

Jilly Cooper is a journalist, writer and media superstar. The author of many number one bestselling novels, including *Riders*, *Rivals*, *Polo*, *The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous*, *Appassionata*, *Score!* and *Pandora*, she lives in Gloucestershire with her husband, Leo, her rescue greyhound, Feather, and five cats. She was appointed OBE in the 2004 Queen's Birthday Honours List for her contribution to literature.

Visit the author's website at [www.jillycooper.co.uk](http://www.jillycooper.co.uk)

'Cooper skilfully weaves her vast cast of characters' stories into a seamless whole and punctuates it all with extremely funny jokes, her customary kindness, even to the initially unloveable and the verve and zippiness that are her trademark . . . Most remarkably of all, she gets better and better with age . . . When I got my hands on a copy of *Wicked!*, it quickly became clear that I would have to put my life on hold for the rest of the week, and I did, ignoring deadlines, leaving children unfed, until I'd galloped through each of its 800-odd pages (which frequently involved staying up half the night, gripped)'

India Knight, *Waterstones Books Quarterly*

'First-class reading pleasure' Rachel Johnson, *Tatler*

'Unbeatable beach reading' *The Week*

'Lots of high jinks and general naughtiness . . . it's vintage Cooper'  
Rachel Cooke, *Observer*

'A hugely enjoyable romp with teenage hormones, teacher lust and toy boys galore' Richard and Judy in the *Daily Express*

'Perfect escapist entertainment' Ian Rankin writing for *The Guardian Review*

'Completely lovely and full of hilariously beautiful people. I always hate finishing her books' Marina Hyde, *Guardian*

'Cooper has tremendous fun with this clash of the classes'  
Toby Clements, *Daily Telegraph*

'The perfect beach companion' Wendy Holden, *Daily Mail*

'Hilarious and daring' Joanna Briscoe, *Guardian*

*Also by Jilly Cooper*

FICTION

Pandora  
*The Rutshire Chronicles:*  
Riders  
Rivals  
Polo  
The Man Who Made Husbands  
    Jealous  
Appassionata  
Score!

NON-FICTION

Animals in War  
Class  
How to Survive Christmas  
Hotfoot to Zabriskie Point (with  
    Patrick Lichfield)  
Intelligent and Loyal  
Jolly Marsupial  
Jolly Super  
Jolly Superlative  
Jolly Super Too  
Super Cooper  
Super Jilly  
Super Men and Super Women  
The Common Years  
Turn Right at the Spotted Dog  
Work and Wedlock  
Angels Rush In  
Araminta's Wedding

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Little Mabel  
Little Mabel's Great Escape  
Little Mabel Saves the Day  
Little Mabel Wins

ROMANCE

Bella  
Emily  
Harriet  
Imogen  
Lisa & Co  
Octavia  
Prudence

ANTHOLOGIES

The British in Love  
Violets and Vinegar

WICKED!

JILLY COOPER



CORGI BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS  
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,  
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW  
www.penguin.co.uk

**WICKED!**  
**A CORGI BOOK: 9780552151566**

PRINTING HISTORY  
Bantam edition published 2006  
Corgi edition published 2007  
Copyright © Jilly Cooper 2006

Jilly Cooper has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The author and publishers are grateful for permission to quote from 'Three Little Birds', Words and Music by Bob Marley.  
© Copyright 1977 Blue Mountain Music Limited. Used by permission of Music Sales Limited. All Rights Reserved.  
International Copyright Secured.

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Addresses for Random House Group Ltd companies outside the UK can be found at: [www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)  
The Random House Group Ltd Reg. No. 954009

The Random House Group Ltd makes every effort to ensure that the papers used in its books are made from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests. Our paper procurement policy can be found at: [www.randomhouse.co.uk/paper.htm](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/paper.htm)

Typeset in 10/12pt New Baskerville by  
Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

This book is dedicated with love and admiration to two great  
headmistresses, Virginia Frayer and Katherine Eckersley,  
and also in loving memory of the Angel School, Islington, and  
Village High School, Derby



