

1

The story doing the rounds at Ritchie Shepherd's production company was accurate when it appeared inside the staff's heads, when they hardly sensed it, let alone spoke it. It was like a faint stink, clear enough to notice, too trivial to mention. All through *Teen Makeover's* autumn and spring seasons, when they clustered round Ritchie, asking him questions they already knew the answers to, cadging compliments and begging him to give their enemies a telling-off, they watched him. They saw he wasn't as funny as before. Was he keeping his jokes for someone else? He moved in a weird way now, they thought. He walked with an awkward bounce, too eager, as if he reckoned something had given him extra energy, or made him younger.

As long as the rumour was unspoken, the hearts of the staff ached. The rumour was this: that after a long peace Ritchie was, once again, cheating on his wife Karin, this time with an under-age girl. They felt sorry for Ritchie's family, but what if the damage went further, to the men and women on the company payroll? They sensed a personal threat. Scandal spread from the first carrier. Everybody liked Ritchie, but they were confident that he was selfish enough to infect them all. The production company offices were intoxicated by nervousness

and suspicion. When twin fourteen-year-old girls showed up one day without an accompanying parent and asked for Ritchie, his PA Paula got up too suddenly from behind her desk, caught the trailing edge of a printed email with her thigh and upended a cup of coffee across her skirt. The chief lighting technician wrote off a fresnel worth two thousand pounds. He dropped it from the bridge when he saw Ritchie smile and touch the elbow of a lanky year ten in a short dress. 'She had womanly curves earlier than most,' is what the gaffer would have said in his defence, if he hadn't been afraid to hex them all, and he only yelled 'Butterfingers!' while the people down below were jumping clear of chips of lens skittering across the floor. When the script editor saw Ritchie talking to a group of pert-bottomed schoolgirls in leotards she strode over and interrupted him in mid-sentence. She realised, as soon as she did it, that she was making a fool of herself. The girls' teachers were there. The ache of fear in her heart had made her do it.

The ache could only be soothed by being put into words. The production team needed an utterance to lift the dread from their chests, and when the rumour eventually found its spoken form, it relieved them so completely that they believed it. Much better that Ritchie's ten-year marriage to Karin should break up and that he should lose custody of his son and daughter over the pretty but older-than-twenty-one new presenter Lina Riggs than that the boss should be doing something illegal and shameful, something that would stain them all with the indelible dye of an unspeakable word. Without anyone noticing the shift, 'I wonder if' and 'I bet' and 'You don't suppose' changed to 'I heard' and 'I've got a juicy one' and 'I know who Ritchie's shagging.' Believing soothed them all.

Ritchie found that whenever he went near Riggsy a stupid smile appeared on his employees' faces. He didn't know how happy he was making them by encouraging them to believe he was betraying his family with a legal adult. They didn't know that their rumour had become wrong as soon as it was said out loud, and that the original rumour, the ache of fear in their hearts, was true. They didn't know that Ritchie was seeing a not-quite-sixteen-year-old girl he'd met when she appeared on *Teen Makeover* the previous season. He saw Nicole once a week. It was his intention to enjoy it for as long as he felt like it, then end it tenderly. Nicole would, he imagined, be moved that he should voluntarily give her up. It would be soon, and nobody would have found out. How could they? The two of them were careful, and London was a wild forest of red brick and roof tiles, where maps only reminded you how little you knew.

2

Ritchie woke in a soft chair in a wide, bright space. An old vinyl record spun and crackled and he heard the sound of Ruby, Dan and Karin in the orchard, three storeys below. Far away something clunked against the sides of a wooden box.

A bib of hot sunlight from the south-facing window lay on his frayed yellow t-shirt, spreading delicious warmth across his chest. The nap left him refreshed and content. His wife and children were close enough for him to hear that they were happy, far enough away to not disturb him.

Facing him, here on the mansard floor, was a ladder on a dolly and a wall lined to the rafters with shelves of records. Ritchie's study had space to ride a bicycle in, but he didn't have a bicycle up here; he had an adult tricycle. The tyres would hum on the waxed oak floorboards as he built up speed, dodging the stairwell that pierced the centre of the room, past the cabinets with his collection of British war comics, past the desk and the chill cabinet where he kept his beer and puddings, past the washstand that had been a Victorian church font and the toilet cubicle in an old red phone box with blacked out windows, to the guitar case. Inside the guitar case was one of two steel-stringed acoustic guitars Karin had commissioned for his fortieth birthday out of spruce and

walnut, inlaid with their names in mother-of-pearl (the other was hers); and inside the guitar a secret thing was hidden, the mobile phone he used to call Nicole.

He got up and looked down through the window. Karin and the children were gathering fruit in the orchard. Their shining hair and foreshortened limbs bobbed in and out of the shade. He could hear that they were talking but the glass muffled the words into fuzzy, friendly un significances. He walked to his desk, opened the chill cabinet and took an individual chocolate pudding serving from the stacks inside. He favoured a brand called ChocPot, which came with its own wooden spoon attached, so he didn't have to hunt for one. He flipped off the lid, put down the pot and picked up his BlackBerry. He shovelled chocolate goo into his mouth with his right hand and scrolled through his emails with his left thumb. A dollop of pudding fell and landed on the shelf of his belly. He put the BlackBerry down, scraped most of the spill off with his index finger, raised the quivering dod to his lips, slurped the finger clean and walked to the font. Without taking the t-shirt off he held it under the running tap with both hands and rubbed till the brown stain almost disappeared. He wrung the wet patch out.

A desire to call Nicole, to catch her alone at home, danced in the pit of his stomach. He strode to the guitar case, flipped the catches and opened it. The guitar wasn't there.

Ritchie's palm and fingers pressed against the blue plush lining of the case. His mouth hung open.

He turned and ran to the stairs, clenching his toes to stop his old flip-flops flying off. He had six flights of stairs to go down without breaking his neck before the orchard was in reach: three storeys, five changes of direction. His hands clawed

for purchase on the football-sized oak globes, varnished and polished to a high gloss, capping the banister on each landing. He lost his grip, slid off the step, hurtled into the wall, landed on his backside, got up and ran on, panting. *I get out of breath when I make love to Nicole*, he thought; *might it bother her?* Amid the clatter of his feet and the pounding of his heart he replayed the sound he'd heard when he woke up, the object knocking against the sides of a wooden box. If curious hands groped inside the guitar, why was a mobile phone there? He'd failed to prepare an important lie.

He reached the foot of the stairs, loped along the hall towards the kitchen and thanked God that the garden door was open. He got to within two strides of the threshold and felt something slither over his thighs. His shorts fell down around his shins. He fell and hit his knee against the kitchen flagstones. The cold slate pressed rudely against his bare hams. He got up, hoisted the shorts around his waist, tightened and knotted the drawstring and limped on into the garden.

