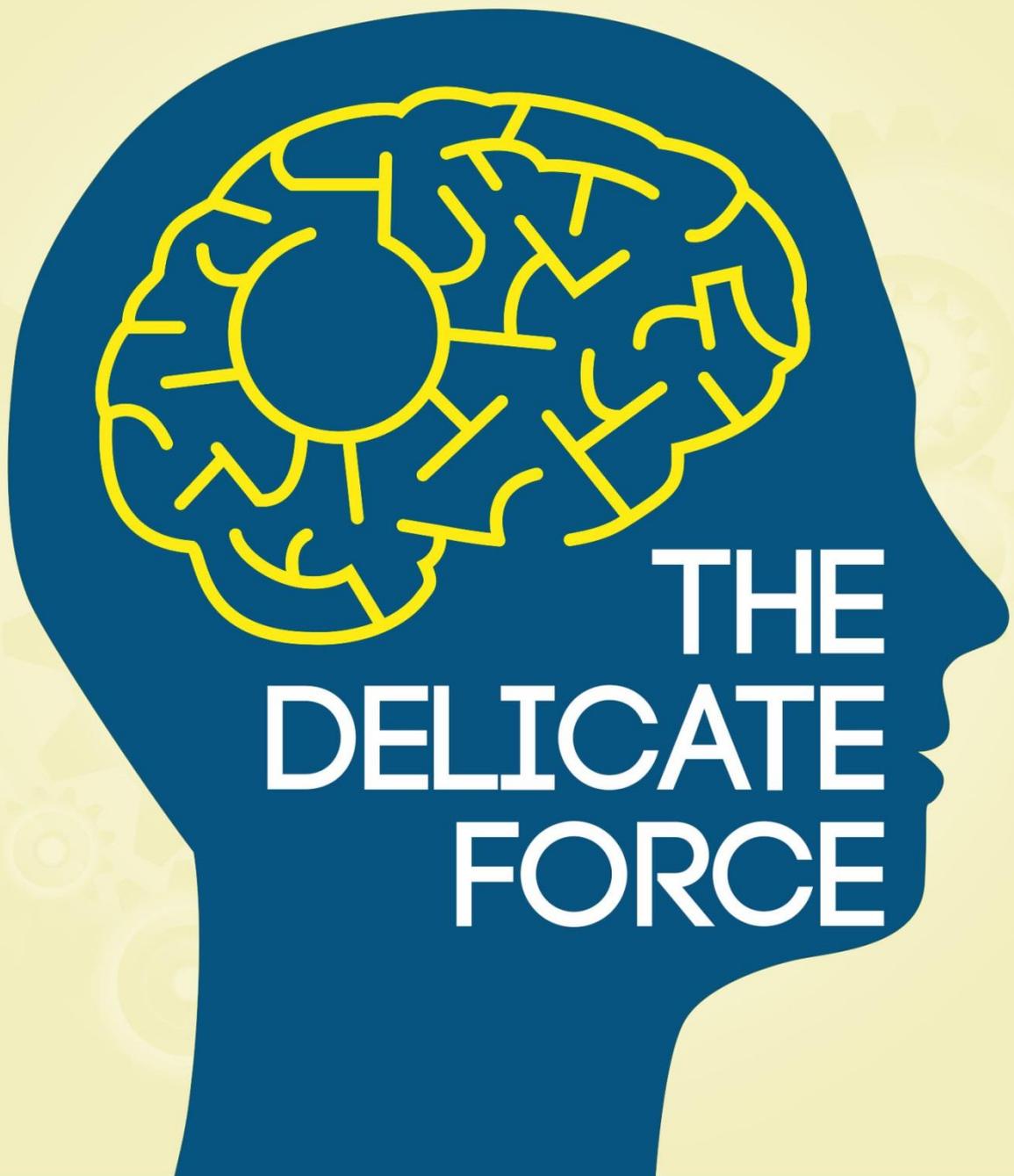


“Each braincell performs a miracle,
hundreds of times every second.”



Chris Thomason

The Delicate Force

Chris Thomason

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Disclaimer

The events, names and activities referenced primarily in the lectures in the story are all real, and wherever possible, search terms have been provided at the end of the book to enable the reader to research these for themselves. All the other characters appearing in this work are fictitious excepting for three — Annalie, Jennifer and Margaret, who appear with their kind permission. Any other resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

To James and Stephanie

And for the unsung hero

Prologue

Brain cells don't have individual names for there are so many of them. However, if Reece Tassicker had wanted to name his brain cells, he might have named them after gods. Because each one performed a miracle, hundreds of times every second.

A perpetual storm raged inside Reece Tassicker's skull as billions of his brain cells each fired off tiny, electrical-impulses to its neighbours. Like most people, he had close to a hundred-billion brain cells, and each was linked to around ten-thousand other brain cells by thin connectors called axons. Each axon had a tiny gap in the middle called a synapse, that the electrical-impulses needed to cross. If the impulse had enough energy to spark across this gap, it continued on its way to the next brain cell, where it was amplified and sent on to other brain cells. If the impulse wasn't powerful enough to cross the synapse, then it would fade into oblivion.

As each brain cell received an incoming electrical-impulse, it instantly decided which of its connections should have that specific impulse forwarded on to them. Sometimes the brain cell would deem just a few-hundred other cells to be worthy recipients. At other times it acted differently, and sent the impulse forward to thousands of neighbouring cells. The moment these next cells received it, they would in turn go through their own instantaneous decision process on how the impulse should be managed.

What caused the cells to decide which of their myriad of neighbours to communicate with, was unknown to science. It was a mysterious force of nature that we all accessed. But it enabled every single thought, for every single person, in every single moment of every single day to occur. It was god-like in its magnificence.

Often, the pattern of brain cells that fired in response to any situation was similar to what had happened previously. As a result, Reece like most others, ended up thinking similar thoughts and doing similar things to what he had always done before in that situation. There were trillions of synapses inside Reece's brain, and many of these tiny gaps had never before been leapt by a spark. They were unused. This meant the two brain cells on either side of the synapse had never communicated with each other. This particular day, at one specific synapse, in a tiny fraction of a second from now, something different was going to happen in Reece Tassicker's brain.

For the previous thirty-seven years of his life, every time an impulse reached this specific synapse, it hadn't enough energy to spark and make the leap across the gap. For some unknown reason, today was a different day. As the impulse, in the form of a simple electrical-charge reached the synapse, the axon released a small spray of electrically-conductive chemicals into the gap, just as it usually did. Today, the impulse had a fraction more charge than ever before, and it was able to spark across the gap and reach the other side of the synapse. It then continued on its way and reached its destination brain cell for the first time.

If this brain cell was capable of individual emotion, it may have displayed an element of surprise, as it had never before received an incoming impulse along this particular axon. It knew exactly what it was supposed to do though, and without any hesitation, it amplified the impulse and sent it out along a different pattern of its own axons. Within this pattern that it selected, there were some other synapses that had never been crossed before, and as the impulse kept being amplified and forwarded by brain cells along the chain, many more previously unused synapses were being crossed for the first time. Within this tiny fraction of a second, the number of Reece's brain cells operating differently reached a critical threshold. And within the storm raging in his brain, a new flash of inspiration occurred.

At that precise moment, Reece Tassicker was in his car driving along the M25 motorway. Reece enjoyed times of solitude — though he didn't admit it to anyone for fear of sounding like a walking personality disorder. It was a good feeling to be alone with your own thoughts, especially with some interesting music in the background.

Right now the radio was playing the song *2-4-6-8 Motorway*, and he'd just passed the blue, exit sign that indicated he was approaching junction eight for Reigate, when he felt a peculiar sensation in his head. It was as if two hands in prayer, suddenly appeared in the middle of his skull and parted, pushing the left and right halves of his brain aside to create a void in the middle. This caused a pulse in his head and he felt momentarily disconnected from his body. It was as if the hands had paused his thinking, to make a silent announcement. That he *Reece Tassicker* should pay attention to something new that was about to arrive unexpectedly. It was a peculiar feeling that he'd had many times before.

Then, without any forewarning of subject-matter or purpose, an idea filled the void in his head, seemingly coming from nowhere. The idea rapidly rendered itself into a fully-formed concept, and it was a brilliant concept too. It brought a faint smile of satisfaction to

his lips. Reece loved the sensation when an idea seemed to miraculously appear in his head like that. But he could never understand how it actually happened.

However, in just a few days' time, he would understand how it happened.

And he'd be the first person in the history of mankind to have this understanding.

Chapter 1 Four weeks ago

Reece is staring at an enormous archway made of bricks. Their rich, red colour flecked with inclusions of black, blue and grey. The perfectly-formed semicircle of the arch extends vertically down each side, in the form of two long, straight columns.

The archway recedes slowly into the distance and the vertical sides appear to get longer and longer. Then another identical archway appears both on the left- and right-sides of the first arch. They are joined together to form a triple-archway. Then two more arches join these, one on either side. All now have long, vertical extensions reaching down to the ground.

Reece now sees what the structure is. A brick viaduct spanning a deep valley. It's been built to carry the world's first railway line along the top of it. There is no visual indication of this; it is simply a known and unquestionable fact. This dates the scene to sometime in the early nineteenth century.

The pairs of tall columns that each support an arch, create a panel of exquisitely-slender windows of the type Reece has usually seen in cathedrals. At that moment, through one of the viaduct window-arches, there appears a cathedral. It's London's St Paul's cathedral — and it's sitting on the floor of the valley. The outline of its magnificent central-dome perfectly concentric to the curvature of the viaduct arches.