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

|                   |                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ADELE             | Single mother who teaches geography at Larkminster Comprehensive (otherwise known as Larks).                                |
| PARIS ALVASTON    | Larks pupil and icon. Founder member of the notorious Wolf Pack.                                                            |
| ANATOLE           | Bagley Hall pupil and beguiling son of the Russian Minister of Affaires.                                                    |
| RUFUS ANDERSON    | Brilliant and eccentric head of geography at Bagley Hall. Henpecked father of two, liable to leave coursework on trains.    |
| SHEENA ANDERSON   | Rufus's concupiscent careerist wife – the main reason Rufus hasn't been given a house at Bagley Hall.                       |
| MRS AXFORD        | Chief caterer at Bagley Hall.                                                                                               |
| MISS BASKET       | A menopausal misfit who teaches geography at Larks.                                                                         |
| BEA FROM THE BEEB | A researcher at the Teaching Awards.                                                                                        |
| DORA BELVEDON     | Bagley Hall new girl. Determined to support her pony and her chocolate Labrador by flogging school scandal to the tabloids. |
| DICKY BELVEDON    | Dora's equally resourceful twin brother who runs his own school shop at Bagley Hall selling booze and fags.                 |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| LADY BELVEDON (ANTHEA)       | Dicky and Dora's young, very pretty, very spoiled mother. A Violet Elizabeth Bottox, drastically impoverished by widowhood, and determined to hunt for a rich new husband, unobserved by her beady son and daughter. |
| JUPITER BELVEDON             | Dora and Dicky's machiavellian eldest brother, chairman of the governors at Bagley Hall, Tory MP for Larkminster, and tipped to take over the party leadership.                                                      |
| HANNA BELVEDON               | Jupiter's lovely and loving wife, a painter.                                                                                                                                                                         |
| SOPHY BELVEDON               | An English teacher of splendid proportions and great charm. Ian and Patience Cartwright's daughter, and wife of Jupiter Belvedon's younger brother, Alizarin.                                                        |
| DULCIE BELVEDON              | Adorable and self-willed daughter of Sophy and Alizarin.                                                                                                                                                             |
| SIR HUGO BETTS               | Governor of Larks who sleeps through most meetings.                                                                                                                                                                  |
| JAMES BENSON                 | An extremely smooth private doctor.                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| THE BISHOP OF<br>LARKMINSTER | A governor of Bagley Hall.                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| GORDON BLENCHELY             | The unsavoury care manager of Oaktree Court, Paris Alvaston's children's home.                                                                                                                                       |
| HENGIST BRETT-TAYLOR         | Hugely charismatic headmaster of Bagley Hall.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| SALLY BRETT-TAYLOR           | Hengist's wife, classic beauty and jolly good sort, hugely contributory towards Hengist's success.                                                                                                                   |



|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ORIANA BRETT-TAYLOR   | Hengist and Sally's daughter, a much admired BBC foreign correspondent.                                                                                                                                                         |
| WALLY BRISTOW         | Stalwart site manager at Larks.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| GENERAL BROADSTAIRS   | Lord Lieutenant of Larkshire and governor of Bagley Hall.                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 'BOFFIN' BROOKS       | The cleverest boy at Bagley Hall, a humourless prig.                                                                                                                                                                            |
| SIR GORDON BROOKS     | Boffin's father, a thrusting captain of industry.                                                                                                                                                                               |
| ALEX BRUCE            | Deputy head of Bagley Hall, nicknamed Mr Fussy.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| POPPET BRUCE          | His dreadful wife, who teaches RE. An acronymphomaniac, determined to impose total political correctness on Bagley Hall.                                                                                                        |
| CHARISMA BRUCE        | Alex and Poppet's severely gifted daughter.                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| MARIA CAMBOLA         | Larks's splendidly flamboyant head of music.                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK | Former showjumping champion and Tory Minister for Sport. Now leading owner/trainer, and director of Venturer, the local ITV station. Despite being as bloody-minded as he is beautiful, Rupert is still Nirvana for most women. |
| TAGGIE CAMPBELL-BLACK | His adored wife – an angel.                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| XAVIER CAMPBELL-BLACK | Bagley Hall pupil and Rupert and Taggie's adopted Colombian son, who has hit moody adolescence head-on.                                                                                                                         |
| BIANCA CAMPBELL-BLACK | Xavier's ravishingly pretty, sunny-natured younger sister, also adopted and Colombian.                                                                                                                                          |

|                     |                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| IAN CARTWRIGHT      | Former commanding officer of a tank regiment, now bursar at Bagley Hall.                                                                                 |
| PATIENCE CARTWRIGHT | Ian's loyal wife – a trooper who teaches riding and runs the stables at Bagley.                                                                          |
| MRS CHALFORD        | Head of history at Larks. A self-important bossy boots who likes to be referred to as 'Chally'.                                                          |
| TARQUIN COURTNEY    | Charismatic captain of rugger at Bagley Hall.                                                                                                            |
| ALISON COX          | Sally Brett-Taylor's housekeeper, known as 'Coxie'.                                                                                                      |
| JANNA CURTIS        | Larks's very young, Yorkshire-born headmistress.                                                                                                         |
| P.C. CUTHBERT       | A zero-tolerant police constable, determined to impose order on Larks.                                                                                   |
| DANIJELA            | Larks pupil from Bosnia.                                                                                                                                 |
| DANNY               | Larks pupil from Ireland.                                                                                                                                |
| EMLYN DAVIES        | A former Welsh rugby international, known as Attila the Hunk, who teaches history at Bagley Hall and coaches the rugger fifteens to serial victory.      |
| DEBBIE              | Ace cook at Larks.                                                                                                                                       |
| ARTIE DEVERELL      | Head of modern languages at Bagley Hall.                                                                                                                 |
| ASHTON DOUGLAS      | The sinister, lipping Chief Executive Officer of S and C Services, the private company brought in by the Government to supervise education in Larkshire. |
| ENID                | Lachrymose librarian at Larks.                                                                                                                           |

