

The Disappearance

❖ GILLIAN CHAN ❖



annick press
toronto + berkeley

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Cover art/design by Kong Njo

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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, and the participation of the Government of Canada/ la participation du gouvernement du Canada for our publishing activities.

Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
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un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Cataloging in Publication

Chan, Gillian, author

The disappearance / Gillian Chan.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55451-983-5 (hardcover).—ISBN 978-1-55451-982-8 (softcover).—

ISBN 978-1-55451-985-9 (EPUB).—ISBN 978-1-55451-984-2 (PDF)

I. Title.

PS8555.H39243D57 2017

jC813¹.54

C2017-901686-5

C2017-901687-3

Cover photos: Forest © iStockphoto.com/anneleven;

Shadowy silhouette of man © iStockphoto.com/xrrr

Published in the U.S.A. by Annick Press (U.S.) Ltd.

Distributed in Canada by University of Toronto Press.

Distributed in the U.S.A. by Publishers Group West.

Printed in Canada

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For my two favorite Chan boys

—G.C.

“So you’ve found nothing, right?”

I was tired of the mind games they’d been playing, thought I’d liven things up a bit by changing tactics. Up until then I’d been giving them the silent treatment, keeping my lips clamped tight shut whenever they asked a question, not even breathing hard in case they thought they were getting to me.

Because I look like such a thug and, I’ll admit it, act like one most of the time, I knew these cops would be like everyone else and think that I was dumb as a rock, but there’s not a lot I don’t understand. You’d be surprised how much people say in front of me, particularly people in charge, because they think it’ll go over my head. It suits me just fine, and I work hard not to let on how smart I actually am. If I have to say anything, I keep it short and simple. Grunts are useful, too.

Not saying anything for nearly four hours hadn’t been a problem. It was totally pissing off the cops, so now that I had spoken it was pathetic to see the wave of relief that visibly swept over them. It was like they had a neon sign over their heads saying, “The little bastard’s finally cracked.”

Only I hadn’t.

I went straight back into silent mode while they pounded me with questions.

“What should we have found, Mike?”

“Come on, tell us where Jacob is.”

“We know you left the group home together. Matt said you ran after you nearly killed Paddy.”

I fought down a smile. They’d let slip two things that made me happy. First, Matt had come through for us. He said he’d give us two hours and he had. Second, Paddy was alive. I’m usually good at justifying my actions—I’ve had to learn to be—but beating the shit out of Paddy was different because of what it said about me. I had hardly dared to think about it. The fear that I had killed him, and concern over what might happen to me, surfaced every so often, filling my mind with waves of panic and making me feel as if I were being hollowed out. Now, I had just a tiny glimmer of hope. All I had to do was hold on and find a way to construct a story about what had happened to Jacob that didn’t make me seem totally crazy, one that would make sense to people who hadn’t experienced what I had. There was no real evidence of anything, and I hoped that once they realized this, I might just be allowed back to Medlar House. I needed to go back; I still had Adam to think about. He needed me, and I’d made a promise to Jacob that I’d take care of Adam, too.

“Where did you go, Mike? You were gone for two

days. We know you went to Dundas the first night and that Jacob was with you. A woman in the donut store called the tip line after we put your photograph on the news. She said you'd both been there. Said you bought some hot chocolate and donuts—supplies, eh? Planning to camp out, maybe?"

It was the ugly one asking the bulk of the questions. She looked tough: her face was weathered and she was built like a brick shithouse. I'd bet that she was a match for most of the criminals who came her way. She was being the good cop. It was almost funny; she was trying to make like she was motherly and it was so obviously alien to her. She was making her voice sound kind, but I could see the effort this was taking, and she couldn't always keep her frustration from showing. The other one wasn't making any effort to disguise his feelings. He looked at me like I was a piece of wet dog crap he'd found on his shoe. He was smooth-looking, all well-cut suit and carefully styled hair. I could tell that he wanted to beat the crap out of me, not waste time trying to make nice. What he didn't know was that if he tried, he'd only land one blow because I'd have him. Not only am I big and strong for my age, I'm fast, too.