The perspective of the view changes as the viaduct moves rapidly closer to Reece, then passes overhead. The view of St Paul's is much clearer now, and it's surrounded by huge, cube-like buildings made from the same red-brick as the viaduct. These are Lancashire cotton mills with large, arch-shaped windows along the sides of every floor of the building. Adjacent to each cube is a towering, red-brick chimney stack.

The juxtaposition of the huge dome of St Paul's, the mill-building cubes and their associated chimneys, resembles an enormous mosque. This is a strange coincidence, for at that moment, a minaret and balcony appear on top of each chimney. Standing on one of the balconies is a chanting muezzin, calling the Muslim faithful to prayer.

His incantations change from their initial, melodious tones to a staccato, monotone stream. Not a song. Not words. Just repetitive bursts of noise. Like a chirping electronic-bird that can only produce one highly-irritating tone. Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep...

Reece stretched out a hand and switched off his alarm clock. He immediately recognised that he'd been dreaming as the alarm sounded, and so he reached for the open notepad and pen that he kept on the bedside table. Trying to recall as much of the dream as possible, he wrote key-words and phrases that captured the content. It was a race against time as the dream rushed away from him. He hung on to its tail for as long as he could, but after a short while it was gone. He finished his sketch of a viaduct with a cathedral dome visible through one of the arches to close out his recollection. He'd review his notes over breakfast to see if the dream became meaningful in any way.

Reece knew that you could always find a better answer, given time to think about the issue. This stemmed from his childhood where he'd frequently been referred to as a dreamer, for he would often be lost in his own thoughts. He found there was always so much to imagine or think about, and even though he spent much of his childhood alone, he was never lonely. Not with the thoughts that went through his mind. From considering strange questions such as why does wind gust rather than flow evenly, to imagining if it would ever be possible to share a thought with another person without using words.

Through his twenties and early-thirties, he still liked to make plenty of time to think about things. Well, truthfully, it was more that his lifestyle *allowed* him plenty of time to think about things. When all his school and university friends seemed to be marrying and starting families, he'd remained single.

Reece had always had a feeling that there was something more to life, and to the world we live in, than meets the eye. That there were some things we, as a race, were for some reason *unaware of*. He had the sense that we all have an individual purpose to achieve something significant, but that nobody really knows what that purpose is. He believed that many people gave up on their purpose because they couldn't define it. However, they retained a nagging feeling that some of the things that occurred in their lives acted as personal reminders to them that this tantalisingly-hidden purpose still existed.

Life also seemed to have determined it wasn't time for Reece Tassicker to have that mystical *relationship with someone special* just yet; but he had a moderately-active social life which he enjoyed. As the British would say, *he had nothing to complain about*.

He'd moved companies and changed roles several times, until he eventually found himself where he was now, as a partner in a consultancy. He worked with large organisations finding innovative ways to grow their business. His specific role was in helping the client to

ask bold questions – questions that their competition would consider too difficult to achieve – and then answering them in ingenious ways. Effectively, he was helping his clients to *out-think* their competition.

There was plenty of thinking involved, which he loved. He'd been told that he was good at what he did, and he accepted the compliments with the quiet modesty that defined him as a person. He knew that his success was entirely due to his ability to think differently from anybody else. While others preferred to respond immediately with supposed best courses of action, he tended to listen and consider the issues more deeply before suggesting alternate options for consideration.

Even though Reece was introspective in nature, he knew that finding a quiet place to kick-back for a while and to wait for a great idea to come along in a serendipitous moment, never worked. Fresh thinking required unusual techniques that stimulated creative thought. One unusual technique that Reece used was to sleep on things. *Literally.*

The difficult issue he was working on currently was for a bank who wanted to identify a new range of products for their customers. The previous night as he'd started to fall asleep, he'd put a simple question in his mind.

What could be a new banking product that would be meaningful for people?

He'd focused on this as he fell asleep, knowing that it would influence his dreams. He repeated the question over and over in his mind, which caused him to fall asleep quickly. He tended to dream a lot, and if his mind was going to be busy dreaming, it may as well be busy doing something useful for him.

"You are what you eat," he muttered to himself, staring into his breakfast muesli. It seemed to have an exceptional number of nuts in today. *Quite appropriate considering the dream I had* he thought. He studied the sentence fragments and rough sketches he'd made on his notepad. This stimulated the voices in his head to start their dialogue.

What do a railway viaduct, St Paul's cathedral, a cotton mill, a chimney stack and a mosque have in common?

Well, they're big, noticeable buildings.

All made of brick and stone.

All built a long time ago.

St Paul's and the mosque represent religions.

Which have also been around a long time.

Agreed. But what's the human element involved here?

They are designed to be used by people in different ways.

Skilled individuals designed them.

They were all built using many human hands.

And all those people are now dead.

Whoa! Where did that thought come from?

It's true isn't it? Nobody involved in the design or construction of those structures is alive anymore.

Good point.

But what have dead people got to do with this bank project?

What if you could sell a product to dead people?

You'd have a huge market.

Why?

Well, there are many more dead people than living ones.

Ha! That's an unusual thought.

The discussion inside his head sometimes took strange directions, but it usually led him somewhere interesting. He waited, but for now the dialogue seemed to have stopped. Reece let the dead-people thought hang around for a while in his mind. It would be a dynamite concept if he could make it work in some way — but nothing immediately came to him, so he parked it away in the back of his mind. It was something he'd come back to later when he had more time.

He chuckled aloud to himself as he imagined telling the client's marketing team that they needed to advertise a service that got the attention of dead people. *That would keep them busy for a while!*

Later that morning, Reece was alone in his car driving along the M25 motorway, when the song *2-4-6-8 Motorway* by the Tom Robinson Band came on the radio. The chorus *2-4-6-8. Ain't never too late* repeated throughout the song, and he subconsciously started to sing along.

2-4-6-8. Ain't never too late.

He noticed he was just approaching the junction eight off-ramp for Reigate, which he thought coincidental. The first part of the chorus began to cycle repeatedly in his mind.

2-4-6-8.

2-4-6-8.

To-4-6-8.

To-4-6-8.

To-for-6-8.

To-for-6-8.

To-for-sicks-8.

To-for-sicks-8.

To-for-sicks-late.

To-for-sicks-late...

He felt an abrupt pulse. As if a single, massive heartbeat occurred in the middle of his head. His mind felt like a crowded dance-floor where the music had unexpectedly stopped. As the dancers retreated to their seats, a single, bright spotlight pierced the dark, creating a circle of rapt attention in the middle of the floor. All the other thoughts active in his head stilled themselves, in anticipation of a new star, about to make an appearance. Reece recognised this sensation in his head as portend of a powerful and beneficial moment. He knew something interesting was about to happen.

The dream came back to him. Viaducts and cathedrals. Mills and mosques. All built by dead people. Then, the concept appeared in the dance-floor spotlight and the voices took over.

To-for-sicks-late.

Sick? Late?

People get old and sick — and then they die and become late.

As in the late John Smith?

Yes.

To? For?

It isn't about selling a banking product to dead people, but selling it for dead people.

Sell a product for people who are going to die?

I like that because there's one thing we know for certain.

That everyone will die sometime?

Yes!

But why would people want to buy a product for when they die?

Because all those big structures in the dream were built in the past by people who are long dead.

Yes. And their structures still remain, long after their death.

Acting as resilient, practical and valued monuments to their efforts.

So, what if people could get a product from a bank that would act as a resilient, practical and valued monument for when they eventually died — even if they were in full health now?

A wave of elation flowed through Reece's body as he recognised this was the insight he'd been looking for. Part of the elation was due to the idea itself, but the remainder was his amazement at how his subconscious mind had been working on the banking-product question in the background — and how it had suddenly pushed a solution out. It was as if his brain had a secret compartment where it could work on issues without him interfering. Whichever way it worked he was grateful — and he gave himself a mental pat on the back.

Why was his brain giving his back a pat when the back had nothing to do with it?

Oh, forget it! Sometimes you ask yourself questions that are too weird.

Chapter 2 Friday 04h55

I'm standing as upright as I can. Rigid like a plank. Back straight, chest out, stomach pulled in. Feet so tightly together that my big toes, heels and ankles touch each other. Hands by my side, palms pressed firmly against my thighs. Fingers pointing straight down, straining to reach the ground. I'm facing forward. Eyes wide and unblinking, staring straight ahead into the distance.

The sergeant major's face appears from my right-side, filling my field of view. I try not to look into his eyes, but to remain focussed on an imaginary object, a half-mile behind his head. His mouth is open wider than a mouth is supposed to open. He's shouting at me so violently, his voice makes my head vibrate.

'What's your number soldier?' barks the open mouth, which is now taking up half of the sergeant major's face.

'Three. One. Four. One. Five. Zero. Three. One,' I answer, adding an explosive 'Sir!' at the end.

'And just how will you make sure you remember that soldier?' yells back the mouth so loudly, it makes his lips ripple and form two bright-red snakes. Each of which is now swallowing the other's tail.

'I'll remember it as thirty-one, forty-one, fifty, thirty-one. Sir!'

'What did you say?' roars the mouth which is so big it has taken up the whole of the sergeant major's head.

'I said I'll remember it as thirty-one, forty-one, fifty, thirty-one. Sir!'

'You'd better remember that for as long as you are in the army soldier because that is your number for life. And don't you ever forget it!' screams the mouth as the two red snakes form the outline of a giant head with a pink mattress as a huge tongue.

'Yes sir!' I shriek in reply as the sergeant major's snake-mattress-head moves on to the soldier on my left. I must remember this number, so I silently start repeating the mantra in my mind.

'Thirty-one. Forty-one. Fifty. Thirty-one.'

'Thirty-one. Forty-one. Fifty. Thirty-one.'

