

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



On the Bare

Fiona Locke

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About the Book

Following the success of *Over the Knee*, Fiona Locke returns with a collection of short stories that explores every aspect of corporal punishment and discipline. A pop star lookalike devises the ultimate revenge for a spoilt diva. A haughty southern belle gets her comeuppance from a rakish suitor. An ambitious historian gets more than she bargained for when she goes treasure-hunting in a haunted house. And Angie earns a trip to the woodshed for acting like a brat in public. And whether it's six of the best from the schoolmaster's cane or a sound smacking over the knee, the stories are told from the perspective of a true enthusiast who knows what a spanking feels like.

Also by Fiona Locke

OVER THE KNEE

ON THE BARE

Fiona Locke



For Chris

*Constant reader,
long-time friend*

Aaron sits on the edge of the bed and beckons me to his right side. And I realise what he has in mind. A hot flush covers my entire body and I clasp my hands beseechingly, like a silent movie heroine.

He lowers his voice. 'Come here, Delaney. Over my knee.'

My own knees threaten to buckle and I do as he says, turning my back to the open door and the two guards outside it, watching.

Aaron guides me over his lap and I stare ahead at the peeling paint on the wall at the back of the cell. A tiny ancient sink juts from the wall and the cell is so cramped I could reach out and touch it if I wanted.

I flinch when I feel his hand on my bottom. Just a pat, but it makes me jump. He gives each cheek a firm squeeze and I feel his hand lift away. I've never been spanked before in my life and I have no idea what to expect. I hold my breath.

With a resounding slap he brings his palm down on my right cheek. I arch my back with a yelp. He smacks my left cheek almost immediately and I writhe on his lap, clutching the edge of the bed. His hand imparts a wicked sting, covering each cheek completely.

The Woodshed

'IF YOU DO that again, Angie ...' Peter's threat hung in the air like a storm about to break.

'You'll what?' I was foolish enough to blurt out.

I saw his face darken and I looked down at my school shoes, instantly regretting my cheek.

'I'll put you over my knee and give your bare bottom a sound smacking,' he announced loudly.

I cringed at his words, turning scarlet and peering out from under my hair, wondering how many people were listening. The garden centre was bustling with activity and it was inconceivable that no one had heard. The Japanese man in the grey business suit must have. He'd watched me stamp through the puddle, looking startled by my behaviour. Yes, I was rather old to be acting so childishly, but in my school uniform I could easily pass for a sixth-former.

'Well, young lady?'

'I'm sorry, sir,' I babbled in a hasty placating whisper. 'I'll be good.'

Peter was completely unembarrassable and he had no qualms about making good on his threats, no matter where we were or how many people were around.

'See that you are,' he said. 'This is your final warning.'

I heaved a giant sigh of relief. It amazed me how often I felt the need to test him. Especially as I so often regretted it. But it was hard not to be a little bratty when he insisted on dragging me out in public dressed like a schoolgirl.

What schoolgirl *wouldn't* be restless and fidgety at a garden centre?

We were there on such an unpleasant errand: Peter wanted a birch tree of his own so that we didn't have to go into the woods to cut switches whenever he needed a rod. I had tried unsuccessfully to convince him that it would be years and years before the trees were big enough for proper switches.

'Young trees are the best,' Peter had said coolly, 'but while they grow we'll continue to harvest the ones in the woods.'

My response to that was a sullen look and the first stamp of my feet in the puddles from last night's torrential rain.

We made our way towards the back of the enclosure where juvenile trees stood in neat rows, like orphans waiting to be adopted. As we reached the mini-orchard I suddenly noticed the Japanese businessman behind us. He stopped abruptly when I turned and he pretended to be engrossed in the care label of a rhododendron. What he was really doing was ogling me.

I grinned and tugged Peter's sleeve. 'Hey!' I whispered. 'That guy's stalking me!'

'Well, you do look rather fetching,' he said, giving my bottom a lecherous pinch that made me yelp. A few heads turned and I blushed, ducking into the rows of trees.

'Ah yes, here we are,' he said. '*Betula pendula*. Silver birch.'

I rolled my eyes, still sulking over the idea of home-grown disciplinary implements. Peter inspected each tree carefully, as if trying to decide which would yield the most effective switches.

I quickly grew bored and wandered away from the plants and the people onto the giant patio scattered with lawn furniture and garden gnomes. Beyond that were the sheds and children's playhouses, and with a childish sense

of fun I skipped over to have a look. I'd always wanted a playhouse as a little girl - a place to hide and to hold secret meetings with my pets. Some of the tiny houses were amazingly elaborate and I felt a little stab of envy for all the fun I'd missed out on.

