THE CHAIN

ADRIAN McKINTY

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There is some wisdom to be had in taking the gloomy view and looking upon the world as a kind of hell.

Arthur Schopenhauer,
Parerga and Paralipomena, 1851

PART ONE

ALL THE LOST GIRLS

1

Thursday, 7:55 a.m.

She's sitting at the bus stop checking the likes on her Instagram feed and doesn't even notice the man with the gun until he's almost next to her.

She could have dropped her school bag and run across the marshes. She's a nimble thirteen-year-old and she knows all the swamps and quicksands of Plum Island. There's a little morning sea fog and the man is big and clumsy. He'd be nervous about pursuit and he'd certainly have to give up the chase before the school bus came at eight o'clock.

All this goes through her head in a second.

The man is now standing right in front of her. He's wearing a black ski mask and pointing the gun at her chest. She gasps and drops her phone. This clearly isn't a joke or a prank. It's November now. Halloween was a week ago.

"Do you know what this is?" the man asks.

"It's a gun," Kylie says.

"It's a gun pointed at your heart. If you scream or struggle or try to run, I'm going to shoot you. Do you understand?"

She nods.

"All right. Good. Keep calm. Put this blindfold on. What your mother does in the next twenty-four hours will determine whether

you live or die. And when . . . if we do let you go, we don't want you to be able to identify us."

Trembling, Kylie puts on the padded, elasticized blindfold.

A car pulls in next to her. The door opens.

"Get in. Watch your head," the man says.

She fumbles her way into the car. The door shuts behind her. Her mind races. She knows she shouldn't have gotten into the vehicle. That's how girls vanish. That's how girls vanish every day. If you get in the car it's over. If you get in the car, you're lost forever. You don't get in the vehicle, you turn around and you run, run, run.

Too late.

"Put her seat belt on," a woman says from the front seat.

Kylie starts to cry under the blindfold.

The man climbs into the back seat next to her and puts her seat belt on. "Please, just try to keep calm, Kylie. We really don't want to hurt you," he says.

"This has got to be a mistake," she says. "My mom doesn't have any money. She doesn't start her new job until—"

"Tell her not to talk!" the woman snaps from the front seat.

"It's not about the money, Kylie," the man says. "Look, just don't talk, OK?"

The car drives off hastily in a slew of sand and gravel. It accelerates hard and moves up through the gears.

Kylie listens as the car drives over the Plum Island bridge and with a wince she hears the tubercular grumble of the school bus go by them.

"Keep it slow," the man says.

The doors power lock and Kylie curses herself for missing a chance. She could have unclicked the seat belt, opened the door, rolled out. Blind panic is beginning to overwhelm her. "Why are you doing this?" she wails.

"What should I tell her?" the man asks.

"Don't tell her anything. Tell her to shut the hell up," the woman replies.

"You need to be quiet, Kylie," the man says.

The car is driving fast on what is probably Water Street near Newburyport. Kylie forces herself to breathe deep. In and out, in and out, the way the school counselors showed her in the mindfulness class. She knows that to stay alive she has to be observant and patient. She's in the eighth-grade accelerated program. Everybody says she's smart. She has to be calm and notice things and take her chances when they come.

That girl in Austria had survived and so had those girls in Cleveland. And she'd seen that Mormon girl who'd been kidnapped when she was fourteen being interviewed on *Good Morning America*. They'd all survived. They'd been lucky, but maybe it was more than luck too.

She swallows another wave of terror that almost chokes her.

Kylie hears the car drive up onto the Route 1 bridge at Newburyport. They're going over the Merrimack River toward New Hampshire.

"Not so fast," the man mutters, and the car slows for a few minutes but then gradually begins to speed up again.

Kylie thinks about her mom. She's driving to Boston this morning to see the oncologist. Her poor mom, this is going to—

"Oh my God," the woman who's driving says, suddenly horrified.

"What is it?" the man asks.

"We just passed a cop car waiting over the state line."

"It's OK, I think you're in the . . . no, oh Christ, his lights are coming on," the man says. "He's pulling you over. You were going too fast! You have to stop."

"I know," the woman replies.

"It'll be OK. No one will have reported this car stolen yet. It's been on that side street in Boston for weeks."

"The car's not the problem, *she's* the problem. Pass me the gun."

"What are you going to do?"

"What can we do?"

"We can talk our way out of it," the man insists.

"With a blindfolded kidnapped girl in the back seat?"

"She won't say anything. Will you, Kylie?"

"No. I promise," Kylie whimpers.

"Tell her to be quiet. Take that thing off her face and tell her to lower her head and look down," the woman says.

"Keep your eyes shut tight. Don't make a sound," the man says, taking the blindfold off and pushing Kylie's head down.

The woman pulls the car over and the police vehicle presumably pulls in behind her. The woman is evidently watching the policeman in the rearview mirror. "He's writing the license plate down in his logbook. Probably called it in on the radio too," she says.

"It's OK. You'll talk to him. It'll be fine."

"All these state police prowlers have dashcams, don't they?"

"I don't know."

"They'll be looking for this car. For three people. We'll have to hide the car in the barn. Maybe for years."

"Don't overreact. He's only going to write you a speeding ticket."

Kylie hears the crunch of the state trooper's boots as he steps out of his vehicle and walks toward them.

She hears the woman roll down the driver's-side window. "Oh God," the woman whispers as he approaches.

The state trooper's boots stop crunching by the open window.

"Is there a problem, Officer?" the woman asks.

"Ma'am, do you know how fast you were going?" the state trooper asks.

"No," the woman says.

"I clocked you at fifty-two. This is a restricted twenty-five school zone. I guess you didn't see the signs."

"No. I didn't know there was a school around here."