The silent shouting in my head seems unusual but it's helping me to remember the number sequence.

'Thirty-one. Forty-one. Fifty. Thirty-one.'

'Thirty-one. Forty-one. Fifty. Beep.'

'Thirty-one. Forty-one. Beep. Beep.'

'Thirty-one. Beep. Beep. Beep.'

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep...

Reece put out a hand, pressing the button on top of the alarm clock. It was five o'clock, his usual wake up time. The alarm had stopped, but why did he still have a beep, beep, beep noise running through his mind?

Your number. Don't forget your number!

A moment of blankness before the image of the sergeant major's snake-mattress-head returned to him.

Thirty-one. Forty-one. Fifty. Thirty-one, silently shouted in his mind.

He quickly captured the number on his bedside pad. Remembering a dream so clearly was always a good start to the day for Reece. Today's dream was a little mystifying though. This wasn't the usual kind of dream containing a rambling selection of distorted realities. This time there was the number, which was obviously meant to be extracted from the dream and retained. *But why?* He looked again. The number 31415031 meant nothing to him. At least he'd managed to capture it — which was important.

There was, however, something more perplexing on his mind. This was the third-time in the last few months he'd had a dream where he knew he was supposed to remember something specific from it.

Chapter 3 Friday 05h10

Reece changed and set off for his morning run. Everyone has a time of day when they feel at their best, and for Reece, the early morning was his. Even more so when it involved a good run. His lungs worked hard drawing in the clean, crisp morning-air and transferring the oxygen it contained into his bloodstream. His elevated heart-rate pumped the oxygen-enriched blood around his body and flooded his brain with it. Reece's brain was much like everybody else's. It only accounted for two per cent of his body-weight, but it consumed around twenty per cent of his oxygen intake. Reece found that running helped with him to focus on things, which made for some very interesting thinking. And this morning he was thinking about his dreams.

The first dream he was supposed to remember occurred back in February. It was about a young girl with a name that sounded like *Gara*. She kept repeating her name to him and telling him that she had something important that he must listen to. Throughout the dream he'd kept asking her what it was, but she replied that she couldn't tell him until he found her. And it was important that he did find her.

At the time he'd recognised this wasn't one of his usual kinds of dream. It wasn't normal to have to remember something specific from a dream. He'd spent time searching the internet for the meaning of dreams but found it to be a highly-imprecise subject. The way you categorised your dream gave it different meanings, and the websites he checked weren't even consistent in their interpretations of the same dream-topic.

During his browsing, Reece found a website about the number of different dreams there were. Seven-billion people live on Earth, all of whom would sleep at some point in every twenty-four hour period. Most of these people would dream, even if they didn't remember their dreams, and most would have several dreams each time they slept. As there were tens of billions of dreams happening in every rotation of the planet, he imagined that there had to be some dream duplication. There were discussions on a wide range of dream-related topics — even one called dream sharing, where people had the same dream at the same time, but there was nothing of relevance to Reece's dream.

His second dream had been about a stone-building with a shiny, black door. The name *Derby* was carved in stone above the door. He was staring at the name and from behind him a huge crowd of people kept chanting the word *Derby* incessantly throughout the dream. He

knew he was also supposed to remember this word. After this dream, he'd gone back to the discussion forum he'd visited earlier, and posted a question on the subject of remembering specific words from dreams. He'd got into a discussion with two people who also seemed to have dreams with elements they were supposed to remember. Their usernames were Bonita1974 and SweetDreamer, which Reece assumed were female names. They had discussed the subject quite intensely with Reece for a few days, but nothing came out of the conversation that helped him understand the real meaning of his own dream. Then, the two women had abruptly stopped posting comments. That had been in early June.

He had an idea to create a website that allowed people to log their memorable dreams to see if there was any commonality between them. A web-designer friend, who owed Reece a favour for putting a big job his way, said it would be quick to set up, as long as it didn't get too much usage. Reece said this was fine and gave him the outline of how it should work. He wrote a comment on the discussion forum that he was setting up a dream-sharing website, and several of the members indicated that they'd like to use it to see if anyone was having the same dreams as them. Someone calling themselves Mentat12 was the exception and was the only person critical of his idea, replying how it would be a complete waste of people's time.

He'd eventually seen the preview of the website and it was basic, but suitable for the purpose. Users posted a brief outline of the dream they were meant to remember, and the date they had it. Then, if others had a similar dream, they could put their details next to the user's dream. It wasn't perfect, but if he did find someone else having the same dream as him, then... well, if that happened he didn't know what he'd do. But he was sure it would start an interesting discussion.

When he posted the outline of it on the forum, he again received some positive feedback. Excepting for the lone comments of Mentat12, who again railed against dream-sharing and how being associated with a dream website for weirdo's would seriously damage Reece's professional reputation.

Reece thought this peculiar. Why would someone on a discussion forum for dreams be so critical of a website for helping people share their dreams? *And how did Mentat12 know he had a professional reputation to maintain?*

But that was last week. As he approached the end of his run, his mind was made up. He was definitely going ahead with the dream-sharing website, especially after this morning's strange dream.

While he cooled down from his run and ate some cereal, he told the forum that he'd been invited to speak at *The Potential of the Human Mind* conference next week in London, and that he'd announce the website launch there. Reece picked up his cereal bowl to get the last few spoonfuls out, and was staring blankly at the screen when a response to his post appeared from Mentat12.

YOU ARE GOING TO FIND THIS HARMFUL IF YOU PROCEED.

Mentat12 had just threatened him.

Chapter 4 Friday 11h00

Canary Wharf is part of the East End of London where the high-street banks have their mine's-bigger-than-yours competition for the height of their head-office tower blocks. Reece was gazing out of a floor-to-ceiling window on the thirty-second floor of his client's building, the snaking-route of the Thames leading his eye towards the heart of the city.

His mind wasn't on the view though. He was preparing to present the findings of the new-products project to the executive team of the bank. The presentation needed to be done elegantly, setting up a storyline to prepare their minds for what he would show them. He ran the first-three sentences he would say over in his mind — but they didn't sound right. He changed a few words around. He always felt nervous before an important presentation, but he'd learnt a trick that getting the first-three sentences to flow well was the key to setting up the tone for the rest of the presentation.

As he mentally rehearsed the sentences, they finally firmed themselves up. They sounded good. His energy levels were high. *This is going to be a great presentation* he told himself. He allowed his eyes to follow the course of the river again, until he lost it among the buildings in the centre of the city. He started thinking about how this project had started.

In January he'd had an article printed in the Harvard Business Review called *Popcorn and the Art of Fine Thinking*. In the article he'd explained the innovative model he applied for thinking about business issues, and he'd used the analogy of making popcorn. He'd described how all the assets a company used in the normal course of its business, were like popcorn kernels in a large pan. Big programs that tried to coordinate all the kernels so they popped at the same time never worked. You had to let each piece pop when it was ready. Turning up the heat by applying powerful, creative thinking was how you got individual kernels — or business assets — to pop precisely when, and how, you needed them to. He'd explained how businesses could successfully pop any, and every, asset with a toolkit he'd provided.

The article had caught the attention of company executives and had brought in some great new business — including the bank he was now about to present to.

A smartly-attired young man came up to Reece and guided him into the boardroom, where he found the bank's senior executives waiting to hear his presentation. Reece introduced himself briefly, paused, looked around the room to get their attention, and then

started with his three, rehearsed opening sentences. He saw the nods of agreement and knew he was addressing their important issues. Over the next hour, he presented a number of concepts to them, saving the best for last.

“The final opportunity I’d like to present is unusual. It’s a product intended for dead people.” He let that point hang to heighten the level of expectation.

“Our research shows that when aged people make out their wills, they have deep concerns that when they die, the inheritances they leave behind will be used wisely. Indeed, when you die, what *do* you leave behind?”

Reece paused to let them consider his rhetorical question.

“Your whole life converts into the memories people have of you, some artefacts, a pile of money, and hopefully some positive behaviours that you have passed on.” He let this most generic of eulogies settle gently on the shoulders of those present. Especially the more aged ones.

“We’ve designed a new product that allows people to leave behind a legacy for individual family members that encourages good financial practice. The product is taken out during the life of the customer and it activates on their death. They can leave as little as £5,000 for each recipient, which is paid in the form of five £1,000 amounts, spread over the years following the individual’s death. The recipient can put these amounts in any product the bank offers, and they are encouraged to use a range of investments to understand where they make the best returns at the lowest risk.”

“Each year, a voucher for the amount is delivered to the recipient, together with a pre-written personal message from the sender — ideally around the subject of making sound investments for the future. This gives the bank a five-year investment portfolio that is a natural lead-in for future re-investment by the recipients. It also gives you probate over the will of the deceased.”

Reece saw their heads nodding in approval. Some were also making notes — which was always a good sign.

“This new product has a high public-relations potential as it’s a socially responsible product. It’s also interesting and unusual in the way it allows the deceased to provide some guidance towards sound financial management for a period beyond their death.”

He paused before he made his final point.

“It’s also a meaningful, emotional and wise memorial of the individual. A service you can offer that reflects the standing any good bank would want in society.” *And believe me, that’s what you need* he added to himself.

The presentation concluded with the CEO thanking Reece for his time and also for his willingness to fly to Johannesburg the next day to give the presentation to their southern-hemisphere management team. It had been one of this team who had initially commissioned the project.

They had then taken a lunch-break and invited Reece to join them. Several of the executives had complimented him on the product for dead people, and asked if there could be other similar opportunities like it. He’d explained how most companies tended to look to the far horizons for new things, rather than looking at the simple and obvious opportunities hidden away inside their business. One of the directors had then spoken to him about the possibility of Reece’s company helping them to identify more growth areas on a systematic basis. Reece smiled inwardly. *Another success!* Things seemed to be going really well for him at the moment.

