

CHAPTER 1

‘Congratulations, congratulations to everyone!’ The Operations Vice President made his opening statement to all of the staff at Deuteron on this, the day of project completion in the next phase of the company’s move into cutting edge innovation in computer user interfaces.

Standing prominently centre stage in the office presentation room was Nick Gregson, a charismatic, tall, well built man whose physical prominence was matched by his intense gaze and engaging smile as he surveyed the people within the presentation room. The room was a banked theatre of seats facing a small stage which sat just below an almost cinema sized presentation screen mounted on the wall behind. The seating, set out in three sections with the main central section facing the stage head on and the two side sections angled inwards towards the outer halves of the stage, were all taken with three hundred of the company staff. Lining the walls were other members of staff who weren’t lucky enough to find a seat before the presentation began or were late entrants. The presentation room was enclosed with soundproofed panels lined with a soft black material. From the ceiling a dimmed glow from the many spot lights set in strategic configuration cast a yellowy hue across the audience in stark contrast to the brightly lit stage from which Nick Gregson continued his address.

‘Congratulations to everyone.’ Nick continued as his eyes roamed around the room picking out individuals as if personally speaking to them.

‘Today marks the completion of project KeyStroke. A project which has been waiting for the technology to catch up to it, a project, which is going to change the face of computing forever. Everyone sitting in this room today has played a part in this project making it one of the most ambitious projects this company has undertaken to date. Of which you should be specifically proud, is the fact that this project has been one of the fastest to implementation. One year; just one year from pad to fully functional prototypes and shortly to production – a fantastic achievement by anyone’s standards.’

Nick, whilst finishing his final sentence, moved over to the left hand side of the stage so as to give the audience an unobstructed view of the presentation screen behind, slightly adjusting his slimline ear piece and microphone as he did so. He motioned to the screen behind which was currently displaying the Deuteron logo on a white background. The name Deuteron sat in the upper half of an oval which was made up of a desert and clear blue sky that was slightly blurred. Written beneath that in the lower desert half it said “It starts here...”. Just below the logo was the phrase “The nucleus of the digital age”. With Nick’s motion the screen changed to the next slide which just had the word “Technology” displayed.

‘Technology is moving at an exceptional rate, faster than it ever has before, and it’s probably fair to say that it will increase in momentum. Today’s software is also keeping pace, making more and more demands on the hardware that it runs on, and in part is driving hardware manufacturers to continually evolve their product ranges whilst also pushing the realms of creativity. Being at the forefront of this technology industry is all about attitude. No longer can

we afford to sit back and react to what others are doing; letting other industries dictate the pace and design, no, we need to start building the products of tomorrow today. We need products which will have the flexibility, the power and the durability to adapt to the ever-changing environment of technology. But they must also be beautiful. Increasingly, technology is becoming the new jewellery of the twenty first century – from the mobile phone to the laptop computer, it is now a common accessory and much like the car, is a symbol of status; but it has to function – and function well.’ The slide behind Nick changed to display the phrase “Pushing the boundaries”.

‘Functional excellence and sexy appearance is all very well and good – but let’s face it, that’s what everyone else does. Innovation too to a certain extent, though critical in anyone’s book, is still what others are doing, or so they say. Microsoft for example, when they launched their new operating system Vista and “wow” being the buzz word – and wow it was; but I was still looking at it on my two year old PC with a slightly aged screen and worn keyboard. It still operates the same way just with a different look, and that’s all it is. Look anywhere in the industry and what we have now is still what we had ten years ago. The only difference is that it just looks sexier and works faster, but essentially it’s exactly the same as we had before. Innovation? Hardly. It’s little more than improvement.’ Again the slide behind Nick changed to “It’s time...”.

‘It’s time. It’s time for something new. It’s time to re-invent innovation – that’s the task I set you all a little over a year ago.’ Nick nodded his head knowingly and flashed a smile at the audience in front of him.

‘You did it. You went beyond all of our expectations and redefined the word innovation and did it in a particularly interesting way. So, now it is time, time to see what we’ve done.’

As Nick moved from the left hand side of the stage, the screen behind him changed to a camera view of the stage. The camera man moved in for a close up and followed Nick to a table which, covered in cloth, had just been wheeled to centre stage. As Nick unveiled the item on the table, he introduces the audience to the Interceptor range and began a demonstration.

‘The Interceptor is, for all intents and purposes, a computer keyboard, but it is no ordinary keyboard. Made from high quality materials and covered in glass, it is a flat panel, touch sensitive full colour LCD device that displays a standard keyboard layout which is typed into directly. It can either be used as a stand-alone keyboard for a standard desktop computer or integrated into a laptop computer making it thinner and ultimately more attractive as a two-screened sleek device. The keyboard layout is completely customisable by the user as they are able to ‘drag’ parts of the layout to suit their requirements. It has an integrated section for a touchpad mouse and also a biometric fingerprint reader for added security and will ‘remember’ the user so that their preferred settings can be displayed. A built in memory card reader allows for extra memory to be added to the device to allow for user specific settings to be saved as well as additional bespoke keyboard layouts which software companies will now be able

to design for their software which will greatly enhance the user experience and also allow for increased productivity.’

The camera man moved in for a close up of the device as Nick continued his demonstration of how easily the Interceptor can be used.

‘In trials, users missed the feedback or “clunk” of standard keys as they were never quite sure whether they had struck the key firmly enough. So we added two things. Sound and vibrate. The user is able to select one or both, to provide the feedback that you get with a normal keyboard. It takes a little getting used to, but after a while of using this, going back to a standard keyboard is almost like driving an older car after having driven a new one for a while, the heavy clutch and not so precise steering – a little alien.’ Nick then moved back to centre stage and the screen slowly transitioned to the next slide which displayed a picture of the Interceptor.

‘This is the true interpretation of the word innovation,’ Nick stated as he motioned toward the slide in the background.

‘It’s still a keyboard yes, but now it is so much more. You are not bound by the positioning of the keys you can move them around. You don’t need your mouse tied to the computer anymore, it’s integrated. Your software will soon be able to configure your keyboard layout for you to make it more intuitive to use. Each user of the keyboard can have their own preferences and won’t need to reset it each time they want to use it. With biometric security becoming the new standard in security, remembering passwords will soon become a thing of the past. You can even take out the memory card, with all of your settings on, put it into another keyboard, maybe at work for example, and have everything set up the way you want it. This will become the new standard in user interface.’ As Nick was speaking, the table with the Interceptor was removed and another bought on in its place. The camera man again took his position whilst Nick continued.