"Did you *do* something to Jacob?" Pretty Boy smiled at me. There was an insinuation in those words: the way he said "do" made it clear what he was hinting at.

I didn't let myself react, just smiled at him. It got right up his nose and I saw his fists clench. When he saw me notice this, he quickly pulled his hands under the tabletop. The social worker who had been called in to be my "appropriate adult" while I was being questioned shifted uneasily in his seat. I looked at him but he kept his eyes on the cop. I gave him marks for that. He was letting Pretty Boy know that he had his number.

Ugly tried again, picking up where she left off. "The next day, early evening, you surface in Hamilton, panhandling outside the train station, but Jacob's not with you anymore."

"You blew it there, didn't you, you little punk?" Pretty Boy smirked at me. "Turned nasty when someone refused you. Not very smart, was it? Because when the police came, they recognized you." He laughed. "Not that you're hard to recognize, not with that face."

The social worker spoke up then. "Enough! There's no need for that. Keep your insults to yourself." He was a runty-looking guy, but he'd set his jaw and was keeping up his death stare. I was beginning to like him. He might look like someone's kindly old uncle, but he had balls.

Pretty Boy matched his glare and continued. "So that's how you ended up back here with us. Now, cut the crap. Tell us what happened to Jacob."

I smiled again, couldn't help it, because he was the one who wasn't being very smart. I mean, wasn't it obvious that I'd wanted to be picked up at that point? "Turned nasty" didn't even begin to describe what I did. It was beautiful—loud and dramatic, a complete meltdown: spit and four-letter words flying, I'd grabbed some old geezer by the lapels, shaken him, and kept hold of him until some passersby rushed to his aid. Then I let myself be overpowered, which for someone my size is a bit of a joke.

Jacob was long gone by then.

They'll never find him, not ever, no matter how hard they look.

That's good.

Knowing that, I can stand whatever crap they throw at me. So maybe it's all right to talk. Only I think I'll keep them waiting a bit longer. Why? Because it amuses the hell out of me to piss them off, and because, more importantly, I have to get it straight in my head first. If I am honest, I'm not really sure what happened to Jacob. All I know is that he is gone and, most important of all, he is safe.

Chapter One



Jacob was already at Medlar House when I got there, last chance ringing in my ears.

Only I didn't really know what they meant by that. Last chance? Where the fuck were they going to send me if I messed up here? It was just a vague threat meant to make me toe their line, behave better. Trouble was, I didn't want to. I'm angry and nothing can change that.

When they took me away from Mom three years ago, I'd gone the foster-parenting route. With foster parents, there's two types. There are the ones who are in it for the money. They couldn't give a shit about their charges, so if you cause trouble you quickly become more trouble than you're worth to them. There's a cold honesty in that I kinda like, but not enough to make their lives easy. Why should I? No one does

that for me. The other type is the do-gooders, the ones who are convinced that they can reach and save the disfigured, emotionally damaged kid. That might work with some. It won't work with me. No one can bring my brother back.

After three failed foster home attempts, they gave up and sent me to my first group home. That one was all right. In fact, it was a hell of a lot better than the foster homes. With more kids around I could float under the radar a little. My plan was to just wait it out until I was eighteen and out on my own. But there was a bit of a scandal, a huge media fuss, and the place got closed down. Without going into details, let's just say that "grope home" might have been a better name for it. Someone even tried it on with me, and I had to get physical, which wasn't appreciated.

So this place, Medlar House, was a bit of an unknown quantity. I figured that it would be the usual dump for kids like me whose parents couldn't handle them, or for kids with problems, or for those unlucky schmucks who just had nowhere else to go. Lucy, who had processed me, made nice with my Children's Aid Society worker, took me down to the main lounge area so I could meet the other kids. Well, I'm sure that's what she intended, but I had other plans. If everyone was there, I could have a look-see and try and work out which of them were going to be stupid enough to give me any trouble.