Unfortunately for Reece, things were about to go wrong — and in a most peculiar way.

Chapter 5 Friday 15h14

Gareth Jones was not a patient man. However, he was now watching the clock on his computer closely. At fourteen minutes and fifteen seconds past three, the new webpage he'd created went live — just as he'd scheduled it to. He refreshed the website page-list he was watching on the screen, and the new webpage he'd just created appeared at the top of the list.

DATE: 11-JUL-2014
TIME: 15:14:15
WEBPAGE: [HTTP://WWW.PECKHAMINSTITUTE.ORG.UK/SFFDF-UBTTJDLFS-1](http://www.peckhaminstitute.org.uk/sffdf-ubttjdlfs-1)

This was the second time in two days he'd posted a new webpage on this subject. Within an hour, the first of the many search-engine spiders that roamed incessantly across the internet looking for new content, found the page. The spider scanned it for content and returned its findings back to its host computer server to index in the master search catalogue. However, at the host server, nothing was indexed.

The page was completely blank.

Chapter 6 Friday 17h35

Reece tapped his Oyster card on the yellow contact-pad of the ticket barriers. They dutifully opened, and he exited the tube station out onto the main concourse of Paddington railway station. He checked the departure board which indicated the next shuttle to Heathrow airport would leave in fifteen-minutes. Enough time to buy the essential items; a train ticket, a book for the flight and a coffee.

He headed towards the station's large WH Smith bookshop and went straight to the management books at the back of the store. A life-size, cardboard cut-out of a stern-looking man wearing a Union Jack waistcoat caught his attention. It was Professor Sir Simon Bartlett. Reece knew that he was scheduled to give the opening address at the conference he was attending next week, and his new book, *Mind the Future*, was being promoted.

He read the back cover, flicked through a few pages and decided to buy it. The book he was holding had a torn dust-cover, and some page-corners were bent over, so he swapped it for the one good copy remaining on the shelf. Reece paid for it with his credit card, and put it in the side-pocket of his carry-on bag. He then walked over to the Heathrow Express ticket machine and bought his ticket. There was still ample time before the train left, so he headed toward the nearby coffee bar.

It wasn't busy, and the young barista making his Grande Latte engaged him in casual conversation. She seemed charming and chatty and his intuition kicked-in. He impulsively handed a ten-pound note and a business card to her.

"Caroline," he said, glancing at her name badge. "Would you do me a favour? If someone wearing a suit orders a coffee, take the cost out of this money. Tell them it's courtesy of me and then give them that card. Whatever money is left over, you can keep."

"Oooh, this sounds unusual. What sort of person do you mean?"

"Preferably a business-looking person — which is why I mentioned the suit. Not too stuck-up. And someone who's a bit chatty like you."

She looked at the business card he'd given her. "Reece Tassicker. Business Designer," she read aloud. "I've never met one of those before. What usually happens?"

"Sometimes people call or send me an email. All my details are on there so they can check me out online to make sure I'm not a crazy."

"Sounds a bit crazy to me — if you don't mind me saying so." She blushed slightly. "But crazy in a nice way."

"I suppose it does. I've written a little message on the back."

She turned the card over to see that Reece had written:

*If you'd like to hear about an ingenious way to grow your business,
then I'd love to talk to you. Enjoy the drink! Reece T*

He carried a few business cards with this written on the back for whenever he intuitively felt the opportunity was right to leave one behind.

“Got to dash,” said Reece. “Enjoy your day.”

“You too.” Caroline turned his business card over in her hands. *At least one interesting thing has happened to me today*, she thought.

Reece had done this before and occasionally it had generated new business introductions. Some recipients of a card found it an innovative approach and wanted to know more. It wasn't something he ever planned to do — it was more of an impulsive act. Reece found it stimulating when a stranger phoned him up as a result of getting a free coffee — for he had to think quickly about what to say, based on the opening comment from the caller.

As he walked to his train, he looked up at the magnificent, soaring arches of the roof of Paddington station. Built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in the mid-1800s, he realised it was a similar memorial to those he'd had in the dream that started his thinking on products for dead people.

Reece boarded the train and took his seat just as the train accelerated away from the platform. He pulled the new book out of his carry-on and, sipping on his coffee, turned to read the contents page. After seeing the book's structure, he let the pages quickly flick through his fingers to get a feel for how it was written. Text, text, more text, a few tables, text, more text, a diagram, more text, a flash of green, then more text. He stopped. *What was the green thing he'd seen?* The rest of the book seemed to be in black and white. Flicking slowly back through the book, one page flopped open. Stuck to the page was a square, lime-green Post-it note, and hand-written on it were the words

DON'T GO AHEAD WITH YOUR DREAM SHARING WEBSITE

Chapter 7 Saturday 08h20

“Come. Come. Come. Come. Come.” Beulah Aronga was worried. Very worried. She was late sending in her dream. They’d told her that she had to send it in by eight o’clock each morning, but it was now almost twenty-past, and she still had a bit left to type. *But there was so much to type today.* “They should give me extra time for these long dreams. Please, please, please don’t let them be angry with me,” she muttered to herself.

As a little girl growing up in Nigeria, she’d always had lots of dreams that seemed so much livelier and real than her friend’s dreams. She was able to remember incredible details about the adventures she had when she slept, while her friends didn’t remember much at all about their dreams. She would dream of many things, and every morning she would tell her old Nana all the wonderful things she’d done. Her Nana used to say that having dreams was a good thing, because that was one way in which her ancestors spoke to her. Nana was wise in the ways of the ancestors. She often told Beulah stories about how the ancestor spirits helped us, and that she should respect what they showed her. This was why she’d always paid good attention to her dreams.

Beulah had come to the UK when her parents moved here over twenty years ago. Many lowly-paid jobs, numerous council-subsidised accommodations, and several cheap-bastard boyfriends later, she’d found herself working as a cashier at a small supermarket. She had a nine-year old daughter who’d grown up to be a lovely child. Especially once cheap-bastard boyfriend number six had upped-and-left one night after an argument.

One evening, she’d been using her mobile phone to add her latest dream to a Facebook dream discussion page, when she saw an advert. It was looking for people who were good dreamers, and who wanted to earn some extra cash as part of a research project. Extra cash really appealed to Beulah, so she submitted her details.

It was almost eighteen-months since the people first got in touch with her. They called her on her mobile and asked questions about her life. What she did during the day, and how well she slept at night. They asked her about some of her most recent dreams, how many she had each night, and how much detail she was able to recall from them. They said she should be honest in what she told them as they had some equipment that was checking the stress levels in her voice, so they’d know if she was lying. She thought this a bit rude. In fact she thought it very rude. But the fact that they were going to pay her fifty pounds if they decided

to use her — well, fifty pounds was a lot of money. So she made sure she told them the truth, which they seemed happy with, as they said they wanted to go ahead with the test.

The man called Gareth, with the funny Welsh accent, then told her that in two-days' time they would be very interested in the dreams that she'd had the previous night. She was to write down all she could remember as soon as she woke up. They would call her later that morning, and she was to read back her notes to them. Gareth told her not to drink alcohol the night before, and not to eat any abnormally-rich food, and that she should go to bed at whatever time she usually did — to get a good night's sleep.

She'd made her notes the next morning and she remembered telling Gareth about a small boy wearing a blue T-shirt with a picture of a zebra on. He was in the basket of a bright-orange, hot-air balloon and the basket had eight ropes tying it to the balloon. There was a kitten-shaped, pink birthday cake with white icing, where the eleven candles on it started burning so fiercely that smoke was billowing into the sky, and the fire brigade came to put the candles out. There were animals flying to the moon on a rocket that looked like Noah's Ark, and many other strange things too.

She'd felt sure that wasn't what she was supposed to have dreamed of, but she hoped she'd get her fifty pounds at least. Gareth said she'd done very well and that he wanted to meet her to pay the fifty pounds, — and to offer her even more money if she'd like to keep telling them about her dreams.

Her flat was very small, but she always tried to keep it clean and tidy. The tidy bit was easy, as she didn't have much of anything to her name. Some second-hand furniture, a modest wardrobe of clothes for her and her daughter, much of which were bought at charity shops. Such was life as an unqualified, black-woman earning £260 a week. The fifty pounds from Gareth would make a big difference to Beulah. However, it wasn't the money that Gareth brought with him that made a difference for her. It was what else he said.

He told her that his organisation was really impressed with the quality of her dream recall, and that he wanted to invite her to be part of a longer-term programme. He explained how they were a research institute studying the types of dreams that people had, and they were especially interested in the little details that some people could remember. Lots of people could remember the bigger picture — but not the detail. Gareth told Beulah how she had shown herself to be very good at recalling the detail, which was why he was giving her this special invitation.

He asked what sort of work she did and what she liked and didn't like about it. She told him all the details of her work, and how she would love to be able to spend more time with her daughter — as they didn't have much in life except for each other. Gareth listened closely to what she said, and made plenty of notes. Finally he told her that because she was such a good dream-recaller, he was going to offer her £350 a week for at least the next year — and quite possibly a lot longer. There were some conditions, she heard him say, just before she burst into tears of joy.

It took quite a while for her sobbing to subside, and Gareth just sat there and waited for her to stop. Beulah thought he seemed a very patient man. He told her they would set up a computer for her to use and they would pay to have an internet connection installed in her flat. Someone would come round to show her how to use the computer, and she would need to send her dreams to Gareth by email every morning. This was to be done no later than eight o'clock at the absolute latest. He also told her that they would call every few days to ask her some questions about her dreams. When they did, they would be using the stress-detector to make sure she was telling them the truth.

