

The Takers and Keepers

Ivan Pope

Descent

Allen was barely awake when the video arrived, but he understood immediately.

You love your keepers, the message said.

He felt sweaty and stale and shook slightly with a sickly shiver. He knew he smelled of a night in the pub and the detritus of sex. In the kitchen his girlfriend worked, marking a pile of schoolbooks for the coming Monday morning. A mug of cold, milky tea and an untouched piece of toast sat just out of reach.

The email contained no message, just a link to a video somewhere out on the internet. He paused a moment to calm his shaking hand. When he clicked through it started automatically and he watched with rapt attention, nodding slowly to himself as the film unfolded.

A video camera, held by an unseen hand, descended slowly into the basement of a house. It panned in the gloom and travelled deeper into the space, down staircases and through small rooms. A hand pushed open a doorway hidden behind a shelving unit and entered the space beyond. At a metal grill the hand pushed it open and proceeded into a small opening through the wall. The descent continues down a ladder. A feeble light illuminates the way. The camera peers into the depths as whoever is carrying it proceeds. Eventually the video steadies and looks into the gloom. A space is revealed, the light is better here. It contains kitchen units and a toilet which appears to be plumbed in. At the end of the room is another small opening in the wall. The camera focuses on this opening as a face momentarily appears and then retreats from view. The camera tracks towards the hole and is poked through. Inside, as the images blur to grey in the dark, a light is switched on and three figures squirm at the light, covering their faces with their arms and turning away. There is no soundtrack, but it is clear someone is shouting instructions. The three turn back to the camera and stare at it in terror. One woman, wearing shorts and a bikini top, and two children dressed in pyjamas. They stare, blinking, until suddenly the light is snapped off and the video ends.

‘What’s that?’ asked Emily. She was standing behind him unseen, watching, a schoolbook dangling between her thumb and forefinger. She bent closer, trying to see the screen. He moved quickly to shut the video

down but he was too slow and the awkward attempt at concealment revealed his excitement. She had come in to ask if he wanted to go out for a coffee, but this had now been swept from her mind. Normally he wouldn't mind, he rather relished any interest in his stuff, but not this, this was too raw.

'What the fuck was it?' she repeated.

'Someone just sent it to me,' he said. 'I don't know, nothing much.'

Why did he have to pretend anything? She knew instinctively it was very much more. He slowly clicked the laptop shut as she said, 'But what was it? Someone in a cellar?'

He had almost forgotten how to breathe. He couldn't answer for fear of revealing the state he had been tipped into, his lungs empty of air while his mind raced for answers.

'Holy fuck,' she said, louder now. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

A ghost. Exactly. That was it. He had seen a ghost. He knew he had turned white, as white as the human in the film. He felt sweaty and shivery and would lie down to recover if she wasn't standing behind him, waiting for an explanation. All the blood had drained from his head and a wave of nausea swept over him.

'It's nothing. Nothing important. Something for work, maybe. Someone trying to frighten me. Or make me laugh.'

His attempt to shake her off didn't work but she wouldn't fight over it, not in the glow of a Sunday morning.

'I hate that stuff,' she said. 'Your mysterious work.'

'It's not funny, I know that,' he agreed.

Go away, go away, go away he thought.

'You know what I mean. All that crap, missing kids, abductors and probably Osama bin Laden hiding in a cave somewhere. It scares me and I really hate it.'

He turned and stared at her. Did he really know her, was he in love with her, how does this thing work, he wondered? He couldn't really be bothered to fight. It can't take much of an effort to understand what I'm doing, he thought.

'I know,' he said, 'I'm sorry.' Not wanting to concede any ground, he could only repeat the same bland apology.

She stood there a few moments longer, waiting for him to soften and reach out, but he was lost to her now, willing her departure so he could take another look. It's been a long time coming, he thought, I can wait a few more minutes. Finally, she walked out of the room in silence, leaving an unpleasant absence. He felt relieved but at the same time he hated himself for forcing her away. Quickly he flipped his machine open again, but when it reconnected, he was surprised by the message.

This video has been removed by its owner.

Allen

Sundays were a day of slow-motion progress, from bed to bar to lunch and back to bed again with Emily. She was a pleasure. He knew he was onto a long-term thing, finally.

He usually tried not to let himself get distracted by emails before he was showered and dressed in the morning, but some days it was easy to give in to the vicarious pleasure of the screen. He hadn't really been reading any emails, just skimming the spam and the junk that waited for his attention and hitting the delete key. He had work to do, a short piece to finish for *The Times*, and something longer to get started on for the Americans, *The Journal of Familial Depravity*. That would be harder, he thought. They would want proper references, the sort of deep research that he didn't normally have the time or inclination for. He opened up the partly written document, but his attention quickly drifted back to the video.

After a long period of drift, Allen had ended up in North London, determined to sort out a way forward. Islington was a place he'd never been to before jail, but he liked it for its easy lifestyle and the anonymity of its residents. People came and went with rapidity, that was good. He didn't have to get to know anyone, they left him alone. Then he met and paired up with a sweet girl, Emily Morgan. She was a teacher, small children. She knew from the first about his past and his time inside, he told her on their first night together, anticipating, perhaps, a longer relationship, or maybe relishing a chance to admit his past. He didn't want anything hanging over his head.

Anyway, Islington suited them both with its coffee shops, boutiques, pubs. Although he hadn't known it before, it turned out to be his sort of life; the drift along busy streets, meetings in cafes, nights in the pub. He even became gregarious, friended, under her spell. He knew people again and he liked them, looked forward generally to seeing them. Her teaching job was in a local school, easy to get to from where they lived. Neither of them was originally a Londoner, but in the way of generations of incomers they'd become attached to the life and the opportunities it offered.

They rented a basement flat with a tiny garden and a gravelled space at the front where an old taxicab was parked. He had somehow acquired the cab along with the flat. The previous tenant, not wanting to take it to his new property, had proposed leaving it with him in return for an outstanding electricity bill. He'd been trying to work out what to do with it ever since.

