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## Chapter 1

Andy Rosetti woke up Thursday morning with his heart pounding. It was 5:33 a.m., and he did not have to get up for another hour. He glanced around his bedroom anxiously, wondering what had interrupted his sleep. Everything seemed at peace in his room, yet his heart was still pounding against his chest. Suddenly the sound of heavy raindrops hitting his window caught his attention. Instantly his bedroom became illuminated with bluish-white light. Within two seconds, crackling thunder erupted. Andy's heart began to pound more heavily. He took a deep breath and placed his head in his hands.

Andy had hated thunderstorms his entire life. The thought of his house getting struck by lightning terrorized him during every storm. He knew the storm was right above his house as lightning and thunder began erupting simultaneously. Burying his head beneath his pillow, Andy attempted to fall back to sleep. Three crashes of thunder later, he knew it was a lost cause.

Andy's cell phone began vibrating on his nightstand. He grabbed a hold of it, fearing the worst. Who would call him at 5:36 a.m.? He glanced at the caller ID and smiled. Lisa Ankerman.

"I figured the storm was keeping you awake," she greeted Andy as he answered the phone. "I thought you might like a distraction."

"You're good," Andy laughed, feeling his heartbeat slow down at the sound of his best friend's voice. "Woke you up too, huh?"

"Yeah, we're going to have horrific weather today," Lisa replied. "My game's probably

going to be cancelled.”

“Jeff and I planned on watching you and Chantal cheer,” Andy said, throwing the covers over his head. “If the game’s cancelled, we should all hang out at my house or something.”

“I made plans with Leslie for after the game,” Lisa replied. “We’ll keep our plans even if the game is cancelled.”

“You sound like you’re up to no good,” Andy sang, knowing Lisa all too well.

Lisa laughed, “You can tag along if you’d like.”

“Nah, not today,” Andy replied quickly. “Chantal would kill me, and I can’t make a habit of traveling that road. Once this week was enough.”

“You’re such a goody-goody,” Lisa sighed, “but I love you for it.”

“I’m Class President. I have *huge* responsibilities,” Andy stated sarcastically. “Seriously, what would you guys do without me?”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure we’d fall apart,” Lisa laughed. “All right, I’m going to hop in the shower before we lose the power. I’ll see you at your locker, all right?”

“Sure thing,” Andy replied. “Thanks for calling, Lis.”

“Only cause I love you that much,” Lisa said. “Bye, Andy.”

“Bye,” Andy sang, flipping shut his cell phone. Lisa had been Andy’s best friend since childhood. She knew him better than anyone else did. Andy smiled, grateful to have such a

caring best friend. He glanced at his alarm clock, deciding it was time to start his day.

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Since September, Chris Dunkin had made a habit of praying each morning before school. He found the days he skipped prayer to be arduous. School, which used to be a giant social playground for Chris, had become a war zone.

Something amazing had happened to Chris, but no one wanted to hear about it. It seemed as if his classmates liked him better as a burnout than a competent jock. Chris never had trouble getting people's attention before. He had always been the center of everything worth paying attention to. No one had ever questioned his leading. Everyone had always followed him with ease, but now they were abrasive.

Whenever Chris had found out about a new drug circulating, a new bridge to jump off, or a new pit to party at, everyone had extolled him. Now that he had found something greater than all of the above, no one would listen to him. In the past month, kids at school had begun throwing strange glances in his direction. He knew it was the result of Jason's rumors.

Chris's childhood best friend, Jason Davids, was a punk. Quick witted, articulate, and as charismatic as anyone could be, Jason was a harbinger of destruction. He could make people laugh like no one else, and everyone loved him for it. His words were as slick as black ice. He was usually high during five of the eight periods in a day, yet he pulled off As in every class. To top it off he dated one of the Kagelli twins, whom everyone wanted to get with. Jason knew how to work the system.

Chris and Jason had been best friends for ten years. Chris had never expected Jason to turn on him with such force. What grieved Chris's heart was not the harm done to his reputation, his tainted image, or the strange way people were treating him. He couldn't have cared less about what people thought of him. What grieved his heart was that he knew where Jason was headed. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." When Chris had read that in Proverbs, he knew God was ministering to him about Jason.

Getting on his knees at the end of his bed, Chris prayed, "Father, help. Despite what Jay is doing to me, I still love him like a brother. I want him to come to know You. He needs You. He needs to see that he is in darkness and that everything he is living for is futile. Please open his eyes. Please, whatever it takes, bring him to the end of himself."

