

MISSING

CLARISSA

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CLARISSA

A Novel

RIPLEY JONES



**WEDNESDAY
BOOKS
NEW YORK**

IMAGINE this: A fairy-tale summer, blue and wild. Skinny-dipping in the Salish Sea with a trail of phosphorescence in your wake, sunburnt shoulders, salt-sticky hair drying in the twilight as the stars come out. The kind of summer you hold in your heart for the rest of your life: the last best summer, a summer summoned in vivid Technicolor decades later with a flash of a song that soundtracked your late-night drives, the briny smell of the ocean wafting through hot concrete streets on your way to a job you never imagined yourself having, your own daughters slinking home after curfew with their weed-reddened eyes and wine-cooler breath.

That summer for us in Oreville was the summer of 1999. Thorny branches so heavy with blackberries they brushed the ground. The air so warm the Sound was balmy enough to swim. Old-timers worried the heat wave heralded the end of the world. The rest of us greased our bodies with Coppertone and lay out on our lawns to bronze.

Our summer was the most epic party summer of anyone who ever lived. We knew no other summer would ever match. We felt sorry for everyone who came after us, who would never know our glory. The football players driving their pickup trucks shirtless to the woods out behind town at sunset, their cabs stuffed with cases of Rainier and their truck beds with cheerleaders. The grunge kids in their dads' flannel shirts, the theater kids belting lines from *Oklahoma!*, the valedictorian looking

over her shoulder as if her college acceptance letters would catch her with a jury-rigged bong built out of empty five-gallon milk containers. The stoners showing up late as always, their pockets bulging with plastic baggies.

That summer, our summer. The last free summer before adulthood closed in.

And then Clarissa Campbell disappeared.

Oreville's a small town. Everybody knew Clarissa. We all knew Brad Bennett too.

The head cheerleader and the captain of the football team: a story you already know. Clarissa was gorgeous, a limber executor of flawless pikes. Brad had a strong arm and a chiseled face. They moved through the world together in a cloud of their own beauty. We expected great things of them. Reality television, maybe. A career in Hollywood. Brad would go on to play for a team. Which team? We didn't think about it too hard.

We didn't think about much of anything that summer, except how to find the next party.

Until the night Clarissa vanished from the forest. After that, all we thought about was Clarissa. The whole country thought about Clarissa. You remember the headlines.

A COMMUNITY MOURNS IN MYSTERY.

UNEXPLAINED DISAPPEARANCE OF SMALL-TOWN GIRL

CAPTURES THE HEART OF A NATION.

CHEERLEADER'S BOYFRIEND QUESTIONED IN

WASHINGTON STATE DISAPPEARANCE.

STILL NO ANSWERS FOR BEAUTY QUEEN'S FAMILY.

WHERE IS CLARISSA CAMPBELL?

Clarissa's perfect face plastered across newspapers from Washington to West Virginia. Clarissa on the evening news. Clarissa's white teeth and blue eyes. Clarissa's long blond hair. Endless speculations on Clarissa's lost future, what she might have become. (All of them futures none of us could remember her wanting when she was real.) No body ever found, the mystery never solved. Even without blood and violence, without answers, her name stayed in circulation. After the headlines came the late-night TV specials. The dramatic reenactments with B-list actors. The straight-to-video feature starring a round-cheeked actress who later overdosed in the bathtub of a much-more-famous married actor. (Yes, we watched them all.)

Despite all this, the details are blurry for those of us who were there. The darkness is heavy out in those woods. We had a bonfire, but its glow didn't stretch far, and the forest goes on for miles. Most of us were pretty drunk.

Here's what we told the police we knew: Clarissa Campbell was crying. Clarissa Campbell was so wasted even the freshmen noticed. (That part didn't make *People*.) Clarissa and Brad weren't speaking. (One of us was pretty sure she saw Brad with his tongue down Reenie Muñoz's throat at some point that night, but she kept that to herself. *Reenie? She's not even that pretty. Did he lose his mind?*)

The king and queen were over. Clarissa had never ugly-cried in public before. Clarissa's mascara was smeared. Clarissa would have been mortified, if she'd known.

We looked away out of respect. We could give her that much. We could pretend we didn't notice. We weren't happy to see her fall. We liked her. She was nice.

