

A dark, blue-toned forest scene. In the center, a person is standing on a path, looking towards the camera. The trees are tall and thin, with a dense canopy of leaves. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and eerie.

the
Voice

HAUNTINGS

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CHAPTER 1

Shots by the Lake

Click—click—click. Isa Garcia took photo after photo of the sailboats lined up on the lake. They looked amazing, their sails all pointed in the same direction, bobbing on the slightly choppy blue waters.

It only takes one great shot, Isa told herself. *I **have** to win that photo contest!* The first prize was a professional digital camera, a camera she could never afford to buy herself. Today she had borrowed a camera from Paul Stevens, her boss at the newspaper. He had hired her for a summer internship. Paul was the newspaper's editor and an expert photographer.

Isa experimented with Paul's camera. The light was perfect,

reflecting off the lake. She adjusted her focus and moved around to get different angles. She had pulled her long brown hair back in a braid. She'd learned that lesson the hard way. Once, on a windy day, she hadn't put her hair back. When she'd looked at the photographs, they had shown long strands of blowing hair.

BANG! A gunshot! Isa jumped and dropped the camera. Luckily, it was on a strap around her neck. She looked at the people around her. No one else seemed worried. Then she looked at the lake and realized the boats were sailing now. The sound must have been the starting gun for the race.

Isa quickly snatched up the camera and started taking photos of the race. Her sandals sank into the sand as she moved closer and closer to the water, trying for unusual angles and shots.

"HELP! HELP!"

Isa whipped her head around.

Who's that? she thought. It was a man's voice. But where was it coming from? It was hard to tell, since people along the shore were cheering loudly and blowing horns for the racers.

It didn't seem to be coming from the lake. Turning away from the lake, she hurried toward a line of tall trees. *It could've come from those woods,* she thought. She held the camera ready, just in case she saw something newsworthy. All her senses were on alert. She had learned that from Paul—to use all her senses while taking pictures. That way she was more likely to notice the unexpected.

I wonder where Paul is? she thought. He was supposed to be at the lake, too, but she hadn't seen him.

Isa passed some picnic tables and a barbecue area. She didn't hear any more calls for help. She peered into the trees, but all she saw were dark spaces between them.

Suddenly a blinding flash of white light shone in her eyes. It was much stronger than a camera flash. It hurt more than looking straight at the sun. Blinking, she rubbed her eyes. *That was strange*, she thought. When she looked again at the trees, the light was gone. She felt suddenly afraid, but she knew she had to control her fear. She raised her camera again.

The boat race was forgotten as she forced herself to walk further into the woods. She took a few photos, thinking the camera might catch something she didn't see. The trees absorbed the light and muffled the sounds of the race. She breathed heavily, and her hands shook.

She heard footsteps coming toward her. In the dim light, she saw a shadow of movement.

"Hello?" she called. No answer. Then she called loudly, "Hello!"

Suddenly a strange voice in her ear

said *RUN FOR YOUR LIFE*. The voice sounded choppy and flat, like an old computer voice. It sounded ... dead.

Panicked, she turned and started to run, still holding the camera. Behind her she heard the footsteps coming faster. As she ran, she zigzagged around trees. She knew she had a better chance of survival if she was a moving target.

She ran out of the woods and toward some people sitting at a picnic table. There were pieces of bark and torn leaves on her clothes, and streaks of dirt on her arms and legs.

The people looked at her as if she was crazy. A woman asked, "Are you OK?"

"Someone's following me!" she cried.

Everyone looked into the woods where Isa had come from. No one was there. Isa used the camera's zoom lens to look more closely. All she saw

were trees and more trees.

“Should we call 911?” asked the woman.

Isa realized that she hadn’t actually *seen* a person—only a moving shadow. She had only heard footsteps, and a strange voice in her ear. Who would believe her? “N-o-o-o,” she said slowly.

She walked back to the lake. She tried to pay attention to the race, but she kept thinking about the cry for help, the strange light, the warning, and the footsteps.

Across the lake, the boats were following a triangular course. The people around Isa were talking, eating snacks, and watching the race. The wind picked up, and she saw a signal flag appear on the starting boat.

“What’s that for?” she asked the person next to her.

“The wind is blowing hard, so the

flag means the people racing need to put on life jackets.”

Isa held up her camera to take a photo of a boat nearing the finish line. One man on it wasn't wearing a life jacket. *Dumb*, she thought. Suddenly the boat tipped far over into the waves, and the sailors couldn't control it. The mainsail swung around and the man without a life jacket fell in. Splash. *Click!* She caught it! She and the people around her watched with relief as the boat swung around and rescued the man.

Maybe this would be her winning shot! She kept taking photos. *Click!* As the race ended she saw a warning message on the camera: *Memory almost full.*

I only have a few pictures left, Isa thought. *I guess I should have brought an extra memory card—but how could I have known? It's Paul's camera.*

She decided to go home. She walked

toward the snack stand where she had left her bike. The shortest path took her past the woods. She forced herself to look into the trees. Suddenly she heard the same strange voice as before. *FIND THE TRUTH*, it said. *FIND. THE. TRUTH.*

She looked around, but no one was near her.

There was a parking lot by the woods. A police car's lights were flashing and an ambulance had just pulled up. The piercing sound of sirens filled the air as more police cars arrived. Bystanders gathered, looking down at something. "Excuse me," Isa said. She flashed her press pass card. She was 18 years old and only five feet two inches—but the press pass gave her authority.

Whatever had happened, she knew it was her job to report it. Paul had taught her that, too. If you accidentally came upon a story, you were on the job.

There was a body on the ground. Paramedics were working on it, trying to revive it. There was a lot of blood. Isa moved a little closer, feeling ill. She hated the sight of blood. *Come on, Isa,* she told herself. *Do your job!*

Someone came with a stretcher. The paramedics lifted the body onto it. Isa saw the person's face.

"NOOOO!" she screamed.

It was Paul.