A gentle English heat rolled over him and he squinted in the brightness. A wood pigeon cooed from the yew tree. Karin, her back to Ritchie, stretched towards a high branch, making the tree snap and rustle as she pulled yellow plums off it. The hem of her muslin skirt climbed up her brown calves and one of the straps of her top fell off her shoulder. There was a scent of grass where the sun heated the juice from the stems his family had crushed with their bare feet. Ritchie was sorry he was meeting his teenage girlfriend later. He wished he could stay at home with his wife and children. Dan ran from trunk to trunk holding Ritchie's guitar like a weapon, dropping to a crouch, aiming the guitar neck, lining up the sights. Ruby was heaping fruit. She saw her father and stood up.

‘Look at Daddy!’ she said. She twisted her little torso round to Karin and back and laughed.

Dan stood up, afraid. ‘Give me the guitar,’ said Ritchie. Dan dropped it on the grass and ran over to stand by his mother. Ritchie picked the guitar up by the neck, letting it swing as he raised it. There was nothing inside. He glanced down at the long grass. The phone could have fallen out, or one of his family could have removed it. The phone contained dozens of messages from Nicole so obscene that he hadn’t been able to bring himself to delete them.

‘I don’t remember you asking if you could come into Daddy’s study,’ said Ritchie.

‘You were asleep,’ said Dan. He grabbed a fold of Karin’s skirt and looked up at her.

‘Mummy, Daddy’s bleeding!’ said Ruby. ‘And he’s breathing funny.’

Karin looked down at Dan and caressed his head. ‘I don’t see why you shouldn’t borrow Daddy’s guitar,’ she said to her son. ‘He never plays it.’

‘Don’t do that,’ said Ritchie. Karin looked at him, and Dan looked, too. They shared a cool, expectant expression, like two doctors he’d interrupted while they discussed his case. ‘Don’t talk about me with Dan as if I’m not here. You’re wrong, by the way. I play it all the time.’ He raised the guitar and saw *Ritchie* in bright mirror writing race across Karin and Dan, reflected off the mother-of-pearl inlay, and each lift up their hands to cover their eyes as his name passed over their faces.

‘Look at it,’ said Karin. ‘The two top strings are broken and the others are miles out of tune.’

‘Mum, Daddy’s bleeding!’ shouted Ruby again, running over

and tugging the other side of her skirt. Ruby was the one who cared for him without hesitation, not out of duty, just because she did, Ritchie was sure. She was six, and he knew she would always feel this way towards him, whatever her age. He'd made a dangerous mistake in being angry with Dan, he saw, since he didn't know where the phone was, yet Dan or Karin – or both! – might know, and were choosing their moment to confront him. He needed to regain control. He didn't think of it as control, because his way of controlling seemed so benign: kindness, generosity. It hadn't occurred to him that striving for a monopoly on generosity was the chief characteristic of a despot.

'What happened to your leg?' said Karin.

'I slipped on the tiles. Dan, come on, show me what you can play.' He held the guitar out towards his son.

'I don't want to play anything,' said Dan, and quick as a trout shot away through the orchard, disappearing beyond the yew tree on the far side.

'Mum, can I put some leaves on Daddy's leg to stop it bleeding?' said Ruby.

'If Daddy lets you, darling.' She studied Ritchie. Her eyes ran over the blood, the frayed clothes, the stained paunch and the bristly chin.

He was afraid Karin didn't love him, which would be a catastrophe, because he loved her, and he loved his children, and if she didn't love him, it would destroy the pleasure he took in cheating on her, and feeling virtuous when he returned to her, full of love.

'Help us pick the plums now you're here,' said Karin. She turned her back to him and went on gathering fruit.

Ritchie put the guitar down, folded his arms and walked

in careful circles, stroking the grass with his toes, humming a song. He bent his head and watched for a hint of silver, glancing up every few seconds to make sure Karin wasn't looking.

Ruby came to him with a bunch of greenery. 'Mum, Dad's been eating chocolate pudding,' she said. 'Why can't we have some?'

'It's bad for you, darling,' said Karin, without turning round. 'It's only for a treat.'

'Why does Daddy get to have treats and we can't?'

'Daddy knows how to treat himself.'

Ritchie saw an opportunity. 'Let's all have chocolate pudding,' he said. 'Once we've harvested the plums.' He thought Karin would like the word 'harvested'. It sounded as if the family were doing something real together, bound to the countryside and the seasons.

Ruby kneeled in the grass next to her father and began to stick leaves onto the congealing blood on his leg. She frowned with concentration. It reminded Ritchie of the expression on Nicole's face when she performed a certain act. He winced. 'Ruby sweetheart, that's much better,' he said. 'Go and find Daddy a nice plum to eat.'

'I've got one,' said Ruby. She reached into the front pocket of her denim dress and handed him a hard little green plum. He took it and rolled it around on his palm.

'Thanks, darling, but it's not ripe yet,' he said.

'Eat it!' said Ruby. She laughed. 'Go on! You have to eat it!'

'I thought you liked the unripe ones,' said Karin. She walked towards him. The muscles on her right forearm stood out under her brown, grained skin from the weight of the bucket full of fruit she was carrying.

Ritchie stood up. He bit into the taut skin of the plum, gnawed off a sliver of astringent flesh and chewed it.

‘Perfect,’ he said. He forced himself not to stretch his mouth wide and spit the fruit out.

3

Ritchie found his son lying by the yew. He was on his front, propped up on his elbows, his bare lower legs kicking into the cool blades of unmown grass in the shadow of the tree's thick branches and his head and body in the sunlight. He had a device in his hands. Ritchie began to run.

When he got closer he saw Dan wasn't reading Nicole's filthy provocations. He was playing a game on his Nintendo. Ritchie sat cross-legged on the ground a few feet away. Dan wasn't going to look up until Ritchie spoke. His red lips were held in a plump wet pout. He'd been lying there, waiting to be looked for. Ritchie wondered if he'd had such chubby arms at Dan's age. Did the boy need a trainer?

'You don't like people going into your room without asking,' Ritchie said.

'It's not the same. I've got secret projects,' said Dan.

'Well, maybe I've got secret projects too.' As soon as Ritchie said this he knew it was the wrong thing to say.

'What secret projects?' said Dan, looking at Ritchie with such a Karin-like expression of curiosity that Ritchie glanced round to see if his wife had crept up on them.

Ritchie leaned closer to Dan and lowered his voice so that Dan looked up anxiously when Ritchie started to speak.

‘You don’t want anyone bursting into your room and seeing you without your clothes on,’ he said.

Dan’s shoulders jumped up in a spasm of embarrassed laughter and he hid his face behind his Nintendo. ‘I don’t mind!’ he said. His blue eyes looked over the top of the gadget and his grinning cheeks bulged out on either side.

