



# MOTHER NATURE

*By Stella Bond*

## **PREFACE**

When a tiny spot of pressure, no bigger than the head of a pin, started off the cataclysmic reaction that swept into the void; it was less than a second later that time as we now know it began. As quick as it could take to blink, the Big Bang had thrown out so much molten liquid and gasses from the tiny point to fill an entire quadrant of space, with the explosion happening with such force that the particles leaving the epicentre travelled faster than any of the light that was created from such a defining event.

Spewing out in all directions, the sphere of everything that was expelled from the bang grew larger and larger. Immense, hot gasses were at the forefront of the explosion, followed by dust and small particles of rock, all of which were blown out from the minute starting point. As the gasses came into contact with the freezing, absolute zero temperatures of space they grew heavier, much solidified, and fused together to create new formations with complex structures in their make-up. Many of these formations combined, growing in size until the internal pressures became so vast that they sparked off fission reactions within their cores, becoming the first stars; pulling in more debris and gasses from around them to fuel their insatiable appetite, as their gravities increased with their mass.

These new stars began to light the up to then blackness of the universe, whilst all around them the gasses that still had to find new homes mutated, as they became nurseries for galaxies that swirled into creation. While spreading outwards from the initial explosion, the coldness of the void warmed up as this gushing cycle formed into

the space that had been left untouched for an infinity; a cycle that from then on, when ticking from proverbial clocks started, would never end.

One of these galaxies, crammed with countless amounts of stars, some with their own planets spinning around them as they were caught within fields of gravity, was the one-hundred thousand light-year in diameter form we now call our Milky-Way. Within the vast collection that makes up our galaxy, on the outer rim there lies a small but poignant solar system, one comparatively small star in the centre that fuelled itself by its own chemical reactions, surrounded by nine planets. After a couple of billion years of forming, each of the planets that revolved around the star in the centre showed their own individuality, beauty and unique appearance.

Neptune, the furthest reaching of the orbiting planets, rich in methane, which absorbs the red spectrum of light, the first of the four gas-giants shows itself as a light blue. Its surface littered with hazy white clouds and four seasons that last a whopping forty-years each. This cold-looking, desolate planet cloaked by eight moons, and narrow, faint rings arranged in clumps could almost be missed if it weren't for its sheer size. Uranus, the just as icy giant next in line, smaller and also blue in colour but with greeny-banded layers that swirl around its whole otherwise undefinable surface. As with all the outer gas-giants in the collection, an unusually thin but perfect set of rings hugged the otherwise bland looking globe.

With its much more prominent and enormous icy-rainbow bands, Saturn, the hydrogen-based planet shows itself from all corners of the system. It is always to be the most defined planet with its bright orange appearance, which reflects light onto the rings that spread out for over two hundred and fifty thousand miles. Upper clouds composed of

ammonia crystals, which sometimes form long-lived ovals of colour caused by storms from the fastest running winds. Saturn, even with its striking appearance also boasts having a warm polar vortex.

The next in the middle of this group, Jupiter, the largest single entity other than our own star. With orange coloured storms that show themselves around the equator including the famous *Red Eye*, which shows through the top levels of gasses, and sometimes last for thousands of years through the white and grey base colours. Its children being the most incredible and diverse of all the moons, one made of water, another of deadly gasses cloaking a solid core, and many holding their own rudimentary atmospheres, whilst each looking different from one-another.

The coppery-green shaded surface of Acura was smaller than the gassy planets that shadowed it, but it had ice-topped mountains and deep-red methane based seas that ran hot in thin lay-lines. The only planet never to own any moons, it hung alone, its single comfort being a thick, colourful layer of gasses that formed its own stratosphere. Even Mars with its iron-rich dusty surface didn't look as brightly coloured as its larger twin, but never the less was closest to our own planet, Earth. Starting out as a wild, volcanic and fiery planet, Earth was, however, much later in time, to become the one we now live upon. An elliptical spheroid with a thin skin of rock covering a molten core that spewed out the hot lava that filled its insides. As each passing eruption squeezed out more of its belly and then cooled, the surface shaped and changed, creating mountains and dips over its whole surface. The other side of which lay Venus, the nitrogen-atmosphere rich morning star, and beyond that the smallest entity Mercury, which not long in its existence

was to be scorched to death by the star that it was closest to, and that all of these circled around – the Sun.