He also asked if he could rub a cotton-bud inside her cheek as part of a standard health check they did on their research subjects. She agreed straight away. For the money he was paying, he could put the cotton-bud anywhere he damn-well wanted to.

It was a week after that when the computer was installed, and she was shown how to use it to email her dreams each day. With her two-finger typing it took a long time to do, so she adjusted her sleeping pattern to wake up at six o'clock, to have plenty of time to type up her dreams. It was a small change to make for the extra money she was making. Gareth had asked her not to speak to people about what she was doing and how much she was getting paid. He said that if anyone found out, they may get jealous, and that wouldn't help Beulah at all. For practically the first time in her life since she stopped being a little girl in Nigeria, she felt that she wasn't struggling to survive any more. Life was just a little better than it had been at any time in her recent past.

This morning wasn't one of the better mornings though. A neighbour that she was friendly with, had banged on her front door earlier asking for help with her mother, who had collapsed. The ambulance eventually arrived, and had taken the mother to hospital. This

meant Beulah had lost over an hour this morning — which was why she'd only now pressed the SEND button, at just after eight-thirty.

“Send, send, send, send,” muttered Beulah to herself again. She wondered if Gareth would be angry with her. She also wondered why the ancestors deemed it necessary to send her a dream of a man carrying a huge credit card under one arm, and dragging a giant book on wheels behind him around a railway station.

That seemed a peculiar thing for the ancestors to know about.

Chapter 8 Saturday 08h30

Gareth Jones clicked the SEND/RECEIVE button on his email program for the third time in less than a minute — but nothing changed on the screen.

Jesus Christ! What the bloody hell is number four doing this morning? It's thirty minutes past deadline time and the feedback still isn't in.

He needed to do the analysis of last night's dreams, but he didn't like to start until he had the feedback from all three dreamers. He never knew which of them may contain a key element, and if he omitted looking at one feedback until later, then he subconsciously may give that feedback more weighting. And that might influence the interpretation.

Why the hell does number four have to be late today of all days? Gareth Jones referred to the dreamers by their number, as de-humanising them made the dream translations more objective. Also, no-one had ever referred to Gareth Jones as a *people person*, which was another indicator as to why he denoted the dreamers by number.

Gareth had recruited three dreamers so far. The first person he'd recruited was Lisa Harris, a librarian from Tyneside in the north of England. She was very good at specific details from her dreams. They may not have always been relevant, but they were very precise.

Then he'd found Bonita Milano. But she was dead now, so effectively there wasn't a number two.

The third recruit had been Patrick Harris, who'd been unemployed since leaving university two-years ago. When Gareth had met with him, his life revolved around online gaming and social networks, which had meant he was highly computer-literate. As he lived with his parents in north London, he had access to their computer whenever he needed it, which seemed to be all day long. Patrick had been remarkably good at putting context to his dreams and Gareth had noticed this from the first test they had done with him. While the others just wrote down their dreams verbatim as they recalled them, often producing disconnected elements and statements, Patrick was different. He'd give the key elements, but he could also experience feelings in his dream, which frequently enabled him to give context to what a specific dream was all about. Gareth found this to be a really useful trait.

Patrick was claiming unemployment benefit, and was receiving some money from his parents, both of whom worked full-time. Gareth offered him £700 a week to be one of their participants under the condition that he stop claiming the unemployment benefit — for the weekly payments would be classified as income. Patrick told him not to worry about that, but he was concerned that his parents might find out he was earning so much money and want

him to start paying towards his living expenses at home. Gareth said he'd arrange to pay it directly into his bank account. It would also be best if he told absolutely no-one about the payments, or what he was doing to get the money. Patrick had agreed to this immediately, which made Gareth sense there was a dishonest streak to him — which he'd have to watch closely. Surprisingly, Patrick had turned out to be very reliable, sending his dreams through each day by the required time.

Then there was number four. She was the blubbering, black woman in that crappy, little flat in Bristol. He couldn't complain too much, as she'd hardly ever been late in the past. And he'd got her at the real bargain price of just £350 a week. She was interesting because her feedback frequently contained unusual details and strange perspectives. These could be tricky to understand at first, but afterwards, they often validated some of the other dreamers' content, and helped to frame the overall understanding of the interpretation.

During the recruitment of these dreamers, he'd told them how the Peckham Institute was conducting a long-term study looking at the development of people's dreams over time. They wanted to monitor a small number of people, possibly over several years, to see how the type of dream, and the detail of their dreams, changed as people got older. This was just a ruse to make them think they could get paid for a long time, which would keep them active and responsive in the short-term. In some ways the longer-term plan might be true, as each of the dreamers was required to give a cheek swab. They were told this was for a health check, but in reality the samples were sent away for detailed genetic testing to see if the participants had any tendency towards chronic disease. Having dreamers with a long life-expectancy could be a great benefit for the Institute. Especially if the results continued to go as well as the first trials had gone.

All the dreamers were supposed to send in their dreams every day, and Gareth had made sure they understood this when he'd met each one. If they failed to send a dream in, then they risked being rejected from the programme. They also had to write down their dreams in the order in which they had them. For many people, even recalling one dream in any kind of detail would have been difficult, but for people who were active dreamers with good recall, this wasn't an issue at all. And of course, this was precisely the type of person that Gareth was looking for.

Typically, it was only the feedback from the dreamers that came in on a Tuesday morning that mattered. And even then, it was only the last one or two dreams of the night that would be of interest. In a normal week, Gareth would quickly skim the content of the emails

on the days other than Tuesday to make sure the quality was there. He might send a reminder to add more detail if any of them started to become too brief in their feedback.

Today was Saturday, not Tuesday. It was an unusual situation, and today's dreams were very important. He needed to start the interpretation now. Finally he saw the email from number four arrive in the form of a bold entry at the top of his email inbox.

Just as different people spoke with different accents, people dreamed with different emphasis. Some of the dreamers tended to have a focus on what people were doing as part of a dream, while others concentrated on a place and its surroundings and environment. Some had a flow of a storyline to their dreams while others tended to capture more specific aspects such as names, numbers, and signs. Gareth had been picking this up over the last year or so and knew what the specific focus was for each of the dreamers. Knowing their styles helped with the interpretations.

Gareth would read one feedback at random and extract all the key pieces of information. He'd then quickly sketch an image of how he visualised what they were saying. Once he'd finished summarising one dreamer's feedback, he'd move straight on to the next, until he'd converted all the feedback into a mix of visuals and key-statements. Only then would he study what he'd produced and start to conclude the findings.

It took Gareth two hours from when he'd received Beulah's feedback to sketch out the dreams — and to understand what the consolidated picture was. It looked like Andre was going to have to be at Paddington station again early tomorrow morning.

Gareth Jones had studied psychology while at university and had stayed on to complete a PhD. He became a full-time researcher at the university with a focus on the psychology of sleep disorders. He started to use the quality of the recall of dreams as a proxy-measure for the deepness of the sleep that the participants had. He'd always ignored the actual content of the dream as he felt this was irrelevant, until, in a freak occurrence, two people happened to discuss the same dream they'd had the night before. When he questioned them, each could be prompted to complete the missing parts to match the dream of the other person. *They'd had the same dream from totally different perspectives.*

Gareth became fascinated with this — almost to the point of obsession — and had put in a proposal to research what he called parallel-dreaming. He discovered that very little work was being done in this area, and felt it was a field that he could be at the forefront of. He

became passionate, almost to the extent of being obsessive, in his belief in the concept of parallel-dreaming.

One problem with parallel-dreaming that he hadn't considered, was how to find people who had the parallel dreams in the first place. He'd done extensive testing with the two subjects that had the initial parallel-dream, but they didn't seem to have any ability to repeat their skill, no matter what he tried. He didn't believe their dream was a fluke, but eventually the funding dried up because he was unable to produce any results beyond that solitary occurrence. He began to despair, but eventually was put in touch with someone who had an interest in dreams, and more importantly, who seemed to have money.

Gareth had several meetings with Paul Peckham, who explained that he was interested in sponsoring two fields of work. One was in the transmission of thought, and the other in the receiving of thought, with the receivers doing this through their dreams. Was Gareth interested in this? Gareth asked how this related to parallel-dreaming and Paul had explained that the transmitter would be sending the same information to all the participants — and as Gareth would be running the receiving end, it would be his job to interpret the dreams and to identify the issue that was being transmitted. Gareth said it sounded very interesting and Paul Peckham agreed to set up the funding through his own institute.

Gareth's role would be to recruit the dreamers and to run the programme with them. Paul had insisted that Gareth abide by two important conditions. The first was that there would be no papers or research published, and no public scrutiny of the institute for the first two years of operation. The second condition was that Gareth should not make any attempt to find out who was transmitting the dreams. Paul explained that if there was any interaction between the sending-party and the receiving-party, it could negatively impact the research programme. Gareth explained that his research protocols could manage any interaction between the transmitter and himself, as this was standard procedure for many kinds of research projects. But Paul Peckham had been adamant that this would not be allowed to happen.

Gareth had reluctantly agreed to take the sponsorship, but was pleasantly surprised to find that Paul had included a generous salary. Normally the recruitment of participants would only take a week or two, but Paul had insisted that Gareth create a comprehensive specification on the type of dreamers they were looking for. He said that he'd got some plans to extend the research and potentially run it for several years, so it was essential to get the best people from the start. It had taken Gareth over a year to find the dreamers and they'd

only started the pilot-research the previous autumn. For some reason, Paul was in no hurry to get hard results from the research — which irritated Gareth somewhat.