|                                       |                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PRIMROSE DUDDON                       | Earnest, noble-browed, ample-breasted form prefect at Bagley Hall.                                                               |
| VICKY FAIRCHILD                       | Two-faced but both of them extremely pretty. Cures truancy at Larks overnight when Janna Curtis appoints her as head of drama.   |
| JASON FENTON                          | Larks's deputy head of drama, known as Goldilocks.                                                                               |
| PIERS FLEMING                         | Wayward head of English at Bagley Hall.                                                                                          |
| JOHNNIE FOWLER                        | Good-looking Larks hellraiser; BNP supporter; persistent truant.                                                                 |
| LANDO FRANCE-LYNCH                    | Master of the Bagley Beagles, whose sparse intellect is compensated for by dazzling all-round athletic and equestrian ability.   |
| DAISY FRANCE-LYNCH                    | His sweet mother, a painter, wife of Ricky France-Lynch, former England polo captain.                                            |
| FREDDIE                               | A waiter at La Perdrix d'Or restaurant.                                                                                          |
| CHIEF INSPECTOR<br>TIMOTHY GABLECROSS | A wise, kind and extremely clever policeman.                                                                                     |
| MAGS GABLECROSS                       | The wise, kind wife of the Chief Inspector, part-time modern languages teacher at Larks.                                         |
| GLORIA                                | PE teacher at Larks not given to hiding her physical lights under bushels.                                                       |
| THEO GRAHAM                           | Head of classics at Bagley Hall, an outwardly crusty old bachelor with a heart of gold. Takes out his hearing aid on Speech Day. |

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| GILLIAN GRIMSTON            | Head of Searston Abbey, an extremely successful Larkminster grant-maintained school for girls.                                                                                |
| LILY HAMILTON               | Aunt of Jupiter, Dicky and Dora Belvedon. A merry, very youthful octogenarian and Janna Curtis's next-door neighbour in the village of Wilmington.                            |
| DAME HERMIONE HAREFIELD     | World famous diva, seriously tiresome, brings out the Crippen in all.                                                                                                         |
| WADE HARGREAVES             | An unexpectedly humane Ofsted Inspector.                                                                                                                                      |
| DENZIL HARPER               | Head of PE at Bagley Hall.                                                                                                                                                    |
| UNCLE HARLEY                | Jamaican drugs dealer, lives on and off with Feral Jackson's mother.                                                                                                          |
| SIR DAVID 'HATCHET' HAWKLEY | Headmaster of Fleetley, illustrious classical scholar. Later Lord Hawkley.                                                                                                    |
| LADY HAWKLEY (HELEN)        | A nervy beauty. Having numbered Rupert Campbell-Black and Roberto Rannaldini among her former husbands, Helen hopes marriage to David Hawkley means calmer waters.            |
| ROD HYDE                    | An awful autocrat, headmaster of St James's, a highly successful Larkminster grant-maintained school, known as St Jimmy's.                                                    |
| 'SKUNK' ILLINGWORTH         | Deputy head of science at Larks.                                                                                                                                              |
| 'FERAL' JACKSON             | Larks's leading truant, Paris Alvaston's best friend and founder member of the Wolf Pack. Afro-Caribbean, beautiful beyond belief, seriously dyslexic, and a natural athlete. |

|                   |                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| NANCY JACKSON     | Feral's mother, a heroin addict.                                                                                                               |
| JESSAMY           | A teaching assistant at Larks.                                                                                                                 |
| JESSICA           | Hengist Brett-Taylor's stunning second secretary, a typomaniac.                                                                                |
| JOAN JOHNSON      | Head of science at Bagley Hall, also in charge of Boudicca, the only girls' house. Nicknamed 'No-Joke Joan' because of a total lack of humour. |
| MRS KAMANI        | Long-suffering owner of Larks's nearest newsagent's.                                                                                           |
| KATA              | Larks pupil and wistful asylum-seeker from Kosovo.                                                                                             |
| AYSHA KHAN        | One of Larks's few achievers. Destined for an arranged marriage in Pakistan.                                                                   |
| RASCHID KHAN      | Aysha's bullying father.                                                                                                                       |
| MRS KHAN          | Aysha's bullied but surprisingly brave mother.                                                                                                 |
| RUSSELL LAMBERT   | Ponderous chairman both of Larks's governors and Larkminster planning committee.                                                               |
| LANCE             | An understandably terrified newly qualified Larks history teacher.                                                                             |
| AMBER LLOYD-FOXÉ  | Minxy founder member of the 'Bagley Babes', otherwise known as the 'Three Disgraces'.                                                          |
| BILLY LLOYD-FOXÉ  | Amber's father, an ex-Olympic showjumper, now a presenter for the BBC.                                                                         |
| JANEY LLOYD-FOXÉ  | His unprincipled journalist wife.                                                                                                              |
| JUNIOR LLOYD-FOXÉ | Amber's merry, racing-mad twin brother.                                                                                                        |

|                   |                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| LYDIA             | Another understandably terrified newly qualified Larks English teacher.                                                      |
| LUBEMIR           | Albanian asylum-seeker and safe-breaker, which makes him an extremely useful partner-in-crime to Cosmo Rannaldini.           |
| MR MATES          | Larks science master, almost as old as Archimedes.                                                                           |
| KITTEN MEADOWS    | Larks pupil and sassy, hell-cat girlfriend of Johnnie Fowler.                                                                |
| JOE MEAKIN        | Under-master in Alex Bruce's house at Bagley Hall.                                                                           |
| ROWAN MERTON      | School secretary at Larks.                                                                                                   |
| MRS MILLS         | A jolly member of Ofsted.                                                                                                    |
| MISS MISERDEN     | Old biddy endlessly complaining about Larks misbehaviour.                                                                    |
| TEDDY MURRAY      | Randal Stancombe's foreman.                                                                                                  |
| NADINE            | Paris Alvaston's social worker.                                                                                              |
| MARTIN 'MONSTER'  | Larks pupil. Overweight                                                                                                      |
| NORMAN            | bully and coward.                                                                                                            |
| 'STORMIN'' NORMAN | Larks parent governor and Monster's mother, given to storming into Larks and punching anyone who crosses her ewe lamb.       |
| MISS PAINSWICK    | Hengist Brett-Taylor's besotted and ferociously efficient secretary.                                                         |
| CINDY PAYNE       | Deceptively cosy New Labour county councillor in charge of education.                                                        |
| KYLIE ROSE PECK   | Sweet-natured Larks pupil and member of the Wolf Pack. So eternally up the duff, she'll soon qualify for a free tower block. |