It suited him fine, this life, this flat in an old house. They had one large bedroom and one small second bedroom, box room really, that he used as a study. A kitchenette at the back opened out onto a garden which was more of a walled yard than a proper garden. He hadn't ever been the gardening type, but he'd taken to this scrap of land and created a space full

of interesting plants in assorted pots. He couldn't name any of them, but he was amazed at his own creativity, something he'd previously put down as vaguely sissy in others. In the summer he spent long hours sitting out here, writing or marking up printouts of articles.

He liked it here, he liked this life. He liked the slow, relentless gathering of information, getting it into some sort of order and then forcing a story from the fragments. He never would have thought he could be a writer, but he seemed to have become one almost by mistake. In the army, keeping notebooks would have been insane and led to bullying. Even when he started writing properly, making attempts at writing about his life, he'd never thought it could be serious. After leaving the army he'd worked as a labourer and run a few scams with mates, serious stuff but nothing worth writing home about. He assumed, like his brothers, that he'd fall into some job where his body did the work and his brain was saved for the pub or the bookies. It was unexpected, the slow drift to brain work, but when it came it was unstoppable. He soon had a subject and an audience and didn't look back.

It was the same with Emily. She wasn't really his type, or maybe she was. From an academic family who had pushed her to go through university, she'd come out the other end as a schoolteacher. Not, he thought, that there was anything wrong with being a schoolteacher, but he knew that if he'd had a chance to go to college he wouldn't have ended up as a teacher.

He ran a hot bath into which he tipped half a bottle of bubbles. Feeling a bit detached from the world, he lay in the foam thinking about the video. He wished he'd paid it more attention, that he hadn't been distracted. He was almost buried in foam when Emily came into the bathroom and gestured to him.

'I'm sorry I snapped at you.'

That was par for the course. She bent down to take a kiss, a peck on the lips, a settlement of their spat. He didn't reply, not wanting to be hijacked into forgiveness, still angry that she couldn't see what he saw. He tried to dismiss her with silence, scared to draw her anywhere near his thoughts. She stood her ground and looked at him as he steeped in the bubbles.

'I know it's your work, I'm sorry. I'm not judging you, but it scares me. I'm not going to pretend. I just don't like it.'

He sighed and turned his eyes up to meet hers. She always ambushed him when he was vulnerable, when he couldn't escape. He stared at her body, realising he now wanted to fuck her. He closed his eyes to escape her gaze.

'Listen, let's talk later. I'm tired. You know what, I need this story, but if it freaks you out, I'll leave it. Your choice, you tell me.'

He tailed off, not wanting to push home his advantage. There was a fundamental difference between them, they knew that. He felt like he'd done too much, seen too much, while she sometimes seemed like a child, fresh out of school. She looked for a quiet life with time to concentrate on

her career, hang out with her friends, walk in the hills. She had what he considered strange hobbies: orienteering, rock-climbing. He'd never been one for separate interests and he didn't really understand what these things, that she'd brought with her from a previous existence, meant. He felt tolerated in that scheme of things but he knew he was not ready to give her up. He didn't mind annoying her to get his way, but he didn't want to push her away. There was a calmness in this relationship, the first time he'd known that sort of peace.

'You'll never give it up,' she said. 'Not even if I ask you to. I don't know why you find it so titillating.'

Not titillating he thought, that's the wrong word. He looked at her through half-closed eyes.

'I thought you weren't going to be like that today.'

She scowled and turned to leave the room.

'There is something at the end of it all,' he said.

'Only you,' she said, 'that's what's at the end of it. Allen fucking Kimbo, always one more lead, one more person to save. You fuck me up, Allen. What you need is a proper job.'

And that was the sentence he hated most.

'You don't have to do this. Nobody asked you to do penance for them.'

Silence.

'You've done your time. Get out of the shadows.'

He laughed. 'It's not personal. It's my job, following this stuff. There are real victims, out there. Nobody else gives a fuck for them, do they? That's what I'm doing.'

Her face creased, but she held her lips together as she had learned as a girl.

'I love you, baby. You do what you have to do and I'll wait for you to get finished.'

She bent, kissed him lightly on the forehead and was gone.

Please don't get involved, she had said.

He'd started his writing career with crap speculative pieces for the trash press and moved on to authoritative pieces for the quality press, when they'd have them. But he had his subject almost to himself, nobody else wanted to cover his beat: the missing and the lost, abductees and prisoners, who disappeared from the world and seldom resurfaced. He'd slowly built up a network of contacts, from prison officers to bent policemen, social workers and probation officers, gangsters and paedophiles. At the start he really had no idea how to find contacts or what they wanted from him, but after a few false starts he'd come to realise that every contact needed something in return. As the work increased and he found he had some spare cash, he fell into a routine of discovering the reward that each source of information wanted. Of course, it wasn't always cash. In fact, money seldom changed hands. The cons wanted phone cards or, more recently,

actual phones smuggled in. The coppers wanted trips to strip clubs or drinking sessions in dark boozers. The social workers wanted nothing at all, apart from maybe covering the cost of petrol and an affirmation of their importance. Whatever, he was happy to play the mind games that built layer on layer his web of contacts. He had a lot of contacts, for sure, and he had inside knowledge of events. But they seldom led to anything concrete.

At first his subject was trafficking. Girls, women, men, children. From Moldova and beyond, through Serbia and out across Europe, Ethiopia, Nigeria and beyond. Girls, women, boys, men. Mothers, fathers, children. Brothers and sisters. People traded as if they were drugs, alongside drugs, with drugs inside them, for drugs.

Drugs can be consumed once, but a woman can be consumed hundreds of times. Traded women were much more valuable than pharmaceuticals, and the authorities were seldom interested. A shivering wreck of a human with fear knocked into her over months or years is hardly likely to tell a passing policeman that she never chose this life, that she was abducted at fifteen from her parents' farm and taken from city to city, fucked by a thousand paying customers.

He was a self-made expert on the global phenomenon of human bondage, and a specialist on the trafficking from Eastern to Western Europe. It was a trade more valuable than the heroin business, in which the rewards were huge and the punishments tiny when caught. Although the authorities had been working to break the networks for years, they were ineffectual and corrupted in many arenas.