Most of the time.

None of us saw Clarissa leave the party.

And none of us saw her again.

And, in our hearts, we know no one will. Because that's one

thing we're sure of, though we'll never say it out loud: Clarissa Campbell, wherever she went that night, is dead. And the last person who saw her is the person who killed her.

We don't know who. Not for sure.

But we have a few ideas. And we know this much:

Everybody loves a dead girl.

EPISODE I

THE
BEGINNING

“EVERYBODY loves a dead girl!”

“Not *everybody*, Cameron.”

“Almost everybody loves a dead pretty white girl.”

Blair shuts her locker door, turns to face her best friend. “So we what, cash in on the obsession of gross people?”

Cam huffs in exasperation at Blair’s unwillingness to see the light. “Not only gross people. Like, all people. Plus, everyone loves podcasts. Millions of people listen to podcasts.”

“You don’t love podcasts. Have you ever listened to a podcast?”

“I’m not everyone. The point is to develop something with broad appeal. Think how good it will look on our college applications if we break an unsolved case.”

“Like you need to worry about college applications,” Blair says. Cam’s transcript already reads like a completed checklist from a handbook for the precocious overachiever, and they’re only juniors.

“Think how good it will look on *your* college application, then. Are you in?” Cam pushes her chin-length black hair out of her eyes, the same impatient gesture Blair’s seen her make since the sixth grade, when Ms. Rubin partnered Cam and Blair on their end-of-year science project. They were as unlikely a pair then as they are now. Blair wanted to get her first A. Cam wanted to make a scale model of an exploding volcano. Cam almost blew up the classroom, Blair got an A+ for managing the chaos, and they’ve been best friends ever since.

Blair learned long ago that when Cam gets a Bright Idea, it’s easiest to say yes and deal with the consequences later. And, as far as Cam’s brainchildren go, Blair has to admit this could be a good one: turn their shared semester-long Journalism project into a podcast on the eternal local mystery that is the disappearance of Clarissa Campbell.

Everyone from Oreville knows the story of Clarissa. Her living ghost haunts the long rain-dark winters alongside the looming specters of Washington’s grim army of infamous serial killers and litany of missing girls. Clarissa Campbell: the prettiest, most popular cheerleader to spring from the soil of Oreville, who disappeared one flawless August night twenty years ago from a party in the middle of the woods outside of town. Clarissa Campbell, who vanished so completely that no one has found a trace of her—not the full investigative force of the Oreville police department, not legions of armchair sleuths and online obsessives, not television news crews or magazine reporters or Clarissa’s friends and family.

No one.

The odds of Blair Johnson and Cameron Muñoz, Teen Podcasters, succeeding where hundreds have failed are slim to none, Blair thinks. But *No* is not a command the vast machine of Cam’s brain is capable of processing.

“Look at all this,” Cam’s saying, thumbing through open

windows on her phone. *People* magazine, CNN.com, conspiracy threads, true-crime forums, a missing persons database. Dozens of pictures of Clarissa's face; Clarissa's long, tan legs; Clarissa in her cheer uniform; Clarissa accepting an award. A candid shot of Clarissa looking melancholy, as if she can sense her own future as a legendary lost girl.

"People are obsessed. This one guy has a whole website saying Clarissa was abducted by a Sasquatch. He updates it monthly with new evidence. I bet we get famous."

"I kind of doubt that," Blair says.

"Seriously. Here"—Cam tabs to a page with two shiny-haired brunettes grinning like maniacs and holding stage-bloody daggers—"these chicks have a podcast where they just, like, get drunk and read the Wikipedia pages for crimes that are *already solved* and they make like a hundred thousand dollars a *month*."

"I don't think Mr. Park will like it if we get drunk," Blair says.

"I'm not saying we have to get drunk," Cam says. "I'm saying podcasting is easy."

"We have to ask Mr. Park first," Blair says. "He could say no."

"He won't say no. We are the best thing that has happened and will happen to Mr. Park in his entire career."

Silently, Blair blesses Cam for that *we*. The likelihood that Mr. Park will remember Blair alone after graduation is small.