‘Well, I do!’ said Ritchie, giving Dan a soft punch on the shoulder. ‘I don’t want you coming in and seeing me without my clothes on!’ Dan rolled over on his back, laughing, making sounds of disgust and sticking out his tongue. *He’s a good boy*, Ritchie thought. *He’s going to be fine*. He had wondered whether Dan was being bullied at school, but there was a man in him, even if it was going to cost a packet to bring it out. Ritchie asked Dan if there was anything he wanted. Dan stopped laughing and lay quietly on the grass, with his face turned away from Ritchie, listening and blinking.

‘Would you like a guitar of your own?’ asked Ritchie.

‘I’ve already got one,’ said Dan.

Ritchie remembered the child-sized electric guitar Dan never played and the drum kit he didn’t touch.

‘Why did you want Daddy’s guitar, Danny love?’ said Ritchie. ‘What’s wrong with yours?’

Dan turned his face further away and sniffed and Ritchie saw tears on his cheeks. Ritchie didn’t understand. He laid his hand on Dan’s shoulder and asked him what the matter was.

‘Nothing,’ said Dan. ‘You don’t care. You don’t care about me and Ruby.’

‘How can you say that?’ said Ritchie. ‘Don’t you know how important it is to me to be a good father to you? Have you any idea what it was like for me growing up without . . .’

'I know,' said Dan.

'You just made an augmented fourth there. I *knooooow*. La *laaaaa*.'

Dan was sitting up, watching him and listening without crying or smiling, a half-familiar expression of slyness on his face. *Perhaps that's who he really is, perhaps he is the school bully, the boss of the playground, the one the other children fear*, Ritchie thought with sudden hope.

'If you made so much money without a father,' said Dan, 'why is it better for me to have one?'

'What a terrible thing to say!' said Ritchie slowly, trying to decide how he felt about it. Different paths forked out from what his son had just told him, and he could follow any fork, and still be Ritchie. On one path, he yelled at his son that he was a heartless, ungrateful little brat. On another, he said nothing, stared coldly at Dan, turned round, walked back to the house – ignoring any appeals for forgiveness – and shunned his family for the rest of the day. The third fork would see him shaking his head, laughing softly, running his hand through Dan's thick fair hair and telling him he was a clever chap.

This was the way he chose. He reached out his hand for the top of his son's head, but at that moment Karin called Dan's name from the far side of the orchard. Dan got up so quickly that Ritchie's hand brushed his ear instead. Dan glanced at his father, confused by the awkward touch, and a little frightened, as if he thought he'd accidentally avoided a blow, not a caress.

'Shall we go on the swing?' said Ritchie.

'Mum's calling me,' said Dan. 'I'm too old for the swing.'

Ruby came galloping towards them, laughing, and Ritchie caught her under her arms and lifted her up, holding her high

so that her head blocked out the sun. He weighed her precious squirming density. Chaotic strands of hair fell over her face and Ritchie savoured the wholeness of her attention. ‘Shall we go on the swing?’ he said, and she nodded, and without looking at Dan Ritchie put Ruby down, took her hand and walked with her to where the rope swing hung from the branch of an old chestnut tree.

He pushed Ruby on the swing and decided he would have a shot. Ruby told him he couldn’t, he was too fat, and while he told her not to be rude, he wondered whether it would take his weight. He sat down carefully on the length of wood and heard the branch creak. Dan and Karin were coming towards them. He shoved off with his heels, let go of the ground and swung to and fro. The creaking of the branch became louder. It wasn’t so much the fear of the branch breaking as his sense that the tree was in pain that made him stop and step off the swing when Dan and Karin came up.

The moment his feet were safely on the turf, as if some goblin up in the branches had slipped the knot, the swing tumbled onto the grass and the rope fell on top of it with an angry slap. Ruby yelped and the others drew in breath and began to laugh. Ritchie caught Karin’s eye and smiled. It seemed to him that this chance moment of small fear had snapped the family neatly together. He almost heard the click.

4

In the bathroom Ritchie took off his filthy t-shirt and shorts and showered. He washed, conditioned and dried his hair and fixed it with oil. He shaved, applied moisturiser and scented lotion from a bottle marked *après-rasage*, plucked wild hairs from his nostrils, ears and eyebrows, cleaned his teeth, flossed and rinsed his mouth with Listerine and spent half an hour choosing a shirt.

Karin had already caught him cheating twice, once just before the children were born, and once just after. 'If you do it again,' she told him, 'I'll divorce you, see you don't get custody, and take you for every penny.'

The idea of being stripped of what he had was frightening, but it was hard for him to imagine. The moment of being exposed seemed worse than the consequences. He'd discovered that he felt no shame about cheating on Karin until she found out. It was the great discovery of his adult life, greater than the discovery that he was a good businessman, or that he was making more money than contemporaries who were more talented musicians. His conscience only troubled him when somebody pointed out that he had one, and that it was bound to trouble him. As long as this didn't happen, he was a man doing his best to be good to two women who had

nothing in common and never needed to meet. He loved his wife; he would never leave her. Apart from Ruby and Dan, Karin's happiness was more important to him than anything. That was why he would do whatever he could to protect her from the knowledge that he was having sex with someone else.

Ritchie took the clothes and went to dress in the room where Karin kept her wardrobe. It had better mirrors, and it was closer to the main staircase. If Karin came looking for a row, and the door was left open, it would force her to keep her voice down to prevent the children hearing. The disadvantage was that he had to be in the room with the big photograph of young Karin covering the whole of one wall. It had been taken when she was nineteen and he was twenty-one and the band's hit had charted in London, New York and Tokyo. One night that year in North Shields, from the window of a limousine stopped at red, Ritchie had watched a chain of girls marching arm-in-arm down the centre of a wet street, singing his and Karin's song, their coats open and the wind driving the rain onto their faces and low-cut frocks till their cheeks and throats shone.

In the photograph Karin was on a park bench at night. She was wearing short boots, a white chiffon scarf and a white bra and knickers. She sprawled on the bench with her elbows hooked on the back and her forearms hanging down, a cigarette in one hand, her legs open. A half-empty litre of vodka stood on the bench beside her. Her skin was bone-white in the flash although the resolution was so good that it was possible to make out the goose pimples and fine hairs on her limbs. Those were the days she was filling her

body with poisons, not, as the newspapers said, because she hated herself, but because she loved herself, and her body's resistance to all those poisons was the exact measure of how indestructibly young and beautiful she felt she was.

The illusion of spontaneity was spoiled by the lacquered golden waves of Karin's hair and the artful black outline of her eyes, but Ritchie knew it wasn't an illusion. He'd been there in the park for the shoot. Karin had pulled off her dress and left it lying on the frosty leaves on the edge of the park road because she wanted to. The stylist had raised her hand to stop her and realised it was pointless. Ritchie knew that the missing half of vodka had gone into Karin. Halfway through she swigged from the bottle, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and as the make-up girl was moving in to rescue her face, let her head loll down into her chest, coughed, laughed, said 'I'm taking this off,' stood up and unzipped the dress. Ritchie saw then that his future wife was wilder than he was.