And beyond the usual trafficking of human flesh, there were deeper and darker processes.

For years he'd followed rumours of the existence of photographs of incarcerated adults and children, entire families that were created underground. He knew there were some very sick people around – they existed in prisons around Europe and the Americas. Each big story that broke in the international press reinforced his belief that something deeper was going on. The Fritzl case, Priklopil, paedophile rings and sex attack kidnappings. Each brought him more clues, but he could never open the door to the network.

He had many scraps of information but no whole picture.

He had been collecting stories of abducted and disappeared people for over five years. As well as a thick file, he had thousands of internet links, fragments of conversations, possible clues and hints of connections.

He believed that there were many more people held long term than the authorities admitted. He knew it was happening and he had some idea of the worst offenders, a group who helped each other take and keep victims..

They called these captives *keepen*.

He settled at his desk in the small back room he used as an office. Sun streamed in, highlighting dust that glowed in response. Spring was turning to summer, but the days were still cold. It was a good time of year; things were moving along nicely on the work front. He looked forward to a few months of solid activity, a few trips, visits to crime scenes, a lot of writing and, maybe, progress with a book proposal. He felt it was time to write something more substantive than articles and news stories. He almost had enough material for a real book. He had been thinking about it for a long while, but he was aware he needed something more, something new and unique. He'd put out feelers, hoping to penetrate deeper into that world. Perhaps this was a result.

The kettle boiling snapped him back from his dreaming. He added ground coffee to the coffee press and poured the boiling water over it. After waiting a few moments, he pushed the plunger down and poured coffee onto the milk. He added a generous spoonful of sugar, stirred and sipped. Hot. He felt it enter his bloodstream while he looked at the email listing, scanning the senders and subjects quickly, looking for the interesting stuff amid the junk. Nothing much, just the continuation of a few conversations and a lot of things that might have been interesting in the past but which now bored him. A lot of things bored him.

Through his distraction he noticed an email from a friend, Peter Jenkins, a funny but somewhat pompous man who edited and owned a popular London magazine, *London Strife*. Peter loved scandal, crime, suffering, drama and celebrities who had strayed.

The email got straight to the point.

Hi Allen, I've got something interesting for you, might be big. Can we talk. Lunch? Peter

Jenkins had a reputation as a chancer, a publisher with a big mouth and an eye for the bigger story that had served him well. Allen trusted him, knew it was no bullshit. He wasn't afraid to print anything, he took risks. For that Allen loved him. He loved the magazine and he loved Jenkins.

Their relationship was complicated. They'd met five or six years previously, soon after Allen came out of prison. Allen was trying to place a couple of pieces he'd written, and Jenkins, recognising something intriguing in him and a raw talent, had taken him under his wing, giving him a series of assignments. As Allen became a better writer, Jenkins took to treating Allen to lunch lunching him and passing on titbits of gossip and intelligence that he'd picked up from his police contacts or links to the ever-changing criminal scene. Allen, on the other hand, was more interested in a seedy demi-monde that was completely alien to Jenkins and constantly tried to drag him towards it. In this way, over time, they formed a powerful alliance. Jenkins provided a home for research that sometimes

took months or years to pull together and he opened doors for Allen as he needed them.

He wrote a swift reply.

Your place? tomorrow lunch, see you there. Allen

The offices of *London Strife* were in Fitzrovia, that slice of historic London that sat between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. It didn't take Allen long to get over there. He found Jenkins sitting in the spring sunshine outside a trendy restaurant, Rack, on Charlotte Street. He was wearing a suit, no tie and big sunglasses. Not one to abstain at lunchtime, he was sipping a vodka tonic.

'Allen,' Jenkins said enthusiastically, patting the seat next to him. Allen sat down and they surveyed the street together.

'Drink?' he asked as a waiter emerged.

'No thanks,' Allen said. He didn't really drink these days, that had been part of the problem that had led him into temptation. They both ordered steak frites, rare, before the waiter could get away again.

'So, how's your underworld?' said Jenkins.

'Gloomy,' said Allen. 'Nothing dramatic, just the usual procession of lost daughters and missing sons.'

'Why is it that daughters are lost but sons go missing? And children, what do they do?' said Jenkins.

'Children are always snatched by strangers,' Allen said. 'Even when they're not. Come on, then. What's your big mystery?'

Jenkins laughed and paused for effect.

'I've only got Jennifer fucking Ransome.'

Jennifer Ransome. Allen knew the story well. Twelve years after disappearing she had walked back out of history, large as life, all grown up. Came into a police station in Holloway two months before and told them who she was and that she wanted to go home. They had no fucking idea. She'd been gone for so long, there was a whole new generation of police. The guy who had led the search was long retired. The press went crazy as she was swept up into a safe house and closeted with police liaison and psychiatrists, doctors, family, the works. But no press. No stories had leaked, no photos either. She was a blank, a fascinating, tantalising, blank.

Jenkins sipped his vodka. 'You know it was always my story?'

Allen nodded. 'Of course, but how ...'

'I know her parents well. I talked to them a lot after she went missing. At first, I was just another reporter, but, after a few months, when everybody thought she was dead, I kept on plugging away, asking questions, demanding her return. I did think she was dead, I always thought that, but I couldn't admit it to her mum and dad. I'd got too close. I kept telling them, she might have run away, with a boy or something. It wasn't very

likely, she was too young, but we grasped at straws. It didn't seem to do any harm. The weeks passed, then the months, and eventually I think we all decided that she was dead, but we never said it out loud. It sort of became the great unfinished business of *London Strife*, of my life really. I carried some guilt, tell you the truth, that I'd gone on so long about her being alive, but in the end the story drifted away. You can't keep focussed on one person like that, and the mag had started to grow, we had a lot of other stories, we were learning our trade. In the end, though I never lost touch with them completely, I moved on. I'm not sure they ever moved on, even by one day. Allen looked at Jenkins' expensive suit. He sure had moved on, he thought, on the backs of these stories.

'And now?' he said, not wanting to spend the whole of lunch rehashing old stories.

