

Chapter One

Jonathan Cummings was in his cubicle drinking coffee from his flask. No, it wasn't what he was used to; six months ago, it would have been his favourite Columbian roast made from the finest beans in South America at £5 a cup. How life's fortunes can change in a blink of an eye. He missed the coffee shop; though it was more than that; a meeting place with other Forex dealers, chewing the cud, swapping gossip, that kind of stuff.

The instant coffee tasted bitter, an insult to his palate; he was a victim of circumstance, he shouldn't be here. The acrimony he felt was more than the gustatory sensation of his coffee; a scapegoat that's what he was, the fall guy who was left without a chair when the music stopped.

The pressure to hit targets was incessant. His bonus, and that of his boss, depended on it, but he wasn't the only one hiding a substantial exposure on forward contracts. He knew it would come good; he just needed a little time; some breathing space. Sleepless night after sleepless night; the worry, the anxiety; his family wondering what was wrong, but he wouldn't discuss it; just a work problem he would say.

It was six months to the day when his world came crashing down; a dreary day, the first week after the Christmas break, early January. He took another sip of his coffee and grimaced.

It was a Monday he recalled, about the same time of day; cold and dreary. The dark morning commute had been horrendous; he'd had to stand much of the way. His desk phone rang.

"Can you come into the office, Jonathan?"

Like a royal summons, the Head of Operations, Karl Heinemann.

Straightaway, he was on alert; Heinemann was not one to call you in for idle chit-chat. Jonathan made his way down the corridor. It was eerily quiet as he walked past the pods of the back-office team. Faces looked up from their computers and watched his movements, like the crowd at Wimbledon following a tennis ball. To Jonathan it felt more like riding a tumbrel to his execution. Heinemann's office wasn't grand or anything, more a meeting room where the Head of Operations had taken up permanent residence.

Three sides of the room were glass, making it feel like a goldfish bowl. The door was open; Heinemann was adjusting the blinds, turning the shiny metal controls that in a flash changed the ambience of the room from an airy space to a claustrophobic prison. The strip lights were spreading an illumination that cast no shadows.

There were no formalities. "Sit down," said Heinemann.

There was a single standard chrome office chair with black leatherette covering in front of the desk. Jonathan complied. Heinemann went to the other side of the desk and took his place. Jonathan looked at him; a thick-set man with short blond curly hair, his square jaw redolent of his Germanic ancestry, an imposing figure. There was a laptop open on his desk. Jonathan started to shake.

"What's the meaning of this?" Heinemann said, and turned the screen around for Jonathan to see. It showed details of Jonathan's trading logs.

"What?" asked Jonathan.

"Your trading book... the level of exposure is substantially in excess of the intraday limits."

"I can explain," said Jonathan.

Then suddenly the room started closing in, suffocating him; he couldn't breathe. He could see Heinemann staring at him looking for the promised explanation, but the words couldn't come out. It was incoherent.

"Have you been drinking?" asked Heinemann.

"It's all ding dong," said Jonathan, then he collapsed. The chair fell to one side as Jonathan grovelled on the floor trying to get up. Tears started rolling down his face, uncontrollable. The sobs became convulsions as weeks and weeks of constant pressure surfaced.

Heinemann was at a loss. He went to the door of his office and called for some help. The first-aider from the back-office processing department was called. Jonathan was now on the floor curled up in a ball in the corner still sobbing.

“You better call an ambulance,” said Charlene Harper, the in-house first responder, who was totally out of her depth.

By the time the paramedics arrived Jonathan appeared to be hallucinating and calling for his deceased mother. He was eventually sedated and taken away in an ambulance.

Jonathan’s present recollection of the incident was pretty much zero. He remembered ‘waking up’ in hospital, the drugs they had pumped into him had kicked in and he started to become more lucid; he was keen to get back to work. Instead, he was referred to a psychiatric unit and prescribed a course of treatment. The days turned into six weeks.

Back at the bank, the audit team conducted a review of his contracts and the extent of the exposure became all too apparent. The internal investigation was thorough, as was to be expected following the financial crisis of 2008; regulation was tighter everywhere now. His supervisor was questioned. She complained that she had been hood-winked; that Jonathan had covered up the indebtedness by underhand methods, whatever that meant, and escaped censure. It was Jonathan who would take the can, one for the team.