It was late afternoon. When I'd been up in my room, unpacking, I'd heard a clatter and voices. It was obvious that the various schools the inmates attended had let out and everyone was home. The room Lucy took me down to was medium-sized, packed with scuffed-up furniture and maybe six kids. Most of them stopped what they were doing as soon as they saw me trailing in after Lucy, all of them giving me the once-over in their own way. There were a couple of gasps when I turned and gave them the full benefit of the scar. It shocks me still, and I'm used to it, so if you've never seen me before it can be a bit of a stomach turner.

It starts just above and to one side of my right eye, then carries on to just above my mouth. You're probably thinking that it's just a red line, maybe a little bit raised. Nah, it's not like that. I overheard one of the nurses in the hospital say that it looked like someone had sliced the whole right side of my face off, and you know what, that's about it. Back then Danny was a bit taller than me, and when he brought the cleaver down in a swinging arc from over his head, it just sliced through everything, taking flesh and muscle, shattering my eye socket. It doesn't hurt—not anymore. I was lucky that the doctors managed to save my eye. They did as good a job as they could—rebuilding my eye socket and cheekbone with prosthetics, covering them with a skin graft—but it's the absence of flesh

that's the shocker. When you hear the word "cheek," you expect a bit of meat even on the thinnest face, but what I have is a sort of declivity: I like that word, picked it up from my plastic surgeon. He promised great things: that he could, in time, and with many operations, get me looking halfway decent again. I told him no. Make me functional and leave it at that. I never looked halfway decent, so why start now? It was hard because I had to kick up an almighty stink, and the only way to convince them to leave me alone was to pretend that I was terrified of more operations. A little bit of fake hysteria goes a long way, especially from someone my size who can do a hell of a lot of damage flailing around. My ugly mutt; that's what my mom called me when I was little, and Mutt became my nickname. It's what Jon always called me, too, right from when he was a little kid who couldn't say "Michael." I liked it, only started to hate it when Danny picked up on it and started to use it because he meant it.

Danny. Now, he's the other reason I didn't want the surgeon messing around trying to make me look better. I want people to remember what Danny did. Yeah, yeah, I know he's serving time up in Kingston, but people forget, don't they? Time heals everything and all that crap. If I keep my face like this, then there's always going to be a reminder, one specially aimed at her—my mother, the one who brought

Danny into our lives in the first place, laughing about how he would be our new dad.

Oh shit, I'm digressing big time, aren't I? I get into a loop sometimes thinking about what happened that December afternoon three years ago when Danny killed my brother, Jon. It's another reason I don't like to talk much. I'm always afraid that I will tell everyone I meet that story.

So, where was I? Yeah, the scar, the other kids at Medlar House seeing it for the first time. Some of them looked away. I knew that they wouldn't give me any trouble. There was one boy, though, who kept staring at me. I could see he was taking his time, his way of showing that he was tough, that I didn't scare him.

"It's Frankenstein's monster," he said with a sneer.

"Paddy!" Lucy sounded outraged. Some of the ones who had looked away got their courage back and sniggered. She glared at them until the laughter stopped.

I was impressed. An insult that got it right—I was the monster, not Frankenstein. This guy was smart. I *was* going to have to sort him out, but later, when Lucy wasn't around. For now, I didn't say anything. All I did was smile, and a smile from me is a horror show. The skin around my mouth, which is mottled red, pulls up in an unnatural way, too many teeth show, and you can see the outline of all the bones.

He looked away.

“This is Mike McCallum.” Lucy had gone into full introduction mode. “He’s come to us from Mississauga and will be in ninth grade.” At least she didn’t add the kind of crap they normally do, like, “I know that you will all make him welcome.” Like hell. I knew that in a place like this the object was survival, and that anyone new was going to be judged according to what kind of threat they might represent or whether they could be bullied, depending on where you saw yourself in the pecking order.

