walk from the home of his parents in Mansfeld. Martin's destination, the University of Erfurt, was only about a mile past the medieval town—just beyond the lakes ahead.

A quick burst of wind stirred the dust from the road, pelting Martin's student tunic with a fine coating of chalky brown silt. Martin furrowed his brow and stood in the road for a moment, examining the sky. Dark clouds churned

like angry dragons nipping at each other's heels. *A storm's coming.* The university student quickened his steps, adjusting his heavy purple cloak as he marched. The cape was secured around an expensive set of Latin law books his father had given him on his ten-day visit home.

Martin allowed his thoughts to wander as he hurried toward the ancient hamlet of Stotternheim. He smiled as he thought of the wealthy young woman his mother had found to be his wife once he finished school.

Overhead the heavens roiled and growled, reminding Martin of his precarious situation—exposed on the open road under a turbulent sky. Martin glanced upward and bit his lip. Black clouds crowded the sun from sight, making the noon hour appear to be dusk. He wondered what fight or mischief might be occurring in the spiritual realm to create such impending chaos here on earth. For Martin, witches and goblins were as real as angels and demons. When the sky snarled, he knew there must be trouble in heaven above.

The future lawyer paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. Fat raindrops fell to the hot dirt road at the law student's feet, sending up little puffs of dry dust. Nothing was truly mundane in Martin's life, and he wondered if the coming storm was God's way of speaking to him. *Perhaps God is not pleased with my life choices. Will God accept me when I die? Have I worked hard enough for my salvation?* In his heart, Martin knew he would not see heaven as a lawyer. After all, the teachings of the church were clear: the only way to truly serve God did not involve Martin's expensive books and lofty career.

Quickening his steps, Martin resolved to reach the outlying buildings of Stotternheim before the storm broke in earnest. The long grass on either side of the road lay nearly flat in the strengthening gales of wind. Suddenly the blackened sky lit up as a tongue of lightning licked the horizon like flames from the mouth of an irate serpent. Craggy rocks glittered in flashes of white fire.

Martin began to run, clutching his schoolbooks. He gripped the hilt of his sword with his opposite hand. A protective weapon was a necessity on the open road. His footsteps fell harder and swifter. Even German schoolchildren knew it was dangerous to be caught in a storm, and Martin was no stranger to death. As rain began to hit the road in torrents, the frantic student squinted and searched for shelter. His toe hit a stone and Martin faltered, swinging the blade of his sword wide with one hand, throwing the other arm beneath himself for protection.

Martin hit the ground and rolled, then clambered to his feet. He could feel the wrathful hiss of the sky as the earth shook with the force of each clap of thunder. It was as if a giant was barreling down the road, intent on crushing Martin beneath his heavy footfall. With every passing moment, the blazing lightning struck closer and the thunder exploded louder, reverberating through his body.

Martin forced himself to concentrate on the ragged rhythm of his feet hitting the ground. The precious law books wrapped within his soaked purple cloak weighed him down as the wind and rain pelted his face. Above him, the atmosphere bellowed and roared. Martin was certain that this kind of rage could only come from God in heaven.

Spying an elm tree ahead of him, Martin veered off the road. Long, sprouted grass whipped at his leggings. Stumbling over ruts and stones, Martin threw his books toward the trunk of the tree and skidded to a stop beneath its leaves. He crouched doubled over with his hands above his knees and stared out into the storm. *I am safe!* The young man's chest heaved like a wounded beast seeking one final breath of life-giving air.

Out of the furious firmament came a thunderclap so loud, Martin was certain he heard God's voice shouting at him. At precisely the same moment, a bolt of lightning hit the elm tree above. The leaves and trunk of the tree burst into flames, throwing Martin to the ground.

Flinging his arms over his face in terror, Martin rolled on his back like a defeated knight fending off the inferno of an encroaching dragon. His eyes were blinded in the blaze of light. Martin was certain now that God was indeed speaking to him—and God was angry. *What can I do to fend off such a God—a God of lightning and thunder, a God of judgment? Certainly I cannot approach Him on my own!* “Saint Anna, help me!” he screamed, calling to the patron saint of miners. “I will become a monk!”