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CHANTAL PECK       | Kylie Rose's mother and also a parent governor at Larks.                                                                                                                      |
| CAMERON PECK       | Kylie Rose's baby son.                                                                                                                                                        |
| GANYMEDE           | Another baby son of Kylie Rose.                                                                                                                                               |
| COLIN 'COL' PETERS | Editor of the <i>Larkminster Gazette</i> . A big, nasty toad in a small pond.                                                                                                 |
| PHIL PIERCE        | Head of science at Larks, loved by the children and a great supporter of Janna Curtis.                                                                                        |
| MIKE PITTS         | Larks's deputy head, furious the head's job has been given to Janna Curtis.                                                                                                   |
| COSMO RANNALDINI   | Dame Hermione's son and Bagley Hall warlord, with a pop group called the Cosmonaughties and the same lethal sex appeal as his father, the great conductor Roberto Rannaldini. |
| DESMOND REYNOLDS   | Smooth Larkminster estate agent known as 'Des Res'.                                                                                                                           |
| ROCKY              | Larks pupil and ungentle giant until the Ritalin kicks in.                                                                                                                    |
| BIFFO RUDGE        | Head of maths at Bagley Hall, ex-rowing Blue, who frequently rides his bike into the River Fleet while coaching the school eight.                                             |
| ROBBIE RUSHTON     | Larks's incurably lazy, left-wing head of geography.                                                                                                                          |
| CARA SHARPE        | Larks's fearsome head of English and drama.                                                                                                                                   |
| 'SATAN' SIMMONS    | Larks bully and best friend of Monster Norman.                                                                                                                                |
| SMART              | Stalwart Bagley Hall rugger player.                                                                                                                                           |

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PEARL SMITH          | Another Larks hell-cat, member of the Wolf Pack.                                                                                                                                                           |
| MISS SPICER          | An unfazed member of Ofsted.                                                                                                                                                                               |
| SAM SPINK            | Bossy-boots union representative at Larks.                                                                                                                                                                 |
| SOLLY THE UNDERTAKER | Governor at Larks.                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| RANDAL STANCOMBE     | Handsome Randal, definitely Mr Dicey rather than Mr Darcy, a wildly successful property developer. One of his private estates of desirable residences, Cavendish Plaza, sits uncomfortably close to Larks. |
| JADE STANCOMBE       | Randal's daughter, sharp-clawed glamourpuss and Bagley Babe.                                                                                                                                               |
| MISS SWEET           | Beleaguered under-matron at Boudicca, reluctantly put in charge of Bagley's sex education.                                                                                                                 |
| CRISPIN THOMAS       | Incurably greedy deputy director of S and C Services.                                                                                                                                                      |
| TRAFFORD             | An unspeakably scrofulous but highly successful artist.                                                                                                                                                    |
| GRANT TYLER          | An electronics giant.                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| MISS UGLOW           | Larks RE teacher.                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| PETE WAINWRIGHT      | Genial under-manager at Larkminster Rovers, the local second division football club.                                                                                                                       |
| BERTIE WALLACE       | Raffish co-owner of Gafellyn Castle in Wales.                                                                                                                                                              |
| RUTH WALTON          | A ravishing adventuress, voted on to Bagley Hall's board of governors to ensure full houses at meetings.                                                                                                   |
| MILLY WALTON         | The third Bagley Babe, charming and emollient but overshadowed by her gorgeous mother.                                                                                                                     |



|                                 |                                                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| THE HON. JACK<br>WATERLANE      | Bagley Hall thicko, captain<br>of the Chinless Wanderers.                                                                                                     |
| LORD WATERLANE                  | Jack's father, who shares his son's<br>fondness for rough trade.                                                                                              |
| STEWART 'STEW' WILBY            | Powerful and visionary headmaster<br>of Redfords, Janna Curtis's former<br>school in the West Riding. Also<br>Janna's former lover.                           |
| SPOTTY WILKINS                  | Bagley Hall pupil.                                                                                                                                            |
| DAFYDD WILLIAMS                 | Sometime builder and piss artist.                                                                                                                             |
| 'GRAFFI' WILLIAMS               | Dafydd's son, and captivating,<br>conniving fifth member of the Wolf<br>Pack. Nicknamed 'Graffi' for his<br>skill at spraying luminous paint on<br>buildings. |
| BRIGADIER CHRISTIAN<br>WOODFORD | A delightful octogenarian, hugely<br>interested in matters military and<br>his beautiful neighbour, Lily<br>Hamilton.                                         |
| MISS WORMLEY                    | English mistress at Bagley Hall –<br>poor thing.                                                                                                              |