"It's heavily signposted, ma'am."

"I'm sorry, I just didn't see them."

"I'll have to see your…" the trooper begins and pauses. Kylie knows he's looking at her. She's shivering all over.

"Sir, is that your daughter in the seat next to you?" the trooper asks.

"Yes," the man says.

"Miss, can you show me your face, please?"

Kylie lifts her head but keeps her eyes tightly shut. She's still trembling. The state trooper has seen that something is amiss. A half second goes by while the cop, Kylie, the woman, and the man all decide what to do next.

The woman groans and then there is the sound of a single gunshot.

2

Thursday, 8:35 a.m.

It's supposed to be a routine visit to the oncologist. A six-month checkup to make sure that all is OK and that her breast cancer is still in remission. Rachel has told Kylie not to worry because she feels great and everything is almost certainly fine.

Secretly, of course, she knows that things might not be fine. Her appointment had originally been scheduled for the Tuesday before Thanksgiving but she'd gotten some blood work done at the lab last week, and when Dr. Reed saw the results, she'd asked Rachel to come in this morning. First thing. Dr. Reed is a dour, even-keeled, unflustered woman originally from Nova Scotia, and she is not one for panicky overreaction.

Rachel tries not to think about it as she drives south on I-95.

What's the point of worrying? She doesn't know anything. Maybe Dr. Reed is going home for Thanksgiving and is scheduling all her appointments early.

Rachel doesn't feel sick. In fact, she hasn't felt this good in a couple of years. For a while there she had thought she was bad luck's favorite child. But all that has changed. The divorce is behind her. She's writing her philosophy lectures for the new job starting in January. Her post-chemo hair has mostly grown back, her strength has returned, and she's putting on weight. The psychic toll of the

past year has been paid. She's back to the organized, in-control woman who worked two jobs to put Marty through law school and get them the house on Plum Island.

She's only thirty-five. She has her whole life ahead of her.

Knock wood, she thinks and pats a green bit of the dashboard she hopes is wood but suspects is plastic. In the arcane clutter of the Volvo 240's cargo area there's an old oak walking stick but there's no point risking life and limb reaching back for that.

The phone says it's 8:36 now. Kylie will be getting off the bus and strolling across the playground with Stuart. She texts Kylie the dumb joke she's been saving up all morning: How do you think the unthinkable?

When Kylie doesn't respond after a minute, Rachel sends her the answer: With an itheberg.

Still no response.

Do you get it? Try it with a lisp, Rachel texts.

Kylie is deliberately ignoring her. *But,* Rachel thinks with a grin, *I'll bet Stuart's laughing.* He always laughs at her dumb jokes.

It's 8:38 now and traffic is backing up.

She doesn't want to be late. She's never late. Maybe if she gets off the interstate and takes Route 1?

Canadians do Thanksgiving on a different day, she remembers. Dr. Reed must want her to come in because the test results don't look good. "No," she says out loud and shakes her head. She's not going to fall into that old spiral of negative thinking. She's moving forward. And even if she still has a passport to the Kingdom of the Sick, that won't define her. That's behind her, along with the waitressing and the Uber driving and falling for Marty's lines.

She's using her full potential at last. She's a teacher now. She thinks about her opening lecture. Maybe Schopenhauer is going to be too heavy for everyone. Maybe she should begin the class with that joke about Sartre and the waitress at the Deux—

Her phone rings, startling her.

Unknown Caller, it says.

She answers with the speakerphone: "Hello?"

"Two things you must remember," a voice says through some kind of speech-distortion machine. "Number one: you are not the first and you will certainly not be the last. Number two: remember, it's not about the money—it's about The Chain."

This has to be some sort of prank, one part of her brain is saying. But other, deeper, more ancient structures in her cerebellum are beginning to react with what can only be described as pure animal terror.

"I think you must have the wrong number," she suggests.

The voice continues obliviously: "In five minutes, Rachel, you will be getting the most important phone call of your life. You are going to need to pull your car over to the shoulder. You're going to need to have your wits about you. You will be getting detailed instructions. Make sure your phone is fully charged and make sure also that you have a pen and paper to write down these instructions. I am not going to pretend that things are going to be easy for you. The coming days will be very difficult, but The Chain will get you through."

Rachel feels very cold. Her mouth tastes of old pennies. Her head is light. "I'm going to have to call the police or—"

"No police. No law enforcement of any kind. You will do just fine, Rachel. You would not have been selected if we thought you were the sort of person who would go to pieces on us. What is being asked of you may seem impossible now but it is entirely within your capabilities."

A splinter of ice runs down her spine. A leak of the future into the present. A terrifying future that, evidently, will manifest itself in just a few minutes.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"Pray that you never find out who we are and what we are capable of."

The line goes dead.

She checks the caller ID again but the number is still not there. That voice, though. Mechanically disguised and deliberate; assured,

chilly, arrogant. What can this person mean about getting the most important phone call of her life? She checks her rearview mirror and moves the Volvo out of the fast lane and into the middle lane just in case another call really is coming in.

She picks nervously at a line of thread that's coming off her red sweater just as the iPhone rings again.

Another Unknown Caller.

She stabs at the green answer key. "Hello?"

"Is this Rachel O'Neill?" a voice asks. A different voice. A woman. A woman who sounds very upset.

Rachel wants to say *No;* she wants to ward off the impending disaster by saying that actually she has started using her maiden name again—Rachel Klein—but she knows there's no point. Nothing she can say or do is going to stop this woman from telling her that the worst has happened.

"Yes," she says.

"I'm so sorry, Rachel, I've got some terrible news for you. Have you got the pen and paper for the instructions?"

"What's happened?" she asks, really scared now.

"I've kidnapped your daughter."