'Now? Now it turns out they never forgot me, and when she reappeared, they called me first. Anyway, eat up. How's the steak?'

'Steak's good. Tell me about this girl.'

'She's not a girl anymore. She's grown up. I'm not sure what happened to her, you'd think she would be broken, but ...'

'But?'

'It's hard to explain. She's motoring. She's got ambition, like she wants to be fucking famous. Get on the telly.'

'Well, good for her,' said Allen.

He paused.

'But what's that got to do with me?'

'Well, she needs someone to write her book, of course. You know, ghost her story. I thought you could do it.'

A ghost for a ghost, he thought, and his pulse quickened. Of course. This was the book, he thought, that he'd been waiting for.

He knew Jennifer's story was valuable. Everybody wanted to know what horrors had gone on, where she'd been held, what indignities she had been subjected to: the usual prurient interest masquerading as public interest. The media had speculated with abandon, but barely any word leaked from the Ransome camp. The police filled in a few of the gaps for their favoured contacts and promised a press conference, maybe even Jennifer herself, 'in good time'. Denied their story, the press made up whatever they wanted, harassed any relatives or friends of the family they could find and constructed elaborate graphics on the basis of their guesswork. Forensic artists were brought in to make impressions of what she might look like now, impressions that varied so much from paper to paper as to be a joke. Nobody really knew what had happened, nobody really knew what was happening.

Allen gripped Jenkins' arm hard, convinced for a moment he was joking. 'Why would she want me?'

‘Her mum wants her to be happy. And there’s money in it, lots of money. We’ve got an agent, we’ll set up an auction for the rights. It’s just a fixed-fee job – and your name on the cover. Below hers, of course.’

‘So, is it true?’

‘True?’

‘That stuff, any of it? The stories?’

It was said that she was quite mad, that she had three dwarf children, that she talked in a strange language, that she had twenty-inch fingernails and white hair. It was also said that she was preparing a media career, that she had signed up as a columnist with a red top and that she would be a contestant on *Celebrity Big Brother*.

‘That’s what you’ll find out, I guess. All I’ve heard is that she was talking to the police and the doctors and that she got the hump for some reason and moved out of hospital and is holed up with her parents in a rented house somewhere. The papers are sniffing around, my guess is that they will find her soon, so you better get a move on. Her parents have given me first sniff, for old times’ sake.’

He giggled. ‘Does that sound sick?’

‘She’s not stupid, you know. The press is going crazy for her and everyone wants to know what happened. To see her. If she wants to write a book, and she wants you to help her write the book, then you fucking get in there and write the book.’

The waiter returned. Jenkins went quiet. When he had gone, Jenkins continued.

‘There’s another thing. A copper, Herman. He’s a Detective Constable now, thinks he owns the case.’

‘And?’

‘Well, we’ve been sparring over this for a long time. When she went, he was just a spotty plod in a hat, but now he’s serious, a real detective. He’s already warned me off the case.’ Jenkins smiled. ‘Do you understand?’

He was serious now. ‘Herman can fuck this story up for us unless we’re smart. But you’re a professional, it’s your job. And it’s your big break. You keep everyone happy and I’ll sort us out a contract.’

‘Since when were you my manager?’ said Allen quietly, under his breath. But he knew that, if the book was going to be written, he would make sure he was the one who wrote it.

Jennifer

Two days later, Allen took a bus out through East London to the leafy edge of the city. Through nervousness he got off the bus too early and, holding a scrap of paper with an address on it, walked for a while, getting more depressed as he went. Family cars sped past, sending dust into the air while the occasional mother pushing a buggy passed him by.

Eventually he found the long, quiet road lined with houses that looked very run-down, standing behind spindly hedges stunted by the grimy traffic fumes. When he got to the house, he double-checked the number on a gatepost and walked up the path past an overgrown front garden. He rang the doorbell and listened as it jangled in the distance. After a short delay the door was opened by a middle-aged woman wearing leather trousers and a top with *Vogue* marked out in pink sparkles. She wore a lot of makeup and was holding a small dog by the collar, which put her into an uncomfortable, half-stooped stance.

He smiled broadly at her. 'Mrs Ransome?'

'Yes,' she said blankly and smiled back.

He held out his hand. 'Allen Kimbo. I've come to talk to Jennifer. I'm the writer, it's about her book? I phoned.'

She seemed to finally get it and, ignoring his hand, nodded him in across the hallway towards the front room. It was large and overheated, violently carpeted and filled with furniture, people and a smoky fug. Allen edged in sideways while the woman who'd answered the door pushed in behind him.

'Don't worry about them, Mr Allen, things are a bit hectic but they're just family. Mostly.'

She spoke into the room, loudly. 'Everyone, this is Allen. He's come to talk to Jenni. She might be writing a book.'

Everybody in the room looked at him with a certain expectation. He half-expected them to give a round of applause, but they just clucked in approval, as if he was a publisher come to announce a gifted daughter's first novel.

He said that he understood what they'd been through, though of course he didn't.

'I'm sorry about the crowd,' said Mrs Ransome. 'This is my sister. Her husband. My oldest. It's his birthday.'

'And this is Mr Soanes, our new lawyer.'

Mr Soanes grinned broadly and waved a wine glass at him in a friendly gesture.

She waved vaguely at the rest of the people present who smiled back at him in turn and returned to their conversations.

'Let's go to the kitchen,' she said. 'I expect you'd like a cup of tea.'

The kitchen was empty. He sat at a small table by a window while she busied herself with the kettle. He looked out at a large back garden and a small tiled area littered with dog faeces.

‘Nice house,’ he said.

‘Yes, isn’t it just? The government are paying for it, for therapy they said, for the best. For now, anyway. They said we needed to be away from everyone. Jenni likes it, she likes the garden.’

‘You must be very glad to have her back,’ he said.

‘I still can’t believe it, but I don’t think I’ll ever get over it. All those years, gone, empty.’ She looked away. ‘You know, although you always have to say you believe she’s still alive, I didn’t really. Not at all. I just gave up hope, years ago, otherwise I would have gone mad. My doctor told me: “Julie,” he said, “Julie, you’ve got to face up to facts.” When I asked him what he meant he said: “She’s gone, you know, and she isn’t coming back.” He was wrong, wasn’t he? But I believed him after that. I didn’t say it to anyone, but I did. I thought she’d gone for good, into the ground.’