It was around this time that Paul had also insisted that Andre work with Gareth. His role would be to ensure the overall security of the project in several different ways. Gareth knew that Andre had, as he described it, *freelance, military experience* and that he had worked for Paul previously in some capacity. Andre was amiable and helpful, but very guarded on his background. Gareth felt the phrase *hard bastard* may have been applied to Andre on some occasions in the past — and meant as a compliment too. He also felt that not knowing too much about Andre's background might be the preferred course of action.

Part of Andre's role was to *make things happen on the project*. Gareth had asked Paul what that meant, but Paul told him not to worry at this point in time.

One particular day about a year ago, Paul had asked for a strange webpage to be put up on the Institute's website, and that he wanted to know the dreamers' output the next morning. When Gareth asked why, Paul just replied he was running a test with the transmission group. Gareth gave Paul the feedback the next day and heard nothing more about it, until Paul came to see Gareth and Andre at their small office in central London, three months later.

He'd explained how the pilot-stage of the project was now at an end, and that the focus of the project was changing. Gareth had been worried when he heard this. Paul had gone on to explain what the focus of the project would be from then on — which blew Gareth's mind. He couldn't comprehend that what he was being told was possible.

Paul reminded them both of the special dreams of three-months earlier and informed them that had been the first test-run. It had been a very successful test-run too. So successful in fact, that Gareth and Andre would each receive a bonus of £250,000. Paul told them they would be receiving more bonuses in the future if things continued to go so well.

This was the moment when Gareth Jones' life-mission changed from being a leading and respected academic in his chosen field of expertise, to a simpler goal of wanting to be rich beyond his wildest dreams.

Chapter 9 Saturday 08h45

During his overnight flight to Johannesburg, Reece had mentally retraced his steps in Paddington station in an attempt to understand how the Post-it note could have got into his book.

Before he bought it, he'd just read the overview on the back-cover and had flicked through a few pages. He'd then swapped the damaged copy for the one which was in better condition. He hadn't noticed any Post-it note in the first book when he'd flicked through the pages. He'd then taken the book to the cashier who'd scanned the barcode with a hand-held scanner, and who then placed the book inside a small, plastic bag in full view of him. The cashier had seemed very much dis-engaged from his work, so he was sure he hadn't put the Post-it note inside.

Reece had then put the book in the side-pocket of his carry-on bag which he'd immediately zipped up. He'd bought the train ticket and then gone for coffee where the bag was by his feet for the few minutes he was there. There was nobody else around, which was how he'd had the opportunity to talk with the barista girl, and give her his card. He'd then got on the train and put his bag on the vacant seat beside him. The train was lightly loaded and there was no-one sitting anywhere near him. He'd taken the book out of his bag and seen the lime-green Post-it note.

There was absolutely no way that anyone could have put it in the book after he'd taken it off the shelf. So it must have been put in *before* he even touched the book. He considered the possibility that the Post-it note wasn't meant for him at all. He opened the book and rechecked it.

DON'T GO AHEAD WITH YOUR DREAM SHARING WEBSITE

Who the hell else but him could possibly be doing a dream-sharing website? Of course it was meant for him. Was it some kind of safety-warning that he was meddling in something risky? Or was it a threat?

A threat!

He recalled the comment that Mentat12 had made on the discussion-board when he'd announced he was going to set up the dream website. This was definitely a threat. And it was definitely meant for him.

But how did they know he was at Paddington station?

And at that time?

And that he would buy that specific book?

Who the bloody hell are they?

Why shouldn't he do this website?

Stop! Too many questions.

The taxi taking him from Johannesburg airport to the conference venue had left the main carriageway of the M1 De Villiers Graaff freeway, and was taking the off-ramp marked Sandton. Reece needed to focus on the presentation he would shortly be giving. He closed his eyes and started to visualise himself in a room, standing in front of the audience.

What was his opening statement going to be?

How should he run the presentation to get the message across with maximum impact?

He decided to use the same approach that he'd used successfully yesterday. He let the opening three-sentence visualisation run on in his mind.

Chapter 10 Saturday 11h25

Reece had presented to a large team of the bank's senior management in a more-relaxed environment than he'd done yesterday. This team were on a week-long, business planning exercise, and his presentation was intended to inspire them with examples of how the bank was looking to grow through new products in the future.

After the presentation, Lauren Harper, the person who'd coordinated his visit, came over to thank him.

"I know your flight back to London isn't until this evening, so do you have plans for the rest of the day?"

"I'm going to get a day-room at the airport hotel and do some work."

She explained that she'd only come in to see his presentation, and was heading home for an informal lunch with friends. She invited him to join them. Reece had been to South Africa a number of times before, and although he didn't like Johannesburg as a city, he did like the people. You could arrive as a complete stranger in a Johannesburg home, and leave with a houseful of new best-friends. Her suggestion was far superior to spending the afternoon working in a hotel room, so he accepted her offer.

Lauren drove him back to her house where he met her husband, Steve. She then offered him use of a spare bedroom, which had an en suite bathroom. There were towels and toiletries laid out on the bed.

"I know what overnight flights are like, so take the chance to freshen up. Come through to the kitchen when you're ready."

Reece undeniably felt overnight-grubby, and was grateful for the chance to clean up. After his shower he made his way to the kitchen, which was in fact, a huge entertainment area. The large kitchen opened out onto a dining area where a table for eight was laid. On the far side of the table, large sliding doors were open, leading out onto the garden that surrounded the house.

"Anything I can do to help?" offered Reece.

"Yes. Get yourself a drink, stand over there, and make scintillating conversation," said Lauren.

"Anything a little more useful I can do to help?"

"You're fine with that," she said, and proceeded to explain who would be joining them for lunch.

“There are two other couples coming. Kobus and Renata, and also David and Michaela. There’s a good friend of ours called DD too. It’s all very relaxed. The conversation can tend to get a bit boisterous, but I’m sure you can handle that,” Lauren said with a smile.

“And what does DD stand for?” asked Reece, trying to fathom out whether this was a male or female name.

“It’s a nickname he’s had ever since we’ve known him. Apparently it stands for Drop Dead. He says it’s because he’s drop-dead gorgeous, but often it’s due to people telling him to drop dead after some of the provocative things he says.”

“Sounds like a character.”

“He’s more than a character. He’s several characters. The stuff that goes on inside his head is impossible to come from just one mind. You’ll see.”

When everyone had arrived and introductions to Reece had been made, Steve ushered people towards the table. Reece found himself sitting between DD and the hostess, Lauren. He spent a little while explaining why he was in South Africa for only twelve hours, which even he thought a little bizarre.

“Oh, I forgot that I need to offer you ladies a pre-emptive apology,” said DD.

“A what?” asked Renata.

“A pre-emptive apology.”

“And what’s one of those?”

“You know that if you say something wrong to someone, then you should always apologise for it afterwards?”

“Go on.”

“Well, I’m apologising for it beforehand. I’m trying to be a more polite and sensitive person. That’s all.”

“Is this a general apology — or for something specific?”

“Something very specific.”

There was a silence. DD liked to insert unnecessarily long pauses to build up the tension.

“What is it?”

“What’s what?”

DD also liked to insert moments of amnesia in his conversation to raise the level of involvement of people with his story.

“What’s the thing you want to apologise for?” came the impatient reply.

“I want to offer a pre-emptive apology just in case I happen to refer to any of you women as a hideously-repulsive, fat-arsed bitch. I wouldn’t want you to take it the wrong way or anything.”

“Not take it the wrong way?” said Michaela, gagging on the sip of wine she’d just taken.

“Of course not. I want you to take it in the most positive sense of the term.”

“You use that term to me and you’ll be in for a big surprise.”

DD turned to Reece. “Not many men would be willing to apologise for something *before* it happens. These women don’t seem to have it in their hearts to forgive.”

“If it’s not too personal a question, how come you’re the only single-guy among all the married couples?” asked Reece provocatively, deciding to play with the fire DD had just lit.

“That’s down to one of two reasons,” he replied. “The first is that I’ve seen how the quality of women declines drastically as soon as they get married. I’m not sure I want to spend the rest of my life married to someone as unforgiving as the women around the table here.”

“There’d better be a second reason coming pretty damn quickly,” said Renata. Her lips pursing aggressively.

“And the second reason would be that there are only three truly-amazing women on the planet, and as you can see,” said DD, gesturing around the table with his fork, “they’ve all been taken already.”

“Definitely the second reason,” said Lauren.

“You obviously all know each other well,” Reece said, nodding his head towards DD in particular.

“The guys and I have all worked together in the past. And as for the women, I’ve known this one, this one and that one for over fifteen years,” said DD, pointing to Renata, Michaela and Lauren respectively.

“Don’t ever refer to me as *this one*,” said Michaela firmly, shaking her finger at DD.

“Profound apologies, Michaela. I didn’t mean to offend you. What I meant to say was I’ve known this one, *that one* and that one for over fifteen years,” DD retorted, with an emphatic nod of his head towards Michaela in the middle.

“He was the best man at our wedding, weren’t you DD?” said Lauren.

“And when was that?” enquired Reece.

“It’ll be fourteen years in October.”

“Jeez Steve, you’d better watch out. Apparently after fourteen years of marriage you can start to get quite attached to them — if you aren’t careful,” said DD with a straight face. “Anyway, I’m surprised that your marriage to Steve has lasted this long considering what he said to me about you on your wedding day.”

Once again DD paused to let the statement hang. Lauren finally picked up on it.

“And what exactly did he say?”

“Just that he thought he needed to get married to help his career. And that you’d do as his interim bride — until he met the woman he truly loved, and wanted to spend the rest of his life with.”

“Well, the fact is, I *am* his wife.”

“Lauren, you should use your correct title when referring to your marital status.”