‘As if the design team didn’t have enough to do with the Interceptor – they probably didn’t have enough to do actually; either that or they are overstaffed...’ Some murmurings and sarcastic laughs from the team in the audience as Nick, with a raised eyebrow and wry grin, waved at them.

‘They gave themselves another challenge. And so here is where I introduce you to... The RealSymVR virtual reality glasses.’ The presentation screen behind Nick then changed back to the camera mans shot of the stage as he made his way over to the new table and removing the cloth to reveal the glasses. Picking them up, Nick continued.

‘In a masterstroke of inspiration and not to mention an insurmountable bite of the R&D budget – the design team decided it was time to revisit the virtual reality exploits of the past and see whether today’s technology would be up to the task to make it mainstream and to make it affordable. In my view, they’ve done it. And now we have a platform upon which we can build a fuller bodied virtual reality experience. So let me introduce you...’ Nick took the glasses and put them on. The screen behind changed to show the view that Nick had from within the glasses.

‘OK now, just bear with me while I get set up here.’ He uncoupled the stereo headphones from the arms of the glasses and placed one in his free ear and then unclipped the short microphone boom from the left hand arm of the glasses and angled it downwards toward his mouth. He then began the demonstration.

‘As you can see, the glasses themselves are not cumbersome to wear. They’re lightweight and attractively designed in black with a cool thin red line across the front which glows lightly when in use and when charging. Inside the glasses are two LCD colour screens, one for each eye. The glasses put the computer screen right in front of your eyes, it’s really quite amazing to be totally dominated by the view of the screen. Also inside the glasses are sensors which follow the movement of the pupil. Being the darkest part of the eye it is easy to track the movement and as the LCD screens illuminate the eye, making the pupil smaller, tracking is very accurate. As you can see from the screen behind, we’re on the desktop in Windows and you can see various icons. As I look at each icon they become highlighted, much like clicking once on the icon using a mouse, as the glasses know exactly where I am looking. With the microphone I can then use voice commands. So if I look at the word document there and highlight it, I can say “open”. Ha, that’s amazing! You can see that the document has now opened and is ready for editing. As I look across the menu bar each one scrolls into view, and as I look down the options they become highlighted, so let’s select tools and then dictation, “open”, and now as I speak you can see that the words are being recorded on the page as text, fantastic!’ Nick then took off the glasses and placed them back on the table. Looking up at the screen he laughed.

‘I think that’s probably the most amazing thing I have seen in a long time. The software runs beautifully as you can see with the Office software, and with the voice commands you can do everything that you need to without even having to touch a keyboard – wait, no, that’s bad – haven’t we just designed a new keyboard? And now it’s obsolete? Great move design team – in my office now!’ Gesticulating at the design team in the audience to go to his office, he laughed.

‘Just kidding guys! Our target audience for the RealSymVR glasses is more with the gaming community and graphics heavy applications such as laboratories who work with 3D molecular modelling. The software for the RealSymVR is still in the development stages at the moment, and has been revised for these types of applications. A beta test is currently scheduled to flush out any bugs in the development and we’ll bring more news to you as soon as we can.’ Moving back centre stage as the glasses table was being removed and the camera man disappeared, the presentation screen changed to display the Deuteron logo once again. Nick stood open armed.

‘A truly amazing achievement that concludes this afternoon’s presentation. My thanks go to you all for this fantastic effort and special thanks to Scott Evans, the head of the design team, a round of applause please for Scott! Stand up, Scott!’

Scott stood up from within the audience in the central section and took the applause by waving.

‘Well done, Scott and team!’ Nick continued. ‘I’d also like to congratulate Jill Camfield, head of software development for all of her and her team’s hard work over the last year. A round of applause please for Jill and team!’

Jill, standing on the left hand side of the presentation room, raised both her hands and nodded her head toward her team whilst clasping her hands to them in appreciation as the rest of the audience applaud on.

Nick, standing centre stage, waved the audience down. ‘Quieten down for a second, quieten down – you’re all just minutes away from a beer honest, I’m nearly done! So, you’ve seen the standard of what we can achieve, and you’ve seen me play with them on stage here. In the boardroom you’ll be able to have a closer look for yourselves as we have several sets set up and ready to roll, so please feel free to have a play yourselves. OK, so its four o’clock, it’s Friday, the week is over as far as I’m concerned! Make your way across to the boardroom I’m sure you won’t need me to tell you where the beer is! Music will be piped in courtesy of...’ Nick quickly looked down at his secretary in the audience just below the stage and questioned ‘...DJ who?’ she answered quietly and Nick raised his eyebrows at her.

‘OK, so music will be piped in courtesy of DJ Hoodiini – with two i’s I’m reliably informed...’

‘That’s ‘cos he’s a Hoodie isn’t he!’ a shout from the audience reliably confirmed.

‘Err yes of course - Ah, that’ll be John then yes, from IT?’ Nick retorted.

‘Well I thought it sounded better than DJ John. You’ve spoilt it now.’

‘Not at all, I’m sure it’s all very street John and it sounds marvellous! Anyway, quickly moving on’ Nick said while winking at John in the audience. ‘We have music, we have beer, we have a venue – go and enjoy the celebration!’

With a cheer from the audience and a round of applause for the presenter, everyone got up and began to make their way to the exit of the presentation room. All except Scott Evans who began to make his way down to the stage which Nick was walking down from.

‘Nick, have you got a second?’

‘Ah Scott, just the man! Walk with me’, Nick intercepted Scott and placed his right hand on Scott’s shoulder and slowly guided him towards the exit. ‘Well done again Scott. I don’t know where you get your ideas from, I really don’t, but I am mightily impressed.’

‘Thanks Nick, I couldn’t have done it without my team though, they really put the time in on this one.’ As they both headed towards the left hand walkway of the presentation room, Jill Camfield made her way towards them. Nick was first to greet her.

‘Jill, good work, good work. I was just saying to Nick that I’m very impressed to say the least. I’m expecting more good things from you two!’

Jill smiled showing off her perfectly straight and perfectly white teeth which almost shimmer in the lights from the stage. ‘It’s been a great

collaboration between the two teams, Nick, and I think we should revisit the amalgamation of the teams to fully exploit the synergies between the two so that we can get the mechanics right from ground level.'