At his disciplinary hearing, he pleaded his case well enough with his union rep; he was no Nick Leeson, the rogue trader that took down Barings; two million was nothing to a company the size of Crèdite Général, one of the largest investment banks in the world. He’d earned that amount in two trades the previous year. In the end, a deal was struck; he would not face criminal charges and would be given a financial package that would cushion the blow of his departure, at least in the short term. The company could not afford the publicity of one of their dealers suffering burn-out or behaving recklessly; it would adversely affect confidence the director had said.

Jonathan signed the deal, no publicity; he would go quietly with a monthly pension and lump sum.

What Jonathan didn’t expect was the fall out. At forty-five, he was no way a spent force; he would soon find something. In his reflective moments at the bank, when the pressure was greatest, he always envisaged a new career, something that would make the most of his many talents, away from the rat-race, somewhere

on the coast, a fish restaurant perhaps. He would show them; those bastards that had driven him into the ground.

Lynn, his wife of fifteen years, had other ideas; she enjoyed the lifestyle that went with a six-figure bonus. It was the day after the hearing in early March at breakfast; Jonathan winced at the memory. “What am I going to tell my friends?” she said. “Now you’re out of a job.”

Their two, early-teenage, children were wrestling with a cornflake packet. “Joshua, put that down. Let your sister finish her breakfast,” admonished Lynn.

“Tell them what you want,” Jonathan reposted.

“But what will we do? I’m not moving; this is my home; I’ve got my friends here.”

“I’ll get another job,” said Jonathan defiantly.

“Not in the City, not with your track record, and certainly not with the money you were earning.”

“I’ll find something. There’ll be dozens of places looking out for someone with my background.”

“A burned-out city trader? I don’t think so,” said Lynn mockingly.

“Well maybe you could get a job,” said Jonathan. Unfortunately, he recognised straightaway that was like lighting a touch paper.

“I don’t think so... I’ve got a job, looking after the kids.”

“What!? They’re at school all day. That’s not a job.”

“I have commitments.”

“Yeah, coffee mornings and luncheon clubs.”

“They’re my friends,” said Lynn. “And what about my Evoque...? What’re you going to do about that?”

“We’ll have to sell it,” replied Jonathan. The children had left the kitchen where breakfast was always eaten; they could tell the signs.

“Why should I have to put up with all this because of your inadequacies?” she shouted at him.

“Don’t worry; I’ll have to get rid of the Porsche as well.”

Jonathan had only recently come to terms that he would lose his precious Nine-Eleven.

“And how am I supposed to get around?”

“You’ll have to buy a cheaper one.”

“So, I’m going to be driving around in a fucking Cleo, is that it?”

“I don’t know, but we are going have to economise.”

“Shit, that’s all we need,” said Lynn and went to chase the children for the school run.

That was the start of the downward spiral.

Jonathan took another sip of his coffee and checked his phone. Out of habit he opened the app which relayed commodity prices. He flicked through; gold, tin, copper all up; metals doing well, always a good sign. He made a mental note then realised it was superfluous information; he wouldn’t be needing it, not today, not ever. The feeling of resentment returned.

She had of course been right; a month of trawling the agencies and internet recruiters, resulted in a big fat zero. The days of unlimited opportunities were long gone; it was a young man’s game now.

His days were long; when he wasn’t job-hunting, he would go to the library or down to the local supermarket browsing the shelves and watching the people, mostly single mums and old-age pensioners who had nothing else better to do with their lives. The anti-depressant tablets he’d been prescribed were keeping the worst of the demons away, but he couldn’t shake off the feeling of anger. Someone should pay for his predicament; someone should pay.

His marriage was in freefall; the cracks in the relationship had already started to appear before Jonathan's breakdown due to his long hours and constant mood swings. The arguments, the verbal battle for supremacy, were unceasing and added to his stress levels; there was no respite. Any dialogue now was littered with innuendos and expletives. The children were rarely out of their bedrooms once they had returned from school. He had no idea what they were going through.

A school caretaker's job was not so bad; a month in and it was going ok; the head-teacher seemed to be pleased enough.

He recounted the recruitment.

Eunice Riley was strictly 'old-school'. She insisted on being called 'Miss Riley' by the staff as well as the pupils, and ruled her roost with a rod of iron. A short woman with close-cropped bleach-blonde hair, she enjoyed power. She lived in the Drive close to Jonathan and Lynn with her partner Una Macy, a manager in the Education Department of the local council.