It seemed to Ritchie now that his wife had deceived him. She'd allowed him to think that no matter how bad he was she was bound to be worse. He'd designed his future as the straight one to her wild woman of rock-ness. But while he was jerking his hips to the crowd and spitting lyrics into a mike, wondering about rates of return on offshore deposits, it turned out she was thinking about children; she was thinking about it even as she gouged lumps out of the air with a hard pick on the guitar strings, singing in deadly harmony with him and making the speaker stacks tremble. Ritchie hadn't changed; she had. Years ago the virtue began to peep out from behind her hellraising disguise, and in a short time, Ritchie found himself watching helplessly as his wife's moral platform

rose from the depths, shot past his own, and continued rising until she stood high above him. She didn't so much give up coke, cocktails, sleeping with boys and girls she liked and cigarettes as kick them off easily, like loose old shoes. 'Let's move to the country,' she said, and they bought a house in Hampshire. She stood by him, beautiful, talented, funny, loving, his alone, the mother of his children, and he was dismayed.

Karin came into the room and smiled at him in a way that Ritchie took to mean 'Let's not talk, shall we?' She opened one of the wardrobes and began to leaf through her old dresses. The hangers clicked on the clothes rail and Ritchie felt the wordlessness inflating until it pressed against the sides of the room. Karin took a short dress sewn with cobalt-blue sequins and another covered in black beads and threw them on the bed. She hauled out a cardboard box, dug in it and emptied it on the floor. Dyed feathers, sequined gloves and hats of metallicised raffia slid out and spilled across the varnished floorboards. She knelt down and hunted among her old treasures.

'Are you going out?' said Ritchie. Karin shook her head without looking up. She unwound a fake jade necklace from a gold plastic tiara set with blue plastic stones and tossed the tiara onto the bed.

'I promised to find dressing-up clothes for Ruby. Her friend Deni's coming for a play date,' she said. 'I have to make supper for them. I might have time to make a few calls afterwards before Deni's mother comes to pick her up and I have to listen to her troubles. Once that's done Dan and Ruby'll need putting to bed and reading to sleep. I don't think I'll be going out.'

It came into Ritchie's mind, as it always did when his wife reminded him how her life was given over to Dan and Ruby, to ask Karin why she needed to spend so much time looking after the children when they paid Milena to do it. He didn't ask the question any more, because he couldn't argue with Karin's answer, that she cared too much about Dan and Ruby to want them to be brought up by somebody else. When Karin said this, Ritchie believed it; why not? He loved them too. But even as he was thinking *Yes, of course, because she loves them*, a parallel thought came to him: that it was part of Karin's long game of superiority and reproach. It was ingenious. She made herself look like the better parent, while depriving him of his great strength in the family, his generosity, his power to see his family's needs and wants and open his wallet to satisfy them. In the beginning, these two ideas of Karin – as a loving mother, and as a devious partner – floated in Ritchie's head together, with the first having more substance. But the idea of Karin as a loving mother was so obvious and simple that it was not very interesting, whereas the idea of devious Karin was contentious and intriguing and called for Ritchie's intelligence to be brought to bear. So he left the idea of the loving mother Karin alone, and kept turning the idea of the devious Karin over, examining and testing it, until it seemed a natural part of his thinking. He took comfort from the notion of a cunning, calculating Karin. To Ritchie it signified that her wild old self wasn't lost.

Karin put the rest of the props and finery back in the box and stowed it in the wardrobe. Ritchie's eyes flicked to the arrogant smile of young Karin spread across the wall. The Karin of twenty years later followed his eyes. She twisted her

head and neck round and up and looked at the flat expanse of her immortal Then.

‘She gets less like me every day,’ she said.

‘Do you mind that?’ said Ritchie.

‘You do.’ Karin pinched the back of her hand and let it go. A ridge lingered for a moment before it smoothed itself. ‘It’s only skin,’ she said. ‘It’s not a deviation from the essential me. If there was an afterlife I wouldn’t want to hang out with the twenty-year-old you, I’m afraid.’

‘It didn’t seem like the real you then, either.’ Ritchie went over to the wall and stroked the little pouch between young Karin’s thighs with his index finger. He hadn’t been able to help imagining a fantastical secret in there that he couldn’t reach, no matter how he touched.

‘Even then you had a porn mind. You can be so cold,’ said Karin.

‘What is it? What’s the matter? I don’t understand.’

‘You never do.’

‘Everybody in this family says I don’t understand, but nobody in this family knows how to explain anything. Like Dan today. What does he need to take my guitar for when we already bought him one?’

‘Because it’s your guitar. He doesn’t want a guitar of his own, he wants your guitar. He wants to be on the show. He wants to be part of that world. The kids at school are always saying to him, if it’s your Dad’s show, why doesn’t he put you on it?’

‘He hasn’t asked for a long time,’ said Ritchie.

‘You told him he was too young.’

‘He is.’

‘And told him what the word “nepotism” meant.’

‘Well!’

‘And kept telling him how your dad wasn’t around to help you.’

‘Why is it so uninteresting for Dan to have a grandfather who was murdered? If I had a grandfather who was murdered I’d think it was cool. I’d go on about it all the time.’

‘You do go on about it all the time. And your father wasn’t murdered. He was executed. It was a war. He was a soldier.’

‘If that was a war,’ said Ritchie, ‘everything’s a war.’

Two hours later, when he was leaving for London, Karin asked why work so often cut into his weekend. ‘You’re not fucking some girl, I hope?’ she said.

Ritchie smiled. ‘You know if I don’t sit in on these Sunday night meetings nobody cracks the whip. There’s no girl,’ he said. ‘I promised not to do that any more, and I won’t. You have to trust me.’

It bothered Ritchie that people lied to protect themselves. He only lied to protect his family. He loved the way a handful of false words could insulate his wife, his children and his peaceful, prosperous future with them in this house from the things he did in London with Nicole.

‘I can hardly see you any more,’ said Karin.

‘You see me all the time,’ said Ritchie. He knew that she had meant something different but he hoped that deliberately misunderstanding her would prevent her telling him what it was. He smiled timidly and his face took on a yearning look.

‘Be careful,’ said Karin. ‘If I find out you’ve been lying, the

lawyers will be all over this place like . . .' the left corner of her mouth turned up in a way that was dear to Ritchie ' . . . Vikings in a monastery.'

'There's nothing to worry about,' said Ritchie. 'I'm not cheating on you.' *Delicate*, he thought, *economical*: fewer than a hundred false words in the day, and he kept his family safe.