'Of course, we'll revisit that at a later stage and I'm sure Scott will have some input into that too.' Nick, knowing that this conversation had become fairly heated in the past as the two heads were at a disagreement with first the amalgamation but secondly who would be in the frame to head up the newly formed team, moved to re-direct the conversation. 'However, I do have one thing I want to discuss with you both. When I was using the RealSymVR glasses I noticed a very faint flicker in the picture.'

'Flicker?' Scott was very quick to answer. 'Shouldn't be any flicker in the screens, they're LCD screens similar to that of a laptop computer and you can't visibly see any refresh rate, and the software should have nothing to with it.'

'Like I said Scott, it was very faint and hardly noticeable, but I thought I should just mention it.' He said with a reassuring smile as he knew that Scott could get very defensive of his workmanship.

'Well we can always make a note of that and review it as part of the revisions during the beta testing.' Jill stated whilst looking at Nick compliantly.

Scott seizing his moment with the mention of the beta test quickly jumped in. 'That's what I wanted to talk to you about, and I'm glad you're here as well Jill as I think this affects you too.' Returning his gaze back to Nick, Scott continued. 'I wasn't aware that another stage of testing had been planned?'

'Nothing to worry about Scott, it's a software based test phase. I assume that you may have been left out of the loop because it mainly affects Jill's team.'

'Yes but normally with any test phases at least one of my team is involved in case of any hardware incompatibilities, so I don't understand why we weren't informed.'

'Like I said, I'm sure that it is nothing to worry about Scott.' Checking his watch and realising that he was late, he quickly flashed a look at the exit 'My apologies both, you'll have to excuse me I'm running a little late.' Nick started walking quickly to the exit and briefly turned around 'Good weekend both, and thanks again!' as he disappeared through the exit door.

Scott, with a rather bemused look on his face turned to look at Jill who herself started to make her way to the exit.

'Jill?'

Jill turned around and looked at Scott with a blank look on her face.

'I'm still not understanding to be honest Jill. It is standard practice to have one of my team involved in testing phases, and I thought this had all been approved. What's this all about?'

Jill slowly made her way back to Scott, flashing her smile at him as she did so. 'Scott, these are just standard software revision tests. We know that the hardware has been nailed down, you've done a great job with that, so there's not really anything for your team to get involved with. You heard what Nick said, the target market for this will be using graphics heavy applications and we need

to ensure that the operating software is up to the task and can run the processors to their full ability.’ Jill took Scott by the arm and lead him to the exit. ‘Now come on, the working week is over, it’s time to revel in our success and celebrate with the rest of the team.’

Not content with the response and getting a little frustrated, Scott tried to re-open the conversation. ‘But Nick mentioned a flicker that could be...’

‘That’s more than likely the operating software not configured correctly for the speed of the graphics chips.’ Jill sternly interrupted. ‘Remember, we had to put this together in a hurry for the presentation. Don’t worry, it’ll all get ironed out in the beta phase of testing and if we need you, then you’ll be the first to know.’

Standing at the exit now Jill motioned towards the elevators to get to the boardroom. ‘Come, let’s go and have a drink with everyone.’

Scott was hesitant for a minute, keen to try and learn a little more about the revisions and the beta test phase decided against it. ‘No, I’ll tell you what; I’ll catch you up OK, I’ve just gotta run to the office and shut down the PC.’ Scott turned around and headed back to his office and quickly turned around to speak to Jill again ‘I’ll catch you up OK?’ while giving her a reassuring smile as he did so.

‘OK, but don’t you be too long, I’m sure most of the beer has gone already!’

‘No doubt!’ He shouted back as he rounded the corner in the corridor.

Jill stood there for a moment with a quizzical look as she watched Scott disappear and then started to make her way towards the elevators.

Back at his desk, Scott sat down in his leather reclining office chair in repose and gazed around generally, thinking. His office was in a general state of untidiness with bits of electronic boards, microchips and plastic parts strewn around over different surfaces. On his desk, a high powered computer with two flat panel nineteen inch screens so that the computer display crossed both of them and allowed him to view two things at once while working on projects. In front of that was a new Interceptor keyboard, currently displaying a screen saver of the Deuteron logo spinning around slowly, which he had been testing personally with his computer. Over to the left underneath the window was a low level filing cabinet full of technical manuals and books on programming languages which he used for his hobbyist activities. On top of that, in amongst different types of materials he had been looking at for different applications, were several glass awards won for design and innovation. The wall to the right side of the office was made up of glass panels which faced directly on to where his team was situated, and the door to the office was the fourth and final panel. Floor to ceiling display cabinets ran along the entire length of the back wall, full of books and manuals, with the odd award sporadically placed inside in no discernable order.

Scott slowly spun his chair in the direction of the window and gazed at the now darkening sky with rouged clouds slowly trundling past. He still couldn’t understand. No one had mentioned anything about another testing

phase. The software had all been approved and he knew it to be operating at optimum levels he'd seen it for himself. There's nothing more that could be done and there was nothing wrong with the hardware – but what the hell was Nick talking about, flicker? There had been no reports of a flicker either through user testing or through video feed. Revisions!

Scott suddenly sat upright.

Nick said in his presentation that the software had already been revised and then Jill confirmed that by saying that the beta phase was just to test the revisions. So the work had been done already and Scott knew nothing about it. How the hell did that get through and when the hell did they do it? Hold on. If that was the case then Nick must have been using one of the revised models in the presentation. He wondered whether that was a reason for the flicker Nick had referred to. The files must be on the system Scott thought to himself.

Quickly wheeling around his chair and moving in closer to the desk, Scott tapped on the Interceptor and the logo disappeared and the keyboard layout quickly replaced it. He dragged his forefinger downward over the biometric scanner and the computer whirred into life. The two screens awoke slowly to reveal the Windows desktop and he began to navigate his way to the project files for both the Interceptor and the RealSymVR glasses. Thinking that if the revisions had been done for one, without his knowledge, they could have done it for both.

Suddenly his office door opened, startling Scott and stopping him in his tracks.

‘‘Scuse me Mr. Evans, sorry to interrupt.’

Breathing a sigh of relief from being startled, Scott realised it was Jim, the office's rotund security guard, poking his head around the door. ‘No problem Jim, you gave me a fright there! What can I do for you?’