She took a mug from the cupboard.

‘She’s like a different girl now, all grown up and knowing what she wants to do. I don’t really know her – don’t tell her I said that – but sometimes it’s like a miracle from god. It’s come as a shock, I’ll say. Her brother, well, he didn’t really know her, he was only tiny when she went, but he’s happy. I say happy, he’s a bit confused. But he’ll get used to it. Even the vicar has been round, you know. He said I need to get back to church. Funny, isn’t it? I stopped going, years ago, and he never visited all those years, but I don’t think I could start again now. Do you think I should go back? Is there any point? I’ve got her back and all.’

Her voice had become high-pitched, volatile. She stopped to take a breath. He could feel the stress coming off her.

‘I see what you mean,’ he said. ‘Maybe it’s just a reaction to her, um, time away. All those years on her own, it doesn’t bear thinking about.’

He hesitated, not sure where this was going. ‘I imagine she spent a lot of time thinking about you.’

Mrs Ransome twisted her handkerchief in her lap. ‘It’s the doctors, they wanted us, her, to be safe. But you know ...’ And she looked behind her to check in case anyone had entered the kitchen, ‘... you know, the newspaper wanted to send us to a hotel. In London. They said they would pay for everything, and Jenni could do some interviews. But the doctors, they didn’t want us to do that. I would have liked a hotel, although this house is very nice. But it scares me, at night, it’s too quiet.’

‘What did Jenni want to do?’

‘Well, she’s got her own plans, that one. It’s as if she came back with plans. But she won’t tell me, she won’t listen to me on anything now. I suppose she’s an adult, but it seems strange to me. I never got to see her

grow up, never got to teach her anything, and now I'm going to lose her all over again.'

He felt pity for this woman, dragged along her whole life by forces she was not in control of.

'My husband won't talk about it, but then he won't talk to anyone, poor love, he's not been well. It's this television thing that I'm worried about, it seems all wrong to me, that she could go on television and, well, I'm not sure if even she knows what. Become some sort of television person and have her own programme and everything. Where did that come from, that's what I want to know?'

He wasn't sure whether he was taking advantage or if this was what she wanted. Play it by ear, he thought, go where it leads. She opened the kitchen door and they stepped out onto the tiny concrete patio. She pointed to some lichen covered plastic garden chairs and they both sat down again. Mrs Ransome lit a cigarette. Allen pulled out a digital recorder.

She reached over and pressed down with her fingertips on his wrist.

'You know, I didn't think she would ever come back. I really didn't. I waited such a long time. I didn't want to give in, but inside I did. Every year we still did our ceremony, on the anniversary, and on her birthday, but in the end, you just give up believing – can you understand that?'

'Of course,' he said.

'She was my little one and I lost her and then I tried to forget about her. And then she came back. Can you, can you ...' She looked around nervously, as if somebody might be listening, then drew deeply on her cigarette.

'How is it, between you and her?' he said.

'Strange thing was, I had a dream about her the night before she appeared. I hadn't dreamed about her for years. Then I seemed to spend the whole night chasing her in and out of this old building.'

She laughed. 'You know how dreams are, first we were standing on the street, on the high street here, where we used to go shopping together. Then I turned around and she was gone. But I knew it was a dream. Even so, I panicked, I thought, what if I wake up and I could have found her and I haven't. I set off where I thought she'd gone, into the shopping centre, but every time I got near her, I lost sight of her again. Funny isn't it, how dreams do that to you? I woke up with a very strange feeling that morning, like I now knew what had happened to her, that she was alright. The truth of it was, year on year, I never stopped wondering where she was but I never thought the worst. And then she came back to me, just like that.'

Allen made sympathetic noises.

She pulled another cigarette from the packet and lit it quickly. 'I really should give these things up. What with the dream and everything, and it was a bad time and I was feeling a down. I just cried, at first, when she came back. I didn't want to believe it. But then, when I was sure, then I

started thinking even worse things. I was scared, I don't mind admitting. She was fifteen when she went, and now she'd be in her twenties, and I'd never clapped eyes on her all that time. I didn't know who she was, or what was she coming home to. Or who was coming home. What I'd dreamed of and wanted for so long, suddenly came true, and it made me feel stupid. Stupid.'

She looked into the distance with a thousand-yard stare.

'She won't really talk to me now, though.' She seemed close to tears. 'She pretends everything is alright, when other people are around. But she doesn't really want to talk to me. I lost my girl, my baby, what I got back, I don't know.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Well, you don't have to be sorry, Mr Allen,' she said, and burst into tears. Then she stopped as suddenly as she had started, pulled out a tissue and blew her nose. 'I hope you won't put that in your book,' she said.

Allen realised this was taking them around in circles.

'Can I talk to Jennifer then?'

'Of course you can, my love, but please keep it short. And be nice to her. She's got some crazy ideas, but we do love her, we don't want her hurt. Not anymore.'

He followed her up the narrow stairs to a landing. They passed a bathroom smelling of damp flannels and mildew. At the top of the stairs Mrs Ransome went up to a closed door and pushed it slowly open, warily. 'Hello Jen,' she said. 'I've got that nice writer man here to talk to you.' She reached back and tugged at Allen's elbow. 'You go on in,' she whispered.

He stepped part way into the room. The curtains were shut but several dim lights were on. His eyes took time to adjust. The room was stuffed with belongings, bags piled around a bed, shelves laden with books, trinkets and boxes. A three-bar heater was on, space carved out for it at the end of the bed, with more bags piled precariously around and dangerously close to the hot elements. Jennifer's mother hovered behind him.

A young woman sat on the far end of the bed in the gloom.

'Hello Jennifer,' he said cautiously. No reply. 'Jenni. Hey.' He took two cautious steps into the room, still holding on to the door handle as he did so, trying to find spaces for his feet in the clutter and feeling he was in danger of toppling into the mess.