5

For his liaisons with Nicole, Ritchie had bought a flat in a cul-de-sac in Limehouse, on the fifth floor of a new block. He found a parking space nearby and when he pressed the lock button on the fob and the car lights flashed out it struck him as coarse, like an invitation to passers-by to join him for dirty games upstairs. But there never were passers-by. At night, windows were lit, and there were signs of habitation. Once he saw a cactus on a windowsill where there hadn't been a cactus the previous week. But he hadn't seen another human being on foot since the estate agent who showed it to him.

He'd told Karin he needed a crash pad for late working nights and early starts. It'd cost him. Yet the ceilings of the flats were low, the rooms cramped and the windows small. A metal grille jutted out a few inches from the largest window. The estate agent called it a *Juliet balcony*. It looked like bars designed to defend the block against the mob.

He'd been grinding coffee beans and making espressos on a stove-top coffee maker in the flat for months, but the smell refused to take, and the place still stank of newness when he opened the door. He saw Nicole's bare foot and ankle, with its gold chain, disappear around the corner at the end of the

hall. She liked to play when he arrived. She would scurry through the flat like a kitten, her feet pattering fast, then going quiet. He'd hear her singing, or the faint jingle of her bangles. Sometimes he walked through the motion of a chase, would find her on the bed or in the kitchen, leaning on the counter with her hands behind her back, one bare knee raised to his hand, looking into his eyes while he pushed her skirt up.

He stood in the hall, listening to Nicole banging doors and drawers. The TV was on, quietly, though he recognised the show from the bleating vowels of the Irish host, cutting through the audience laughter.

I should end it now, thought Ritchie. The alien quality of her presence inside his property thrilled, scared and irritated him as it had in the first place. He remembered the moment when his mind swung from the thought that he couldn't have her to the thought that she was his to have.

Nicole's eyes reminded Ritchie of a scholarship boy at his school called Barney Parks. Ritchie and Jules and Randeep couldn't let Barney Parks go past when they saw him in a hand-me-down blazer God knows how many sizes too big. Kudos to Barney Parks for getting into a school his parents couldn't afford but he had to be shown what it meant to look ridiculous in public. The teachers gave their lessons and the boys gave theirs. They stopped him and Ritchie and Randeep held him while Jules got behind him, lifted up his blazer and began pushing his own arms into the sleeves to show that there was room in there for two boys. The trouble with doing that sort of thing was, if the victim didn't laugh it off, it made Ritchie feel bad, and he was sure he was good, so it couldn't be his fault; it seemed to him that world was full of selfish

victims who deserved a little bullying in order to teach them to take their punishment more gracefully.

Barney Parks didn't laugh it off. Barney Parks struggled. He was wiry, and Ritchie had to grip tightly. The defiance in Barney Parks' steady, dark eyes, wet with tears held back, made the blood in Ritchie surge and his face burn. It wasn't really defiance. Barney Parks wanted them to do this to him. Barney Parks never spoke, just locked his eyes on Ritchie's; his gaze declared that he wanted to be attacked, because the more urgently they wrestled him, the stronger they would see he was; that they could make him bend, and twist, even cry out in the end, but that there was a core of resistance and self in him they were seeking without knowing it, and he would never let them get there. This would make them keep coming back, and this was what Barney Parks wanted. Ritchie had begun breathing heavily, let go of Barney Parks, drawn back his right fist, punched Barney Parks in the face and run away. Ritchie was twelve. Barney Parks would have been nine. With Nicole, Ritchie felt the same fake struggle, the same fake defiance, but he didn't have to punch her. He knew what to do, and how to look at her.

Ritchie moved forward. He called Nicole's name. His stomach hurt. *I shouldn't have eaten the plum*, he thought. Nicole came out and walked towards him. Her eyes were distant. She looked at him as if she didn't know him, as girls her age who didn't know who he was would look at him when they caught him staring. Over her jeans and t-shirt she was wearing the light linen coat he'd bought her. He lifted his hands towards her and she walked past him, put her hand on the knob of the door latch, twisted it, opened the door an inch and turned her head back to him. Now he wanted her. Why should he

wonder that the newness of her skin tempted him as it did? The idea of breaking up with her seemed to have been planted in his head by a traitor.

‘Do you need something from the shop?’ he said. He was astounded by his banality yet couldn’t help repeating: ‘Are you going to the shop?’

Nicole raised a hand to move her perfectly straight, precisely cut hair, which had dark streaks among the blonde, off her face and neck. The gold watchband was heavy on her hardly full-formed wrist, with the delicate tendons Ritchie loved to stroke. She had depleted, with speed and efficiency, the account he’d set up to service her wants: she didn’t like cheap things.

‘You’ve got to speak to my mum. She’s in the lounge.’ Nicole nodded down the hall.

A needle of terror pierced Ritchie. ‘How did she find out?’

Nicole slumped her shoulders and cocked her head. ‘Because I told her!’ She shook her face at him. ‘Don’t you talk to your kids? She’s known about you and me from the start. Anyway she’s in there now and she needs to speak to you.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Home.’ She blinked and waited.

‘I lost the phone,’ said Ritchie. ‘That’s why I didn’t call.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Nicole. She opened the red crocodile-skin bag she was carrying and stabbed the contents with her fingertips. She found a mobile, the twin of the one he’d lost, and gave it to Ritchie.

‘Don’t you need it?’ said Ritchie.

‘I only used it to call you,’ said Nicole. She stepped across the threshold and considered him for an instant. ‘I saw us in the mirror,’ she said. ‘We don’t look right together.’ She left, slamming the door. Her scent lingered.

Ritchie stood staring at the peephole, turned round in the direction of the TV noise, closed his open mouth, turned back, shouted Nicole's name, opened the door, saw the lift closing and shouted her name again. It seemed to him that events were taking place in the wrong order.

6

Nicole's mother was on the sofa, watching television. She had her back to Ritchie when he came into the room. Her bleached, shoulder-length blonde hair was piled up on the headrest. She'd taken off her shoes and her bare feet were up on the glass top of the coffee table. She was drinking red wine and feeding from a bowl of salted almonds. The chat show host delivered a gag – Ritchie didn't notice what, because he was watching Nicole's mother's scarlet toenails move as she flexed her feet – and she laughed along with the audience.

'Hello?' said Ritchie.

Nicole's mother looked round, gulped the nuts she was chewing, put down the glass and stood up, smoothing her red skirt and, Ritchie thought, getting salt and nut grease on the fabric.

'I'm sorry,' she said, grinning, leaving her hands on her hips. 'Louise. Nicole said I should make myself at home. Where is she?' She looked over Ritchie's shoulder. She didn't seem surprised when Ritchie told her that her daughter had left.

'God!' she said. She stepped back, clenched her fists and tapped them together under her chin. 'Ritchie Shepherd! I can't believe I'm this close to you. I was such a fan of yours

in the old days.' She blinked several times. She was excited and her breaths came quickly.

Ritchie invited her to sit down again and went to sit in another chair opposite but she called him back and patted the place next to her. Ritchie laughed, fetched a fresh glass and the bottle and sat down with her, keeping a foot of space between them.