‘Sorry about that, sir. We're about to lock down this floor, it's gone six; but if you're working late, sir, I can always make a note of it and keep it open for ya?’ Fumbling around in his pocket he brought out a scruffy looking pad and pen as if to jot down a late worker so that he could keep it on file in case something should happen, such as a fire, as he'd need to know who was still left in the building.

‘No no, no problem, Jim. I'll be just five minutes and I'll be right with you.’

‘No problem, sir.’ Jim said as he placed his pad and pen back into his pocket.

‘You know that there are some revellers still upstairs?’

‘Yup, ‘n I'll be turfin them out in a minute as well.’ He said with a grin.

‘Good on ya Jim!’

Scott quickly synchronised the project files from the central server with his laptop computer and disconnected it, placed it into his laptop bag, donned his coat and made his way over to Jim who was holding the door open for him.

CHAPTER 2

It's funny what you think about.

It's funny what you think about when you know you're going to die. For example, if you're in an elevator that has suddenly broken its mountings and is hurtling towards the ground at an incredible turn of speed, what would happen if you jumped as high and as hard as you could the instant before it hits the ground? Would the speed of your jump upward have sufficient momentum to counter the falling speed and render you almost stationary in the air, so that when eventually you do start to fall back down, and the elevator has hit the floor, would you land safely?

Or why your brain only decides to remind you of something at the most inconvenient of times. When you leave your house for example, you're quite sure that you have forgotten something but everything appears to be OK, right up until the point that you are in your car just about to join the motorway, and your brain then decides to tell you "by the way, you forgot to put those important files that you needed today in your bag." Bugger.

Mostly though, you think about your life. All of the good things that have happened. The fond childhood memories, mother and father, brothers, sisters, friends, your wife, the kids. Material things don't even feature – it's only the people. The people whose lives you have touched and those that have touched your life. You think about the bad times too, the arguments that now seem so trivial, the broken relationships and the people that you've hurt. The embarrassing moments that every now and again, and for no reason, just pop into your head; as if to remind you that you are human after all. You think about your emotions, your love for your family, the joy of being with people that love and enjoy you as a person, but you also remember the wasted emotions, the hate, the jealousy and the envy. It shames you to think that you wasted time on such emotions and fought to satisfy them for no other reason than pride, and now you realise that you could have spent that time so much more wisely – now that time has run out. Life doesn't so much flash before you're eyes; you seem to experience it again. You remember the most pertinent parts of your life, funny though how the majority of them appeared trivial at the time, but now, now they are so very important. I guess that the trivial things in life, the things that appear trivial to you anyway, are the most important things for others, and maybe, just maybe, that's what counts.

Right up until the last moments of your life... you remember...

'Are we nearly there yet, daddy?'

'Nearly there Amy, sweetheart, not long to go now.' A quick look in the rear view mirror to make sure Amy is OK.

It had been a long drive and an early start from London, but fortunately the Saturday morning traffic had been very light. It was no wonder Amy was beginning to get a little frustrated in the back of the car, barring a few comfort breaks on the way, Amy had been as good as gold cooped up in her child seat with only Teddy for company. They had made good progress that morning,

taking a little over four hours to get to Cumbria. Their destination, Grange-over-Sands Airfield located in the southerly part of the county in the South Lakeland District. A long weekend had been planned for some time, as booking accommodation there was difficult at the best of times. As regular visitors to the area, they had struck up a good relationship with the owners of some picturesque cottages in a village called Flookburgh which was a short journey away from Grange-over-Sands. This afforded some preferential rates during the peak seasons plus a little flexibility in booking times. Nearing their destination now, the black Audi A8 pulled into the car park at the airfield.

‘Here we are, everybody, all safe and sound!’

‘Goody, ‘cos Teddy really needs to pee.’ Amy stated in no uncertain terms as she discarded Teddy unceremoniously to the other side of the car. ‘Mummy, can you let me out please?’

‘OK honey, one second.’

‘Do you want me to take her Jules?’

‘No, don’t worry hun, I need to go myself anyway. Where shall we meet?’

‘I’ll get my stuff out of the boot and then meet you in the cafeteria? We can have a spot of lunch before we get started, how does that sound?’

‘Excellent, I’m starved. See you down there.’ With that, they both got out of the car and Julia went round to the back to let Amy out of her car seat. ‘Oh, don’t forget to bring the camera bag with you.’

With his head buried deep inside the boot of the car, he momentarily popped his head out. ‘Sorry?’

‘The camera bag, don’t forget it.’

‘What, this camera bag perchance?’ dangling the bag just beside the car.

Julia smiled and shook her head slightly, ‘that’ll be the one.’

‘Mummy I really need to pee!’ Amy, outside of the car now, was performing the “pee dance” as her parents called it, a kind of erratic jumping and skipping of sorts in a circular motion denoting that it’s not going to be held in much longer.

‘OK, honey, lets go then. See you in a bit hun!’

‘Bye, daddy!’ Amy shouted as she began to quickly walk towards the single level office building just a few yards away from the car park, Julia in hot pursuit behind her.

‘Oh OK, bye then!’ His words lost though as a plane flew overhead just coming into land on the single one thousand meter airstrip a little off into the distance. His gaze followed the plane and he allowed his eyes to wander across the horizon. The midday sun finding its strength and the early morning haze dissipating rapidly in the warming heat. A clear blue sky blanketed the horizon and a very light cool breeze gently ruffled his hair. Perfect conditions for skydiving, yes, today was going to be a good day. He shifted his view over to the group of buildings in front of him, the first of which, the main reception office, Julia and Amy had just disappeared into, not particularly busy for the time of day but he was glad of that. Being “slightly older” than that of the normal clientele for this activity, he was always a little conscious of not having

the bullish confidence of the younger generation. He had jumped many times before and so was competent, but most of these jumps had been static line jumps where the parachute had deployed automatically when exiting the aircraft. This gave him the confidence of control of the parachute on the descent and also on how to control the landing. There had been quite a few accompanied AFF or accelerated freefall jumps from ten thousand feet and progressively he'd been able to assume control over those jumps from his instructor, but today was to mark his first solo accelerated freefall jump. Having completed the required number of accompanied freefall jumps, his instructor had said to him that he was more than ready to go solo, but he was still a little uncertain as to whether he'd understood everything correctly. Today though, he seemed to be full of confidence and eager to go, only a very slight nervous tickle in his belly roused him into action. 'Got to stop thinking negatively, be positive' he told himself. He reached in to the boot of the car for the last of the kit bags and dropped it on the floor beside the car. Closed the boot and flicked the key fob to lock the car and set the alarm. Picking up the bag from the floor, he threw the strap over his left shoulder, and checking to make sure he had the camera bag, began to make his way over to reception.