## THE ANIMALS

|                      |                                                             |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| CADBURY              | Dora Belvedon's chocolate Labrador.                         |
| LOOFAH               | Dora Belvedon's delinquent pony.                            |
| PARTNER              | Janna Curtis's ginger and white mongrel.                    |
| NORTHCLIFFE          | Patience Cartwright's golden retriever.                     |
| ELAINE               | Hengist Brett-Taylor's white greyhound.                     |
| GENERAL              | Lily Hamilton's white and black Persian cat.                |
| VERLAINE AND RIMBAUD | Artie Deverell's Jack Russells.                             |
| BOGOTÁ               | Xavier Campbell-Black's black Labrador.                     |
| HINDSIGHT            | Theo Graham's marmalade cat.                                |
| FAST                 | One of Rupert Campbell-Black's horses. Aptly named.         |
| PENSCOMBE PETERKIN   | Another of Rupert Campbell-Black's star horses.             |
| BELUGA               | An extremely kind horse who teaches Paris Alvaston to ride. |
| PLOVER               | Patience Cartwright's grey mare, doted on by Beluga.        |

# 1

Larkminster, county town of Larkshire, has long been considered the most precious jewel in the Cotswolds' crown. Throughout the year, its streets are paved with tourists, admiring the glorious pale gold twelfth-century cathedral, the Queen Anne courthouse and the ancient castle, whose battlements descend into the River Fleet as it idles its way round the town.

Larkminster, famous for its splendid beeches and limes and designated England's Town of Trees at the Millennium, was anticipating further fame because its newly elected Conservative MP, Jupiter Belvedon, was hotly tipped to take over the Tory party and oust Tony Blair at the next election.

In his Larkminster constituency, the machiavellian Jupiter was frustrated by a hung Labour and Lib-Dem county council who always voted tactically to keep out the Tories. But in January 2001, to the county council's horror, central government decided to take the running of Larkshire's schools away from the local education authority, who they felt was mismanaging its finances and not adhering sufficiently to the national curriculum. They then handed this task to a private company called S and C Services, the 'S' and the 'C' standing for 'Support' and 'Challenge'.

Larkminster itself boasted a famous public school, Bagley Hall, some five miles outside the town; a choir school attached to the cathedral; two excellent state schools: Searston Abbey and St James's, known as St Jimmy's; and a perfectly frightful sink school, Larkminster Comprehensive, which was situated

on the edge of the town's black spot, the notorious Shakespeare Estate.

Like many outwardly serene and elegant West Country towns, Larkminster was greatly exercised by the increase in violent crime, for which it believed the Shakespeare Estate and Larkminster Comprehensive, or 'Larks' as it was known, were entirely responsible.

Randal Stancombe, a Rich List property developer and a hugely influential local player with a manicured finger in every pie, was particularly concerned. Cavendish Plaza, one of his private estates of desirable residences newly built above the flood plain of the River Fleet, was constantly troubled by Larks delinquents mugging, nicking car radios and knocking fairies off Rolls-Royces on their way to school. Randal Stancombe was putting increasing pressure on the police and the county council to clean up the area.

Larkminster Comp had for some years been a candidate for closure. It was at the bottom of the league tables and could only muster five hundred children rattling around in a building large enough for twelve hundred. Taxpayers' money should not be squandered heating empty schools.

Reading the graffiti on the wall, and not liking the prospect of bullying interference from a private company like S and C Services, the then headmaster, Ted Mitchell, had immediately resigned in February 2001. Larks Comp should have been shut down then, but the county council and S and C Services, nervous of the local uproar, the petitions, the poster campaigns, the marches on County Hall and even Westminster and the inevitable loss of seats that occur whenever a school is threatened with closure, dodged the issue.

They should have handed the job to Larks's deputy head, Mike Pitts, a seedy alcoholic who would have killed off the place in a few months. Instead they decided to give Larks a last chance and in April advertised in *The Times Educational Supplement* for a new head. This was why on a hot sunny day in early May, Janna Curtis, head of English at Redfords Comprehensive in West Yorkshire, caught the Intercity from Leeds to Larkminster.

On any journey, Janna overloaded herself with work which she truly intended to do. Aware that Year Eleven would be taking their first English exam in less than three weeks, she should have reread her GCSE revision notes. She should also have checked the English department's activities for the rest of term. Even more important, she should have tackled the pile of information about Larks Comp and the area that she had downloaded from the internet.

But after registering that Larks was underachieving disastrously and those 'right-wing bastards' Randal Stancombe and S and C Services were putting the boot in, she was sidetracked by a *Daily Mail* abandoned by a passenger getting off at Birmingham. Despite her horror at its right-wing views, she soon became engrossed in a story about Posh and Becks, followed by Lynda Lee-Potter's much too enthusiastic comments about 'another right-wing bastard': Rupert Campbell-Black.

The train was stiflingly hot. Even if she'd had the money, Janna would never have done anything so revoltingly elitist as travel first class, but she wished air conditioning extended into standard class as well, so she didn't go scarlet before her interview. She was gagging for a large vodka and tonic to steady her nerves, but, on no breakfast, she'd become garrulous. Not that she was going to get the job; they'd think her much too young and inexperienced and she wasn't even sure she wanted it.

Gazing at a cloud of pink and white apple blossom clashing with bilious yellow fields of rape as the train trundled through Worcestershire, Janna reflected that the past three years at Redfords had been the most thrilling of her life. The cheers must have been heard in Westminster the day she and the other staff were told their school had finally struggled out of special measures (the euphemism for a dangerously failing school).