'I went to see you at Hammersmith Palais when I was twelve,' she said. 'You and your wife.'

'She wasn't my wife then.'

'God, I fancied you!' Louise laughed. 'If you hadn't been there with Karin, I would have tried to get backstage. I was a bit of a groupie in my time.'

'You would have been too young for me.'

Louise smiled and looked off into a corner. 'Yeah?' she said, and twisted strands of hair round her finger. Ritchie swallowed and laughed carefully. Louise pretended to look stern. She hunched her shoulders and pressed her hands between her thighs.

'You've been naughty, Ritchie,' she said.

Ritchie could smell propositions before they arrived. He asked Louise why she'd come.

'Oh, Ritchie,' she said. 'Nicole can't see you any more.'

It seemed that Nicole had begun going out with a footballer from QPR's youth squad. Bruce was eighteen. Everyone knew he was going to break into the first team when the season started. He was a lovely lad, Louise said, very gentle and polite, with a great sense of humour. She knew Ritchie would be upset; but he'd known it couldn't last for ever, hadn't he, not when he wasn't going to leave Karin.

Ritchie, who disliked hearing his wife called Karin by people

who'd only met her in the pages of celebrity magazines, agreed that he had known this.

'Since Nicole's dad left, and she was only five then, it's just been the two of us,' said Louise. 'We're like girls together, you know. We're like sisters, best friends. We tell each other everything. And when she said she was going out with you I felt a bit funny. I couldn't help thinking well, he is married, and she's not really supposed to, you know, when she's fifteen, and she didn't go on the show so the producer could pick her out and say "She's the one I want, she's the best-looking, I'll have her."' Louise put out her hand and cupped Ritchie's cheek. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Ritchie. You've been sweet to her, you really have, all the things you've bought for us and everything. I was no angel when I was her age. I slept with men who had rings in all sorts of places.'

This released a parp of laughter from Ritchie. He grinned and swallowed. His upper lip stuck fast to his teeth and he prised it loose with his tongue. He didn't believe he wouldn't see Nicole again. Everything Louise was saying, it seemed to Ritchie, only concerned Louise; all he had to do was lower his head and plough through Louise's wants and get to the other side, when Louise wouldn't be there any more.

The rise and fall of Louise's chest as she breathed became more pronounced and her eyes darkened and shone. 'I was a bit jealous of Nicole for a while,' she said. 'I thought: I'm a fan of his. I'm his age, a good deal younger, in fact. I'm single, I'm not bad-looking. If he needs a bit on the side, why not me?'

'That's flattering,' said Ritchie.

'D'you want to see how big a fan I was?' said Louise. She undid two buttons of her blouse, turned round so that her back was to Ritchie and peeled the blouse down over her shoulders.

Ritchie found himself staring at his own face and his wife's, etched together by a tattooist's needle on a stranger's clear white skin, between her right shoulder blade and the horizontal white strap of her bra. He thought of the child Nicole watching Louise undress in a bedroom in a stuffy flat in Acton and asking about these indelible faces. As Louise's skin aged, would his and Karin's image age too, he wondered, or would Louise die in fifty years' time, an old woman with two immortals on her back?

Ritchie put his hands on Louise's waist and moved closer. The tattoo artist had taken the image from the cover of their first album. When Ritchie squinted he could see that the words were there, in miniature. *The Lazygods: Fountain*.

'That cover was my idea, you know,' he said, and kissed the tattoo. Louise laughed. Ritchie moved his tongue over the inked image of his own face, plunged his hands inside Louise's bra and squeezed her breasts.

The phone in his pocket, the one Nicole had given him, started to vibrate. Ritchie stood up, pushed Louise away and took several steps back from the sofa while he took the phone out. He looked at the screen in terror. *Ritchie calling*, it said.

Louise turned herself round and watched him with eyes that had hardened. When he snatched his hands away from her he'd almost shoved her. Ritchie could see she wasn't sure whether to be angry or to pretend to be angry as part of their game. She straightened her skirt and crossed her legs primly but didn't close her blouse or pull her bra up to cover her breasts. She watched Ritchie sceptically with her head tilted to one side. The phone was still ringing. It seemed to Ritchie to have been ringing for minutes. He had an urge to ask Louise what he should do. He despised himself for being weak enough

to consider it. He stood still, licking his lips, gripping the phone while it buzzed in his sweaty fist, staring at the woman he'd been on the verge of having. He felt his status diminishing with each moment of speechlessness. The hardness in Louise's eyes was turning to mockery.

'You look like you're expecting bad news, Ritchie,' she said. 'Are you going to answer it?'

'Not in front of you,' said Ritchie. He hadn't meant to sound curt, but it was too late.

'Sorry!' said Louise, and began buttoning up her blouse. The phone stopped ringing.

'This isn't the best time,' said Ritchie, holding his hands out, still gripping the phone tightly, not moving towards Louise. 'I have to deal with this.' Louise got up, animated by all sorts of nervous, jerky actions, hooking her bag over her shoulder, fixing her hair, touching her earrings, checking her phone, biting her lip.

'You're a busy man,' she said. 'I don't know how you found time for Nicole but I can see you don't have time for me.' Her mouth flexed in a joyless smile and she blinked. 'Cheerio, then.'

'Goodbye,' said Ritchie. He gave Louise the full, wide, I'm-all-yours grin he gave people he'd met once when he was sure he wouldn't see them again, and she left.

Ritchie sat down, took out Nicole's phone, called his lost mobile and closed his eyes. It rang twice before somebody picked up. He could hear them breathing strangely.

'Hello?' he said.

'Is that Daddy?' said Ruby.

'Oh,' said Ritchie. He opened his eyes. 'Hello, my little angel. Yes, I'm Daddy. It's your Daddy. Where are you?'

'I'm in bed,' said Ruby. 'Where are you?'

'In London.'

'Your voice sounds funny.'

'Does it? Listen, Ruby darling, where did you find the phone?'

'In the garden.'

'In the garden!'

'In the grass.'

'Mmm.' Ritchie stood up. 'What do Mummy and Dan think about that?'

'They don't know,' said Ruby. 'It's a secret. I'm hiding it under my pillow.'

'What a clever girl you are,' said Ritchie. 'It's not easy to hide things from Mummy, is it?'

'I'm going to call the pizza place.'

'It's too late for pizza, darling. You should be sleeping. Where's Mummy?'

'Gone to play music.'

'And where's Milena?'

'In her room.'

'Has she read you your story and said night-night?'

'Yes.'

'So she thinks you're sleeping?'

'Yes.'

Ritchie was walking out of the flat towards the lift. He felt light and strong and aware, as he did before a difficult meeting with channel executives.

'Ruby darling,' he said, 'that's Daddy's phone. I dropped it by accident in the garden.' The lift was descending. The doors opened and he walked towards the street door. 'Hello?' he said. 'Are you there, love?'