This was an extremely brief description of how our solar system looked over five billion years ago - just before the biggest asteroid that had ever been seen in this area of space hit Acura. With the power of two planets colliding at speeds so immense, Acura was shattered into countless pieces that threw themselves outwards many of the fragments hurtling towards some of the other inner planets, while many others losing themselves into the emptiness. The now famous asteroid belt that fills the space between Jupiter and Mars holds the majority of the remnants of that once beautiful sight. From that shattered planet, one of the largest fragments hit our own Earth, ripping a gigantic slice from its thin skin and defacing it even more than it already had been, while leaving the massive chunk that it had scooped up floating in the orbit, which gravity had caught in its grip. Many thousands of years later, when the dust had settled and the skies became transparent again, our newly created moon reflected light from the Sun and shone in the night sky.

Another billion years passed by and, although the Earth's crust appeared to be repaired, its own molten lava flowed in rivers over most of it and combined with the roaring heat of the new sun, helped scorch the surface. As the crust thickened, the volcanoes that spat out the core were becoming fewer although no less fierce, fault lines from the initial impact of the forgotten Acura still making easy access for the core to find its way through to the surface. Most of the hard rock was made up from burnt out volcanoes and the contents of those that had blown apart from the intense pressures from within, while platelets still moved and shuddered. There were also many craters from

asteroids and comets, which continued to rain down from the skies; helping to deface what was left.

Icy comets were some of the strangest and unique residues from the Big Bang some few billion years before. Formed from oxygen and hydrogen, these sets of gases were created into existence at the time of the explosion, but hitting the coldness of the universe, they froze into pure lumps of ice, with properties that weren't seen in any other forms. Showing their distinct tail when circling other stars that expelled solar heat and winds, being propelled by the different gravities that they encountered, these freezing objects explore the furthest of orbits. Within these tiny objects, the first acids transformed into the most complex of molecular patterns as crystals of ice changed and mutated while travelling from the vicinities of heated stars to the zero temperatures of space, and back again. When they too rained down on this desolate planet they gave it its first, much needed drinks of water.

Like many of the others, one of the larger ice-based entities ploughed into our rugged terrain, it shattered most of its structure, turning most of the shards of water crystals back into their liquid form, while the rest of it melted on the warm surface of the ground. This particular comet had something extraordinary within its make-up, aminoacids had mixed with proteins, and this mixture held itself together as a small lake of liquid on the hard surface of rock base where it had landed. The murky lake that the comet first created was kept warm by the sun beating down on it, cooking it for years and allowing the chemicals inside to form the first basic strands of deoxyribonucleic acid.

Many of the Earth years passed and long after the comet had crashed to the ground, the pool of liquid inside the small crater that it had created was still cooking away,

becoming more and more complex in its structure with every moment that passed. More proteins and sugars started to form and mix together as the syrupy, black substance simmered away under the intense heat of the Sun, as well as by some of the magma runs flowing not too far from it, while more chemical reactions kept taking place on and under the surface. As by accident more than by any possible design there was a point when the mixture was just right to do something remarkable, a phenomena that could never have been predicted happened. Somewhere deep in the bowels of the murk, a small clump of carbon atoms started to create their own sparks of low intensity electricity and another new reaction happened. The mixture became more active, bubbling up to the surface before bursting, splattering the rock surface around it as if it had been carbonised and shaken, before dribbling back down into the pool.

For days, at a time when there was less than nineteen hours between new sunrises due to the planet spinning faster back then, the frothing and fizzing of the black liquid continued until everything calmed back down, with almost the same speed as it had started. With less than a ripple above, a faint beat was initiated, a continuous and regular tick no more detectable than that of a modern wrist watch, a beat that ticked its way down, counting to the time when the Earth was to create it's most prized possession and spawn it's first and most influential life form.