The fight to save Redfords had been unrelenting, but who minded working until midnight, week in, week out, when you were in love with the headmaster, Stew Wilby, who had made you head of English before you were thirty and who frequently put down his magic wand to shag you on the office carpet?

In the end Stew couldn't bring himself to leave his wife, Beth,

and had retreated into a marriage far more intact than he had made out. People were beginning to gossip and the warmth of the reference Stew had sent to the governing board at Larks – which he had showed her yesterday: ‘I shall be devastated to lose an outstanding teacher, but I cannot stand in Janna Curtis’s way’ – gave Janna the feeling that he might be relieved to see the back of her.

‘Staying with Beth, staying with Beth,’ mocked the wheels as the train rattled over the border into the wooded valleys of Larkshire. In her positive moments, all Janna wanted was to escape as far as possible from Stew into a challenge that would give her no time to mourn. Larkminster Comp seemed the answer.

She was met at the station by Phil Pierce, Larks’s head of science. Bony-faced, bespectacled, mousy-haired, he wore a creased sand-coloured suit, obviously dragged out of a back drawer in honour of the heat wave and jazzed up by a blue silk tie covered in leaping red frogs.

Phil didn’t drive Janna to Larks via the Shakespeare Estate to bump over litter-strewn roads and breathe in the stench of bins dustmen were too scared to empty. Instead he took her on the longer scenic route where she could enjoy the River Fleet sparkling, the white cherry blossom in the Town of Trees dancing against ominously rain-filled navy-blue clouds and the lichen blazing like little suns on the ancient buildings.

‘How beautiful,’ sighed Janna, then bristled with disapproval as she noticed, hanging overhead like birds of prey, a number of huge cranes bearing the name of Randal Stancombe.

‘That capitalist monster’s doing a lot of work,’ she stormed, ‘and I didn’t realize that fascist bast— I mean fiend was MP here,’ as she caught sight of posters of pale, patrician Jupiter Belvedon in the window of the Conservative Club. ‘I bet he’s in league with S and C Services,’ she added furiously. ‘Private companies only take over education to make a fat profit.’

‘Representatives of S and C Services will certainly be at your interview later,’ said Phil Pierce gently, ‘so perhaps . . .’

‘I’d better button my lip,’ sighed Janna, ‘and my clothes,’ she added, doing up the buttons of the crocus-yellow dress she had bought from Jigsaw after school yesterday.

Looking at the terrace houses painted in neat pastels, their front gardens bright with wallflowers and forget-me-nots, Janna wondered if Larkminster might be too smug, rich and middle class.

As if reading her thoughts, Phil Pierce said: 'This may seem a prosperous county, but there's a very high level of socio-economic deprivation. Eighty per cent of our children are on free school dinners. Many have special educational needs.'

'I hope you receive sufficient funding.'

'Does anyone?' sighed Phil. 'This is Larks.'

Janna was agreeably charmed by the tawny, romantically rambling Victorian building perched on the side of a hill, its turrets and battlements swathed in pink clematis and amethyst wisteria, its parkland crowded with rare trees and with cow parsley and wild garlic advancing in waves on wildly daisied lawns.

Phil kicked off by giving her a quick tour of the school, which was conveniently empty of challenging children because it was polling day at the local elections.

All one needed for outside, reflected Janna, were a pair of secateurs and a mowing machine. The windows could also be mended and unboarded, the graffiti painted over and the chains, taps and locks replaced in the lavatories. The corridors and classroom walls were also badly lacking in posters, paintings and written work by the children. Redfords, her school in Yorkshire, was like walking into a rainbow.

She was disappointed that there were no children around, so no one could watch her taking a lesson. This had always secured her jobs in the past. Instead she was given post to deal with, to show off her management skills, and made a good impression by immediately tackling anything involving media and parents. She was also handed two budgets and quickly identified why one was good, the other bad.

She was aware of being beadily scrutinized by the school secretary, Rowan Merton, who was conventionally pretty: lovely skin, grey eyes, dark brown bob; but who simultaneously radiated smugness and disapproval, like the cat who'd got the cream and found it off.

Still too nervous to eat, Janna refused the quick bite of lunch offered her by Phil Pierce. She was then whisked away to an off-site interview because the governors were equally nervous of the Larks deputy head, Mike Pitts, who, livid he hadn't been offered the job, was likely to grow nasty when sobering up after lunch.

Only as Janna was leaving the Larks building did the heavens open, so she didn't appreciate in how many places rain normally poured in through the roof.



## 2

Janna was interviewed round the corner, past a row of boarded-up shops, in a pub called the Ghost and Castle, which was of the same tawny, turreted architecture as the school. The landlord was clearly a joker. A skeleton propped up the public bar, which was adorned with etchings of ghosts draped in sheets terrorizing maidens or old men in nightcaps. Rooms off were entitled Spook-Easy and Spirits Bar. The plat du jour chalked up on a blackboard was Ghoulash at £4.50.

Janna giggled and wondered how many Larks pupils were regulars here. At least they could mug up for GCSE in the Macbeth room, whose blood-red walls were decorated with lurid oils of Banquo's ghost, Duncan's murder and a sleep-walking Lady Macbeth. Here Larks's governors, a semi-circle of the Great and the Good, mostly councillors and educationalists, awaited her.

Think before you speak and remember eye contact at all times, Janna told herself as, beaming at everyone, she swivelled round like a searchlight.