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In the backseat of his brother Luke's BMW, Jason Davids sat beside Marc Dunkin on his way to school. Marc was a senior at MLH and co-captain of the varsity football team. He was Luke's wingman and Chris's cousin. The Davids and Dunkin families had been well acquainted for years.

"Slow down, dude! The roads are slick," Marc exclaimed, patting Luke on the shoulder. "Your girlfriend is in the car," he added, referring to Missy Kent, the stunning blonde who was sitting shotgun.

"I know how to handle this baby," Luke replied, patting the dashboard. "I love this car."

Marc rolled his eyes. "No doubt my practice is going to be cancelled today. The field is

probably mush by now. JV won't be able to play either."

"Your cousin is sick on the field," Luke stated, putting on his blinker to turn into the high school's parking lot. "No doubt he takes right after you."

"Yeah, except Marc never joined a cult," Jason stated dryly. "You have to talk to him about that."

Marc shrugged, "Whatever works for him. Honestly, I'm proud of Chris. My whole family is." Jason rolled his eyes and glanced at the rain drizzling down his window.

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"Hey Court, what's up?" Chris called, appearing at Courtney Angeletti's locker before Homeroom.

"Not much!" Courtney replied, twirling around in recognition of her ex-boyfriend's deep voice.

Chris smiled. "Are you going to Alyssa's party tomorrow night?"

"Oh please," Courtney rolled her eyes. "I can't believe she's going to risk having a party. After getting arrested at Jason's last month, I would think she'd be careful," she reasoned.

"Alyssa Kelly?" Chris laughed. "No, never. I was friends with that girl way too long to expect any sign of intelligence from her."

Courtney smiled. "Are you going?"

Chris laughed, “Uh, that would be a solid no.”

“Good answer,” she said and winked at her close friend. Over the summer, Courtney had broken up with her long-term boyfriend, Bryan Sartelli, to date Chris. She had done that because she wanted a taste of the rebellious lifestyle Chris led. Ironically, Chris had begun dating Courtney because he wanted an out from that same lifestyle. During their breakup, Chris had told Courtney his reasoning, and she had been shocked. Prior to their breakup, Courtney had been too wrapped up in herself to even realize Chris felt discontent. In dire need to feel accepted by the popular crowd of her freshman class, Courtney had flushed her values, morals, compassion, empathy, and consideration down the toilet. Alyssa Kelly and Cathy Kagelli had decided to take Courtney under their wings and that had consumed her.

## Chapter 2

"So, did you invite her?" Alyssa asked on the walk home from school with Cathy and Jason.

"Who?" Cathy shivered, glancing at Alyssa strangely.

"Julianna Camen!" Alyssa clarified, passing a lit cigarette to Cathy. Cathy nodded, hesitantly taking the cigarette from Alyssa.

"JULIANNA CAMEN!" Jason hollered, widening his cobalt blue eyes in disapproval. Julianna was his friend Jon Anderson's newest girlfriend. Jon had begun dating her after his dramatic breakup with Alyssa at Jason's last party. As if that was not enough of a reason for Alyssa to resent Julianna, Julianna was best friends with Cathy's favorite enemy--Courtney Angeletti. Inviting Julianna to Alyssa's party seemed as senseless to Jason as Jon dating her.

"I'm going to invite Julianna to get ready with me for the party," Cathy said nonchalantly.

"Why?" Jason questioned with a disgusted look upon his attractive face. "She's such a dork!"

"To help her fit in," Alyssa shrugged.

"No," Cathy shook her head, rolling her eyes at Alyssa, "to get back at Courtney, Chantal, and Jon."



"For what!" Jason exclaimed, glaring at Cathy. "Don't tell me you are still pissed off about what happened at my party! Chantal had nothing to do with that."

"Shut up about that!" Cathy demanded, pushing Jason in the shoulder. "Don't you get it? If Julianna becomes friends with us, then she'll ditch Courtney, Chantal, and Jon in a heartbeat. Maybe you'll get your friends back too."