He could see her, but she still didn't respond as he clambered further into the room. He grinned inanely, suddenly feeling stupid.

'I've come to talk about your book.' He paused. 'If that's what you want. Your mum said you did.'

He didn't know whether to talk to her as a child or an adult. The heat was getting to him, there was a deep, earthy, pungent smell in the room which

almost made him gag. Still she didn't respond. He froze, willing a response from the figure in front of him.

Then, from the doorway, her mother piped up.

'Jen dear, this is the man I told you about. From the magazine, Mr Jenkins' friend. You asked me to bring him, didn't you? Don't be silly now, dear.'

Suddenly she made a strange sound. 'Ch, ch, chey. You can sit where you want,' she said.

Her voice was calm and strong, a bit childish with a strange lisp crossed with a stammer. He'd spent a lot of time wondering what she'd look like, but he hadn't anticipated how she'd sound. He took another step into the room, tempted now to jump from hummock to hummock. She turned around and looked straight at him and smiled.

'Hello Jennifer,' he said, more boldly now.

She was a large girl, not fat but big-boned with flesh over the bones. She was wearing a skirt and striped top and makeup, as if she'd taken time over her appearance. Not the small waifish child he'd been imagining; she was an adult wearing modern clothes.

He tried not to stare as he took in her elegant hair, styled and coloured with a silver and brown peppering, something rather trendy about it all, or maybe old-fashioned, he thought. He realised he didn't know much about hair styles. She was clutching a tiny blue mobile phone. On the bed next to her was a laptop. He looked around for somewhere to sit and she patted the side of the bed next to herself. He climbed quickly over the bags and sat himself on the corner of the bed. He smiled at her, a large, friendly smile, intended to calm her down. Her mother hung around at the door, silent but watchful, a chaperone for her returned daughter. He was starting to sweat in the close heat of this room, he could feel the pricks of it on his scalp.

'Mummy, you can leave us, thank you.'

It was the voice of an adult but with a lilt to it, as if it had been learned from watching American television.

He stared at the young woman sitting on the bed. She had a large, long face, somewhat like her mother's. Her face was drawn and pale and she looked young despite the makeup.

She stared at him. 'What's the matter? Do you think I should look like a troll?'

For a moment he didn't know how to respond. He was getting dozy in the close heat of the room. Then he laughed. 'Actually, you look great,' he said.

This broke the tension and she smiled in return. 'I don't know what your name is.'

'It's Allen,' he said.

'OK, Allen, what are we going to do?'

‘We’re going to write a book?’ he said. ‘To write your book. Is that what you want?’

She stared at him. ‘Will you be nice to me? If you’re going to write my book and I’m going to tell the world, then you’ll have to be nice to me. I’m not going to hide anymore.’

‘You don’t have to hide,’ he said, thinking that she did, probably.

‘I know I don’t have to,’ she shot back. ‘This is part of our plan; I dreamed this a lot, for a long time. I knew you would come after he let me out, don’t think you are so clever. When I stopped dreaming, when it got real, I didn’t like it. It’s been a long time, is all.’

Allen wasn’t sure where to start.

‘Would you like to talk about it?’

‘I want to get on television.’

‘I understand that,’ he said, ‘but first we must write your book. You have to help me; you have to tell me stuff. We’ll do it together.’

She sat in silence for a few minutes. ‘Aylen, promise you will listen to me and only write what I say.’

‘I will do my best,’ he said. He felt completely adrift in the face of someone who’d been held captive for twelve years.

‘It’s my birthday soon.’

‘How old will you be?’ he said.

‘I forgot.’

That was the child.

‘Can you remember how it started?’ he tried. ‘We could start with that. Or how you got out, if you like.’

A long silence. He was beginning to wonder if she’d fallen asleep on him.

‘Can you get me on the telly?’ she said.

‘Probably anything if you want, but you’ll have to give me some help because I can’t do anything for you if you won’t talk to me.’

‘Do you write for *The Sun*? What sort of a writer are you, anyway? Writing about dead people? Writing about fucked-up people, is that what you do?’

‘I’m just a writer. I try to write about people who have problems, who have been lost – like you, I guess. I don’t write for *The Sun*. Do you think I should?’

She thought about this for a long time and Allen wondered what was going through her mind. He had talked to other returnees and knew the sort of things they struggled with. He understood the darkness of it, he didn’t shy away from that, the second-hand struggle to emerge from the dark chambers. But he also enjoyed letting light into spaces where no light had shone. He never knew where it would lead.

‘OK.’ Her voice had changed now, become more girlish. ‘Come on then.’

‘Come on what?’

‘I will tell you the bad things. I’m not scared anymore.’

He started to feel she was playing games with him.

He hadn't intended to do much more than have a chat with her, but he could feel the tension in the air. Allen slowly pulled his recorder from a pocket and placed it on the bed.

'Want to start now?'

She grinned at him. 'I've got a lot to say. I've been practising. What do you want me to tell?'

'Well, how about you tell me how it all started – what you can remember.'

She made a little noise like a strangled laugh. 'He got me when I was on my way to school. A horrid man, but that's not what I thought when I met him. I liked him, he was funny at first. He took me to live with him in his flat, but when we got there he wouldn't let me go, he made me live in a garage. Or a cellar, I'm not sure. A room, anyway. And he didn't have any children or pets, or even a wife. He just lived on his own. And he was mean.'

She sniffled violently, as if she was about to burst into tears. He waited for her to go on.

'He took me up to his house.'

Up.

'And he threw me into this little room; he told me I had to stay there. Then he turned off all the lights and left me for a long time. That's how it all started. He left me and I cried and cried for a few days, then he came back with some food and I was so hungry I said thank you.'

'Tell me a bit more about him,' he said.

She folded slowly down onto the bed and lay on her side, placing her hands under her head, staring up at the ceiling as if trying to see things.

'It was a long time ago. I was only little, but even then I knew it was wrong, what he was doing. I wanted to go home to my mum. I wanted that so much, I would lie in the dark and think about my mum and try to make her know I was still alive. You know I lived with him for years. Years and years. You get used to it, you get used to anything really, and he turned out quite funny. He could make me laugh. We watched television together, and he looked after me. He made me my favourite food, but for a long time he never let me out of his house.'