The chairman of the governors, Russell Lambert, had tiny eyes, sticking-out ears, a long nose like King Babar and loved the sound of his pompous, very put-on voice. A big elephant in a small watering hole, thought Janna.

Like most good teachers, she of necessity picked up names quickly. As Russell Lambert introduced her, she clocked first Brett Scott, a board member of Larkminster Rovers, who had an appropriately roving eye and looked game for a great night

on the tiles, and secondly Crispin Thomas, deputy educational director of S and C Services, who did not.

Crispin, a petulant, pig-faced blond, had a snuffling voice, and from his tan and the spare tyre billowing over the waistband of his off-white suit, had recently returned from a self-indulgent holiday.

Under a painting of the Weird Sisters and infinitely more terrifying, like a crow who'd been made over by Trinny and Susannah, quivered a woman with black, straight hair and a twitching scarlet mouth. Appropriately named Cara Sharpe, she was a teacher governor, supposed to present the concerns of the staff to the governing body.

And I bet she sneaks to both sides, thought Janna.

'Cara is our immensely effective head of English and drama,' said Russell sycophantically.

So she won't welcome any interference on the English front from me, Janna surmised, squaring her little shoulders. At the end of the row, the vice-chairman, Sir Hugo Betts, who resembled a camel on Prozac, fought sleep.

Russell Lambert made no bones about the state of the school: 'Larks is at rock bottom.'

'Then it can only go up,' said Janna cheerfully.

Her audience knew from her impressive CV that she had been a crucial part of the high-flying team that had turned around disastrously failing Redfords. But then she had been led by a charismatic head, Stew Wilby. If she took on Larks, she would be on her own.

She also seemed terrifyingly young. She had lots of dark freckles and wild, rippling dark red hair, a big mouth (which she seldom kept shut), merry onyx-brown eyes and a snub nose. She was not beautiful – her jaw was too square – but she had a face of great sweetness, humour and friendliness. She was small, about five feet one, and after the drenching of rain, her crocus-yellow dress clung enticingly to a very pretty figure. A teardrop of mascara on her cheekbone gave a look of Pierrot.

Phil Pierce, who was very taken, asked her how she would deal with an underachieving teacher.

'I'd immediately involve the head of department,' replied

Janna in her soft Yorkshire accent, ‘and tactfully find out what’s wrong. Is it discipline? Are the children trampling all over him? Is it poor teaching? Academically has he got what it takes, or is he presenting material wrongly? And then, gently, because if he’s underachieving he’ll have no confidence, try and work it through. After this,’ she went on, ‘he would either succeed or fail. If the latter, he’s not right for teaching, because the education of children is all that matters.’

The semi-circle – except for scowling Cara Sharpe, Rowan Merton, who was taking the minutes, and Sir Hugo Betts, who was asleep – smiled approvingly.

‘What are your weaknesses?’ snuffled Crispin Thomas from S and C.

Janna laughed. ‘Short legs and an even shorter fuse. But my strengths are that I adore children and I thrive on hard work. Are the parents involved here?’

‘Well, we get the odd troublemaker,’ said Russell heartily, failing to add that a large proportion of Larks parents were too out of it from drugs to register. ‘The children can be challenging.’

‘I don’t mind challenging children,’ said Janna. ‘You couldn’t find more sad and demoralized kids than the ones at Redfords, but in a few months—’

‘Yes, we read about that in the *Guardian*,’ interrupted Crispin rudely.

Janna bit her lip; they didn’t seem interested in her past.

‘I want to give every child and teacher the chance to shine and for them to leave my school with their confidence boosted to enable them to survive and enjoy the world.’

She paused hopefully. A loud snore rent the air followed by an even more thunderous rumble from her own tummy, which woke Sir Hugo with a start.

‘What, what, what?’ He groped for his flies.

Janna caught Phil Pierce’s eye and burst out laughing, so everyone else laughed except Cara and Rowan.

Janna had expected the board to get in touch in a week or so, but Russell Lambert, at a nod from Crispin Thomas, asked her to wait in an ante-room entitled Your Favourite Haunt. Phil

Pierce brought her a cup of tea and some egg sandwiches, at which she was still too nervous to do more than nibble. Phil was such a sweet man; she'd love working with him.

Breathing in dark purple lilac, she gazed out of the window at buildings darkened to the colour of toffee by the rain and trees as various in their greenness as kids in any school. Beyond lay the deep blue undulation of the Malvern Hills. Surely she could find fulfilment and happiness here?

She was summoned back by Rowan, looking beadier than ever.

'We've decided not to waste your time asking you to come for a second interview,' announced Russell Lambert.

Janna's face fell.

'It was good of you all to see me,' she muttered. 'I know I look young . . .'

'We'd like to offer you the job,' said Russell.

Janna burst into tears, her mascara mingling with her freckles as she babbled, 'That's wicked! Fantastic! Are you sure? I'm going to be a head, such an honour, I promise to justify your faith, that's really wicked.'

The half-circle smiled indulgently.

'Can I buy you all a drink to celebrate?' stammered Janna, reaching for her briefcase. 'On me, I mean.'

'Should be on us,' said the director of Larkminster Rovers. 'What'll you have, love?'

'Not if she's going to catch the fast train home,' said Russell, looking at his watch, 'and Crispin and I have to talk salaries and technicalities with . . . may I call you Janna?'