I crept inside one small wooden structure and peered out through the window. My stalker was loitering conspicuously by the sundials. He stood in profile to me, but I could see him casting sidelong glances my way.

Bloody perv, I thought.

It was then that I had my great idea. As I emerged from the playhouse he feigned interest in the nearest birdbath. Perfect. The entire area was wet and muddy and there was no one else around. I sidled past him nonchalantly, waiting for him to turn and follow my arse with his eyes. When he did I jumped as high as I could and came down with a terrific splash in the muddy water, soaking both of us.

I saw the whole thing in glorious slow motion. My legs tucked under me in midair, the flash of my white cotton panties, his eyes widening at the sight. Then a low protracted 'Noooooo!' from him, hands outstretched, as my shoes hit the puddle. Droplets shimmering in a *Matrix*-like freeze-frame all around us. Brilliant.

Time returned to normal and he stepped back, looking down at his suit in dismay. My white school socks - and my legs - were covered in muck and I laughed helplessly as my stalker plucked feebly at the little clumps of mud sticking to his trousers.

My laughter died in my throat as Peter's hand clapped down on my shoulder.

'Right,' he said. 'You were warned, young lady.'

Suddenly thrust back into the here and now, I chewed my lower lip and looked miserably down at my own muddy lower half.

'But - but -' I stammered.

'No buts, young lady. Now you will apologise to this gentleman for your childish behaviour. And then I'm going to take you into that woodshed over there and give you the spanking you deserve for being such a brat.'

My eyes widened in horror. They widened even more at the look of smug satisfaction on the 'gentleman's' face.

'But he was following me!' I wailed.

'That's as may be. But I'm certainly going to ask him to witness your punishment.' Peter addressed him: 'If you wouldn't mind?'

'Not at all,' he said in perfect cultured English. 'It would be a pleasure.'

I cast a wretched, pleading look at Peter, though I knew it would do no good. He had spanked me once on a crowded Underground platform, oblivious to the astonishment of the waiting passengers; a private woodshed wasn't going to faze him. At least he hadn't threatened to birch me in the middle of the garden centre.

Peter took me by the hand and I dug my heels in, turning my sulky face up to his in a last desperate bid for mercy.

'Pouting won't get you anywhere but deeper in trouble, young lady. Do you want me to take my belt off?'

I gasped and shook my head frantically, my ears burning. The suit nodded approvingly. He probably thought Peter was my father.

'Are you going to apologise?' Peter asked.

I hung my head and mumbled, 'I'm sorry.'

Peter tutted. 'Did that sound sincere?' he asked his new friend.

'No, not very.'

'All right, I'm *very* sorry!'

My words fell into a heavy silence and I saw Peter shake his head. 'I'm afraid the apology may have to wait until she has something to be sorry *about*.'

He tilted my chin up so I had to face him. 'And you've only made it worse for yourself with your insolence.'

I had too much pride to beg, especially when punishment was inevitable. I couldn't take back what I had done and I suffered the same bout of second-guessing that I always did in such circumstances. If I could only hit the 'back' button and start over ...

'Right,' Peter said. 'In you go. Let's get this over with.'

The woodshed smelled of fresh-cut pine. Though it was only about eight feet square, it felt like a cavern to me. There was ample room for the three of us.

'Stand here, Angie. Bend forward and put your hands on the wall.'

I knew that if I refused he could make it worse. Burning with shame, I obeyed. At least the position meant that I didn't have to look at our guest. He would surely want the view from behind.

I reached forward and pressed my sweaty palms against the rough-sawn wood, lowering my head.

'Bottom out,' Peter said. 'Arch your back.'

I did it without protest, presenting myself. I whimpered a little as Peter raised my navy-blue pleated skirt and tucked it into the waistband. Next I felt him smoothing the tail of my shirt up over my lower back. Now the businessman could have a proper look at the schoolgirl bottom he'd been ogling. I squeezed my eyes shut, mortified by the exposure.

'You were a very naughty girl, weren't you?' Peter asked.

I gave a little moan, resisting the urge to beg him just to get it over with. 'Yes, sir.'

'And what happens to naughty little girls?'

'They get punished.'

'How, Angie?'

'They get spanked.'

'Mm-hmm. And do they get spanked over their panties?'