Jonathan also knew her from the Resident's Association where he was, naturally enough, treasurer. She was the chair and quite a formidable presence; her contra-temps with the local council were the stuff of legends. She would read out her letters to the authorities at committee meetings, often to hoots of laughter from the members, and the grovelling replies from 'some illiterate minion' as she would call them; everything from road gritting to dog-fouling, she was a habitual complainer. Jonathan, in lighter moments, had often said he thought the council had set up a special department just to deal with Eunice Riley.

It was at the May meeting when Jonathan noticed Eunice chatting to one of the other committee members and made eye contact. Straight away she broke off her conversation and walked over to him.

"Hello Jonathan, have you got fixed up yet...?" There was a blank look from Jonathan.

"With work," clarified Eunice.

"Er, no, nothing yet," said Jonathan.

“Oh, that’s good, only I have a vacancy at the school and I thought you might be interested. Not long term of course, but it might help things until you find something more permanent.”

“Yes, I could be what is it?”

“It’s an admin post, I need someone with good organisational skills, and, as you know, we’ve always been impressed with your work as Treasurer with the Association.” Eunice spoke quickly as if trying to hide something.

“Sounds interesting... what would I be doing?”

“It’s a very important role... We need someone to take over from Jim... Aitcheson; he’s retiring through ill health.”

“But he’s the caretaker,” said Jonathan with a hint of disdain.

“Quite,” said Eunice. “But he’s been doing the job for twenty years, and we need someone to widen the remit, particularly with things like health and safety. Ofsted take a keen interest in that area these days, it’s very important that we get it right. It’s not like the old days when it was just tidying around and locking up; it’s far more important. We think of it more as a ‘site-manager’.”

Jonathan was still trying to take in the implications. There was something about the school caretaker role which he didn’t find particularly palatable, but on a temporary basis, it would at least get him out of the house; he was starting to crawl up the wall with boredom.

“Well... ok, yes, thank you,” said Jonathan.

“Oh, that’s so good... I’ve already spoken to the Governors and mentioned you, and they seemed quite keen for me to offer you the post without any formalities. I told them I would be seeing you tonight. It will save a lot of time advertising and interviewing, not to mention the cost. Never could stand all this recruitment business.” She raised her eyebrows in confirmation.

Eunice looked at Jonathan. “Shall we say Monday...? Pop in tomorrow and we can sort out all the security and criminal record formalities.”

“Yes great,” said Jonathan and Eunice walked away to engage with others in her flock.

Lynn walked into the hall a few minutes later; she was not ready when Jonathan wanted to leave the house. She walked up to him at the urn where the coffees and teas were dispensed.

“Would you like a drink?” he said, trying to keep up some pretence in public.

She was wearing a light-weight jacket which she took off and folded into her arms.

“Yes, go on, I’ll have a coffee,” said Lynn.

“Guess what...” said Jonathan, as he poured water into a plastic coup. “I’ve got a new job.”

“That’s great,” said Lynn. “What is it?”

Jonathan spooned in a measure of coffee and a spot of milk, without making eye contact.

“Working at the school... Eunice has just asked if I would be interested and I said ‘yes’... At least I’ll be out from under your feet.” He handed her the drink.

“Yes, thank goodness... What will you be doing?” asked Lynn.

“It’s a new role... ‘site manager’,” said Jonathan.

“What does that entail?” said Lynn, taking her first sip of coffee.

“Don’t know precisely. Eunice is going to go over the job description with me next Monday. She’s asked me to start then.”

“That’s all very sudden,” observed Lynn.

“Yes, Jim Aitcheson is leaving.”

“What, Jim Aitcheson...? Isn’t he the caretaker?” said Lynn.

“Err, yes,” said Jonathan, forgetting that Lynn would know probably be aware of his name from some of the neighbours whose kids attended Glen Park.

She stared at him with a mix of horror and disbelief. “So, you’re going to be the new caretaker... Fuck, that’s all I need,” she said and walked away to chat to other neighbours.

Jonathan passed the vetting process and was duly installed as ‘Site-manager’, the new job title, of Glen Park High School.

Jim Aitcheson was available to show him the ropes for the first few days. He had his own ‘office’ suitably annotated ‘Caretaker’. Jim called it his ‘cubicle’ as it better resembled that description; it was barely big enough for the two of them. Jonathan would never forget his first introduction to the cubicle. “I thought it was a broom cupboard,” he joked with Jim, who seemed somewhat offended. The lack of space wasn’t helped by the large amount of clutter which Jonathan would clear as soon as he was in residence.