At the shore of the comet lake, a single, large bubble grew from out of the depths, the blackened skin blocking out the view of what was within. As the bubble enlarged, the skin that covered it thinned and tightened, showing deep red veins running just inside the black looking dome. The veins pulsated in time with the ticking as a red liquid pumped

through them, the skin stretching more and more, becoming so taught and transparent that it became more of a window than that of a covering.

Then, deep within something moved, then moved again. Something poked from inside, misshaping the bubble from its uniformed roundness. A shape appeared and pushed harder against the stretching window before showing the formation of fingers, spread wide until the whole hand pushed as it reached out. The thin skin of the bubble so taut that it could no longer hold itself together, it burst, and the hand that had appeared from inside reached upwards towards the warm rocks surrounding the pool, and scrabbling it found some purchase. The fingers closed and clawed hard for some grip, and when it found it, it heaved the arm that it was connected to up. Another hand reached out from the blackness and also grabbed, fingers dug into the rock just like the first one. From the murky depths, connected by its new body, a bald, smooth head lifted up from the sludge, covered in black slime. Its mouth opened, coughing out some of the substance that had created it before it let out a piercing scream that only halted so that it can breath in the sulphur rich, acrid air. With purpose, the figure of a young, naked human-looking girl lifted herself onto the hard ground that surrounded the lake. In the deformed position where she lay, she lifted her head up to the sky and produced a loud, heartbreaking cry.



# *Act 1*

## *Life*

*'If you treat Nature with respect, she'll treat you kindly.'*

*Ray Mears, 2004*

## **Chapter 1 - Dog**

On a typical weekday morning, Katherine Porter was cutting tuna sandwiches into quarters for her son's packed lunch. She had been humming an old Tom Petty track that she had heard the evening before on the MTV television station, and falling asleep later last night had been difficult with the tune swirling around her mind, but somehow getting things ready for the day ahead had dispersed the eight-second loop of lyrics. Her flaming red hair was tied loose behind her head, and her face was so far void of make-up. The problem with taking ages to fall asleep was that her body clock had taken quite a knock, and she woke up more than an hour later than normal. The morning breath that she tasted in her mouth was diluted by a swig of orange juice, just before she placed the quartered sandwiches with an apple and a packet of potato chips into the plastic lunchbox.

She contemplated the chocolate bar she would have liked to have added to the meal, but instead put in a cereal bar she knew the boy would probably not eat anyway. To her, this was always the busiest part of the day, making sure the men of the house were ready for their days out, and then the job of cleaning up the mess that they'd left behind. When the home was to once again be hers, she would sit down and listen to the radio before getting herself more presentable. The thought of shopping later was not one to relish, but apart from the food stocks that needed replenishing for her and the family, she had one other to contend with, which needed just one more tin of food before he was going back to his proper owners, who had been away on a short holiday.

Rex was a large and rather fluffy German Sheppard dog that she could now see out of the window over the sink, sniffing around on the short lawn by the back door. She

would have rather not had the large, moulting and demanding mutt to look after, but when her friend Janice had said that she'd have to put the dog into kennels for the five days she was going away to enjoy the short competition break she'd won, Kathy had cheaply said that it would be no problem looking after him. Regret had come when after the initial excitement of the new, temporary addition to the household, her Mont Blanc handbag had been chewed to destruction, along with much of the contents.

The kitchen sink was still full of dishes, mugs and cooking utensils from the evening before, with a residue of bubbles from the washing up liquid covering most of the smaller items. Even the draining board had the doggie-bag contents of the spaghetti bolognaise in the pot that she'd used to cook it up; the scent of the beefy sauce now encrusted on the stainless steel sides still permeating the room, even though undetectable to her through a sticky morning mouth. In just a short while, she would realise that these left-overs would be a perfect recipe for postponing a shopping trip; if just for a few more hours.