Half an hour later on the Ghost and Castle steps, Janna was still thanking them.

'I'd like to walk to the station,' she confessed. 'I want to drink in my new town. Doesn't matter if I get the later train. I'm so excited, I'll float home.'

But as she hadn't yet signed the contract, Russell, not risking Janna anywhere near the Shakespeare Estate, steered her towards his very clean Rover. Despite the stifling heat of the day, he pulled on thick brown leather driving gloves as though he

didn't want to leave fingerprints on anything. As he settled in the driving seat, she noticed how his spreading thighs filled his grey flannel trousers.

As they passed the offices of the *Larkminster Gazette*, a billboard announced Randal Stancombe's latest plans for the area.

'That greedy fat cat's got a stranglehold on everything,' spat Janna.

'Wearing my other hat,' reproved Russell, 'as chair of the local planning committee, I can assure you Randal is a very good friend indeed to Larkminster, not least because of the thousands of people he employs.'

Feeling he'd been squashing, he then suggested Janna might like to ring her parents with news of her job.

'Mum passed away at Christmas.' Janna paused. 'She would have been right proud. I wish I could text her in heaven. We came from a very poor family; Mum scrubbed floors to pay for my school uniform, but she loved books and always encouraged us to read. She used to take me to see the Brontës' house in Haworth. I read English because of her.'

'And your father?'

'Dad was a steelworker. He used to take me to Headingley and Old Trafford. Then he left home; he couldn't cope with Mum being ill.' Her voice faltered. She wasn't going to add that her father had been violent and had drunk the family penniless.

She wished she could ring Stew but he'd be taking a staff meeting. Yorkshire was so full of painful memories; she'd be glad to get down south and make a fresh start.

Nothing, however, had prepared her for the anguish of leaving Redfords. Parents and children, who'd thought she'd be with them for ever, seemed equally devastated.

'Why are you living us?' wrote one eleven-year-old. 'I don't want you to live.'

'Are your new children better than us?' wrote another. 'Please change your mind.'

Almost harder to bear was the despair of the older pupils, including some of the roughest, toughest boys, whom she was abandoning in the middle of their GCSE course.

‘How will we ever understand *Much Ado* without you? We’re going to miss you, miss.’

They all gave her good-luck presents and cards they could ill afford and Janna couldn’t look them in the eye and tell them the truth: ‘I’m leaving because your headmaster broke my heart and now it’s breaking twice.’

Then Stew had done the sweetest thing: he’d had framed a group photograph of the entire school, which every teacher and child had signed. Janna cried every time she looked at it.

Some teachers were very sad she was leaving and wished her well. Others, jealous of her closeness to Stew, expressed their incredulity at her getting the job.

‘You’d better cut your hair, you’ll never have time to wash that mane every morning. And do buy some sensible clothes.’

‘And you’ll have to curb that temper and you won’t be able to swan into meetings twenty minutes late if you’re taking them.’

Waylaid by a sobbing child, Janna would forget about time.

There had also been the hell of seeing Stew interview and appoint her successor: a willowy brunette with large, serious, hazel eyes behind her spectacles – the bloody cow – and everyone getting excited about a Christmas production of *Oliver!* of which Janna would be no part.

Stew had taken her out for a discreet farewell dinner and, because she was moving to the country, given her a little Staffordshire cow as a leaving present.

‘I’m so proud of you, Janny. You’ve probably got eighteen months to try and turn round that school. Don’t lose your rag and antagonize people unnecessarily and go easy on the “boogers”, “bluddies” and “basstards”, they just show off your Yorkshire accent.’ Then, pinching her cheek when she looked sulky: ‘I don’t want anything to wreck your lovely, generous, spontaneous nature.’

‘Yeah, yeah. “The only failure is not to have tried”,’ Janna quoted one of Redfords’s mantras back at him.

After a second bottle they had both cried and Stew had quoted: “So, we’ll go no more a-roving”,’ but when he got to the bit about the sword outwearing its sheath and the heart

wearing out the breast, Janna remembered how they'd worn out the carpet in his office.

I've given him my Bridget Jones years, she thought bitterly. Sometimes she wondered why she loved him so much: his hair was thinning, his body thickening and, apart from the penetrating dark brown eyes, his square face lacked beauty, but whenever he spoke, everyone listened and his powers of persuasion were infinite.

'Little Jannie, I cannot believe you're going to be a head-mistress.' His fingers edged over her breast. 'We can still meet. Can I come home this evening?'

'No,' snapped Janna. 'I'm a head, but no longer a mistress.'

Janna, however, was never cast down for long. At half-term, she had come south and found herself a minute but adorable eighteenth-century house called Jubilee Cottage. Like a child's drawing, it had a path spilling over with catmint and lavender leading up to a gabled porch with 'Jubilate' engraved above the door and mullioned windows on either side. It was the last house in the small village of Wilmington, which had a pub, a shop and a watercress-choked stream dawdling along the edge of the High Street.

Janna could easily afford the mortgage on her splendid new salary. She couldn't believe she'd be earning so much.

Wilmington thankfully was three miles from Larkminster Comp. However much you loved kids, it was a mistake to live over your school. When she grew tired of telling her children they were all stars, she could escape home, wander on her own lawn in bare feet and gaze up at her own stars.

All the same, missing Stew, it was terribly easy to go through a bottle of wine of an evening.

'I shall buy a new car and get a dog,' vowed Janna.