"Come on, say yes. It'll be fun. She's probably still alive. That would be amazing, right? We'll find her drinking martinis next to a pool in Los Angeles or something. Maybe she'll get us parts in the movie about her."

"You have no idea how to make a podcast."

"How hard can it be to record ourselves talking?"

"Cam," Blair says, laughing, "I think it takes more than that."

"Say yes."

"Fine. Yes," Blair says. She checks her reflection in her phone camera, the same self-conscious impulse Cam's been trying to

get her to give up since they both turned thirteen and Blair discovered boys.

“You look great,” Cam says. “You always do.”

“I do not.”

“Oh, shut up, B. Come on, I’m going to be late for Calc.”

But then Cam sniffs, wrinkling her nose at the all-too-familiar smell of rich jock that permanently precedes Blair’s boyfriend’s entrance. He sweeps up behind Blair, a vision of muscle and artful five-o’clock shadow and cheekbones: James Howard, the handsomest boy in all the school.

Cam would happily knife him.

He covers Blair’s eyes with his hands. She giggles, a sound she only makes around James. A sound Cam loathes.

“Guess who,” he says.

“Look, B, it’s your knight in shining armor,” Cam says.

Cam is not a subtle person, and the only reason James is unaware of the full extent to which she hates him is that it is unfathomable to James that any girl, even one as weird as Cam, could be wholly unmoved by his charms. Nevertheless, he avoids her as much as he is able, a tacit agreement that suits them both.

“Mmm, you smell good,” Blair says as he dips her into a dramatic kiss.

“Mom got you a new bottle of Axe?” Cam suggests.

James sets Blair back on her feet. “Ralph Lauren,” he says.

“Cam,” says Blair.

“Classy,” Cam says. “See you in Journo, B? I gotta run.”

“We’re going the same direction—” Blair begins, but Cam’s already darting away through the crowded hall, waving a hand behind her like a retinue-dismissing queen.

“She’s such a freak,” James says, not for the first time. “I don’t know what you see in her.”

She doesn’t know what I see in you, Blair thinks, rueful. Her bestie’s enmity toward her boyfriend remains the sole bone of

contention between them. Why can't Cam see how lucky Blair is? James is a senior, gorgeous, adored by teachers and students alike, all-state basketball star, rich parents, those eyes.

Plus, James is going places: Duke on a basketball scholarship, to be precise, the first Oreville High sports star to head so far in so long he made the front page of the *Oreville Examiner*.

And of all the girls James could have—which is any of them—he's picked, for whatever reason, Blair Johnson. Their first date, she kept pinching herself. Their first month, she was sure he'd ghost. James and *her*?

But here they are, two years later, all in love.

"She's like that with everyone," Blair lies, not for the first time either.

James beams down at her, ruffling her carefully curled hair. She'll have to spend five minutes in the bathroom later fixing the damage, but it's worth it for the look in his eyes when he looks at her.

"I have to go to class," Blair says.

"Meet me after practice?"

"I'm working on this Journalism project with Cam."

"What project?"

"We're making a podcast." She opens her mouth to tell him about Clarissa. She doesn't have Cam's enthusiasm, but she knows it's a good idea. James will get it.

"A podcast?" he says. "That's so cute."

"It's not cute. It's serious," she says, and ruins the effect with another giggle.

"Sure, babe," he says. "But it's only the second week of school and you spend all your time with her already."

"I don't," she says. She doesn't. Cam has the same complaint about James.

The problem is, there's only so much of Blair to go around.

"Have it your way. See you later."

“Love you,” she says in a small voice, but he’s already walking away.

Blair hurries off in the same direction Cam headed, torn as usual between the person who knows her best and the person who—she swears—loves her most.

CAM’S TAKEN JOURNALISM every semester since freshman year. Not so much because she wants a future as a girl reporter—truth is, Cam’s not much of a writer—but because Mr. Park is one of the two things in Cam’s life that make high school bearable. Mr. Park, the only teacher who gets it—who gets anything—and Blair. This year Cam convinced Blair to sign up with her, which makes Journalism the only place at school Cam feels at home.