There were a few mumbled hellos, and then Lucy said, “Well, I’ll leave you to get to know everyone. I’ve got to go help Chaz get dinner together.” Judging from the disgusting smells that were starting to drift into the room, Chaz needed all the help he could get.

Once she’d left, there was this leaden silence. I half expected the boy called Paddy to try something, get me in trouble on my first day, but he turned away and got into a conversation with a thin, rat-faced boy with a half-assed afro. I decided that I’d better make it clear how things were going to be, so I sauntered over to the stained sofa that sat in front of the TV. I grabbed the remote from a little kid and clicked through to see what crap programming they had, then waited for the protests that I knew would come when I settled on a twenty-four-hour news channel rather than the garish cartoon they had been watching.

It was then that I saw him. The TV was on a table that had been placed in a corner of the room, creating a small, triangular space behind it. When I'd been standing up, he was invisible, but now that I was sitting and staring directly at the TV, I could see that a boy was crammed into that space. He was sitting on the floor, his back pressed up against the back of the television set. I couldn't see his head or his face, but from the way his back curved, and the way his knees were drawn up, he probably had his head down, resting on his knees.

"Wha..at?" I yelled. "Who the hell is that?"

"That's Jacob," Paddy answered, adding maliciously, "He was the house freak, until you came."

I let the last part go. The boy hiding behind the TV was way too interesting. His posture screamed that he was trying to shut out everything around him, a feeling I knew only too well.

"Why's he there?"

Paddy laughed. "Jacob tries to pretend that nothing here exists." He looked slyly at me and then moved closer to the television. There was a bowl of fruit on a nearby coffee table. Fruit that had definitely seen better days, shriveled up apples and oranges whose skins looked leathery. Paddy picked up one of the apples, hefted it in his hand, then leaned over the television, raised his right hand, and dashed the apple straight down on the kid's head. I knew he'd thrown it hard

because I could see how he nearly lost his balance, the force of the throw pulling him forward. The apple had been half rotten and collapsed on impact, leaving brown mush in the kid's hair.

He didn't even flinch.

I was impressed.

Paddy reached for another apple, but I stopped him. "Okay, I get it, but you're blocking the TV so move your scrawny ass!"

For a second, I thought he was going to say no, but he shifted gears fast when I lurched menacingly in his direction.

Dinner wasn't for about forty minutes, so I had plenty of time to watch this Jacob, and I swear he didn't move once. I even found myself peering closely to make sure that he was breathing—he was, little shallow breaths that hardly made his sides move. He was amazing, so interesting to watch that I didn't really pay attention to the news, but I kept it on, enjoying the whining of the other kids about the loss of their cartoons, even swatting one or two who got too vociferous in their protests. I was half hoping that Paddy would try something. It would earn him big brownie points if he took on the ugly newcomer and set himself up as the savior of the others, but he didn't. He watched me almost as closely as I was watching Jacob, and there was a look in his eye that I didn't like one bit.

The smells wafting into the room got stronger, cabbage with a tinge of charcoal, and when a gong sounded, everyone careened off out of the room. Everyone, that is, except me and Jacob and one other kid, one of the younger ones who hung back by the door. I deliberately waited, since I wanted to see what the weird kid would do.

About five minutes passed and then this tall, burly guy came in. He had thick, graying hair tied into a ponytail at the back of his neck. Put him in leathers and a bandanna and he would have been your archetypal biker dude. He looked shocked to see me there, but apart from a nod of acknowledgment didn't speak to me at all. He knelt down to one side of the TV. The kid by the door followed him in as if the tall guy was a magnet.

"Jacob," he said, his voice gentle. "Jacob, come on. It's dinnertime."

There was no answer, not a sign that the kid had even heard him. He looked like a small boulder.

"C'mon, Jake, let's do this the easy way. Jakey?" He edged closer, pushing the table and TV slightly to one side so that he had room to reach through.

With the TV no longer pressed against his back, there was finally some movement from the boy: a twitch, a slight easing of the rigidity of his muscles. He kept his head resting on his knees but turned it so that one eye could see the man.

