

Chapter 1

The mysterious whisper and unsettling colors are what I remember most about the day my little brother nearly died.

I remember the deep purple splotches on his face and the brown mud covering his skinny, bare arms. I can still see in my mind the green strings of algae stuck to his white t-shirt with the red stripes and how it had reminded me of Christmas.

And I remember how desperately I wanted to save him, not knowing that one day I would wish that I had listened to that strange whisper and let him drown in that dirty, murky pond.

It had been a scorcher that day - hot enough that my mother, who never liked anyone to see her pale white legs, was in shorts. Hot enough that she even went out in public in those shorts, taking us to the mini-market down the street for some ice cream and sodas. Hot enough that when we got home, instead of sinking into her armchair and grabbing a crochet hook, she splashed around with us in our kiddie pool to cool off.

The fact that she put aside her crochet hobby said something. My mother was forever crocheting something - afghans, pot holders, doilies, hats, and mittens. She owned every size of crochet hook you could get from the craft store. Stacks of yarn filled her bedroom closet from floor to ceiling.

Her obsession with crochet started after my father collapsed on the kitchen floor and never took another breath. I didn't see my father die, and neither did my brother. While my mother panicked and made a frantic call to 911, my brother and I were in the backyard playing with our little die-cast race cars in the dirt.

Life was not the same in our house after that day. My mother became sad and distant. My brother and I would sit on the couch with the TV on, and she would sit in her big green chair, either concentrating hard on a pattern or furiously hooking yarn with a crochet hook over and over again. Sometimes I would sit there and watch her hands - her left one holding her latest creation in place and her right one working the hook in a mesmerizing rhythm.

It had been Rony's idea to go to the pond down the street. He begged our mother to take us. We weren't allowed to go there by ourselves, although we'd snuck there a few times, and he was stuck on catching a frog that he could take home.

The pond was different that day. Rocks covered in baked algae poked out of the dark water, and the mud around its edges was dry and cracked from the heat. It smelled funny, too. My mother turned up her nose while I grabbed a stick and poked around on the water's edge.

Rony ran off to find his frogs. My mother laid down on a patch of grass in the shade, kicked off her sandals, stretched her white legs, and closed her eyes.

I wandered off, swinging the stick through the grass, poking at strange things I found, and picking at a scab on my leg that I'd gotten from falling off my bike.

The scab came off easily, and I carefully placed it in my hand, staring at the crusty, brownish thing with wonder. I flipped it over and noticed how the other side was wet with pus. "Cool," I thought to myself before tossing it into the grass.

My leg bled where the scab had been. I wiped the blood off my leg, lifted my head, and gazed across the pond to where Rony was leaning at the water's edge, looking at something.

I watched as he reached his hand into the water to try to grab whatever it was that had caught his attention, and then I sat down to write my name in the dirt. "Vida," I spelled out with the stick, drawing a heart around it when I was done and adding a few blades of grass for decoration.

When I finished, I looked back up to see what Rony was doing, but I couldn't spot him. My eyes quickly scanned the pond, but he wasn't there. I could see my mother but not him. I stood up and looked around, trying to figure out where he had gone.

"Rony?" I called out.

My mother opened her eyes and looked over in my direction from her patch of grass. She didn't get up.

"What are you doing, Vida?" she asked.

"Nothing, mom," I said, looking around.

"You two stay close," she said. Then she leaned her head back and closed her eyes again.

The spot where I'd pulled the scab off my leg was itchy, and I leaned down to scratch it before heading in the direction where I'd last seen Rony. He was probably chasing a frog in the bushes.

Halfway there, though, something caught my eye, and my brain struggled to make sense of what I saw. *Why is Rony's shirt with the red stripes in the water?*

I stood there for a moment, trying to figure out what it meant. The grass tickled my feet, the hot sun made me sweat, and for some reason, Rony's shirt was in the water.

But then I figured it out. And I ran.

I bolted as fast as I could toward Rony, nearly tripping over rocks and almost falling headfirst into the dried mud when I tried to jump over a log.

As fast as I had been running to reach him, I stopped short at the water's edge, not because I wanted to, but because something willed me to. I could see Rony's shirt in the water, clearer now that I was closer, and he was in it. But I couldn't move.

I no longer heard grasshoppers jumping in the grass or lizards scurrying around in the bushes. Mosquitoes were no longer making circles on the water, and the rank smell of dried algae and things baked in the heat had disappeared.

I looked down at my hands, and they suddenly seemed full of light, and it wasn't from the sun that was shining on them. It was like I suddenly had some type of magical power. The light started getting blurry, and everything else around me was beginning to do the same. I blinked my eyes a few times to focus, but it didn't do any good.

And then a voice, light as the wind and barely audible, blew past my ear, startling me.

"Let him go," the voice said.

The light disappeared from my hands, and in an instant, everything was normal again. The grasshoppers were back doing their thing, I could hear noises in the bushes, and I could smell the pond too.

I stood there with my feet firmly planted on the ground, confused.

One of Rony's hands floated to the surface, and I couldn't help but want to reach for it.

"I can't let him go," I said out loud. I was hoping whoever had whispered to me was listening. "I *can't*," I said with conviction. And then I screamed for my mother and jumped into the water to get my little brother.

At the hospital, everyone praised me for saving Rony's life. The doctors and nurses all patted me on my back and told me what a strong and brave girl I was to pull him out of the pond and call out for help. But I couldn't stop thinking about that whisper.

Rony didn't look like himself in the hospital bed. His eyes were closed, he had tubes coming out of his nose and mouth, and there was still some green algae in his hair. I heard my mother tell a nurse that she could smell the pond on him when she leaned in close. And then she started crying again. She had hidden her tears when my father died, but now they flowed freely.

I didn't get close enough to my brother to smell the pond. I didn't get close to him at all but instead stood back while my mother touched his hands and even rubbed his feet. I found myself looking at my own hands, wondering if the light was going to come back.

When my grandmother came to see Rony, she wasn't afraid to touch him. She held his hand too, hummed a lullaby, and told him, "everything's going to be fine little one."

My mother left the room to talk to the doctors, and I watched my grandmother. I felt awkward. Everything in the room felt wrong.

My grandmother turned to me and pulled me in close for a hug.

"Vida, honey, are you alright?" she said.

I said nothing and wept in my grandmother's arms.

She held me for a few moments while I cried, then pulled away and wiped the tears from my cheeks.

Her touch felt peculiar and cold, and I thought about how she had just held Rony's hand a few minutes before then. I looked over at Rony's bed, where he laid with his eyes closed. A shadow that looked sort of like a dark rain cloud was hanging over him. It was there for only a second, then disappeared into the wall behind him.