'What about this room, what was it like?'

Her voice was getting quieter, smaller. 'It was dark and cold and smelly. And I had to live in it for a long, long, time. More time than I can remember. At first he was not nice to me, and he made the room horrible, but when we became friends he let me make it a bit nicer.'

He wanted to ask what she meant, not nice. He realised this was dangerous ground. It felt as if she was challenging him to question this. He pressed on, keeping his feelings under control.

'He became your friend?'

Jennifer was drifting away, she seemed closed off, locked in a memory of her world. It was hard to work out where to start, but he wanted to get her talking.

‘And when you disappeared, what about that? How did it happen?’

‘I didn’t disappear, you know. I was always there.’ She laughed. ‘When you say disappeared, it’s like you mean I didn’t exist anymore, but I did. Did you think I was dead? Mum did, you know. She told everyone I was dead, she lit candles for me. But I wasn’t dead. Maybe to Mum and Dad and everyone I wasn’t there, but to me I was always there, in my grave, but alive.’

He asked her where they’d walked to and how it had happened and she started to unravel her story, in a jumpy fashion, leaving out detail, ignoring some questions. She rambled a lot, about a day on the buses and buying ice-cream. She had a good memory for something that had happened twelve years before, it seemed.

‘He got me on my way to school. Well, I wasn’t really on my way to school, I went to the shops and met him in there, sort of, you know. He talked to me in a nice way and we walked down the road talking, you know, sort of friendly. I didn’t want to go in to school, I was trying to think of a way to skive off for the day, but I didn’t have anywhere to go to. We chatted down the road, you know. I was shy of him.’

‘I went with him, I did, really,’ she said shyly. ‘I quite liked him, after we’d talked a bit and he gave me a packet of cigarettes. I knew I shouldn’t really talk to him and go off with him, Mum told me that, but I did because I was in a mood and I was scared of school. He didn’t seem scary, he didn’t talk down to me like I was a kid, he understood what I was on about and he told me he’d never been to school a lot himself, that he didn’t think I should go if I didn’t want to. He said I was almost a grown-up and I should start to make my own decisions. After a while I forgot that it was a school day and he was a man that I’d never met before, he didn’t seem much older than me and it was like we were friends. Then it was lunchtime and I was hungry and so was he and we laughed a lot and he said would I like to come to his flat for lunch. I didn’t really want to, but I didn’t know what else to do and by then we were getting on so well that I thought why not? It was like an adventure. We were in a bit of London I didn’t really know, that I hadn’t been to before, big buildings, not tower blocks, but like that, a poor part of town, poorer than I was used to, but he seemed okay, so we went up to his flat. He made me lunch.’

Allen scratched down a few words and checked his recorder. He didn’t want to interrupt the flow.

They watched television, she said. He didn’t try anything, but she got nervous.

‘I started to feel like he didn’t want me to leave. When I said I should be getting home, he talked a lot and he changed the subject so I didn’t know

what he was saying. He said we could go out for fish and chips later, that he would look after me. I was scared, but I didn't want to show it. I thought I'd got myself into a stupid situation and I started to worry about what my mum would think when she found out. I said maybe we should go for chips, because I thought that when we were out I could run away from him or shout and ask for help in the shop. Then he said, sure, let's go. He gave me a cup of tea and said I must drink it up before they went, so I gulped it down.'

She stopped talking suddenly. He watched her intently, trying to work out what she was thinking. He tried to make out her face, but it was in shadow.

'Alright there?' he said. 'Are you feeling poorly? Do you want to stop for a bit?'

He didn't want to stop, but thought he'd better look after her, take it easy. She seemed in a frail state of mind.

'No, I'm alright,' she said. 'I'm ok, it's just, it's hard to say this, it sounds stupid, but how long was I gone for?'

He felt sorry for her, but couldn't help thinking that he was on the edge of a great story.

'A few years,' he said. 'A lot. People want to find out what you've been doing all that time,' he said.

'Yeah, sure. Do they really?' She seemed to perk up somewhat. 'They're interested in me?'

He didn't have the heart to tell her the salubrious nature of this intent. He wondered about his own desire to know, camouflaged and sanctified by his role as journalist.

'What happened to the fish and chips?' he said, restarting the thread.

'We never got fish and chips. I don't know why. I wasn't awake for a long time after that. I don't know what happened. I woke up in a room that I was locked in to, I couldn't open the door. I banged on the door and shouted and nobody ever came. Then I got very scared and I cried, but I felt so sick I couldn't stand up for long. I didn't know that place was my new house.'

'What do you mean, your new house?'

'I had to stay in that room for all the time I was there. I hardly ever got let out again for years and years. Do you think The Prick would let me out, even if I begged him? I stayed in the same place for such a long time. He said it wasn't safe to go out.'

'Why do you call him that?' Allen said.

'The Prick? Because he's a man and he's got a, you know? That's why I call him that. Why do you think? He's the man I met at the shop, the same man.'

'Can you describe him, what did he look like, what did he do every day? Did he have a job?'

She told him she'd been locked in the same room, almost without respite, she said. It was really two rooms, one big and one small. The rooms had no windows. The big room had a bed in it and a bookshelf, though there were no books at first. She said the room was cold sometimes, there was no heating and she would spend all day under a blanket, and sometimes it was very hot and she could hardly breathe. She thought she was at the top of the building they'd gone to on that first day. Other times she came to believe she was in a cellar, though she thought maybe that was only a dream. She could hear noises through the walls sometimes, but she couldn't work out what they were. Her days were spent sleeping and waiting for him to bring her food and water. She was dependent on him for everything. At first, she said, she had nothing, not even a covering for the night, and she slept in her clothes and shivered. She had no clock for the first year and lost track of time. Time had not meant much to her during what she said was her lost time, she'd slept and woken as she needed to.

She'd spent a lot of time at first wondering why nobody was coming to look for her. When she asked The Prick why he would not let her go, he told her that there was a gang of people who stole and killed children, and that he was saving her from that gang.