I blushed to the roots of my hair, but I knew what I had to say. 'No, sir. On the bare.'

'On the bare,' Peter echoed, and I squirmed in embarrassed misery as he slowly peeled down my white cotton school knickers.

'A good sound smacking,' he said, 'to teach you a lesson.'

I held my breath and waited for the first smack. It wasn't gentle. It was terrifyingly loud in the confined space and I squealed with pain. I could feel the outline of his fingers burning across my left cheek, glowing as the blood rushed to the surface. I peered back over my shoulder to see the Japanese man nodding appreciatively.

Peter brought his hand down just as hard on my right cheek, eliciting a shriek from me. I danced in place, my hands hovering in the air behind me. I desperately wanted to clutch my bottom, to rub away the sting, but I didn't dare move too far out of position lest I make things worse. Peter was a master at demonstrating that, even at rock bottom, there was still room to fall.

'Angie ...'

It was all the warning I needed. I resumed my position, sucking in my breath as I waited for him to start again.

Peter placed one hand in the small of my back and began to spank me in earnest. No matter how often he did it, it never ceased to embarrass me and it never ceased to hurt. And having an audience made it worse. I yelped and cried out with each swat, pressing my hands into the wall and trying to tune out the probing eyes. The familiar cadence was hard to take, giving me no time to register anything but the pain and the desire to make it stop. In moments like this I would do anything, promise anything, agree to anything.

'Please - no, stop! I'm sorry - honest! Oww! Please! I'll never - ouch! - I'll never do it again, I promise! Please ...'

But Peter was never swayed by my pleas or protests.

He didn't neglect my thighs, either, and those well-aimed smacks made me beg even more frantically. I leaped and tried to kick, but my knickers were tangled around my ankles, preventing me raising my legs.

Finally, he stopped and I sagged against the wall, exhausted. But my relief was short-lived.

'That's for your childish behaviour,' Peter said. 'We still have to deal with your insolence.'

'But I'm sorry!' I wailed, truly and genuinely remorseful. My bottom was raw and aching with heat.

'You're always sorry, Angie. Just never sorry enough. At least not until you've been taught a firm lesson.'

My face burned as hotly as my bottom. The boards creaked beneath his feet as he moved around behind me, inspecting his work. He pinched the soft flesh of my right cheek and I hissed.

'Hmm. Yes, that does look a little tender. But I think a few cuts of a switch will make a lasting impression. As we're here to buy a birch tree I think it only fair to test their suitability.'

'Quite right,' our guest said with solemn approval.

I gasped in horror.

'I wonder if you'd mind keeping an eye on her while I step outside?' Peter said politely. 'A little cornertime is always good when a girl's due a well-deserved thrashing.'

Tears sprang to my eyes as I imagined the businessman's gleeful expression. The silence stretched to fill the woodshed and I waited for the hated command.

'In the corner,' Peter said at last. 'Hands on your head.'

I shuffled two feet to my left, the flimsy cotton panties like manacles around my ankles. My bottom was still on display, framed by my raised skirt. I laced my fingers on top of my head and touched my elbows to the walls either side of me. I was only too aware how the position arched my back, pushing my bottom up like an offering. Peter approached me and took his time arranging my school shirt

carefully above my waist, exposing me fully and leaving nothing to the imagination.

‘Do feel free to smack her if she misbehaves while I’m gone.’

There was a rough scrape as Peter opened the door and a thin bar of daylight rushed to embrace my feet. ‘I shan’t be long.’

‘Take your time,’ said my new keeper. ‘I will watch her closely.’

The door closed, stealing my little beam of light and plunging me into confinement again. My skin prickled with hyper-awareness and my breathing grew shallow as I strained to hear the slightest shift of his weight on the floor. I froze in place, determined to deny him the slightest excuse to take Peter at his word. I expected him to edge closer, to talk to me, perhaps even take liberties. But he stayed where he was, his silence more unnerving than any amount of triumphant gloating would have been. I felt his eyes probing and I pressed my legs together in a futile attempt to hide myself from his gaze.

I squirmed as I imagined Peter outside, unhurriedly examining each little birch sapling, knowing that every minute was an eternity for me. It was made so much worse by the shame of being left here with the man I’d wronged. Beads of perspiration welled on my forehead and a droplet trickled down my face as I stood there in disgrace. The passage of time was excruciating, but the dread of knowing what would happen when Peter returned was even worse.