'Hello again, how are you?' The young lady behind the receptionist desk, who couldn't have been any older than twenty two, smiled sweetly with her greeting. Her dark eyes and skin betraying her ethnic origins, the almost jet black wavy hair cut to shoulder length seemed to gently follow the contours of her face, with one side pinned behind her left ear.

'Very well thank you, if a little nervous today it has to be said,' He said whilst placing his bags on the floor in front of the desk.

'Looks as if we have a big day planned for you today, you feeling up to it?' Her smile broadened such that it set off her attractive features.

'Ha! I'm always up for a challenge.' He said with mock authority and then stated under his breath 'no matter how silly it seems' smiling and gently winking at her. 'Um, would I be able to leave these bags here at all, I just need to find my family in the cafeteria.'

'No problem, just pop them over there by the seats and I'll have them taken through for you. I think I saw your little girl dart into the toilets over there; she's a little cutie isn't she?'

'Thank you, yes. She's a little terror really. She's getting to an age now where she knows what she wants and, of course, wants it all immediately.'

'How old is she?'

'She'll be seven next month, but sometimes I swear she's in her teens!'

'I think my mum and dad would have said the same thing probably! It's a girl thing I think!'

'Well, it's some kind of thing. Anyway, if they come past would you be kind enough to let them know that I've gone through to the cafeteria?'

'My pleasure. I'll also let Ryan know that you've arrived and get him to meet you in the café if that's OK with you?'

‘That’s perfect, thank you.’ Said as he moves his bags next to the seating which ran at right angles to the reception desk just below the windows facing out to the car park. Following the signs for the cafeteria, he walked back past the receptionist smiling as he did so. The office building wasn’t particularly big, consisting of the small reception area, ladies and gents toilets just off the left hand side of the reception through a very small hallway and then behind the reception area was the cafeteria. A small area for the till was positioned in the far left hand corner of the café with an elderly lady sitting behind it chatting with gentleman who was sitting at a table directly opposite. Running alongside the left hand side, leading up to the till, was a counter with glass cabinets housing an assortment of foods and large tea and coffee machines. On the café floor there were about seven or eight tables, each with four seats. The tables were covered with coloured checked plastic table cloths, similar to ones seen in a “greasy spoon” on any high street. On top of those there were the standard red and yellow squeeze bottles for ketchup and mustard, silver salt and pepper shakers and menu propped up in between the grouping. Along the back wall hung many picture frames of various aircraft at the hangers and groups of people all in their skydiving apparel stuck in a static cheering stance with fists in the air, or just standing in a group grinning cheesily for the camera. On the wall to the rear, behind the receptionist’s desk was mounted a large pinboard with dog-eared bits of paper pinned to it with faded writing and a multitude of photos of people in mid freefall attached in no particular order. Along side of that was a chiller full of various cans and bottles of soft drink. To the right were floor to ceiling windows looking out towards the airfield. In the far distance, a wall of tall conifer trees could be seen and by getting closer to the windows and looking right, the hanger could just be made out as it sat at a slight angle to the cafeteria. Further down the windowed wall, opposite the till, was a door leading out to the airfield. Walking through now and flashing a smile at the elderly lady at the till, he took a seat at a table near the window, two tables in, affording him a view of the outside whilst also facing into the café itself. Suddenly a chirpy Amy ran in towards her daddy, obviously refreshed after her toilet break, closely followed by Julia.

‘Alright stinky bum!’ Amy chirped happily giving no thought to the other people in the café.

‘Stinky bum?’ He replied, gently twisting his head around and slightly downwards, making a pronounced sniffing movement of his nose. ‘How do you know? You been sniffing around have you?’

‘Yuk daddy! That’s disgusting!’ Amy said, turning her nose up at the very idea, as she took a seat opposite her dad. Julia followed and hung her handbag over the back of one of the chairs.

‘That’s pretty gross darling,’ she said with a giggle.

‘Well if I’m being accused of such a terrible crime, we need to establish the facts of the case and how the witness came to be in possession of such information.’ Raising one eyebrow at his daughter now and bowing closer to her, he said with a mock sternness in his voice, ‘so little girl, how do you know this terrible thing?’

‘Cos the toilet at home is always stinky after you’ve been in it.’

‘Woah! A little too much information there I think,’ Julia responded, very surprised at her daughter’s honest response.

‘Make a note darling.’ He said to Julia looking a bit glum, ‘get stronger air freshener for the bathroom.’

‘You asked for it, hun.’

‘Beginning to wish I hadn’t now. He said noticing the looks from the lady at the till and the gentleman sitting opposite her.

‘Right, I’m starved and need some food. Amy what do you want?’

‘Can I have a Coke and a ham bun please, mummy?’

‘No problem, and you stinky bum, what can I get for you?’

Screwing up his nose and looking at Amy giggling, he asked for just a coffee as having something to eat before the jump wasn’t really one of the wisest things to do. With that Julia wandered off to the chiller to get a Coke for Amy and a bottle of water for herself, and then made her way across to the food counter. At that moment, Ryan the jump instructor came in through the door from the airfield. Dressed in an all-in-one army green jumpsuit, Ryan was a stocky, well built man with unkempt short brown hair and heavy set facial features. But whilst his nose, chin and cheeks seem quite pronounced, his smile gave him an almost cheeky and childish appearance which immediately engendered a level of trust and a feeling of lifelong friendship. His bubbling enthusiasm for his work was immediately apparent through his constant smile and confident stance, as he made his way over to greet his pupil for the weekend.

‘Today’s the day huh? How are you feeling?’ Ryan asked as he made his way up to the spare chair next to Amy just across from her dad. Placing both hands on the edges of the chair’s back and slightly leaning across in an only very slightly intimidating manner.

‘Surprisingly, I’m very much looking forward to it to be honest, a little nervous but feeling good.’

‘Excellent. Well, we’ve got perfect conditions for it today, you couldn’t wish for better weather.’ Shifting his attention toward little Amy, he relaxed his stance a little. ‘Hello little one, and hows you today?’

‘Hello.’ Amy said a little shyly. ‘I’m hungry, mummy’s getting me a ham bun.’ Claspng her hands together with a shy smile on her face.