There are so many things Cam knows about Blair that Blair refuses to know about herself: that she’s beautiful, that she makes jumping hurdles in track look like ballet, that she’s generous and wise and funny, that she has an intuitive understanding of the thing you do with liquid eyeliner to draw matching flicks at the outside corner of each eye. (Cam tried once; it went badly.) Blair is patient and tolerant, supports Cam’s good ideas and checks her worst ones, sees through Cam’s prickle and bluster to the best of her. Cam’s strung together out of barbed wire and broken glass, a person too sharp for the world, every part of her trying to go in fourteen thousand different directions at once. It’s Blair who keeps her electrons in orbit around a fixed center, roots her in the real world, knocks her head back to level and her heart back into her chest.

Blair’s the most generous person Cam knows, and sometimes Cam wants to shake her, shout *Stop giving other people everything that you are!* But that’s Blair’s superpower. She can care and care and keep going with her own heart intact, a phenomenon that’s as incomprehensible to Cam as spooky action at a distance.

How a girl as good as Blair can't see her own worth is a mystery far greater than whatever happened to Clarissa Campbell.

Cam crashes into Journo with her usual chaos energy. Mr. Park doesn't bother to glance up at Cam's commotion. Journalism's an elective, and not a popular one: The whole class this year is six students. Blair, Cam, a couple of white freshman boys whose names Cam will be unable to retain until at least winter break, a white sophomore girl, and Sophie Jenkins, who's Pinay. Sophie is a senior and a total vamp who crosses and uncrosses her legs in front of Mr. Park a lot, which is crazy, because Mr. Park is seven hundred years old. Like, at least forty.

Blair's already at her desk, notebook out and pen at the ready. Cam collapses into the seat next to her, panting. Pens explode from her bag. Papers fly. A book falls on the floor with a bang. Where did that come from? Oops.

"Good of you to join us today, Ms. Muñoz," Mr. Park says, as he always does when Cam is late, which is always. *How* is she always late? She really, truly does not mean to be always, always late. "As you're all aware, today we'll be discussing our semester reporting projects with each other. I'm excited to hear what you've come up with."

The assignment was open-ended: Pick a topic, pick a medium. Pick a partner, or not, as they chose. But Cam knows that doesn't mean Mr. Park will go easy on them. He gives his classes a lot of free rein, but his standards are high. It's one of the things Cam likes best about him: He treats his students like adults.

Mr. Park is Korean American. He looks like he was airlifted in out of some teen show about a librarian who helps teenage girls battle vampires. His hair is a mess, his sweater a rumpled mass of moss-colored wool. Cam knows without looking that he's sporting the same shapeless brown corduroy pants he wears every Tuesday.

And behind his funny old-fashioned glasses, his dark eyes are ruthless as mirrors.

Plenty of students have made the mistake of falling for Mr. Park's space-cadet act, but not Cam. Mr. Park is the smartest person she's ever met. Mr. Park is maybe, just maybe, smarter than her. If the undead do come for the students of Oreville (unlikely; even creatures of the night would find her hometown a waste of effort), Mr. Park could handle it.

Cam's so ready to show off their podcast she's almost hopping out of her chair. Mr. Park shoots her an amused glance and then points to the freshmen. Mike and Mark? Mick and Marty? How can anyone remember these things? Martlemicky are two pimply white boys who play video games. Who can tell such entities apart?

"Matt and Miles, you've decided to work together, correct? Let's start with you and go around the room."

Matt? Miles? whispers something into his notebook. "We're making a documentary about Area 51," the other one says, louder.

Cam catches a flicker of Mr. Park's grin. "How exciting," he says. "I'll be sure to keep a lookout for government agents. Jenna?"

The sophomore sits up straight and pushes her glasses up her nose. "I'm researching a reported piece on the immediate effects of climate change on the Pacific Northwest coastal environment," she says.

"We should have thought of that," Blair whispers.

"I *did*," Cam says under her breath.

"Excellent, Jenna," Mr. Park says. "I'm looking forward to seeing where your research goes. Let me know if you'd like some examples of long-form environmental journalism to take a look at. Sophie?"

Today Sophie's wearing fire-engine red lipstick and an actual pencil skirt. Cam wonders what dopey angle she'll come out

with. Best Blushes for Fall? Ten Tips for Sexy Selfies? Somebody as pretty as Sophie is surely a dim bulb.