Back home I had the ticking grandfather clock to mark the crawling minutes while I waited for punishment. Here I couldn’t make out even the hint of a wristwatch. My arms were beginning to ache from the position. I shifted nervously and my guardian cleared his throat.

‘Keep still, little girl,’ he said, each word a sharp little barb in my wounded pride.

As if mirroring my desolation, spatters of rain began to fall on my little wooden prison. Before long it was a proper downpour and I pictured the churchgoers scrambling in out of the rain. It brought Peter back as well, but that was little comfort. The rain only ensured that we would have total privacy.

‘Was she good?’ Peter asked.

After a cruel pause my jailer announced, ‘A little restive, but she stayed where you put her.’

‘Ah, very good.’

I didn’t know who that comment was directed at, but I didn’t care. I focused all my attention on the rain pounding down on the roof of the shed, praying it would last, praying it would stop. I had no idea which was the lesser of evils. There was no prospect that Peter would spare me if someone were to barge in. But the longer the three of us were trapped out here, the longer my sentence would be.

At last he said, ‘You can come out now, Angie.’

I turned to face him, wincing at the pain in my shoulders as I lowered my arms. No use playing it up; it wouldn’t earn me any sympathy.

Peter held up two switches – long and supple and stripped of their leaves. ‘From two different saplings,’ he explained. ‘Perhaps one will be more effective than the other.’

To my dismay, he handed one of the switches to his new friend, who immediately swished it through the air and nodded appreciatively. I looked at the floor.

With a sigh Peter lifted my chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing me to meet his eyes. ‘Now. You know you were a naughty girl,’ he said softly, ‘and you know you deserved to be punished.’

I covered my face and Peter gently peeled my hands away.

‘I am only going to give you six. And then this gentleman is going to give you six. You will count them and say “thank

you, sir” after each one. When we have finished you will apologise to him for your childish antics. If we believe you’re sincere, the matter will be forgiven. Now let’s get this over with. Bend over and touch your toes for me.’

His tone was patronising but loving and it was always my undoing. It made me feel like a child, safe and guided. I could seek refuge in a place where all my misdeeds could be corrected with corporal punishment, the slate wiped clean. Nothing in my adult life was ever as certain and there was a strange comfort in the inevitability of his discipline.

I obeyed and Peter took up a position to my left, laying the switch against my bottom. He gave me one light tap before drawing back. I braced myself, pressing my fingertips against my shoes as he whipped the switch down sharply. A line of fire blazed across both cheeks, tearing an agonised cry from my throat.

My hands flew behind me to clutch my bottom and I panted for breath, struggling to regain my composure. Eventually the sting began to dissipate and I got control of myself.

‘One. Thank you, sir.’

The second stroke fell as soon as I was back in position, wrenching the words from me. ‘Two - oww! Thank you, sir.’

Number three was the hardest yet and I bit back a little scream, my knees wobbling unsteadily and my hands wavering for balance. But I got hold of myself and counted.

‘Three. Thank you, sir.’

He didn’t torture me by making me wait long between strokes and I did my best to make him proud of me. I locked my legs and breathed deeply as the pain of each burning stripe pulsed like fire throughout my skin.

‘Four,’ I gasped. ‘Th-thank you, sir.’

Only two more, only two more, I chanted inside my head. Well, only two more from Peter. I still had another six to come from our guest.

The fifth stroke sliced into my bottom and I peered between my legs at the businessman as I counted. His face was impassive, betraying no sadistic delight in my suffering.

‘Five. Thank you, sir.’

I closed my eyes and absorbed the sixth stroke with only a slight shudder.

‘Six,’ I said after a few moments. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Good girl,’ Peter said kindly. ‘Now show me how brave you can be for the last six.’

The men traded places without a word and I waited in the hollow silence, submissively accepting my fate. The businessman didn’t address the target the way Peter had; he merely brought the switch down, striping both cheeks with flawless aim. Had he done this before?

I inhaled sharply as my bottom came alive with fire again. It was excruciating. But I accepted it, embraced it.

I tensed and relaxed, then counted. ‘One. Thank you, sir.’

Again the switch found its mark with admirable precision. I released the breath I’d been holding and counted, letting the pain wash over me, in and around me. I had found the resonance of the pain and it flowed through me like pure energy, transporting me to a place of serenity. I felt the next stroke land and I counted it, but I was somewhere high above the pain now, floating in a zone where time had slowed down.