‘It’s not yours!’ said Ruby. ‘It says “Nicole” in the little screen.’

Of course, they taught her to read! thought Ritchie. *They took her innocence!* His throat tightened. He was overcome with tenderness towards his little daughter, tucked in bed with her feet halfway down the pony quilt, not understanding the evil forces of disclosure that the poisoned silver box held to her ear were summoning. Only Ritchie could save her from these cruel powers. The top of his nose tingled with sadness and affection as he got into the car.

‘Aren’t you sleepy?’ he said. He began to drive home, clamping the phone between his shoulder and his ear when he shifted gears.

‘No.’

Ritchie’s strength was not in foreseeing emergencies, but dealing with them when they came up. He could get her to open the window and throw the phone out; but what if she fell? He could ask her to take a heavy object and smash the phone to pieces. But did Ruby have heavy objects in her room, and if so, could she lift them? He could direct her to take out the SIM card but it was likely that her tiny soft fingers would fail to find purchase on the tricky catch over the battery compartment, she would become frustrated, there would be crying, and Karin would be alerted.

‘Ruby, you do know you’re Daddy’s absolutely favourite girl, don’t you?’ he said. ‘I want you to be super-brave and clever and do what Daddy asks you. Will you do that for me?’

‘OK.’

‘Because the phone you found is really very important and special and secret. And if you’re super brave and clever I’ll

give you whatever you want. What do you want most in the world?’

‘I want to be on television.’

‘I can put you on television, darling, of course I can. And if you want that to happen, all you have to do is put the phone to sleep and hide it under your pillow and in the morning it’ll be gone. And – this is very important, the most important thing, darling – you must keep it a secret, and not tell anyone you found the phone, not even Mummy or Dan or anyone at school or Granny or Auntie Bec or anyone. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘So just put the phone to sleep, darling, and hide it under your pillow, and then you go to sleep.’

‘I want a story.’

Along the dual carriageway to the M25 Ritchie told Ruby the story of the lion and the mouse, how the lion didn’t eat the mouse when it was woken up, and how later the mouse saved the lion by chewing through a hunter’s net. When he finished he asked Ruby quietly if she was still awake. He asked three times, more gently each time, and when there was no answer he hung up and increased his speed.

Coming up the driveway of the house he saw the lights on in the studio, which was in an old stable block set away from the main building. He parked the car well short, trotted up to the front door of the house and went to Milena’s room, down the hall from Ruby’s room and Dan’s. He found Milena sitting in a tracksuit on her sofa with her knees up, drinking tea and watching TV.

‘Karin’s in the studio,’ she said. ‘She wasn’t expecting you.’

Ritchie grinned. 'I felt like not staying away,' he said. 'Are the kids in bed?'

'Oh, ages ago. They're asleep.'

'How were they?'

'Fine. Dan wouldn't eat his pasta. He said the shape of macaroni made it taste bad.'

'I'll just look in on them.'

Ritchie closed Milena's door behind him – it had been open – and went to Ruby's room. It was lit by a dim yellow night light. Milena had cleared everything off the floor, dolls, books and costumes together, and heaped them in a crate by the chest of drawers. Under the window the front of the doll's house stood ajar and some of the miniature furniture it contained was stacked higgledy-piggledy in the back of Dan's old Tonka dumptruck. Ruby had the quilt pushed down to her waist. Her mouth was slightly open. Ritchie could hear her breathing. It seemed to him that the penguins on her pyjamas were staring at him in a tough way. The phone had fallen on the floor. Ritchie went over to pick it up. A floorboard creaked loudly under his foot. He heard Karin's voice. She was talking to Milena. He grabbed the phone, shoved it in his pocket, leaned down, stroked his daughter's head and kissed her. The door opened and Karin whispered to him.

Karin was wary, but glad to see him. They went to bed early and made love before they went to sleep. The thought that he was cheating Nicole by loving his wife gave Ritchie strength. The thought that he had narrowly managed to save his family from terrible danger made him tender. It did not seem to Ritchie that he loved Karin any less because while he was thrusting into her he was imagining Louise and Nicole

sitting next to the bed watching him with their skirts pushed up round their waists and their hands moving between their thighs.

Ritchie and Karin fell asleep wrapped in each other, which they didn't usually do, because her hair tickled him and his body heat kept her awake.

7

Ritchie was at the Rika Films studios before eight next day. By mid-morning shivers of panic were rippling through the building. One of the acts, a band of fourteen-year-olds from Rotherham called The What, had shown such rapid improvement from the original audition that the team was convinced it had been swindled. As it stood the kids sounded too professional to be put on the show and they'd been brought into the studio early to get them to recapture their previous, possibly fake, hopelessness.

At the same time Lazz, Riggsy's co-presenter, was refusing to come to work. Lazz had discovered that the blooper reel for the Christmas special, which was already in the can, didn't include any funny on-camera mistakes by him, because he hadn't made any. His agent Midge agreed that this showed a high level of professionalism on Lazz's part, but said that his client felt the absence of footage of him giggling, stumbling over words or getting into trouble with props and animals might alienate him from his fan base by suggesting a lack of personal warmth; and that, if scripted blunders were not provided, his client intended to begin making mistakes at precise ten-minute intervals, with the cold, striving determination for which he was renowned in the business.

As these crises ripened a group of BBC executives turned up at the studio without warning – just for a chat and a look around, they said.

The more anxious and pale the faces that appeared in doorways when Ritchie passed, the better he felt. This was his work. This was where he was strong, respected and necessary, and his people were right to look to him for leadership, because he'd lead them through these vexing daily difficulties, as he'd done before. He was the producer. Here in the studio he felt capable and happy in a way he hadn't for months. Was there need for anything except work and family?

For Ritchie, almost having sex with Nicole's mother had made Nicole lose her freshness. He felt the right thing to do would be to treat the eight months of the affair as something that had happened to the girl. It was true, he thought, that he'd been present, but he shouldn't be selfish. The memories were properly hers and, being young, she needed them more than he did. He tended to divide his memories into two categories: things that had happened to him, and things that had happened to other people while he was there. He felt it was part of the generosity he cherished in himself. If he no longer wanted part of the past, why shouldn't somebody else have it?

Ritchie went down the ramp towards the main stage, where the pinch-faced boys of The What, their hair swinging over their eyes, were walking stiffly to and fro with guitars, picking their way over leads. Paula grabbed his elbow from behind, looked at him with wide eyes and said that there was still no sign of Lazz, but Midge had turned up, breathing fire. Ritchie laughed, rested his hand on her shoulder, said she shouldn't worry and told her to send Midge in.