‘A ham bun!’ Ryan said incredulously. ‘I wanna ham bun too, do you think your mummy’ll get me one as well?’

‘No silly, she can’t afford to get you one as well!’

‘Aw no, and I really want one too.’ Looking back secretly over at her dad, he lowered his voice to an almost inaudible whisper he said jokingly ‘you can afford the jump today right?’

‘Well I don’t know now.’ He responded checking for his wallet. ‘If we can’t stretch to a spare ham bun we might be in a spot of bother.’ With them both laughing loudly, Julia returned to the table with a tray and gently placed it in front of Amy who made a beeline straight for her bun lest Ryan try and make a quick grab for it.

‘What did I miss?’

‘Just discussing economics of the ham bun sweetheart.’ As Amy tucked in.

‘Ah OK, I won’t ask. Hey, Ryan, it’s good to see you again, how are you?’

‘I’m very well, very well indeed thank you. I was just saying to your man here, it’s a big day for him today.’

‘Absolutely, he’s been looking forward to this for ages, though I have absolutely no clue why!’

‘And there I was thinking that we may get you up on a tandem jump this weekend.’ Ryan said with a sarcastic grin.

‘Not a chance, I’m keeping my feet firmly on the ground thank you very much!’

‘Aw that’s a shame! OK, well kickoff is at one o’clock so I’ll leave you to enjoy your lunches, and I’ll see you in the hanger in about half an hour?’

‘That’s perfect, Ryan, thank you.’ Ryan, with a final smile and half salute, then made his way through to the reception area leaving the family to their lunch.

From the cafeteria, it was only a short walk to the hanger which was a particularly large white building with two large sliding doors that were currently open. Inside the hanger, various people were moving around several small aircraft which appeared to be in the midst of some routine maintenance or were being prepared for use for today or at some point tomorrow. Signage on the pathway to the hanger warned people to keep within the white lined pedestrian walkway so as not to veer off into the path of an oncoming aircraft that may be emerging from the hanger on its way to the airstrip. The pedestrian walkway lead to a door of the hanger which was on the right hand side of the large doors. The sign above the door gave a welcome to the “Grange-Over-Sands Flight Instruction and Parachuting Centre”, and another sign below that said “Members Only”. Through the door and inside the hanger, and at first glance, all appeared to be a little haphazardly organised. To the immediate whilst walking through the door, there was a desk with a chair behind it and on the desk were various papers and a log book. Directly in front were lockers and low level benches to use whilst getting prepared for flight, and behind those to the right hand side were racks of various types of equipment ranging from jumpsuits to parachute packs and helmets and other types of apparel. There were no walls to section off this area from the rest of the hanger and it would be easy to just wonder off and explore the rest of the area. Julia, having tight hold of Amy to prevent her from going off in such an exploration was the first to spot Ryan coming through from the hanger.

‘Ah, there’s Ryan just over there hun.’ She said pointing toward the left a little way behind the table and chair.

‘Hey guys, you all ready to go?’ Ryan took a seat at the table and began to make an entry into the log book.

‘As ready as I’ll ever be.’

‘Good stuff! Your bags have been bought through and put just over there by the lockers. If you want to get all toggled up while I mark the register for today’s jump, I’ll come over and check you over and then take you across to the bird.’

‘OK, no problem.’ Making his way over to the lockers, he discarded his jacket onto the bench and began to extract his equipment from his sports bag.

Ryan, finishing up making his entry into the log book, looking up at Amy. ‘Hiya little’un, how was that ham bun of yours?’

‘Was nice thank you, I’m very full now!’ She said hugging her mum close as she was still a little shy.

‘That’s good then! I hear they do the best ham buns in there, you can’t beat ‘em apparently!’ Averting his attention from Amy to Julia now, ‘I’ve got Andy coming down to meet you both. You’ve met him before haven’t you?’

‘Yes, I think he was the one that we were with the last time we were here.’

‘Excellent, he’ll take you across to the viewing area so you can see all of the action. He’s also got his video camera so will be taking some footage of your man coming into land.’

‘Wonderful,’ she said a little sarcastically. ‘We’ll never see the end of that when we get home! You will take care of him up there, won’t you?’

‘Don’t you even worry about that. I’ve done this a countless number of times and never had a problem. I’ll be right behind him all the way and at the first sign of any trouble, I’ll be able to bring him right out of it.’

‘That’s very reassuring, thank you.’

‘He’ll be fine. He’s been riding a bike with stabilisers on for far too long now, it’s time to cut him loose,’ he said with a sincerely reassuring smile.

‘She worries about me, it must be love’ a voice from the background lightened the concern. Fully dressed in his jumpsuit and rigging now, he made his way back across to the table where Ryan was beginning to rise. From behind Ryan, Andy jogged into view a little out of breath from trying not to be late. Andy, a slim, average height lad, no older than twenty skipped around the table to greet Julia and little Amy. Wearing a grey and slightly dirty jumpsuit, collar turned up at the neck, he swept back his long hair, which was clearly styled to be messy as was the current fashion, away from his eyes before changing the camera from one hand to the other to be able to shake hands with Julia.

‘Good to meet you again, I’m sorry I’m a bit late.’

‘No problem, good to see you again.’

‘Andy, if you could take them through to the viewing area, I’ll make my final checks here and then make for the plane,’ Ryan said a little authoritatively.

‘OK, no probs. If you want to follow me through, and be careful, there’s a few things scattered on the floor. It’s more dangerous in here than it is up there at the moment!’ Andy quipped.

Julia looked across to her husband and said ‘You be careful up there OK?’ and then blew him a kiss.

‘Of course sweetheart, don’t worry,’ he said a little embarrassed at the sentiment being expressed whilst other men were present. With that, Julia, Amy

and Andy made their way out through the hanger to the viewing area located on the other side of the airfield.

‘Right.’ Ryan stated. ‘Let’s look you over – how are you feeling?’

‘Just a little nervous but feeling quite calm though.’

‘That’s good. It’s good to be a little nervous; it’ll keep you on your toes. OK, so we have to go through the standard checks now before we make for the aircraft. So, let’s check your AAD, the Automatic Activation Device, first and make sure that it’s set up correctly. As you know, this will automatically deploy your parachute should you not deploy it yourself before the predetermined hard deck level, but this doesn’t mean that you can forget about doing it yourself. Check your altimeter on the way down OK. The AAD is only there in case you are unable to deploy for whatever reason. In this case, I’m going to set the hard deck at five and half thousand feet, that’s the standard for students and especially on your first solo run.’