After a long time, she said, he brought her comics and some books and some clothes. She said it took some time before he knew what she wanted, like he had to learn.

'He was a bit funny in the head, he couldn't really talk to me, to girls. I don't think he'd ever had a girlfriend.' She stopped suddenly. 'But of course, I don't know. I don't know what he did. At first, he was stupid, then he learned a lot and he made me laugh, he brought me nice things. Life became more comfortable,' she said.

Allen wondered about her mental state, whether he should be doing this interview. It was a bit dubious, he thought, maybe even unethical, not a word he'd ever considered before. It was starting to feel too much like a confessional and he didn't want to be a priest. Twilight was beginning to draw in. He was starting to feel cocooned in the room, as if they had in some way returned to Jennifer's prison, the strange room she was talking about. Time itself was as lost here as it had been there. Through his increasing sleepiness he forced himself to concentrate on her story, to think about what she was saying. He didn't know what was important, what might explain everything.

'He brought me food every day at first, or he left it for me when he disappeared. Tins and that.'

'Disappeared?'

'He did,' she said. 'He went off, sometimes for a week or even more. I don't know where he went, he wouldn't tell me.' He left her with the food and a bucket for a toilet. 'After a few months he got one of them chemical

toilets,' she said, 'but it smelled much worse than the bucket.' She made a face. 'It was better though. He didn't like emptying it, see?'

Allen tried to imagine how twelve years could pass in a tiny space, how she had coped with not seeing daylight or talking to any others. He asked how she passed the time.

'He brought me some books. Another man came sometimes and talked to me. Then there was a video machine, and films. I slept a lot; I think it was in the food, something to make me sleep. I liked to be asleep more than awake. When The Prick came to visit I wasn't allowed to talk much, but when the other man came we talked a lot and watched television together.

'He did buy me nice clothes, but sometimes I had to wear the same clothes for a long time, maybe even a year. Sometimes he didn't come to visit me for a long time. I opened tins of food when I wanted to, but I didn't like it.

'I missed my mother and my brother all the time, then in the end I forgot about them. What I mean is, I couldn't really remember what it was like to see them every day. It was different: my life before the room became like a dream that I could hardly remember. In my room I was safe. I dreamed that my room was on top of a huge tree blowing in the wind and I was a princess who could not be allowed to escape because a prince wanted to marry her, a prince from a tiger kingdom who would eat her up.'

'Do you know why he let you go?' he asked. He had been trying to work out why she was let out, what had triggered her release after all that time.

'Of course,' she said. 'It's our plan. I'm going to be famous. I'm going to be on television, and he's going to watch me. That's what we agreed.'

He wasn't expecting that and now began to wonder where this was going.

'Why does he want to do that?' he asked.

'Because that's how the world works. Because that was what we agreed, when we got married, that he would let me go but I would always be visible, he could always see me.'

'How can he see you?'

'I don't know.' She shrugged. 'He's clever, and I have to go where he can, that's all. That's why I need to be on television.'

'What happens if it doesn't work, if you don't become famous?' he asked.

'It will work. If it doesn't, I'm going back to him.'

'Why?'

'Because I love him,' she said.

There was a sound at the door. When he turned, Jennifer's mother was standing there. 'I think you two should stop now, you'll get Jennifer all tired out. I think we've done enough for today. Would you like a cup of tea?' she asked. He looked at his watch. Two hours had passed in this crowded room. 'No thanks,' he said. He turned back to his interviewee.

‘Thanks, Jennifer,’ he said. ‘That was a good start. I hope it’s not been too much for you?’

‘It’s been lovely,’ she said. ‘Will you do my book?’

‘I would really like to. I’ll come back and if we still get on, I think so. We’ll need to spend more time together, and you’ll need to tell me your story properly. Everything. I’ll write it down as we go along, record some of it. How does that sound?’

Her mother interrupted from behind him. ‘I’m sure we can arrange something, assuming that man gets a contract,’ she said, making clear that today was over.

Allen stood up and stretched his stiff legs.

‘Goodbye Jen,’ he said.

She looked away, not answering as he left the room.

The people gathered downstairs didn’t seem in any hurry to leave. They were settling in for a drinking session. Laughter reverberated around the house. As he left, Jennifer’s mother told him he should certainly come back. ‘I think she likes you, but let’s wait until she’s calmed down a bit,’ she said. He still wasn’t sure whether she really wanted it to happen, but he was determined to write this book.

Walking back to the bus stop, he wondered how he would take it if that were his daughter, if he’d lost her for twelve years. He had a daughter of his own who he hadn’t seen for several years, an uncomfortably similar situation, he realised. At least he knew where she was, who she was with. He only had to pick up the phone. She hadn’t gone without a trace. Not like Jennifer. But Jennifer had come back. And was threatening to go again. It didn’t make much sense. There was worse, he thought. She seemed to have bonded with her captor, unlike most of the stories he was hearing. He couldn’t relate it to personal experience, to know the wrench of that sort of loss. He could try and imagine it. Bringing a child into the world, looking after it, learning everything about it day after day, watching it change from a fragile baby, only to lose it to ... to what?

During the journey home his mind churned over the logic, the history, the timings of this event. He tried to relate it to his own knowledge. When she had gone, who might have been around, where she was held. She hadn’t given him any clues, not yet. He wondered what the police had asked her, what efforts they were making to find this place. They might not believe her story. Did he? It wasn’t really a valid question; her story fitted perfectly well into what he knew about these things, how human beings could be hidden away in the middle of a city without anyone noticing, be broken down. Even friends and family could sometimes pretend to themselves that there was nothing wrong. He’d found it staggering how a partner was party to the predations of their loved one, like Detroux’s girlfriend in Belgium, how she’d left two girls to starve to death in his basement while he was in prison. Scared, she said. Human fear, fear of loneliness, love, abuse,

control, manipulation – powerful motivators. And Jennifer, maybe she could lead him to whoever had held her: The Prick, as she called him. If he was watching, if they did have a plan. It seemed crazy, he knew, but stranger things did happen. Maybe.