Sophie flips her glossy ponytail over one tastefully cardiganed shoulder and smiles brightly. “I’m doing an oral history of how local Native communities maintain their cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge across generations while navigating settler encroachments on their sovereignty,” she says.

One of Mr. Park’s eyebrows goes up, something that happens only when he’s impressed. “Excellent, Sophie. Where are you starting?”

“I have some relatives by marriage in the S’Klallam Tribe, so I’m talking to them first,” Sophie says. “As an outsider, I want to be careful about how I approach the interview process. I don’t want to replicate colonial intrusions.”

Mr. Park’s other eyebrow goes up—an unheard-of accolade. Cam’s heart sinks. Are they going to be bested by *Sophie Jenkins*? Cam has to admit Sophie’s idea is good. And Sophie is a lot smarter than Cam thought.

Next to her, Blair grins at Cam’s visible distress. Cam will not stand for being upstaged.

“We’re going to find Clarissa Campbell and make a podcast about it!” Cam blurts, steamrolling Sophie’s moment of glory. Sophie turns and gives Cam an amused look, which for some reason makes Cam blush. Jenna’s face is blank. Mattmiles looks ready to hide under a desk, but they look like that every day.

Mr. Park leans back in his chair, silent for a long moment. His eyebrows stay lowered.

“Interesting,” he says, his tone giving nothing away. “Do you have a new angle on the case?”

“Not yet,” Cam says. “It’s only the second week of the semester.”

“Fair enough. Do either of you have experience making podcasts?”

Why's he grilling them? Why isn't he excited? Cam doesn't get it. Blair kicks her under her desk, but she barges ahead. "Do we need it? All we have to do is hit Record and put it online."

Mr. Park's face is impossible to read. "Keep in mind that's a sensitive issue for a lot of people here. Tread carefully. And you might want to do a bit of research into podcasting before you 'hit Record and put it online.'"

"Yes, Mr. Park," Blair says before Cam can argue. Cam slumps back in her seat, the air around her crackling with fury and hurt.

Tread carefully? thinks Cam. *What's that supposed to mean? What's wrong with Mr. Park?*

Tread carefully? thinks Blair. *What does Mr. Park know that we don't?*

BLAIR'S BETTER AT track than she is at school, but the way she sees it, she's still only herself: nobody you'd notice. She's made it to State, but she'll never place. She's not James, with college recruiters lining up to offer her the future.

Still, she's fast, consistent, logs mile after mile after mile. She likes the feeling of freedom, knowing that her legs can carry her as far as she wants to go. She likes the time alone to think.

Most of the time it's the only time alone she gets.

Today practice is tempo, hills, tempo, cooldown. She dances through it, showers fast, sprints to meet Cam at her car for fun. Like most of the once-valuable objects in her life—bicycle, computer, bedroom TV—it's a hand-me-down that's already passed through all her brothers. Blair tries not to feel like an afterthought in her own house.

Cam's raided the school library while Blair sweated through her paces. She has a pile of books with titles like *American Predator* and *In Cold Blood*.

“I’m not reading those,” Blair says, unlocking the driver’s side. Cam chucks the stack in the back seat and climbs in front.

“You don’t have to,” Cam says. “I’m looking at narrative arcs.”

Right, Blair thinks. Because first and foremost, what they’re doing is telling a story. A story about a girl who disappeared.

Her phone chimes with an incoming text, chimes again. She doesn’t have to check to know who it is, but she looks anyway.

See u soon?

Baby?

With Cam remember? she types.

I thought we had plans

Did they? They couldn’t have. She would remember. No. They didn’t. She told him by her locker she was meeting Cam after practice. He’s being jealous. Of Cam, which is crazy. But maybe he’s right. He’s her boyfriend! Cam will be around forever, but boyfriends need tending.

Still, she promised. And anyway, here’s Cam. In her car. With half the library.

Sorry baby, she types. Gotta work on this project. Tomorrow?

She waits, but gets only silence. Cam gives her phone a foul look, but to Blair’s relief she doesn’t say anything.

“Your house?” Blair asks.

“Onward,” Cam says. “To fame and fortune.”

“I’ll settle for an A,” Blair says.