Upstairs and unaware that his other-half had missed out on a good nights sleep, her husband Daven was in the bedroom, straightening his tie using the small mirror that was inset into the wardrobe. His teeth were clean, his shoes polished and his hair brushed - ready for another day at the office. Daven loved his job, and almost as much enjoyed making sure he looked the part. He wasn't all dressed in the typical back and white that the men in the field were expected to wear, but he did like to feel smart. He was a FBI investigator and not just any Fed - he felt he had the best job of all. He couldn't even recall how long he had worked for the Bureau without sitting down and working it out, but knew he did not want a change of career any time soon. He had fallen into the job

more by accident after having his first book published on the subject that he had written during his military service. The subject that he had gained a Master's degree in, growing into a passion and then from one person to another and so on, it wasn't long before he got a name for himself, culminating in being head-hunted by the most well known security service in the world. From more of just an interest as a teenager and being told that he could never make a career out of it by his parents who fitted the bills for his education, luck and three years of researched writing had given him the employment he now enjoyed. The best bit was that every aspect of the work made each day different and he knew how lucky he was to gain so much satisfaction from his job; even if it was obscure from the normal investigations that the firm dealt with.

Years before he had been a Captain in the Air Force, flying some of the country's most iconic fighter jets, but circumstances had changed when his son was born, and after he had served his duty he decided to quit so that he could spend more time with his new family. There were of course parts of his military service he did miss, the camaraderie between the other service personnel, the sense of order that the service brought and most of all the flying. However, he had kept up his licenses and made sure he did his statutory hours up in the air, which was made easier with the career he now enjoyed. The FBI kept a pool of helicopters and aeroplanes at the local airport for quick transport, and there were quite a few occasions when Daven would have to attend a scene for his part of his investigations, often piloting himself.

Of course there wasn't the closeness that came with fighting or preparing to fight for your country; too many people in the Bureau were using their placements to move up the promotional ladder, and in many cases using that ladder to step into the world of

politics. Neither of those were Daven's style and so he tended to keep his small department separate from the falseness of most of the others; small department being the operative words. However, there wasn't anyone who didn't respect him for keeping a small distance from the way the rest of the building he worked in was run; far the opposite. Daven was a very rare specimen of a gentleman mixed with the look of the military to back him up. He kept fit by running on Saturday mornings and often went for a swim after work, if it had been a busy day. Recently however, things in the office had been quieter so swimming wasn't so much to wash away the stresses of the job, but to keep himself toned with a session of lengths.

Down the hallway, the smallest member of the family, Sam, was not so ready. He was not a fan of school and was much more interested in playing with his superhero toys. This morning Superman had saved the world twice from his new archenemy Batman; in his imagination - and on his bedroom floor, the spoils of war were more than evident. The other action figures, which had each played an important role in the battle of life and death, were lying around in varying states of injury. Even the quilt from his bed had been transformed into a landscape with hills and valleys, perfect for a fight to stop the end of the world, as we know it. With Batman captured on the end of a scaled model of a crane that he had got for his last birthday in the centre of the room, Sam returned to the real world when he heard his mother's voice shouting from downstairs.

"Sam! Are you ready yet?"

Throwing his Superman figure onto the quilt he decided that this battle would have to wait until later, when he hoped he would be able to continue it. He shouted back towards the door.

"Yes Mum!"

Picking up his school bag, he rushed out of the door along the corridor and down the stairs, almost throwing the bag down by the kitchen table before he had even entered the kitchen door.

"Whoa! Slow it down there Sam. You know what I've said about running in the house." The last things Kathy wanted today were either an accident, which was quite often waiting to happen, or the thought of the world, or young boys rushing past her when she wasn't feeling wide awake; just yet.

The eight-year old boy stopped in his tracks, skidding on the linoleum flooring before coming to a complete halt. "Sorry mum," he apologised with his best angelic face, a view that tended to melt his mother and stop any chance of further chastising.

"Now let me take a look at you, have you brushed your teeth?" said Kathy, bending her knees so that she could carry out an inspection.

Sam opened his mouth wide and breathed into his mother's face as if it was proof that he had indeed used his toothbrush that morning, even if it was very briefly.

Kathy could barely smell the scent of toothpaste on his breath. "Oh, well", she thought, "who was she to talk? Do as I say, not as I do," she thought to herself, and resisted the urge to send him back upstairs to do a better job of cleaning his teeth.

Kathy reached forward and started to straighten Sam's shirt and tie.

"Is your sports kit all together and packed?"