Midge made a performance of being angry. Ritchie called the gaffer over and told him that during the next two shows he'd have to drop three small bits of kit from the lighting rig over the stage while Lazz was in shot, as if by accident. 'We'll get Lazz to do a big double take the first time, not so big the second, the third kind of a —' Ritchie boggled his eyes, opened his mouth and flapped his upturned palms in the air. 'It'll be planned spontaneity. Running gag in the out-takes. Great laughs.'

'Planned spontaneity,' repeated Midge, and smiled. 'That's funny.'

Ritchie turned to the gaffer.

'Just pick some safe widgets to drop,' he said. 'We mustn't hurt him.'

The gaffer stood with his hands on his hips, facing the ground with his lower jaw jutting out. He looked up at Ritchie. His voice wavered. 'I've been doing this all my life,' he said. 'I'm proud of getting it right. D'you want to see my record? One accident in forty-five years.'

'Come on, Jeff,' said Ritchie. 'It's light entertainment. It's not life and death.'

'I've lit the real entertainers,' said the gaffer. 'The professionals. Now what it is, it's kids, amateurs and who's the biggest fuck-up, that's what gets the attention.' He walked off cursing.

'Stay and listen to the band,' said Ritchie to Midge. He called to the boys on stage and they looked up through their hair. They swung their low-slung guitars to face the little group standing in front of the empty tiers of seats. There was a squawk of feedback, the singer counted them in, and they began to play.

The bass player plucked at an ominous note. The guitarist laid a rasping chord over it, sustained it, chopped it off and repeated it. After a few bars the drummer lashed the skins of his tom-toms and locked himself into a rhythm of bass and snare. The monotony of pitch, the increasing volume and the cumulative beat of the instruments ground the listeners down, making them long for the release and their hearts kick as they anticipated it. The singer grasped the mike stand, flexed his fingers, leaned forward, opened his mouth and closed his eyes.

The hairs at the back of Ritchie's neck rose as the singer's voice filled the studio. How could a fourteen-year-old have the confidence to set out on those steady, drawn-out notes? Where did he get the power? Where did a young boy in England find the pain in that voice, then find the bravery to put a band together?

The chord shift, when it came, seemed to lift him off the ground as the guitar and bass and the singer's voice stepped up the scale.

'They're good,' said Midge in Ritchie's ear.

'They're the real thing,' said Ritchie. 'I can handle it, though.'

Clapping hard, he walked to the stage and climbed up to stand among the boys. He was a foot taller than the tallest of them. They weren't full grown, he supposed, but even so they looked malnourished, their elbow joints grotesquely large on their spindly white arms. Here and there he saw a prominent feature within the hair – an enormous Roman nose, wide red lips, dark eyes. He asked their names and they told him in turn. As they spoke they began to utter short, hissing laughs, and when the drummer gave his name, they found it hilarious.

Ritchie pointed at the guitarist's Fender copy and held out his hands. 'Do you mind?' he said. The guitarist lifted the strap off his shoulders and gave the instrument to Ritchie, who played a Lazygods riff with his thumb and index finger. At the end he closed his eyes, leaned back and quivered his middle finger on the fretboard for tremolo. He opened his eyes, nodding, and looked at the drummer, inviting him to come in. The drummer stared at him without moving.

'That was probably before your time,' said Ritchie, handing the guitar back. 'How many hours a day do you practise?'

The guitarist looked at the singer. They shrugged and said at the same time: 'Don't know.'

Ritchie folded his arms and looked from face to face. 'What were you trying to do when you signed up for this?' he said.

The word 'win' passed in a murmur from mouth to mouth.

'This is a tough business,' said Ritchie. 'I've been where you are now. And I'm telling you, you've got talent.' He waited and went on. 'That's our problem. What our audience is looking for is a story about kids who don't have talent, who get some nice clothes and a bit of coaching from professionals and go from being bad at what they do to being adequate. Our message is that we can make anyone look special. Ordinary people aren't as bad as they seem. This isn't a talent show. It's a lack of talent show. So I'm going to tell you now, we can't let you win. You're too good. Is that clear?'

The hair murmured and shook. *It's like talking to bushes in the wind*, thought Ritchie.

'You've shown that you're good enough to pretend to be crap,' said Ritchie gravely. He beat his fist in the air to stress the seriousness of his points. 'Now my question to you is, can you do that again? Have you got what it takes to show a TV audience of millions that you're a shit band, and then make out that you've got slightly better?'

The boys looked at each other. 'We've got to pretend to be losers, like,' said the singer.

'Pretend to be losers, and then show that a makeover can turn you into guys who are definitely not losers, without any hint that you could ever have been winners.'

'Losers, not-losers, not winners,' said the singer slowly. Something happened to the bass player; he doubled up, as if stabbed in the stomach, swivelled round so his back was turned to Ritchie, and fell to his knees. Ritchie asked if he was all right.

'Don't worry about him, Mr Shepherd,' said the singer. 'He gets attacks. We can play shite for you.'

'And then get slightly better.'

'Aye.' The singer glanced at the guitarist, who nodded as if to encourage him to take a bold step. 'We like some Lazygods stuff.'

Ritchie laughed. 'I haven't played for years,' he said. A vision of a revival charged into his head: he, Ritchie, older, wiser, powerful. He, the dead rock god resurrected at Glastonbury. Worshipped from a plain sown with waving arms, a field of limbs rippling out to the horizon.

'We want to play with Karin,' said the singer.

Ritchie's grin melted like plastic shrivelling in a bonfire.

'She's a mother of two young children now,' he said.

'She can still sing,' said the bass player.

‘We saw her do an acoustic gig last year,’ said the guitarist.

Ritchie turned away, waving his hand at them. ‘You do it the way we agreed and I’ll talk to her,’ he said. He made for the steps and chose to jump off the stage instead. He hesitated at the edge. It looked all of a sudden like an ankle-breaker, but he couldn’t back out in front of the kids and Midge. He bent his knees, raised his arms, closed his eyes and jumped. He landed, staggered and straightened up quickly. Over his shoulder he saw the bass player having another attack.

It was only noon, Ritchie saw, and with firmness and guile he’d solved the problems that had made his staff tremble. He offered Midge a lift to the West End on his way to pick up his mother and sister.

‘The lovely Bec,’ said Midge.

‘You’ve got a lot of testosterone in you for a small man. Keep your dirty paws off her.’

‘She’s not my type. I only like the skinny ones. Is she free, then?’

‘She’s still seeing Val Oatman.’

‘Do you think Val Oatman was crazy and made his newspaper crazy, or did it make him crazy when he started editing a crazy newspaper?’

‘He’s not right for her,’ said Ritchie. ‘She doesn’t know about him.’

‘I know what Val Oatman does. I can’t say the same about Bec. Can you?’ said Midge.

‘She’s my sister.’

‘But she moved into a world you don’t know anything about.’

'I know what she does.'

'Really? Tiny creatures swimming in her blood, birds of paradise? Could you explain it to me right now?'

Ritchie laughed and changed the subject.