Cam smiles. “Please,” she says. “The A is already guaranteed.”

Cam’s room is extremely Cam. Books everywhere, piles of papers, several plants in varying states of distress, a poster of the

periodic table that's hung crooked on one wall for as long as Blair's known her. Cam's cat, Kitten, snores peacefully on her unmade bed. Cam named him when she was ten and he was, in fact, a kitten. Six years later he's an immense pitch-black tyrant who weighs at least twenty pounds.

Unlike Blair, Cam's an only child. It's just Cam; her mom, Irene; and Kitten. When she was younger, Blair thought Cam must get lonely. Now, she envies Cam her peace.

Cam's laptop is the only pristine thing in her room. It has a special place on her desk, occupying the sole point of order in a maelstrom of chaos. Blair knows Irene saved for months to buy it, and Cam treats it like it's on loan from a museum of fine art.

"We can get started now," Cam says. "I'll record us on my phone and edit it later. I downloaded this free sound editing program a lot of people use."

Blair settles herself cross-legged on Cam's floor. "Started with what, though? Talking?"

"Isn't that what a podcast is? People talking?"

"What should we say?"

Cam looks at her phone as if it will give her an answer. "First we could talk about the mystery," she says. "And then our theories of what happened."

"We don't have any theories of what happened."

Cam frowns. "Not yet. But we will. Just talk until it sounds good."

Blair doesn't think this is much of a plan. But Cam always gets to where she wants to go, even if the route is a mystery to everyone but her.

"Sure," Blair says. Cam pushes a stack of chemistry quizzes aside and sits on the floor in front of Blair, their foreheads almost touching, Cam's phone on the floor between them.

"Here we go," Cam says, and taps Record.

CAM

Uh, I think it's on. Yeah, it's on. Well, this is a podcast about, um, about this girl who was . . . Well, she grew up in our town, and then she disappeared.

BLAIR

We should maybe say who we are, Cam.

CAM

Uh, right. I'm Cam.

[A long pause.]

BLAIR

Did you want to—should we, like, say more about ourselves?

CAM

Like what else?

BLAIR

Um, I'm Blair. We're in Mr. Park's Journalism class. This is our project. In high school. I mean, for high school Journalism class. Our project is Clarissa.

CAM

Clarissa Campbell.

BLAIR

Right. Clarissa Campbell.

CAM

Which is the most famous unsolved mystery in Oreville.

BLAIR

Is it?

CAM

Are there any other ones?

BLAIR

The Mystery of the Puget Sound Golf Course Senior Prank Day Vandal last year.

CAM

They never figured out who peed on Officer Em's patrol car during drug awareness week in seventh grade.

BLAIR

Not a lot happens in Oreville.

CAM

[Laughing] Nope.

BLAIR

We have to do interviews, though. I mean, this can't only be us talking the whole time.

CAM

Yeah, we'll interview people.

BLAIR

Who?

CAM

Clarissa's friends. Uh, her parents. You know. People who knew her.

BLAIR

Just, like, call them? Out of the blue?

CAM

Why not?

BLAIR

Mr. Park says we have to have a research component too.

CAM

We *are* doing research. I *did* research. I mean, this is just the introduction. *[Pause.]* Mr. Park is our Journalism teacher.

BLAIR

I think I already said that. Wait, what is our podcast called?

[Silence.]

CAM

Uh, *Into the Woods*?

BLAIR

Isn't that a musical? Technically Clarissa went out of the woods. We think.

[Silence.]

CAM

We could start with the facts. *[Sound of papers rustling.]*

CAM

[Muffled.] Oops. *[More clearly.]* The facts are, um, that in August 1999—the second weekend of August—

BLAIR

The nineteenth, right?

CAM

The fourteenth. On Saturday, the fourteenth of August, 1999, the, uh, the seniors from Oreville that had just graduated threw a party in the woods. And—

BLAIR

We should tell them about the woods.

CAM

What about the woods?

BLAIR

Like, where they are. And what they look like and stuff. I think podcasts usually start with atmosphere.

CAM

This totally—

Cam leans forward and taps Pause—“sucks,” she finishes. “We sound like nitwits.”

“Maybe it’s not as bad as you think,” Blair says hopefully.