I felt as if I had stepped outside myself and I watched in blissful fascination as some other girl – not me – was whipped. She stood obediently touching her toes, her school skirt raised and her knickers around her knees, her white knee socks spattered with mud. The Japanese man sliced the length of birch into her bared bottom and she gasped with impossible pain. Or was it impossible pleasure? I couldn’t tell.

In a dreamy voice she counted – four, five ...

'Six. Thank you, sir.'

'Very good, Angie,' Peter said, his voice full of pride. 'You may get up now.'

I drifted slowly back to reality, still dazed as I rose unsteadily from my position. Peter embraced me fiercely and I blinked away tears as my arms limply tried to return the hug.

Then he held me at arm's length and his face grew serious again. 'Are you ready to apologise now?'

I nodded meekly.

Turning to the businessman, I bowed my head in a gesture of true humility, tears pricking my eyes. 'I'm very sorry, sir,' I said softly. 'I hope you feel I've paid for my behaviour.'

He couldn't suppress a smile as he wrapped his arms around me and told me I was forgiven.

'I think the rain has stopped,' Peter said brightly, 'so we should return to our selection. Tell me, Angie - which one of these was more effective?'

I blushed, gingerly pulling my knickers up over my scorched bottom. I smoothed my skirt down and gave him a pouty look.

'If I may repay your kindness,' said the businessman with a polite smile, 'take both the trees. With my compliments. Prune them regularly and I'm sure they'll flourish.'

At our surprised expressions he added, 'My supplier keeps me well stocked.'

The Good Old Days

'IT'S POSITIVELY VILE!'

Amelia wrinkled her nose in disgust. She lifted the pleated grey skirt with two fingers and dropped it onto the desk like a dead rat. 'I'm not wearing it.' She folded her arms across her chest, signalling an end to any further discussion.

The bookish woman behind the desk adjusted her glasses and gave a polite little cough. She lifted the phone and dialled a sequence of numbers while Amelia waited huffily.

'Mr Chandos? It's Miss North here. Sorry to trouble you, but I wonder if I could impose on you to come to my office? We have a ...' She glanced up at Amelia, then back down at the desk. 'Situation. Yes, very good. Thank you.'

Miss North rang off and gestured expansively for Amelia to sit in one of the chairs opposite the desk. 'Mr Chandos is on his way. You may speak to him about your complaint.'

'Thank you,' Amelia said with excruciating politeness.

She sat down, feeling a minor triumph already at the extra attention. Yes, she'd signed a contract and yes, she'd agreed to sacrifice a little glamour for the sake of authenticity. But the uniform was a step too far. The housemates on *Big Brother* got to wear their own clothes; why couldn't the participants in this show wear their own school uniforms? Amelia was proud of the subtle alterations she'd made to hers, so that it set off her shapely figure. But in the drab grey monstrosity Miss North had given her, she'd look like an evacuee from the Second World War.

Mr Chandos arrived and Amelia rose to greet him. He was younger than she'd been expecting - mid-forties, she guessed. She had imagined a crusty old buzzard of a headmaster, but the man in the crisp white shirt was darkly handsome.

'The young lady has a complaint about the uniform,' said Miss North in a patronising tone. 'She refuses to wear it.'

Amelia ignored her, giving Mr Chandos her sweetest smile. 'It's only that it's so unflattering for TV. I'm sure you understand.'

'Yes, I understand,' he said pleasantly. 'We're going to be recreating the school environment of the 1950s. Authentic uniforms are an essential part of the atmosphere.'

It was a tone he might have used to impart some dry historical fact - the date of a battle perhaps.

'Look, I realise what you're trying to do here and I'm being perfectly reasonable.'

'Miss Rutherford, it's quite straightforward.' His tone was sharper now. 'Either you wear the proper uniform of Queen Mary's College or you will not be a part of the show.'

Amelia's eyes flashed. She desperately wanted to be on TV, even on a silly reality show like *The Good Old Days*. The whole point was exposure and a shot at fame. But to imagine her friends seeing her in such a horrid uniform ... no make-up ... To say nothing of the film directors who might see the show ...

'Oh, bother!' she said at last, her mouth set in a resentful pout. She snatched the hateful garments from the woman's desk and stalked off to find the dormitory.

Mr Chandos smiled knowingly.

The Good Old Days was the show everyone had been waiting for. A social experiment on the effectiveness of school discipline. Twenty pupils had agreed to spend six weeks in a recreated 1950s school, subject to 1950s discipline.