"Yep, it's in my bag," replied Sam in a manner that could have resembled one as if he had put his sports kit together all by himself, wriggling and pulling faces as his mother brushed imaginary dirt from the front of his shirt and tucked it into his pants all

over again. Then the shirt straightener noticed something a bit odd. Pulling back his collar and unbuttoning the top button that was only half fastened, she noticed a familiar sight – Sam’s Superman pyjama top.

"Are you kidding me... how many times do I have to tell you?" she shrieked, changing her tone and waking up much more than she had before in an instant. Although Kathy was red haired, bordering on the side of ginger, she rarely had the same temperament that was associated with women like that, however, on the odd occasion she could still regress to the fiery side that was so prominent when she was a child growing up.

"But mum..."

"Don't you dare *but mum* me! I've told you about this over and over again, now go upstairs and get dressed properly for school," she hissed. It had been three times that she had caught him trying this stunt in about as many weeks, and she was starting to get sick of telling him. There had been a few arguments in the beginning about it when he first tried it, his side being that it looked the same as a tee-shirt so who would ever know.

"And brush your teeth again while you're up there – and do a better job this time!" His mother continued to shout.

Sam dropped his shoulders as he turned around, his head bowed low and his arms looking as though they would scrape along the ground. He scuffed his way out of the kitchen towards the stairs. If she had just trusted him to dress himself properly without having to straighten his shirt, he would have gotten away with it. But then, he never got away with it, no matter how many times he tried.

In the bedroom, Daven took the jacket that was hanging up on the clothes rail and was just putting it over his shoulders as he walked out and along the landing when he met his young son along the way. Although Sam's head was held low, he could just see tears in the corners of the boy's eyes.

"Hey, morning Slugger! What's up?" said Daven, noticing the boy's now unbuttoned shirt and the Superman logo showing from beneath it. He had all the clues he needed to figure out the situation for himself without a response from his son; there were advantages to having the job he had.

"Are you being treated all harshly again?" he said, with his best sympathetic voice, but not loud enough for his wife to hear him. Daven sympathized with his son, he knew how important having an imagination was to learning, and as an aid for later life, he himself still remembered being in the playground at school, about the age his son was now, pretending he had bionic limbs after watching a series on the television that became his favourite show at the time. He almost wondered for a brief second whether this situation was his own fault for encouraging the boy to use his brain, to play and to come up with things in his mind that might later help him to problem solve, but the thought quickly passed.

"No, but... I want to be a superhero and superheroes have to have their superhero clothes on underneath their normal clothes and Mum..."

Daven knelt down on the floor in front of Sam, and placed his finger on the child's lips to interrupt him. Putting his other hand inside his jacket he pulled out a glasses case. He opened the case and, setting his glasses upon his nose, peered forward at the pyjama top, which was now showing behind the half-unbuttoned school issue shirt.



"Ah, a dribble stain! I thought that might be the case. Now what if there was an emergency and you had to save the world? Would you like to be known as the superhero that dribbles?"

Sam looked down at the stain that was being pointed to, then back up and into his father's eyes where he noticed the small infectious smile, which made him giggle through his own wetted eyes.

"No!"

"Then there's another much more important reason for you to take it off," smiled Daven. "I bet your Mum noticed that and didn't want anyone else to see."

"I suppose so," admitted Sam. "But that doesn't stop me from wanting to be a superhero when I grow up," the boy continued.

"If you really want to be a superhero when you grow up then be patient. Your time will come."

Sam's smile instantly reached from ear to ear, these were the words of encouragement he'd always wanted to hear. "You think so? Do you think my time will come? You think I could be a real superhero one day?"

"Like I said, your time will come," repeated his father. "You can make anything happen if you want it bad enough."

Rushing into his bedroom and ripping his shirt off, Sam was now quite pleased to change into his school uniform without the superhero adornment, that would be saved for another day. He even popped back into the bathroom and rubbed his toothbrush around his mouth before buttoning up his shirt. Daven walked down the stairs with a big grin on his face. He had the knack of teaching with very little being said, which was easy

considering the experience that he had gained over the years. More than that though he was pleased to have yet again defused a possible conflict over the Superman top, which he really didn't want to crop up all over again.