Cam replays the recording and they listen to themselves talk in excruciating silence.

“Maybe we need a script,” Blair says.

“A script!” Cam says. “That’s a good idea.”

“Do I really say ‘like’ that much?”

“That one was practice,” Cam says, and swipes to delete.

“To get the bugs out.”

“It never happened.”

“We do need a name first, right? *The Girl in the Woods?*”

Cam googles. “Already a mystery novel. *The Dead Girl?*”

“Don’t we want her not to be dead?”

Cam googles again. “It’s the name of a movie anyway. And like fifteen books.”

“*Escape from Oreville?*”

Cam laughs. “*What Happened to Clarissa Campbell?*”

“Kind of literal,” Blair says.

They sit in companionable silence for a moment, thinking.

“*Clarissa Is Missing?*” Blair suggests. They look at each other and say at the same time, “*Missing Clarissa.*”

“Yes!” Cam says with satisfaction. “That’s it. You did it, B.”

“You think so?”

“Podcast names always have this double entendre thing,” Cam says authoritatively.

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. They just do. Let’s start over.”

“We decided on a script.”

Cam arranges her notes in front of her. “I can read from this. The first episode is the introduction. For the next one we can interview someone who knew her.”

“Let me write some stuff down first.”

Cam flips through *The Big Book of Serial Killers* while Blair scratches away in her notebook, crosses things out, mutters to herself. She sits back and nods.

“Ready?” Cam asks.

“Ready.”

CAM

Uh, hi, everybody. I’m Cameron Muñoz.

BLAIR

And I’m Blair Johnson. We’re juniors at Oreville High School.

CAM

And this is Episode One of *Missing Clarissa*. So, even if you're not from Oreville, Washington—even if you've never heard of Oreville, Washington, which is pretty likely, given that it's a dump of a town with twenty thousand inhabitants, and that's including the whole county—you've probably heard of Clarissa Campbell. Her story was national news in 1999 and has spawned a, uh, whole wave of conspiracy theories and investigations. No one knows what happened to her. No one has heard from her since she disappeared—or, if they have, they're not telling. But a Google search of Clarissa's name still yields thousands of results twenty years later—everything from wing-nuts who think she was abducted by forest monsters to people who think she wanted to start over somewhere else.

BLAIR

So, um, anyway, the disappearance of Clarissa Campbell is the most exciting thing that's happened in our town. It's sort of like an urban legend. A story you know without remembering how you heard it first.

CAM

But when she disappeared, it was big news. For a while, the whole country was obsessed with Clarissa. A young, beautiful white girl with a promising future, disappearing into thin air? It was a narrative made for late-night true-crime specials and—

BLAIR

Cam, we were going to stick to the facts of the case for now.

CAM

That *is* a fact. *[Clears throat.]* Anyway, we think . . . Well, we don't think anything yet. We don't have a theory of what hap-

pened. We think she might still be alive, and it would be pretty cool if we can find her.

BLAIR

She can give us tips for getting out of Oreville. So, Clarissa disappeared from a party in the woods west of here. If you've never been to Oreville, you're not alone. It's a small town on the Olympic Peninsula, way out near the edge of the world where the continent drops off into the Pacific Ocean. The summers here are sweet and golden, sandwiched between long, wet gray winters where the sky comes down to meet the treetops. And everywhere out here is forest. The woods where Clarissa disappeared are beautiful, but they're not what I would call friendly. They're green and dark even in the middle of the day and so big you feel like you can drown in them. And at night . . .

Blair trails off, embarrassed. Cam's staring at her. "What?" she mumbles, hitting Pause.

"Where did *that* come from?"

"Sorry," Blair mumbles, crumpling the paper she's reading from.

"No, I mean it was good," Cam says. "Total atmosphere."

"It was dumb. Let's cut it."

"It wasn't dumb," Cam says. Blair's eyes are welling with tears. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Blair says. "I'm fine! It's stupid, that's all."

"Okay, okay," Cam says. "It's cool. We can cut it if you want. I can go to the library after school tomorrow. Not that I don't think Sasquatch Man did his homework, but Mr. Park says we should use primary sources for our project."

"As long as we redo the first one," Blair says.

