Chapter 1

Adam relaxed under the water’s surface and smiled at the muffled squeals and giggles of his little sister over by the kiddie pool. He loved hearing her laugh.

He blew the air out of his lungs and sank to the pool bottom. Relaxed in the weightless haven, he took a moment to enjoy the cool, refreshing stillness before pushing toward the surface. *I would stay down here all day if I could*, he thought as every care released from his body into the quiet sanctuary.

Eyes open, he lifted his face upward. *Why is it so dark up there?*

He vaulted from the floor like a missile. A few strokes and kicks should have brought him up, but …

*Wow, it’s deeper than I thought.* He strained against the water as he pulled himself upward. Why was it taking so long?

He looked desperately around. Was the pool getting darker? His smooth stroke turned to a panicked thrashing. His lungs screamed for air. He pumped harder, arms flailing. *I need to breathe!*

*Dad? Do you see me?* He expected to feel the rescuing grasp of his father or big brother any moment. *They must have seen me jump in*.

He kicked harder. *Am I even swimming the right way?*

Darkness closed in. He could hold his breath no longer. His thoughts clouded and he felt his consciousness slipping away.

With a splash and a gasp, Adam broke the surface. He gulped in the air until it hit him; *something’s wrong.*

He swiped water from his face to locate the ladder. *What in the world? Where …?* There was no ladder—or even sides around the pool. Instead, weeds, rocks, and tall grass surrounded him. *A pond? How …?*

To his left, Adam spotted a sandy area where he waded out of the pond, water raining from his wiry, adolescent frame.

*What is this place?* No buildings, no people, no sounds—just a pond surrounded by rocks and trees.

The only sound was his own desperate breathing. The air was … thin—empty. Like the atmosphere itself was dead. He shuddered at the eerie stillness.

He startled himself when his faltering voice broke the silence. “Mom? Dad?” Where was his big brother? His little sister? His home? Where did everything go?

Mind racing, he turned a full circle. *There must be someone.* He started up a nearby rise for a better view. His stomach knotted as he suppressed tears. After a few steps, his pace exploded into a frantic run in desperation for a higher vantage point.

Atop the hill, his heart sank. The expansive view revealed only an endless carpet of treetops stretching to every horizon. No people, no roads, not even a path.

Reality seeped into his thoughts like ice water, chilling his soul. He was alone in a strange world with no sign of civilization. Tears finally broke free. His voice cracked when he called out. “Mom!” Then he shrieked. “Dad! Anyone! Help me!”

He slumped to the ground, pulled his knees to his chest, and covered his head with his arms trying to wish his way out of this terror. Was he trapped forever in this strange, empty world?

He closed his eyes and imagined his big brother walking up the hill and reassuring him. Just thinking about his brother gave Adam a moment of courage. *If only he were here. He would know what to do.*

What *would* his brother do? He struggled to even remember what his brother looked like, much less what he would do. Why was his memory so foggy?

*I know he wouldn’t freak out. He would probably go back to the pond and wait for Mom and Dad.*

Back at the pond, Adam searched for a position that provided the best view of the area. He lowered himself to the ground and reclined against a large rock. Then he bolted upright, turned, and pressed his hand to the boulder. It wasn’t hard like a normal rock. *This isn’t right.* He ran his hand along the boulder. *What is this place?*

He picked up a small stone and rolled it in his hand. He squeezed it. Then he ran his fingers through the dirt. Nothing seemed right. The stone was too light, pebbles too smooth. The soil didn’t dirty his hands.

He examined the landscape. Everything beyond arm’s reach seemed … flat. Almost like pictures on the pages of a storybook. Things seemed real enough up close, but the farther a tree or a rock was from him, the less real it appeared.

Adam caught his breath. Off in the distance, purple, red, and yellow rays shot upward. And there were other colors—colors he had never known. They were rising from … *What is that? A building!*

He blinked twice. The colors were gone, but he could still see the structure. *What happened to the colors? And why didn’t I see that building before?*

He closed his eyes to picture the colors. The memory arose so vividly it startled him. Yes, he had seen colors. They had radiated from the building. And they moved, shimmering like light reflecting off water. Wait—no, not like water. This movement was different. Like the movement of a living thing.

He looked again at the building. It was up in the hills, but he could see it clear as day—an old, ramshackle cottage. The longer he studied it, the more his fascination grew.

The cottage seemed to be his best chance of finding someone who might help him, but … what caused those lights? He told himself it was silly to be afraid of colors. What could they do to him? It was probably just the angle of the sunlight—or his mind playing tricks on him. But how could there be colors he had never seen?