The theme had been explored before with modern students eating Spam fritters and languishing under the archaic 'chalk and talk' teaching regime. However, the authenticity had been severely compromised by the lack of corporal punishment - a famously prevalent feature of any such education in 'the good old days'. Critics had derided the concept of a post-war English school giving timeouts instead of canings for bad behaviour.

Mr Chandos intended to rectify that. His 1950s establishment would be authentic in every respect - especially the most vital one. And his guinea pigs knew exactly what they were getting into. They were all of legal age. They had signed consent forms and agreed to enter into the spirit of the thing. They would not be harmed or damaged - merely treated to the same punishment regime enjoyed by previous generations. They all seemed to think it was a small price to pay for being on TV.

Amelia stood glaring at her reflection. The shapeless grey blazer, the heavy woollen skirt, the itchy knee socks - all of it conspired to make her look fat. This was supposed to be her big break. Her big shot at fame. But the uniform!

The creature in the mirror looked like a nightmare version of herself. Her flaxen plaits were like wilted daffodils, and without make-up, the harsh fluorescent lights brought her every imperfection into sharp relief. The straw boater was an indignity, but the knickers were the ultimate humiliation. An atrocity in thick bottle-green cotton, they came up to her navel and pinched around the top of each thigh. She'd never even worn *shorts* that covered so much, let alone underwear. It was too awful!

She reached for her mobile phone before remembering that she'd handed it in along with all her other 'modern' items. For six weeks she would have access to nothing that wasn't available in the schools of the 1950s. She was

already feeling the ache of withdrawal and it had only been twenty minutes.

'Hi! Cool uniforms, huh? I love the boater!'

Amelia stared glumly at the new arrival – a pale girl with mousy brown hair and glasses. The dreadful uniform suited her perfectly.

'I'm Lisa Jennings,' she chirped. 'You must be Amelia Rutherford. They said you were already up here. I'm so excited – are you? I mean, it'll be like going back in time!'

Amelia cringed as the girl prattled on.

'People say they had like, better teachers back then and that our parents got a better education than we're getting. I can't wait to see how different it all is.'

'I read the mission statement too,' Amelia snapped, still glowering at herself in the mirror.

Lisa positioned herself next to Amelia and gazed with childlike wonderment at their reflections. 'Hey, don't be sad,' she said. 'It's like an escape from the pressures of the modern world. No email, no Internet. Things were so much simpler back then.'

Did the girl always talk like that? Perhaps she'd been raised by motivational speakers – and not very good ones at that.

'I'll be fine,' Amelia said, deciding to put on a game face. 'Just wish I could text my boyfriend. I'll have to see if I can find out where they took our stuff and sneak in to get it.'

Lisa looked betrayed. 'But that's like, going against the whole spirit of the show. The idea is for us to experience life without all of that.'

Was she for real? 'Reality' TV wasn't about reality; it was about TV. No one would do it if there wasn't an audience. Keira Knightley might wear a corset in some period costume drama, but between takes she'd be drinking double lattes in her air-conditioned trailer with her iPod and all the comforts of the twenty-first century.

'The cameras are certainly authentic,' Amelia said, nodding towards the open doorway where a man stood filming them. She wiggled her fingers at the lens. 'Hi, Mum!'

Lisa ducked away shyly and headed off down the corridor where Amelia could hear her infecting the new arrivals with her perkiness.

Things got off to a smooth enough start and the pupils quickly overcame their self-consciousness about the role play. After a couple of days of hamming it up and showing off to each other, they began to settle into the 1950s routine. They were roused at dawn each morning for breakfast, morning assembly, and then the most tedious lessons Amelia had ever endured. Lunch was barely edible. Games were a joke. And after a vile dinner they were expected to do prep for two hours before going to bed.

Amelia got on well enough with the other girls, most of whom weren't boarders at their own schools and were soon homesick. A couple of them were frightfully common and Amelia couldn't help but grimace at their regional accents, but she was still friendly towards them. The whole country was watching, after all.

Darcy Pickthorn, from Cheltenham Ladies' College, was made Head Girl, much to Amelia's chagrin; she had wanted the position for herself. She found a friend in Hedy Lyttelton-Cole, though, a boarder from Gordonstoun. They shared class notes and helped each other study.

The boys were generally a scruffy lot and the only one Amelia found appealing was Edward Gascoigne, whose movie-star looks almost made her forget his impenetrable Geordie accent.

In class they were segregated - boys on one side, girls on the other. And they had all been taken aback by the bizarre teaching style in this ancient regime. One day Mr Franklin had whacked an inattentive boy across the back of