“Attaboy, Jake. It’s me, Chaz. Just me, no one else, I promise. Come on, get yourself up on your hind legs and come through to eat. I’ve got Lucy saving you a place next to me.” He reached out one meaty hand and tentatively put it on the kid’s shoulder.

I realized that I was holding my breath, waiting to see what would happen next. If it had been me, I would have lashed out, anything to get rid of that hand. I thought that either it would play out like that or the kid would curl up tighter, shutting down even more. Instead, to my surprise, he leaned into the touch, just a little, and I saw his head lift, too.

This Chaz guy was good. He didn’t move, didn’t push too hard. Instead, he kept talking, a gentle, rumbling patter of encouragement, and gradually the kid shifted position, unclasping his hands from around his legs, turning to look at Chaz, and finally pushing himself up, awkwardly maneuvering his way out from behind the TV. Chaz rose with him, keeping that reassuring hand in place.

“That’s it. We’ll just take our time now, Jacob, and go into the dining room. Luce’ll have your dinner ready and you can just sit there quietly and eat.” Chaz was gently steering the boy toward the door now, presumably to where the god-awful smell was coming from. As they left the room, he turned, winked at me, and added, “You’d better come, too!” I was puzzled that he didn’t acknowledge the other kid,

the small one who was following him closely like a little shadow.

Dining room! That was like calling a puddle a lake. I'm savvy enough not to expect much in the way of comfort or style from these places, but this was one of the worst I'd seen. The room itself was large but looked cramped and crowded because of the long refectory table that was jammed into it. The chairs around it left little space to walk. Lucy was sitting at the head with four smaller kids surrounding her, all talking away, and one empty space into which the shadow kid zoomed. A silence fell as the whole table looked up at us as we entered the room. Some of them hadn't been in the TV room before dinner and were in the lucky position of getting their first glimpse of me. I flashed them my ghastly grin. It never fails—the gasps, the looking away. I gave a little bow, but pulled out of it sharply when I realized that Chaz was looking at me and grinning appreciatively.

At the end of the table nearest the door were three empty spaces: the middle one was obviously Chaz's, facing Lucy at the other end. The ones on either side of it had been left for me and Jacob. One of them had a plate of food laid out in front of it. From what Chaz had said earlier, I knew that this must be for Jacob, but since I like to make my mark and see what happens when you push, I went to sit there. A small mewling sound came from Jacob, the first noise I had heard

from him. I continued to ease myself into the chair, pretending not to have heard anything, when Chaz said, “Not yours, big fella! You get to serve yourself.”

Lifting my hands up, palms out, to indicate no offense, I took my time moving over to the other seat. There was a big bowl of what was probably chili (it was red and it had meat and beans in it, so this was a fair guess), a bowl of boiled and slightly blackened cabbage (the origin of the stench), and a platter of rice, all within handy reach. I started ladling out as much as I could get on the plate. I’m not that fussy about what I eat, just as long as there is a lot of it. The noise level had risen again now that we were no longer providing the floor show, and I sneaked a look over at the weird kid to see how he was handling it.

He was chowing down, but not on the food that the rest of us had. I now understood why Chaz had made a big thing about how Lucy would have his food all ready for him. Instead of the red glop we had, on his plate was what looked like sliced ham, some plain boiled potatoes, and, of course, cabbage. It crossed my mind at this point whether I should start being finicky about my food, just to yank their chains, but I decided against it because although this Jacob had been given special food, there wasn’t much of it. The interesting thing was that as he was eating, he was looking at me. He wasn’t doing the “oh my God I can’t help myself I’ve just got to keep looking at

this disfigured guy because I've never seen anything so gross" staring, nor was it the kind of look that is trying to assess someone's strength or weakness; it was a kind of thoughtful, considering look. As soon as he saw me watching, he dropped his gaze back down to his plate. This kept on for a while, like a game. He would start staring at me, but pretend he wasn't when I looked at him. Then it got a little weird. When I looked up from my plate to try and catch him, he wasn't looking at me but rather just over my left shoulder. I was spooked and immediately spun around, but there was no one there.