Once more, he squeezed his eyes closed. This time the images in his memory were even more striking. They were more than mere colors. It was like he had not only seen them but *felt* them—like they held some kind of power. A power that … wasn’t safe.

Adam opened his eyes and stared at the cottage. In time, a few of the colors reappeared. Something about them tugged at his spirit, drawing him despite his fear—almost as though it were a person, beckoning him.

He wanted to go to it. But what if his parents came and he wasn’t at the pond? They might not notice the cottage. He hadn’t, at first.

Adam circled the pond, watching for a place where he could see beneath the surface. If he dove in, would it take him back home? Or somewhere else? Would he come up at all? He waded up to his knees, peered into the murky abyss, and shuddered.

He backed out of the water and turned again toward the cottage. If he trained his eyes on it and kept a straight course, it shouldn’t take long to get there.

Within ten minutes of walking he had lost line of sight with the pond. Between him and the cottage lay steep, rocky terrain, and the valleys were obscured by dark shadows. The knots in his stomach returned.

Something rustled behind him and he spun into a defensive stance—legs planted and hands up. But only trees surrounded him.

He heard the noise again and looked up. A dark, churning cloud rolled toward him.

The cloud resolved into a massive flock of birds. Adam stared wide-eyed, then broke into a smile.

Their wings whistled, and the pitch varied with their speed, creating a delightful symphony. Groups split apart, cutting, darting, and circling in a kaleidoscope of brilliant, dancing color.

One bird lighted on a nearby branch. Its bright purple throat deepened into a darker purple breast with golden bars running down the underside.

While the strange hues of the cottage had frightened Adam, these colors delighted him.

After examining Adam, the bird flew off, rejoining the flock which moved back toward the pond. Enthralled, Adam followed, hardly aware he was walking. Whenever he stopped, the birds circled him, then resumed their progress as if drawing Adam along were a game.

For Adam, it *was* a game. He waited for the birds to encircle him, watched them go again, and ran after them, laughing.

The entertainment continued an hour or more. But eventually the sounds and movements of the birds grew monotonous, and boredom set in.

Free from the distraction, he reawakened to his plight and the terror returned. What had he been doing? How could he so easily forget his family just because of a dumb flock of birds?

He turned back toward the cottage, now a tiny dot in the distance. How could he have traveled that far?

*I better get moving.*

A blinding flash and a crack of thunder made him jump. Pouring rain pelted him. Adam dashed for shelter under the trees.

A shiver ran through him. He backed further into the refuge as the storm intensified, grateful for the leafy haven.

As he pushed a branch out of his way, something soft grazed his cheek. He reached to brush it away. His fingers punctured the fuzzy little ball and dripped with juice.

*Wow! A peach!*

He licked his fingers. The juice tasted sweet as candy.

He examined the surrounding trees. *This is an orchard!*

For the first time in this world, Adam realized he was hungry—ravenously hungry. The void of longing seemed to arise from deeper inside than his stomach.

*The cottage can wait,* he thought as he liberated the delicacy from the branch.

He bit into it. Pleasure coursed through him, head to toe. He had the strange thought that he would fight to the death for this peach. And yet, he didn’t finish it. Exhilarating as the first bite was, he wanted another peach—a different peach. He dropped the first in search of a bigger, juicier one.

He picked another, and another, rushing from branch to branch to fill his arms. The load spilled when Adam’s toe caught on a stray root and he stumbled, landing on his hands and knees with a large green ball beneath him.

*A watermelon!* This orchard seemed too good to be true. With a sharp rock and a little determination, Adam soon had red juice running down his chin as he devoured one piece after another.

As he wandered among the trees, everything Adam sampled delighted his palate. This orchard offered every imaginable fruit—many Adam had never seen before.

Every bite made him want two more. But even after stuffing himself, he didn’t feel full. In fact, he felt empty. Not hungry, but hollow and unsatisfied.

He threw an apple against a tree and kicked at the ground. *I hate this place!*

Still, he couldn’t stop eating.

As Adam ventured further into the orchard, travel became easier—level ground and fewer stones and logs to step over. A corridor emerged. *This is a path. There must be people around here!*

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than he heard movement among the trees ahead—someone walking.

Adam’s heart raced. His darting eyes could make out nothing through the trees. He thought he wanted to find people in this world, but … *Will he hurt me? Or take me away? What if it’s not even a person?*

Adam crawled into a thicket and froze.

The footsteps came nearer, slowed, then stopped.

Adam held his breath until he could no longer hear footsteps. He silently lifted his hand, pinched a branch, and moved it aside to risk a peek.

His heart stopped when the opening revealed two eyes staring at him a foot away.