The hand-over was straightforward enough; just a question of going through the routines, but during conversation Jonathan was staggered to hear that Jim had been diagnosed with work-related stress.

“Between you and me, I’ve been in touch with one of those compo people,” he told Jonathan, as they made one of their rounds. “They think I might have a good case.”

Jonathan was at a loss to understand where there could possibly be anything remotely stressful about the job, but then when you have been used to dealing with million-dollar trades involving split second decisions... It was all relative.

Wednesday was Jim’s last day, and there was a presentation in the staff room after classes.

Glen Park High was a much sort-after school, regularly achieving ‘outstanding’ status in their various inspections. It had around seventy teaching staff plus another fifty-odd assistants and administrators supporting nine hundred and fifty students aged between thirteen and eighteen. The sixth-form was heralded as ‘a fine example’ of twenty-first century education, according to the last Ofsted report with University entry at ninety-five percent. The school’s reputation undoubtedly was an influence on house prices in its immediate catchment area.

Despite Glen Park's reputation, Lynn had decided on a different school for Joshua and Ayesha. "You get all sorts there," she said, when they were choosing the children's education. There was a smaller school on the east side of town, St Aidan's, which she thought was more exclusive and not much further to travel. "They have proper uniforms," was her convincing argument to persuade Jonathan.

Jonathan didn't attend the presentation, but waited in the office for Jim to get back and collect his things.

It was four o'clock by the time Jim returned from having received accolades from the Head-Teacher and good wishes from the staff.

"They got me this," he said proudly, and showed Jonathan an E-reader. "Always wanted one of these; come in really useful for my holidays. We do a lot of walking, me and Dora."

"That's great," said Jonathan feigning a genuine interest in the gift and accompanying 'Sorry You're Leaving' card.

Jim collected his bits and pieces and put them in a plastic supermarket carrier bag.

"Right, I'll be off then," he said and offered his hand to Jonathan.

"Good luck," said Jonathan.

"You too," said Jim. "You're gonna need it."

Jonathan looked in surprise.

"Just be careful, some of the girls are a bit... You'll see," said Jim, and Jonathan watched as he opened the office door and walked out, looking, Jonathan thought, like a relieved man.

Jonathan sat for a moment considering Jim's comments. Then looked around his new domain; he would make changes. Momentarily he felt a sense of motivation; alright he was on a tenth of his former salary, but it was not about the money, there was an opportunity here and at last he felt 'useful' again. The de-cluttering exercise started.

Tonight, he would be leaving at six, although some nights, if there was a Governor's meeting or sports function, for instance, he would be required to work overtime he'd been warned.

Jonathan completed his rounds and pushed his newly-acquired bike through the main entrance. The cleaners would arrive shortly and would oversee securing the building after they had finished.

With the school being less than a mile from his house, he had replaced his beloved Porsche with a mountain bike. He would be home in just over five minutes. Lynn's Clio was on the drive. There had been a great deal of resistance to selling the Range Rover. The Evoque was the result of the previous year's bonus and Jonathan had presented the keys to Lynn on Christmas Day. Seeing her face light up was worth the fifty-thousand pound price tag. It was her pride and joy and a regular conversation piece among her friends who, she had told Jonathan, were incredibly jealous at her good fortune. Those friends were almost certainly mocking her now as her world was beginning to fall to pieces.

It's no coincidence that the most affluent areas in UK cities tend to lie in the western suburbs. The prevailing winds predominate from the west and in the industrial revolution with factories spewing out their smoke and fumes, the wealthy built their homes on the side away from the dust and grime that permeated the air eastwards. Middleton is such a place; a typically picturesque Oxfordshire town and just an hour's commute from London.

Jonathan and Lynn Cummings moved away from their Notting Hill flat as the children started growing and they needed more space; that was over ten years ago. With Jonathan's job and his substantial salary Lynn was able to look after the children full time.

Glen Park is a much sort-after suburb in a much sort-after town and the Cummings moved into Ash Tree Rise, a small cul-de-sac just off Glen Park Drive. The Drive is really a small private estate guarded by two stone pillars at the entrance. Large '20 MPH' signs, mostly ignored, are appended to each pillar. The road is less than a mile in length and runs up a steep incline. At the top, there is a private nursing home for elderly people with lots of money. As well as Ash Tree Rise, there are two other smaller cul-de-sacs, that

branch off, about seventy properties in total; all individual, all very expensive, and all contributing annual fees to the Glen Park Drive Residents' Association.