"Have you just been making light of me telling him off about that damn pyjama top?" Asked Kathy when she heard Daven entering the kitchen behind her. She had her hands in the sink full of fresh, warm soapy water, cleaning the cutting board that she had used to make the sandwiches on.

"Just making sure that he doesn't start the day off feeling upset," said Daven defending himself with a sly grin on his face, a look that his son had inherited along with the other angelic ones that had captured her heart many years before; how could she be mad with someone who could put on a face like that? Kathy took her hands out of the sink and without drying them, walked over to Daven with a mischievous look in her expression. She smiled, reaching up and wrapping her arms around Daven's neck, brushing the wetness over the back of his head and letting it drip down into his clothing. She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "It's not our son that I have to keep stopping from saving the world, now is it?"

Daven smiled, tilting his head to one side, he was used to Kathy getting her own back on him if he had overstepped the mark, and the dishwater trickling down his collar was today's sign that he had.

"That's why you love me," joked Daven.

"No, that's not why I love you," she said, letting her husband go so that she could dry her hands by wiping them on the hand towel, "but it is one of the reasons," she smiled.

## Chapter 2 - Lettuce

The air was thick with the smell of a wide variety of animals, their cages and their food. This shop was just like any other pet shop, except that the scent in this one was so great that it was almost tangible. There was some noise from the animals, but not enough to suggest that any of them were either content or for that matter healthy. The gerbils, hamsters and mice were all fast asleep in their sawdust, as you would expect from nocturnals, except that even when the shop was closed overnight, their behaviour did not change by any significant amount. The chinchillas were as usual performing a repetitive routine running along the same route in their cages over and over again, like they had for the last five weeks since their shipment had arrived. Worst though were the two parrots that were making a sad kind of distress call at intermittent intervals between picking out some of their own feathers, leaving bald patches that increased in size over the weeks of their confinement.

The bell rang as the front door opened and Sarah Etheridge entered the shop clutching a small furry rabbit in her hands. She looked out of place as soon as she walked in, a total contrast between her and her new surroundings. The door was covered in so many sellotaped adverts that people had paid to stick on it that it was impossible to see the glass that they were stuck to. There were photos for lost pets and adverts for ones that needed new homes, most of them with faded ink and discoloured paper, showing that the out of date adverts were never removed. Sarah was dressed in clean, smart but dull clothes, with her hair tied in a simple ponytail. She was of slight build and had a somewhat nervous expression on her face. Some might say that she was plain in looks but

what she lacked in that department was made up for in her heart, a heart that was by her own admission, severely underused. She was holding the rabbit very close to her chin, and seemed to be whispering into its ear while stroking the fur on its back with the fingers of her free hand when it wasn't dealing with the door handle.

Paul Rundle appeared from the back room, she recognised the shop owner as soon as he came into her view. He was a large hairy man with a potbelly that protruded from under his grubby T-shirt. He hadn't bothered to shave for a few days and his hair was greasy and untidy. His jeans were ripped and dirty around the pockets, and the handprints down the front of his legs showed the amount of times he had neglected to wash his hands, instead just wiping them across himself. Paul had bought the shop a few years ago with his inheritance, rarely having worked before then. He didn't particularly like animals nor did he particularly like work, preferring to sit on the sofa in the flat behind the shop and watch sport all day on one television screen whilst playing computer games on another. He was not as old as the picture in the minds of everyone who saw him suggested, neither did he have a lack of intelligence, however his enthusiasm for anything other than the two sitting down activities he spent his time on never showed.

"Yes?" was the nearest to a greeting he could muster, as he looked the young woman up and down. His coffee breath from the umpteenth mug of caffeine that day disguising the odour of whiskey that still flowed through his blood from the evening before.

"Sorry to bother you again, but I think the rabbit you sold me yesterday has got something wrong with it," stuttered Sarah, put off by the uncouth sight of the gentleman that she was addressing. She took care to place the rabbit down on the counter for

inspection, maintaining contact with her left hand and continuing to stroke the rabbit with a gentle finger. "He has been limping a lot and now I think he's in some pain," she continued, "And if you look, you can see patches where he's losing his fur."