But before Cam can argue, Irene pokes her head around the doorframe.

Her skin's a few shades darker than Cam's—Irene's Mexican American, Cam's dad was white—but otherwise they look unnervingly alike: same high cheekbones, same sharp dark eyes. Except where Cam's black hair is a cowlicky mess chopped short at her chin, Irene's falls to the middle of her back in a smooth wave on the rare occasions when she takes it out of its tidy bun. And while Cam dresses like she ran through a Goodwill men's department grabbing things at random, Blair's only seen Irene in some version of stretchy jeans, tank top, and zip-up sweatshirt in all the years she's known her.

"Hi, Blair," Irene says.

"Hi, Irene," says Blair. Cam's mom hasn't been Ms. Muñoz to her in years. Sometimes she slips up and calls Irene Mom too.

Irene registers Cam's phone and open laptop. "What are you up to?"

"Making a podcast," Cam says. "For Journalism."

Cam's impatient with her mom the same way she is with all adults, which Irene endures with bemused tolerance. Blair has told Cam more than once how lucky she is: Irene isn't just cool. She lets Cam run free, doesn't ask Cam to be anything she isn't. But Cam's too headstrong to recognize her own fortune.

"What's the podcast about?" Irene asks.

"That cheerleader who disappeared in the nineties," Cam says. She sits up, alert. "Wait, did you know her?"

"Clarissa? Sure, I knew who she was. She was a year behind me."

Irene's from Oreville too, although she got out for a while before Cam was born, to New York City of all places. Irene's early adulthood has the haze of legend: squatting in abandoned warehouses in Williamsburg, running feral from dive bar to dive bar in the East Village, playing drums in an all-girl, all-Latinx punk band called the Young Lourdes.

Irene met Cam's dad, Oliver, at the February 15 anti-Iraq War

protest in 2003. Irene was a black bloc street medic, Oliver a leftist professor of economics at NYU. The police kettled them, along with a hundred other protestors, outside the Cooper Station post office; nightsticks descended. (Cam asked once if Irene had thought Oliver was handsome when they first saw each other. “I had no idea,” Irene said matter-of-factly. “He was covered in blood.”)

Irene treated Oliver’s head wound and they spent the night in jail together. (“And every night thereafter,” Irene said, the one time she told Cam the whole story.) Less than a year later, Irene was pregnant. And four years after that, Oliver died of a fast-moving, late-diagnosed cancer. Irene came back to Oreville so her parents could help her out, but now that Cam’s grandparents are dead too, she has no idea why Irene insists on remaining imprisoned here.

Cam holds her phone out, thumb poised over Record. “Want to tell us about it? We have to interview people who knew her.”

“I didn’t know her personally,” Irene says. “I don’t feel like cooking—want pizza?”

“But you must have heard the story,” Cam persists.

Irene gives Cam a look.

“Pizza sounds great,” Blair says hastily.

Irene winks. “Don’t tell your parents I won’t cook for you, Blair. They already think I’m a reprobate.”

It’s a long-running joke between them, how diligently wholesome Blair’s family is, how Cam’s mom is more like a teenager herself. But Blair knows Irene knows that this house is the one where she can breathe.

“Give us half an hour to practice some more?” Cam asks.

“Deal,” Irene says, and leaves them to it.

Later, after Blair goes home, Cam listens to what they’ve done. Their voices are burbly, as if they recorded underwater. But the part where Blair talks about the woods sends a thrilling chill

down Cam's back. It's too good to cut! It's magnificent! Blair is brilliant! She will just have to come around.

Cam transfers the audio file to her laptop, cuts in a few seconds of synth-y pop music at the beginning, adds a segment of herself recapping what they've gone over so far and telling their imaginary audience to check out the next episode. The sound is truly abysmal. They'll have to figure something out. But for a first try, she thinks, it's not half bad.

She finds a hosting site. It only takes a few minutes to make an account. She debates what to call the first episode, settles on "The Beginning." Clicks Upload. Blair is going to kill her, but she can't help herself.

She creates a burner account, FindClarissa1999, in the biggest Clarissa forum.

Hey, check out this podcast from Clarissa's hometown, she types, and adds the link.

Satisfied at last, she goes to bed.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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