

**HAUNTED: The Cursed Lake**

By

Mahtab Narsimhan

## Chapter 1

Jonah brought the axe down with such force that the block shattered. A large piece of wood splashed into the water, sending ripples toward the center of the lake. Only a patch the size of a rowboat, beyond the buoys, remained undisturbed. Oily calm.

*Strange*, thought Jonah as he massaged his aching back. He shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun and stared at the spot for a while longer. If only he had time for a quick dip, he would have a chance to investigate. Was there a current in that section which kept the water so calm when the rest wasn't?

A gust of breeze wafted toward him, bringing a myriad of smells—water, sunshine, fresh grass, damp wood, and an underlying tinge of something putrid. An animal had probably died in the forest on the far side of the lake. He'd have to ask Mom about it and get the caretaker, Frank, to find it and bury it. The smell would get worse as the weather grew warmer.

Jonah stood at the edge of the water. The oily, calm patch had disappeared. A wind ruffled the surface of the lake, and the sun poked golden fingers into its sandy bottom, pockmarked with algae-covered rocks. How awesome would it be to swim all day, then lie on the grass with a book—

"Jonah! Stop dreaming and hurry. I need help with the cabins."

Summer had just begun, but Mom's voice was already tinged with exhaustion and impatience. This was their first year running Camp Sunny Acres since they'd bought it last fall. If they didn't do well this season, it would all be over.

"Coming!" he called out.

As Jonah stacked the wood in the shelter beside the lake, he breathed in a lungful of resin and something earthy, like mushrooms. Birds squawked raucously overhead, playing tag. If only he could be a real camper and look forward to a summer filled with nothing but swimming, sports, crafts, and reading. But since Dad died two years ago, life had changed

for the Anders family. His last summer had gone by in a whirl of bagging groceries and babysitting. They had needed the money. Running a camp this year had to be better.

*Stay positive*, he reminded himself. Dad would have wanted him to be brave and look after Mom. He was the man of the family now, and he had to stop feeling sorry for himself.

Mrs. Rastogi, the cook, whom they had inherited when they bought Sunny Acres, walked toward the cafeteria with an armload of groceries. Plump, with a kind laugh and salt-pepper hair—which she wore in a plait down to her waist—she was, hands down, the best cook ever.

“Let me help,” said Jonah as he hurried up to her.

“Thank you, Jonah,” said Mrs. Rastogi, letting him take a few bags from her arms. “Ready for the campers? It’s going to be non-stop for the next two weeks.”

“I know,” said Jonah, trying not to sound mournful.

“What’s the matter?” said Mrs. Rastogi.

Jonah shrugged as they trudged up the pathway between the cabins.

The place looked rundown, and in need of repairs and a fresh coat of paint, but it already felt like home. Would the campers like it enough to come back the next year? Could he and Mom make a success of Camp Sunny Acres, or would they have to pack up and leave in the winter? The questions, like a cloud of mosquitoes, wouldn’t stop bugging him.

“There’s so much to learn and do out here,” said Jonah. “I hope we have a great season. I love this place already and don’t want to leave.”

“None of us know what fate has in store for us,” said Mrs. Rastogi softly. “You come to me if you need any help or if something is bothering you. Okay?”

Jonah flicked a glance over his shoulder at the lake. The sun was high in the sky and its surface glittered like a million diamonds. A breeze cooled his warm face. Did he dare ask her about that weird patch in the water? Would she think it was his imagination and laugh at him?

“Sure,” he said. “Thanks, Mrs. R.”

They'd reached the cafeteria and entered through the back door into the kitchen. He placed the groceries carefully on the table.

"Anything else?" he asked her.

"Just this," said Mrs. Rastogi, taking an ice-cream sandwich from the freezer. She handed it to Jonah. "Finish that *before* you meet the campers, or they'll all want one before lunch."

"Thanks," said Jonah.

He took the long way back to the camp office, strolling beside the lake as he bit into the cold sandwich, enjoying the sweetness on his tongue. There was a loud honk and the crunch of gravel. The busload of campers had arrived.

They'd need help to register, find their cabins, and settle in. Then a tour of the camp, so they knew where everything was before heading for lunch. *Better hurry*. If Mom had to call out twice, there'd be fireworks before Canada Day.

A wave tiptoed stealthily to shore. Jonah paused, watching, as it sidled up to the sandy bank and spent itself in a hiss of foam. His heartbeat quickened. There were no fish in this lake. No boat had gone by, nor was there any breeze right this minute. So where had the wave come from?

Just as he turned to run to the camp office, someone whispered, so softly he wasn't sure if he'd heard it or imagined it.

*"Jonah."*