Jonathan parked his bike in the double garage and opened the inner door which led to the 'wet' room where the washing machine and freezer was located, then to the kitchen.

The family were sat eating their dinner.

"Hi Dad," said Joshua.

"Hi Dad," said Ayesha.

"Hi guys," replied Jonathan. "How was your day?"

"They're being bullied," said Lynn, before either had had chance to answer.

"What do you mean, 'bullied'?" said Jonathan, his face etched with concern.

"According to Ayesha, her FaceBook page is being bombarded with horrible comments about her Dad being a caretaker," replied Lynn.

"Just ignore them," said Jonathan. "They'll soon get fed up with it... Anyway, it's site-manager now."

"Well, it's alright for you," said Ayesha.

Jonathan could see her anguish. "Yes, I know... but when things get tough, you find out who your real friends are. Just concentrate on them."

This unsurprisingly failed to placate her. Lynn gave him a caustic look.

"I don't know why you're looking at me like that. At least I've got a job," said Jonathan.

"Is that what you call it?" said Lynn.

He ignored the comment and left the family to get changed hoping that the atmosphere would improve by the time he returned.

Strangely, the job had proved to be a lifeline to Jonathan, giving him much needed structure to his day. The old 'caretaker' notice on his office had been replaced with his new title of 'site-manager' which did give him slightly more kudos.

Between leaving the bank and taking up the job, he had spent time sorting out the family finances to try and get them on an even keel, but it was an uphill struggle. He had sold both the cars and paid off some of the mortgage to reduce the repayments. There was however still a monthly shortfall despite his bank pension, which, in the short term, he would finance from his pay-off. By his calculations, it would give him a breathing space of less than a year. Lynn did get her Clio, much to the delight of some of her friends. It was second-hand, the final insult.

He re-focused and took another sip of his coffee. His hands were shaking, a left-over from his breakdown. The trembling caused his drink to drip from his mug and dropped onto his jeans. "Shit!" he exclaimed as the hot liquid reached his skin. He dabbed the resultant damp patch with a tissue.

Having finished the first coffee of the day, he wiped the flask's plastic cup with the same tissue and screwed it back in its place ready for his next break at eleven. He threw the soiled tissue in his waste-paper bin then held out his hand in front of him and concentrated hard until the shaking gradually stopped.

It was eight-thirty and time to do his first round of the premises; just a cursory check to ensure there were no health and safety issues. Vandalism wasn't rife, but not unknown; bins being upturned was a favourite. This morning there were no such problems. All the doors to the building had been unlocked and staff and pupils were arriving in droves.

He was about to walk out of the main entrance to check the perimeter when he noticed three sixth-formers walking towards him. A striking, tall blonde flanked by two friends, arm in arm; one, dark hair, the other ginger and bookish-looking. He had seen them walking around the school a few times; they appeared inseparable. The doorway was not wide enough for four people to pass through and Jonathan did the chivalrous thing and stopped to let them enter. As they approached him, Blondie looked at Jonathan; it was not a comfortable stare and she appeared to lick her lips. Her friends found it funny and they giggled

loudly. He looked around after they had walked past and blondie also turned; she appeared to blow him a kiss; there were more giggles. He turned back quickly and shook his head. Maybe he was mistaken, but for a moment, the thought unsettled him.

He completed his early-morning tour and returned to his cubicle still worrying about his encounter with the blonde. He had brought in his laptop from home and had already programmed a work schedule which had really impressed Eunice Riley. "I don't think Jim knew one end of a computer to another," she said when Jonathan showed her his handiwork. He checked his log which detailed the various jobs he had to complete, and ticked off the first event; then shut his laptop. He was still getting used to his jeans and trainers as his work uniform. After years of power-dressing, it was strange; but on a steaming hot summer's day, it was welcome.

He checked his watch again; the twenty-thousand-pound Rolex he'd bought with his first bonus from the jewellers in Canary Wharf. Incongruous, of course, for a site-manager and he knew he would have to sell it sooner or later, but for now it represented success, reminding him of what he was capable of achieving.