‘Understood,’ he said looking intently at his instructor and giving him his full attention. Ryan continued talking through his checks.

‘OK, we have altimeter and knife. The altimeter is set to zero which is correct. Your helmet is secure and goggles clean. Three ring system in good condition and stowed correctly. Chest strap tight and straight and loose end secured with Velcro, cutaway pad accessible and fully up, the reserve handle nipple secure with slight excess cable in good condition. Leg straps secure not twisted and loose ends secured with Velcro and comfort pads correctly placed. Jumpsuit looking good, ah, just need to secure that pocket there, that’s all OK.’ Said Ryan, pulling on the chest strap once again making sure that it was completely secure but not overly tight, also rechecking the leg straps from the parachute back pack which come around the waist and around each leg tight to the groin area to make sure that they are also secure, along with the shoulder straps and comfort pads.

‘Excellent, now just need to check your footwear and parachute pack. If you can just turn your back to me for a second.’ As he did as instructed, Ryan then started to pull at the rigging at the back to make sure that it was all secure.

‘OK, the reserve pin, let’s have a look at that little baby, grommets and loops all look to be in good condition, the reserve cable is free through the handle housing and everything all OK, just re-secure the reserve flap. Your AAD is all OK. The Main Pin looks in good condition and no damage, good cabling and stowed nicely and risers covered. Superb. OK so lets get to the deployment system, pilot chute looks good, pin looking good. Fantastic, everything here looking good.’

‘That’s good to hear, I spent quite a while going through the kit to make sure everything was by the book.’

‘No, it’s a good job, and I’m glad to see you’ve invested some money in some good kit. Right, just need to look you over again to make sure that everything is picture perfect.’ Ryan was now walking around him just generally looking the kit over and gently tugging on the straps just to satisfy himself that everything was indeed set up correctly. ‘OK, let me just run you quickly through what’s going to happen. Your rigging has been thoroughly checked and

is all OK, and in a moment, I'm going to sign the manifest sheet in the log confirming that the pre-flight checks have been completed. The aircraft checks are already being made and so should be ready for us when we get there. Once on the aircraft, we're going to climb to about ten thousand feet. I'm going to ask you at that point whether you are happy to continue and you'll need to give me a firm and confident indication that you are ready to go. If I think otherwise, I will abort the jump. When ready to jump, wait for my say so, I will shout "go, go, go" when we reach the required position. You will then jump first, and I will jump immediately after you. I'm going to maintain a very close position to your's so that if you should get into any trouble at all, I can help you out and deploy your chute for you. I want you to keep an eye on your altimeter on the way down. We're going to freefall for about four thousand feet and when your altimeter reads six thousand feet AGL, that's above ground level, I want you to pull your ripcord. If you miss the mark, you'll see me give you an indication to pull and I will also shout the word "pull" to you. If I see you having any difficulty I will fly into your position and release for you. Are you clear on all that?'

'Crystal clear. It's good to know that you'll be close by.'

'I will be close by, so that means you can enjoy the jump OK. So that's all the official stuff out of the way, remember, have fun up there. It's an immense experience and the novelty still hasn't worn off for me yet. So, you feeling good?'

'Absolutely.' He nodded with a broad smile on his face realising that he was just moments away from one of the most exhilarating moments in his life, one that he had been working towards for some time.

'Superb, let's get to the bird and do this thing!'

The aircraft was an Australian PAC XL750 manufactured by Pacific Aerospace Corporation. It was an 18 seater, including pilot, single prop aircraft which has a ceiling of twenty thousand feet and can cruise for a little over five hours fully loaded. It's not a particularly attractive model, with a large air intake protruding from below the elongated nose just behind the propeller, and when the two front doors were opened at the front for where the pilot disembarks, it resembled a ladybird preparing to fly by opening its outer elytra which cover the wings of the insect, as the doors of the plane open in a similar fashion. To the rear of the aircraft, there was a large opening for passengers to alight, this was custom made for parachutists. When grounded, the aircraft sits on a tricycle landing gear configuration, with one wheel under each wing and the third underneath the nose. Inside, the layout on this particular aircraft had only eight seats in the front half, for the initial take off and flight, with the rear half clear for the parachutists to stand while preparing for their jump. On the ceiling, just above the exit door, is rigging for the static line jump parachutists, so that when they exit the aircraft, their parachute, being attached to the line, will deploy automatically when the static line reaches its maximum length and triggers the chute to deploy. On the side, opposite the exit, is a large firm metal grid which curves slightly in line with the ceiling, to provide an anchor to hang on to for

those waiting to jump. It was here that Ryan was now standing beckoning his charge to make ready for his first solo jump.

‘Are you ready?’ Ryan shouts and was barely audible over the sound of the aircraft and also the wind rushing by the open exit hatch. A firm thumbs up indicated that everything was all OK. Ryan now, seeing that his charge was confidently ready go and had a firm grip on the metal grid, shifted his attention to the light on the ceiling which was mounted on a bulkhead just preceding the exit hatch. It flashed green indicating that the pilot has reached the primary jump location.

Again, Ryan shouted ‘Are you ready?’

Nerves now rising with the body’s increasing adrenalin rush, he gave another firm thumbs up accompanied by a shout ‘Ready!’

Ryan gently nodded acknowledging the response and also to acknowledge confidence in his charges appearance. He beckoned him over to the exit and helped him to his final stance.

‘GO GO GO!’

With the final instruction, he stepped out of the exit hatch into nothingness and into loud roar of air. Immediately after, Ryan followed suit.

Falling now, the roar of the passing air seemed to become quieter as he became more acclimatised to the noise. Feeling calmer now, he felt almost stationary in the air as the view of the ground beneath him seemed to be approaching very slowly, the only indication of the falling speed being the plane above him shrinking quickly away above him as he took a quick glance back at it. Arms and legs outstretched now and the fabric of his jump suit rippling fast and noisily with the passing air, he took in the view around him. Ryan quickly fell in to view and with a huge grin and arms outstretched before him gave two thumbs up as if to say “isn’t this great and are you OK?” As an answer back to his instructor on both counts, he flashed the thumbs up and then began to take in the view around him once again. A quick check of his altimeter revealed he was only a thousand feet into the fall with another three to go before he had to pull the ripcord. Ryan kept a close course next to his charge in case anything should happen also and enjoying the experience.