Jason glared at Cathy in disbelief. "You guys are terrible," he stated after a moment. He shook his head in disgust as he stalked off ahead of his girlfriend. She was always conniving, always plotting, and always playing with peoples' minds. Jason, although he liked to tease, never intentionally wanted to hurt anyone. In fact, he just wanted everyone to have a fun time. He hated drama, hated mind games, and, more than anything, hated cigarette smoking. Even though most of his friends smoked, he had never expected his own girlfriend to join the bandwagon. When he met Cathy, he had been attracted to her dry sense of humor, quick wit, love of adventure, and physical appearance. After two years of dating her, he'd learned many of those qualities went hand in hand with the things he hated most about her.

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Storm clouds hovered over Montgomery as a spider web of electricity radiated across the blackened sky. The scheduled JV football game had been postponed as a result of the severe storm warning issued across the county. Sitting on her queen-size bed, Chantal Kagelli bit her French-manicured fingernails. "I don't know what we can do." She shrugged, glancing at her boyfriend. "I planned on cheering at the game."

"We can go to my house," Andy suggested. "We could call Chris and Marielle and see

what they're up to. Maybe they'll want to hang out."

"Doesn't Chris have practice even though the game was canceled?" Chantal asked, reaching toward her white wicker nightstand for the cordless telephone.

"No," Andy shook his head. "All school activities were canceled today because of the weather. Even drama club and stuff like that."

"Wow, they're not joking around with this storm," Chantal stated matter-of-factly. "Call Chris and see what's up. I'm going to watch the weather."

"All right," Andy agreed, taking the phone from Chantal. It was strange for Andy to be calling Chris Dunkin. For the longest time Chris and Andy had been on complete opposite ends of Montgomery's social realm. For years, Chris had been at the center of the rowdiest clique in their grade, which included Chantal's twin sister, Cathy, and her boyfriend, Jason. Knowing that Chris and Jason were best friends, Andy had assumed Chris was just as irresponsible, ruthless, and immoral as Jason. For years, it had been impossible to get a splash of Chris without a deluge of Jason.

Chris's other best friend was Jon Anderson. Andy, who liked most people, despised Jon. Jon was Chantal's first love—something Andy had wanted to be—and that bothered him to no end. Jon was well known for his harsh temper, cocky smile, and long list of female admirers.

To Andy's surprise, Chris seemed nothing like his best friends. Andy respected Chris's recent decision to make God the central focus of his life. By attending church weekly with Chantal's family, Andy had witnessed many people find their faith. The change in Chris was, by

far, the most dramatic Andy had ever seen. It had challenged Andy to search his own heart much more intricately.

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"It's getting pretty bad out," Chantal observed, sitting comfortably with Andy on her bedroom couch. "I'm glad we stayed here. I wouldn't want my little sister home with just Cathy and Jason. They're probably baked out of their minds right now."

"True. Don't worry though, it's only a thunderstorm," Andy soothed, kissing his long-term girlfriend's forehead.

"You're probably more scared than I am. Don't forget, I know you very well, Andy Rosetti. Let's stop the movie and put on the weather," Chantal suggested, jumping to her feet. "They said something about a supercell. I don't really know what that is."

"Tal, it's only a *thunderstorm*," Andy stressed, pulling her back down onto the couch. "Don't get up! I'll miss you."

"You'll miss me a lot more if I get sucked up in a tornado!" Chantal exclaimed, returning to her feet. She swiftly made way across her large bedroom to stop the movie. Tuning to the weather channel, Chantal froze in her tracks.

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"Chantal, why are you making us stay down here?" Cathy whined as she slouched onto the cold cellar floor. "There are so many things I could be doing right now."

"There is a tornado warning!" Chantal hollered in disgust. "My gosh, Cathy, think for once! Sometimes I wonder if you have any brain cells left at all." Chantal sighed and rested her head on Andy's shoulder. "Are you scared?" she asked as she turned toward her nine-year-old sister, Stephanie.

Stephanie nodded intently. "Where are Mom and Dad?" she asked.

"They're safe at work," Andy replied, embracing Chantal and Stephanie. "Just like you're safe here with us."

"Are you scared?" Stephanie questioned.

"Not when I'm with you and Andy," Chantal answered.

"Where's Lady?" Stephanie asked. "Lady?" she called, sitting straight up.

"Oh my gosh!" Chantal cried as her stomach dropped.

"Where is she?" Andy questioned, jumping to his feet.

"I . . . I . . . I don't know! Outside?" Chantal stammered.

"I'll be right back," Andy promised, dashing up the basement stairs at lightning speed.

"Wait!" Chantal exclaimed, but her voice was drowned out by the thunderous boom erupting outside.