“And what’s that precisely?”

“Technically, your correct title is that you are Steve’s first wife” replied DD.

“I’m his *only* wife.”

“Technically, first wife. Just trying to be accurate. That’s all,” said DD.

Lauren decided not to rise to the bait.

“You seem awfully well-informed about women and marriage considering you’re still single,” added Renata.

“I’ve known you three couples for so long that I feel I’m effectively married to a third of each of you women. But I just get the best bits of you.”

“You think that this is the best of us do you?” said Michaela in a mock-threatening manner.

“Yes, based on what your husbands say about you,” said DD struggling to keep his tone as factual as possible. “Would one of you ladies please pass me the salad bowl?”

The salad bowl remained on the table.

“Come on,” he said. “No need to be upset with me. Not yet, anyway.”

Throughout the main course the conversation roamed over subjects far and wide.

“DD, how’s the lasagne?” asked Lauren, spoon in hand, ready to dish him a second serving.

“Lauren, there’s only one way to describe your lasagne.” He paused for effect, noticing that Michaela had just taken a mouthful of food. “And that’s to say it’s just like making love to Michaela.”

“Wha... Wha... Wha... What?” choked Michaela.

“Michaela, you should get that repetitiveness checked out. It sounds like you’ve got a problem there.”

“And how’s my lasagne like that DD?” asked Lauren.

“Like what?” said DD being deliberately obtuse, purely for effect.

“How’s my lasagne just like making love to Michaela?”

“Because when you’ve had it once, you just want more and more,” DD replied, offering his empty plate for a second helping.

“What! What! What! What did you just say?” exploded Michaela, almost choking again on her food.

“I do believe that I’m paying both Lauren’s lasagne, and your love-making capabilities, a great compliment. David, you’re her husband, am I right here?”

“You certainly are DD.”

“How can you say that?” exclaimed Michaela, smacking her husband’s arm.

DD leaned towards Reece in a conspiratorial manner. “David’s going to have a lot of explaining to do the next time he starts making amorous moves on his wife,” he chuckled.

“Hey Michaela, you know that if you ever want your husband disposed of, I have a friend who can do it for you,” interrupted DD, giving her a grossly-exaggerated wink. “And he pays a very good rate too.”

DD left the statement hanging while he took another mouthful of food. All present knew they were being set up for a line, but DD ate his food in the silence, knowing that eventually someone would rise to his bait.

“He would actually pay to do that?” said Renata.

Kobus shook his head, knowing his wife was being set up by DD.

“Yes, and he pays a really good rate of £30 per kilo of body-weight too.”

DD was building the set-up nicely, and again let the silence hang.

“What does he do with the body?”

“Actually, I’m not sure. But I do know that he owns a business that makes cook-at-home lasagne.”

“Thanks for that little gem DD,” said Lauren, firmly closing out that line of conversation.

“Have I told you about my brilliant idea for a new business? I’m starting my own company to launch it,” enthused DD.

“You being serious?” asked Kobus.

“Absolutely. It’s a self-improvement programme for women that I’ve developed,” said DD, waving his fork at the three women around the table.

“What’s this programme called?” asked Michaela suspiciously.

“It’s called *Unleash The Whore Within*,” DD replied with a proud smile.

“That’s charming,” said Michaela sarcastically.

DD nodded. Reece noticed how DD held the pause, recognising this as his trademark characteristic when telling a story.

“Would you like to know more?” DD eventually enquired of Michaela.

“If we must.”

“My research shows that beneath the prim-and-proper persona that every woman exudes, is a latent, whore-like tendency that wants to be unleashed. Women want an alter-ego they can use to vent unbridled sexual-lust on their husbands.” He paused briefly to look around the table. Three pairs of female-eyes glared contempt at him.

“You’ll like this,” he continued, “because the programme is a single, two-hour lecture that you women attend. It’s where I explain the principles that enable you to *Unleash The Whore Within*. At the end, I hand out an action plan of all the things you need to do to deliver the ultimate in sexual bliss for your husband. But do you know what the best bit is?”

The customary pause followed as DD took a sip of wine.

“It only costs £99!” he concluded excitedly.

“You seriously believe that women will pay £99 and then actually attend a lecture called *Unleash The Whore Within*?” asked Renata incredulously.

“No, not at all” said DD.

Silence again, as DD waited for someone to respond.

“How do you make money then?” asked Lauren in an exasperated tone.

“Of course women are never going to buy a product with a name like that. But imagine how many men will want to buy it as a gift for their wives and girlfriends. That’s where I’m going to make an absolute fortune. But I still haven’t come to the best bit of this idea yet.”

He took another infuriatingly-long sip of wine.

“How many women do you think are actually going to turn up to a venue with a big banner at the front saying *Unleash The Whore Within?*” A pause duly ensued.

“None!” DD exclaimed. “I won’t even have to run a single lecture,” he proclaimed victoriously.

“You talk absolute crap,” said Michaela, realising that DD hadn’t been the slightest bit serious.

“It’s absolute genius,” said DD.

Reece put a hand on DD’s shoulder, “I have to admit that’s inspired thinking.”

“Please don’t encourage him Reece,” begged Lauren.

“See, Reece recognises great thinking, and he’s an expert in this area.”

“And you’re the greatest thinker ever aren’t you DD?” said Lauren, tousling his hair as she passed behind him, clearing the plates.

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you Lauren. It’s the lowest form of wit,” said DD.

“Well it suits you because you’re the lowest form of life,” she responded matter-of-factly. “Why my husband chose a best-man at our marriage, who in reality is the worst-man on the planet is beyond me?”

“You know that a comment like that will definitely get you on the front-cover of *Whore & Bitch* magazine don’t you?”

“Don’t make me angry. You won’t like me when I’m angry,” yelled Lauren from the kitchen.

“I don’t like you when you aren’t angry, so it won’t make much of a difference,” DD yelled back, desperately trying to keep a straight face.

“Did you know that at one time I used to think you were hot, young, sexy and gorgeous?” he added.

“And when did that stop?” enquired Lauren.

“Just now when you started yelling at me. When you were a little girl, innocently playing with your toys and dolls, did you ever imagine that you’d grow up to be an absolute bitch?”

“No. I don’t believe that thought ever crossed my mind DD.”

“Fortunately, you’re still a little way from getting there.”

“How far?” asked Lauren.

DD held up his first-finger and thumb, showing the smallest of gaps between them.

“You know DD, during the moment of conception, when the male’s sperm race to be the one to fertilise the female’s egg, the particular one that is successful is considered to be the best out of the 120-million in the race to survive. If you were the best out of those 120-million, then there must have been some real crap in the ones that didn’t make it!” Lauren hit back.

“Do you know that I get really turned on when a woman yells at me? And what’s more, I think it will be a really good thing if you and Steve get divorced,” said DD.

“Why?”

“Because then your ex-husband and I can spend more time out boozing whenever we feel like it. And as an added bonus, you could be my bit-of-fluff-on-the-side.”

“If I ever become your bit-of-fluff, then my life will be in a very dire situation.” DD and Lauren both laughed at this.

“If you think that any woman would ever want to be your bit-of-fluff-on-the-side, as you so articulately put it, then you don’t understand women,” said Renata.

“You think us men don’t understand women?” asked DD. “It’s the other way round. You women don’t understand us men. And I have proof,” he added.

“Really?” asked Renata.

“Really,” replied DD. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Do we have a choice?” she said in a resigned manner.

“No, so listen closely.” Once again DD paused, just to infuriate the women a little more.

“First, you women only have X-chromosomes, whereas we men have both X- and Y-chromosomes. So in actual fact, we men are half-women already. Which is why we understand you, but you don’t understand us. And secondly,” he continued, “every man was once a woman during an earlier reincarnation of our spirit.”

“What crap is this?” asked Michaela.

“Guys, isn’t this true?” DD appealed, motioning to the males around the table with his wine glass. The three husbands all gave restrained nods of agreement.

They had no idea where DD was going with this line of conversation but it was always amusing, and often gave them a new perspective on life. There was a very-high chance it was all bullshit, but DD was able to get away with saying things to their wives that they would never dare say themselves.

“Every man knows that reincarnation is a fact of reality, because we men evolved from women in a past reincarnation. Hence we know it to be true. You women haven’t yet made this advancement of gender, which is why you all deny it. Of course this complete ignorance you all possess isn’t really your fault.” He paused to let the last comment sink in. “But eventually you’ll understand the cause of it as you transcend through reincarnation.”

“You’re saying that when women die, we’ll be reincarnated as men?”

“Absolutely not!” replied DD vehemently.

“But you just said that men are reincarnations of women.” Michaela protested.

“Yes,” said DD. “But you can’t go from a woman to a man in one reincarnation. It’s too big a leap for you to take.”

“So what’s the next reincarnation for a woman then?”

“A dung beetle,” said DD authoritatively.

“A dung beetle?” repeated Michaela absentmindedly, not believing what she just heard.

“A dung beetle,” confirmed DD. “It’s a good move for you. It enables you start doing something useful with your lives. You might spend your short, dung beetle life pushing crap around — but at least you won’t be full of it.”

Reece was finding it hard not to grin. To cover up his struggle he asked “What happens after that?”

“The next reincarnation after the dung beetle is a pig, which again is a great improvement from being a woman. And then a dog, followed by an eagle, and then into a leopard, and onward to the final reincarnation where you transcend into that ultimate of all species — a man,” concluded DD triumphantly, banging his fist on his chest for added effect.

The men sniggered quietly to themselves, wary of enjoying the story too much.

“This is why you’re destined to remain single for the rest of your life,” said Michaela. “You are such a misogynist.”

“What’s a misogynist?” asked DD.