By eleven o'clock, he'd repaired one of the door handles to the staff common room that had come loose and had taken a break for another coffee; it was time to check the boiler-room. It was not for any heating requirements; it was over twenty-three degrees outside, just a routine security check. He collected his shoulder bag of keys and wrapped it around his neck. It was another health and safety requirement; he could not just put them in his pocket. He walked down the corridor from his office and through the back access to the school which led to the playground and school field.

The boiler-room was in an adjoining block, one of several buildings he was overseeing. The main academic centre was on two floors; the sixth-form college stretched the whole of the top floor and housed six class-rooms and a common room. As he walked towards the next block he could see the thirteen-year-olds in the ground floor rooms being put through their paces by their teachers. On the top floor at the end of the block was the sixth-form common room. Jonathan was deep in thought as usual, but he was suddenly distracted by three girls peering through the window at him. He recognised them straight away; it was blondie and her two friends. Without any warning blondie pulled open her blouse and lifted up her

bra. There were howls of laughter from the girls and Jonathan hurriedly looked away and quickened his stride, wondering what to do.

He reached the room that housed the heating system and tapped in the four-digit entry code to unlock the door. Apart from the admin office where the central records were kept, he was the only person with knowledge of the code allowing access to this area. He went inside and stood for a moment with his hands on his knees. He was shaking again. It was not a large room, dominated by the industrial-sized gas boiler in the centre with pipes snaking out to all areas of the school. Jonathan went through the routines, checking the display readings, making sure the various warning notices were intact. It was a subliminal action; his mind was elsewhere.

The shock of the boob-flashing was eating into his head. Why would she do that, he was asking himself. He couldn't report them, it would be only his word against theirs; perhaps it was just mischief. The picture though, was etched into his sub-conscious; the breasts, full, round and, in different circumstances, very inviting.

He started some deep breathing as prescribed by his psychiatrist during his treatment period, and his heart-rate gradually returned to normal. He composed himself and left the boiler-room to complete his pre-lunch check which, fortunately, did not require him to pass the sixth-form block.

The rest of the day passed without incident; that was until around quarter to four, just before he was about to leave on his final building round, when there was a call to his mobile from the deputy head. One of the female toilets had become blocked and was overflowing. He wasn't sure if unblocking lavatories was in his job description, but, in the absence of anyone else, he took up the challenge without question.

The toilet concerned was on the ground floor next to the stairs that led up to the sixth-form area in the main block. Jonathan thought nothing of it and made his way the short distance carrying his key bag. He knocked on the door.

“Hello, maintenance... is there anyone in there?” he shouted.

He paused for a moment to give anyone inside a chance to answer, and then slowly pushed open the door. “Hello, maintenance,” he repeated, and looked around; it was empty. There were five stalls in this

particular facility and sure enough he could see the middle stall was full to the brim with water. He retrieved his keys from his bag and opened the closet in the corner which housed a mop, bucket and other cleaning materials. This was the domain of the regular cleaners.

He retrieved a fold up yellow plastic sign from the back of the cupboard which said 'Closed - Maintenance in Progress'. He placed it outside the entrance to the toilet, and went back in to check the problem.

He could see straight away that the lavatory bowl had been filled with toilet paper and sanitary towels causing the obstruction. He went back to the closet and found a packet of protective gloves and put them on, then took the mop and went back to the flooded stall. He gradually cleared the bowl of the blockage and flushed; sorted. Jonathan felt a sense of achievement and looked proudly at his efforts. He disposed of the soggy paper from the toilet in the rubbish bin and mopped around. He was putting the mop and bucket back in the cleaners' closet when he could hear giggling outside and suddenly three girls walked in.

"Sorry girls, the toilets are out of order; didn't you see the notice...? You'll have to use the ones in reception," said Jonathan sternly.

"Oh, that's a shame... It's such a walk."

It was blondie and her two associates. "We only want to use the mirror to put on our lippy." She pouted seductively.

"Yes, just our lippy," said number two, the ginger.

"My lips are so dry," said the dark-haired third girl, and she began to lick them suggestively.

Jonathan thought for a moment. "Go on then, but be quick, eh...? And watch the floor; it's still wet in places."

He left the toilet momentarily to collect the health and safety notice which was still outside to return it to the closet. As he re-entered the facility, blondie had hitched her skirt up so it was only a couple of inches below her underwear.

"What do you think, Jonny...? Is my skirt too short?"