On the ground below, Julia and Amy were in the viewing area with Andy, who now had his camera out and was following the action. A TV monitor was linked up to the camera which was sitting on a table beside them powered by what looked to Julia like a car battery. Julia, watching the monitor intently, quickly checked on Amy who seemed to be more intent on chasing a passing butterfly, rather than paying attention to what her father was doing way up in the sky. Suddenly, Andy perked up and said ‘There, there they are, you can just make them out now.’

Julia quickly averted her attention back to the screen to see two growing dots in the middle of a sea of blue. Quietly relieved that everything appeared to be OK she responded to Andy ‘this goes beyond mid life crisis’.

‘Ha! It really is the experience of a lifetime. There’s nothing like it. Jumping out of a plane, the adrenalin rush, the fall, the view, it’s excellent fun!’

‘That’s as maybe for someone your age, but this is a middle aged man you’re talking about! Why he can’t just be satisfied with restoring old cars or something a little safer is quite beyond me.’

‘Well, he’s not the only one and I doubt he’ll be the last. He we go, they’re coming into better view. I should think they’re getting to the point now where they will be opening their chutes.’

Julia continued to watch the screen intently, quietly thanking god it was nearly over.

Closing his eyes and relishing the feeling of being out of control imagining that with his eyes shut he could hit the ground any moment without realising; the adrenaline levels increased to give a wonderfully elated and excited feeling. A sensation of pure calmness overcame him as he rested into freefall, eyes still closed, arms and legs outstretched and only the rushing of air over his body an indication that something existed outside of himself. Opening his eyes now, realising that he needed to check the altimeter, he saw Ryan just off to his right with his thumbs up as an indication that now was nearly the time to deploy. Six and half thousand feet, his hand reached for the ripcord. Ryan watching this movement was satisfied that everything was OK, covered his own ripcord in readiness to pull moments after his charge did so. At that moment, Ryan saw his charge straighten up. Slightly perplexed, he made to move into his position to meet him head on, but as he did so, his charge suddenly put his legs together and arms tight in by his side, dipped his head so that his body followed and then sped off underneath the instructor just out of arms reach. As Ryan made a grab for him, he missed and with a deft move of his body he turned around and assumed the same position, headed off toward his quarry at high speed.

‘Woah, something doesn’t look right.’ Andy stated nervously as he watched the events unfold before him through the camera.

‘Oh my god, what’s happening?’ Julia said with high anxiety showing through her voice.

‘It looks like your husband has gone into AFF and Ryan seems to be following.’

‘What the hell is AFF, speak English!’

‘AFF, umm, it’s Accelerated Freefall. Where you make yourself into a torpedo shape to achieve maximum freefall speed,’ Andy responded in a slightly flustered manner.

‘Why? Why has he done that? What the hell is going on?’ Said Julia getting more and more anxious and not shifting her gaze from the screen watching it intensely.

‘I don’t know, I don’t know, but I do know one thing, Ryan is the absolute best up there. So if there is something wrong, Ryan’s the guy to sort it out.’

‘Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, please...’ the word “please” drawn out as Julia pleaded for her husband to be OK.

‘SHIT! What’s he doing!’ Ryan shouted to himself. Looking at his altimeter counting off the feet per second in rapid succession as their speed increases downward, the earth below quickly rising up to meet them. Six thousand feet now and the speed quickly increasing. Ryan’s experience tells him that if this keeps up, they’ll both reach terminal velocity very quickly. He knows that in this position, the maximum speed they will reach is about one hundred and twenty miles per hour at a descent rate of about one hundred and eighty feet per second. A quick calculation revealed the stark truth, that if this does keep up, this will all be over in a little over thirty seconds. His quarry ahead seemed to be gently pulling away, four thousand feet now, damn that went fast. Hold on, his AAD should have gone off ages ago, he couldn’t have disconnected it could he? Why would he do that, no there must be a malfunction with it, but I checked it, it was fine, but why is he still speeding away, why hasn’t the chute deployed? ‘Pull damn you, PULL!’ Two thousand feet now and Ryan is getting nervous, he can’t hold out too much longer on pulling his own chute. Making a more concerted effort now he tightens up as much as he can to reduce the drag and hopefully increase his descent rate to at least pull back some of the gap that seemed to be building. ‘Come on! Come on!’ Tears now welling in his eyes, as he knew it was too late, he couldn’t hold off on releasing his chute any longer, the speed was too great as it was, and the ground was getting awfully close, too close for comfort.

‘JESUS CHRIST! What’s happening up there? His chute should have opened by now surely!’ Julia, in hysterics now watching the events unfold on the screen in front of her, could now see with her own eyes her husband hurtling towards the earth at a startling speed.

Andy, completely speechless and in a stunned trance as he followed the trail of the two skydivers with his camera. Tears welled in his eyes as he heard Amy in the background asking her mummy whether that was daddy in the sky over there.

Ryan, completely dejected and completely out of time, realises that there is nothing more he can do, to go any further would mean suicide. He separates his legs and spreads out his arms in a star shape to shave off some of the speed he had built up to try and get to a more sensible speed in which to be able to safely deploy his own parachute. He pulled the ripcord and with a jolt he slows, and can only hope that his charge speeding away below him does the same thing and very soon.

Julia screamed at her husband to open his parachute. In absolute hysterics she started to run across the field away from the viewing area with her arms flailing in the air as if to try and get his attention to snap him out of whatever seemed to have clouded his mind. But she could only watch as the instructor pulled his own chute, leaving her husband to whatever end may befall him. She could only watch as her husband fell ever closer to earth.

A stunned silence fell across field. Many people had come out from the hanger to watch the terrible events unfold, many people had come out to watch Julia's husband, Nick Gregson, fall to his death. Little Amy now beside her mummy took her by the hand.

'Is daddy OK, mummy?'

It's funny what you think about.

It's funny what you think about when you know you're going to die. Like the look on Ryan's face as I speed off beneath him after disconnecting the AAD, that was fun. I wonder whether you'd be able to fashion a parachute out of items of clothing if you were to fall from a plane without one.

It's funny what you think about. Everything is calm, everything is alright. You've done all you can do and you can do no more. You close your eyes and watch the memories as they go through your mind, they make you happy.

Right up until the last moments of your life... you remember...