“Someone who hates women, you ignorant pig.”

“Actually, the ignorant pig was four reincarnations ago,” said DD “Anyway, you know I don’t hate you. This is just my way of showing affection for you without saying things that will get me into trouble with your husbands.”

“You’ve got the weirdest way of showing affection for somebody,” said Lauren.

“But that’s the whole point of being different — not doing the same as everybody else. Life would be so boring if everything was always going to be the same. And so predictable.”

“What do you say about that, Reece?” asked Kobus.

“He’s got a point. Taking an interesting perspective always stretches your thinking,” Reece replied.

“Talking about interesting perspectives, I’ve got a very topical one for you, considering we’re having lunch,” said DD.

“Stop. No more perspectives from you. Just be quiet for once,” said Renata.

“Imagine you three married-couples are in a plane crossing the Andes and it crashes,” continued DD unabated. Three pairs of female-eyes rolled in disdain.

“You three guys survive and your wives all die. There’s no food, and after a couple of days you’re starving — and you decide to eat the women. The question is this. *In what order would you eat the bodies?* I mean, would each of you want to eat your own wife first, last, or in the middle?”

“I can’t believe you’re asking this question,” said Michaela, completely dumbfounded.

“It’s lunchtime so it’s topical. Anyway, shut up. The food doesn’t speak” said DD nodding towards her, and instantly receiving a look-of-death in return.

“So, you guys. What’s your answer? Who do you eat first?”

The three husbands all declined to respond for fear of incriminating themselves. Reece thought this the wise thing for them to do. He didn’t know how he’d answer the question either, if it was asked of him.

“Reece, you’re a creative thinker. How would you answer that question?” said DD turning toward him.

Reece found that if he thought about a problem that wasn’t really his to answer, he usually couldn’t come up with anything snappy, or out of the ordinary. However, when he was put on the spot and expected to say something instantly, he knew he could just let his mind go blank — and then say the first thing that came into his head. This was a peculiar, but useful, capability Reece knew he possessed.

“A stew,” he said without a pause, “then you wouldn’t know who was who in it. And I’m sure it would be tender, delicious — and very tasteful,” he added as an afterthought to appease the about-to-be-eaten females.

“A very good answer,” said Lauren. “Unlike DD’s tasteless question.”

“Nice comment man,” said DD, giving Reece a gentle punch on the arm.

“So what’s a good example of creative thinking in business Reece?” asked David.

“You might believe it’s about big-picture thinking — the next new thing to change the world. Occasionally it is, but most of the time it isn’t. Businesses usually want small changes to the things they already do — but something that will have a big impact for them. Often, the smaller the change, the more appealing it is to them, and that’s where the creative thinking comes in. Looking at the same thing that everybody else looks at, but seeing something very different.”

“I can give you an example of making small changes for a big difference,” said DD. “Just using the keyboard of my computer, I’ve created the world’s strongest online-password, that’s absolutely impossible to crack.”

The customary pause from DD before he continued.

“It’s a sixteen-digit password that changes every time. It’s so secure that even I don’t know what it is.”

“How can you have a password that changes every time — and that you don’t know?” asked David.

“That’s the clever bit, so listen up. I close my eyes and press six keys at random. To make a password more secure, you should incorporate unusual keystrokes that other people don’t normally use. So I then press the backspace key six-times. I then press one, two, three and four — and it’s done. How about that for a really secure password?”

“So your password is six random keys, six backspace presses, and then 1-2-3-4?”

“Certainly is,” confirmed DD.

“In a slightly-perverse way you’ve got my point across,” admitted Reece.

“DD, you are such an asshole,” said Renata. “Why is it you always have to take things to such extremes?”

“Because that’s where things get interesting. If you have beautiful-black on the left side and wonderful-white on the right side, then who wants to be in the ghastly-grey middle-ground?”

That’s an interesting approach for thinking about things Reece thought. Be at the edges, no matter where the edges are. Just avoid the middle-ground which is where the

majority of people will be. He made a mental note to develop that into a thinking tool in the future.

“I say provocative things to dislodge people’s thinking. If you’re in the middle-ground then that’s just existing. But being at the extremes — that’s living. That’s real thinking.”

“Talking about not being the same as everyone else, someone seems to think that getting a personalised number plate for his car is a wonderful idea,” said Renata, rolling her eyes in the direction of her husband. “I think it’s a complete waste of time and money.”

“Then maybe I can help you there,” replied DD, pursing his lips in thought.

“Hey Kobus,” said DD in a loud-and-stern manner, that was clearly intended to get the attention of the whole table. “Renata says you’re looking to get a personalised number plate.”

“That’s right.”

“Man, I just want you to know that I think it’s a brilliant idea. Totally brilliant.”

“Thanks DD.”

“However,” said DD raising his finger for effect, “there is just one thing that we’ll need to consider.” The use of the word *we* was clearly intended to make this sound like a comment coming from the entire table.

“And what’s that?” asked Kobus, feeling justifiably concerned about what DD’s next comment would be.

“Well,” said DD, using the thumb and first-finger of each hand to form a rectangle in the air, the size of a car registration plate, “we’re going to have to use awfully-small letters to get *COMPLETELY USELESS WANKER* onto a number plate.”

The table dissolved into laughter. Renata laid her hand on DD’s forearm and said, “thanks for the help.”

After dessert, Reece and DD stood in the afternoon sun, talking. Reece had discovered that DD was an engineer who designed new products for a multi-national home-appliance manufacturer.

“How do you come up with all these things that you say?” asked Reece.

“Man, sometimes my mouth just starts saying something — and I have no idea how it’s going to end. I just trust that my mind will be able to finish it off in time. It also has to do with the fact that this is kind of a safe environment,” he said, waving his arm in the direction

of the others inside. “I can say whatever I want — and get away with it. Well, most of the time. It sometimes feels like a chance to put my mind to the test to see what it’s really capable of.”

“Do you get the opportunity to think like this in your work?” asked Reece.

“When we’re developing new ideas for products, it helps to be very open and free-wheeling in thinking, to explore for new ideas and opportunities. How about you?”

“Same. When we’re opening up new opportunities, absolutely anything goes, and strange thinking is encouraged. Obviously outside of that time you have to behave, and think normally.”

“It’s sometimes hard to behave normally isn’t it?” said DD with a wink.

Reece tended to judge people quickly — sometimes too quickly — but now he sensed a bond of unspoken-understanding with DD. It felt intuitively comfortable to him.

“I believe that our minds are much smarter than we are. This may seem like a paradox, but I think many people expend a lot of energy restraining their mind rather than letting it do what it’s truly capable of. Your *Unleash The Whore Within* programme might have a lot of success as an *Unleash The Genius Within* programme instead.”

Lauren had walked over to join the two of them. “I hope this guy’s not giving you too much grief,” she said to Reece, affectionately squeezing DD’s arm. “He’s in London himself next week — aren’t you DD?”

DD nodded.

“What are you doing there?” asked Reece.

“I’m attending a conference for four days.”

“Is it the *Potential of the Human Mind* conference?”

“Yes, you know of it?”

“I’m speaking at it,” said Reece.

“That’s a weird coincidence!” exclaimed Lauren.

“It is,” agreed DD. “Will you be there just on the day you’re speaking?”

“No. They invited me to attend for the whole duration and to stay at the hotel on full-board too. They were really generous — especially as it seems to be a very over-priced conference.”

“I know,” said DD. “Fortunately, my company are paying, and that’s the only reason I’m going. What subject are you speaking on?”

“The application of different thinking styles to create new opportunities.”

“Sounds interesting. How did you get the speaking gig?”

“I wrote an article called *Popcorn and the Art of Fine Thinking* that was published a few months back. They must have seen that.”

“I read that article.” said DD. “And that’s why you’re speaking?”

“It must be. I got the invitation a few weeks ago, and that’s all that I can think of that might have got the organiser’s attention.”

Reece didn’t realise how wrong he was in this assumption...

Chapter 11 Saturday overnight

The leisurely lunch drifted on until the setting winter sun signalled the end of the afternoon. DD had offered to drive Reece back to the airport. On the way, DD explained that after five-years of service, his company allowed employees to attend any work-related conference of their choice, where all expenses were paid. Naturally, everyone chose an overseas event — and he'd chosen next week's London event.

Reece had begun to understand how similar his and DD's individual fields of work were. DD designed tangible products, whereas Reece designed the intangible business models and services. He'd felt surprisingly comfortable with DD's brashness, which contrasted with his own more-reserved and relaxed approach to life. He thought DD to be one of the most enigmatic characters he'd ever met, in the way that he could switch his thinking between a serious, work-related focus, and then instantly flip to the totally nonsense-related conversational topics he'd been hearing over lunch. Whichever way DD's switch was flipped, it always produced a very creative flow of conversation. Reece was looking forward to some interesting talk-time with DD at the conference.

Four hours later, flight VA218 was at its cruising altitude of 34,000 feet, heading due-North on its way to Heathrow. After a splendid three-course dinner, Reece opened up his copy of *Mind the Future* and skipped to the page with the Post-it note on. The way the message *DON'T GO AHEAD WITH YOUR DREAM SHARING WEBSITE* was phrased, could be read as a quiet statement, *and* as an active threat, both at the same time.....

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I hope you've enjoyed this sample of my book. There are sixty-six more chapters of intrigue and fascinating revelations to go. When I was researching the material for the book, I was amazed at some of the items I found. There are things happening in science, nature and the universe-in-general, that shouldn't be. These have been kept as factual occurrences and the story has been built around them.

If you'd like to read the full story, you can buy *The Delicate Force* online from your country's Amazon store. Thanks for reading.

Chris Thomason,
September 2014