He just stood there staring, holding the signage in his hand; he wanted to run but his legs wouldn't function.

"Do you think my boyfriend will like it?" Blondie continued. "I think it will turn him on. What do you think, Jonny?"

Jonathan ignored the remark and the sobriquet; he had no idea why she was calling him, 'Jonny', and went to the closet and deposited the sign. He rummaged around in his bag for the key to re-lock it. He was having difficulty in concentrating and his hands were trembling. After a few seconds, he managed to find it and locked the closet. He turned around. Blondie pulled up her skirt further.

"Do you like my knickers, Jonny?" she said. "These are my special ones."

Jonathan walked past the girls, trying to avert his eyes from the delights of the girl's underwear.

"Come on girls... out, or I'll have to report you, and it's Mr Cummings to you," he spluttered unconvincingly.

"Oh, you won't do that, will he Carrie?" said Blondie looking at the dark-haired girl.

"Oh no... We will make your life hell if you do that," said Carrie.

The ginger-haired was chewing gum and blew a large bubble that popped and dragged chewing gum down her chin. She pushed the gum back in her mouth and sucked her fingers lasciviously; not the persona her appearance suggested.

"Ok, enough games, time to go. I need to lock up," said Jonathan, more conciliatory.

"We're just messing around aren't we, Faith?"

"Yes, Sharon... just messing," replied ginger.

"Did you like my tits, earlier," said Sharon, the blonde.

"I don't know what you mean," said Jonathan.

"Oh, you must have seen them... at the window," said Sharon.

“Come on you need to go,” said Jonathan ignoring the remark.

“Would you like to see them again?” said Sharon and she started to unbutton her blouse.

Jonathan ran out of the toilets and walked briskly back to his office. There were fits of giggles coming from the girls’ toilet.

Back in his cubicle he sat on his chair with his head in his hands trying to regain his composure, taking deep breaths again, not knowing what to do. It was gone four o’clock; only the admin staff, who left at five, and a couple of teachers would be about in the block.

It took a few minutes, but gradually he pulled himself together; he needed to complete his rounds of the class rooms. He cautiously left his office, checking left and right to make sure there was no-one about. His final perimeter check would be just before six when the cleaners arrived. He felt anxious wondering whether the girls would still be about. There were a couple of students receiving extra tuition supervised by a bored-looking teaching assistant in one of the rooms; a group of boys on the cricket pitch in the middle of the playing-field being coached by one of the teachers. He was throwing balls at them while they batted them back. There was no sign of the protagonists.

At six o’clock he locked the main entrance and headed home. He had a small rucksack around his shoulders which contained his empty flask, his phone and a Tupperware sandwich-box which had contained his lunch. As he pedalled back, he couldn’t shake off the sight of Sharon’s breasts pressed against the window of the sixth-form common room, and her long legs; he could picture her scanty underwear. He shook his head from side to side as if to expel the thoughts from his brain and out through his ears as if they had some physicality. It didn’t work.

He arrived back at the house; Lynn’s Clio was parked in its usual place on the drive. He removed his safety helmet and wheeled his bike into the garage. He felt sweaty from the journey; it had been a warm day and his shirt stuck to his body. He removed his rucksack and leant his bike against the garage wall. He was about to enter the house when he heard the unmistakable sound of a text alert on his phone. He reached into the bag and retrieved it. He logged in and nearly dropped the phone. The blood rushed from

his face and his hands started shaking violently. He stared at the screen; it was a naked selfie from the neck down, probably taken in the toilets at school judging by the background.

'Sorry you didn't recognise them earlier – here's a reminder,' was the accompanying text. He started hyperventilating and had to wait to control his breathing before going indoors. He was trying to rationalise the situation; where did she get his mobile phone number, he asked himself, but could not come up with an answer.

He would give it some thought; at least he knew who the girls were; he would discuss it with the Head in the morning and sort it out once and for all. He had the evidence on his phone; the number could easily be traced.

Then another text arrived. *'Oh, and don't even think of reporting this or we will make your life hell xx'*. There were various love hearts and other symbols; the message was clear. There would be no discussion with Eunice Riley.

Jonathan sank to his knees. He was so confused; he didn't know how to handle the situation, it was something he had never experienced before. There was no-one who could give him advice, no-one to turn to, no friends he could confide in or talk it through.

His day however was about to get exceedingly worse.