During the meal Chaz didn't talk much to him. I figured that he had done his job getting Jacob into the dining room, and that now he could relax. I thought he might concentrate on me, the new kid, trying to pump me for information and get a handle on how they should treat me, but, apart from offering me more food, he left me alone, too, which I thought was kind of cool of him until it occurred to me that maybe he was just one of those idle time-serving bastards who have no real interest in the kids they work with.

Paddy, the kid who had thought about giving me some grief earlier on, was two seats away from Jacob, and he kept giving me evils whenever he looked my way. I felt like sighing; even though I knew I was going to have to fight him soon, I just didn't feel like doing it that night. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't

scared of him or anything, it's just that it's always the same and I get tired of it, having to prove how tough I am to get people to leave me alone. I was trying to think how it could be avoided when Lucy gave me the perfect out.

She stood up and, in a voice that could have shattered glass, yelled over the general end-of-meal hubbub. "Right, those on clear-up duty, and you know who are," she shouted, looking straight at Paddy, "get cracking and get the table wiped down so we can get started on homework. Anyone who doesn't think they have homework"—she smiled here—"can come and convince either Chaz or myself that you truly don't. If you are successful, you can either go and watch TV or go to your rooms."

Paddy had homework—what a shame! Since it was my first day, I had none. I had already done my TV intimidation for the day, so I was free to go to my room, where I could relax peacefully, maybe read some of the fat fantasy paperback that I had snatched from the backpack of the social worker who had brought me over here. It was by an author I had never heard of before, Patrick Rothfuss. Just to keep in practice, and to keep my legend growing, I shoved and jostled a few little kids out of my way as I left the dining room, not enough so that Lucy and Chaz would notice and say something, but enough to remind everyone that they shouldn't mess with

me. Then I wandered back upstairs. My room was close to the bathroom and for once, it seemed like I had lucked out: it didn't look like I had a roommate. Although there were two beds in the room, there was no evidence of anyone else using it: a clock on the bedside table but nothing else—no books, mementos, or photographs. Just about every kid in these places has something that they cling on to, something from their past life, no matter how crappy that was. The saddest ones are the photographs of parents, because in most cases you just know that these were not the good guys, that they are the reason the kids are here in the first place, either because they abused them or because they were drunks or drug addicts who didn't give a rat's ass about their kids.

I have a photograph, just one, but I don't show it to anyone. Instead, I keep it stashed in the lining of my jacket.

It was taken just a few months before Danny killed Jon.

It was on Halloween. We're standing on our front porch, just before we left to go trick-or-treating. Jon loved Halloween, the dressing up, the candy, and he wanted us to have matching costumes. To be completely honest, I'd rather have gone off with my friends and left him to go around the neighborhood with Mom, but he was so hyped about how neat it would be, and there was a part of me that worried

that Mom might let him down and that he would end up stuck at home with Danny. Jon loved old myths and legends and he wanted us to have costumes that came from them. I drew the line when he suggested that I should be a cyclops to his Odysseus. There was no way I was going to prance around in nothing but a loincloth made out of Mom's ratty sheepskin rug with a single eye painted on my forehead. So he came up with Robin Hood and Little John and that's what we were: me with an old broom handle to be my quarterstaff and him with a toy bow and arrow. We cleaned up that year when it came to candy. Our pillowcases were so full that Jon could hardly lift his, so I ended up carrying them both. It was down to his charm, nothing to do with me. I just lurked in the background looking big and craggy, let him do all the talking, charming all the old geezers and grannies with his politeness and handsome smile.

I'm doing it again, letting Jon take over my thoughts.

I had just flopped down on the bed with my book when the door opened. I jumped to my feet, ready for any trouble that might come.

I needn't have bothered. Walking in, cool as could be, no one leading him or pushing him this time, was Jacob. He didn't pay any attention to me, just lay down on his back on the other bed and stared up at the ceiling.