Paul wiped his hands once again down the front of his legs and then poked the rabbit hard on its back hip, in the same manner that he'd often kick the wheel of his stationwagon as an inspection to see if anything was wrong with it. The little animal shuffled away in apparent discomfort, nestling back into Sarah's warm hand, which had momentarily moved away in the hope that more of a diagnosis was about to be forthcoming.

"I'm not going to give you back your money just because you can't look after your pets properly," barked the big man. "He was fine when he left here, you're just like all the others. You've fed him something dodgy I bet!"

Sarah was not keen on any kind of confrontation, and picking the rabbit back up from the counter she backed away. It wasn't that she wanted to just leave, as she felt that her new pet would not live very long without some kind of help, but she also did not want to argue with this man, or for that matter be close to him at all; there was something about him that gave her the creeps. If it wasn't the fact that this Pet Shop was so close to her own flat then she wouldn't have taken the chance to buy a pet from it, even after hearing the rumours about the place. Perhaps she should just take the rabbit to the veterinary surgery three blocks away and see if they could help, she considered again, however the thought of the expense hadn't made that her first option. She opened her mouth to explain her plans to the shopkeeper if he was not going to help, stroking and cuddling the rabbit close to her just as the doorbell behind her sounded again.

The figure that entered the shop was dressed in a long, dark brown robe with a hood that covered the face, but the shape if Sarah was to guess appeared to be that of an old woman. The figure shuffled to the window where there was a large section devoted to the other rabbits that were on display. This was where Sarah had picked her pet not twenty-four hours before, and as she knew, the whole area was dirty and had not been cleaned for a long time, much like the rest of the store. It was this view that had helped Sarah to decide to try and save at least one of the helpless creatures, but also she wanted something in her life that she could really love. The young rabbits that lived in the window were all in a less than perfect state, ears held low, many of them were blinded from sties and the rest had limps or skin disorders. Lank, brown-edged lettuce leaves were scattered around in the confined space and a green tinged bottle, which must have once contained drinking water for the animals, was clipped to the side. A large hand-written sign above them said *'Bargain Bunnies - One Dollar'*.

"Hey, keep away from those unless you're gonna buy!" boomed Paul, but the robed figure did not twitch. Sarah moved aside as Paul lifted the hinged counter and strode through the open section towards the stranger who was looking over the makeshift wooden board into the window confinement.

"Can I help you?" he growled, but just as he spoke, the figure turned away and shuffled back to the door, opening it and leaving without saying a word.

Paul shook his head, walked to the window display and looked out just in time to see the robed figure disappearing out of view. If it was an old woman, which it seemed to be by the stature and way it walked, then she could shuffle away fast, he thought. Then, looking down at the rabbits, he noticed that they were all playing together and looking

very healthy, none were limping, and there were no evident sties. Even the scraps of lettuce that were lying around now looked crisp and fresh. The water bottle appeared to contain clean water, the green algae had gone, and the entire area smelled almost fresh against the permeated smell behind it.

Sarah also walked up to the window and looked into the rabbit display, she had decided to go and seek help elsewhere but curiosity made her take a look at what a robed figure would have been doing.

"Oh my," she uttered, an expression of shock and surprise on her face when she saw the change in the compartment. "This cant be," she thought and some part of her wondered if it might be some kind of elaborate magic trick, although she couldn't see how. Sarah backed away towards the door, opened it with her free hand and walked far outside to catch up with the robed figure, but looking up and down the sidewalk there was no sign of her. She sighed and took one more glance back at the newer looking display in the window. Paul was inside looking over at the happily playing rabbits, he then raised his head and stared at her with a blank expression, scratching his head in bemusement. Sarah stared back down the street for another chance to see the robe but whoever it was had gone.

### Chapter 3 - Gas

Michella was quite confident as far as her job goes, and with her deep blue eyes, olive skin, thick, shiny, dark hair that skimmed her lean shoulders she also turned heads in the building where she worked. Added to that, she had the personality to match both the job description as well as her looks, and it seemed as if every man fell for her in one way or another within minutes of meeting her, if not before. She was one of those women who in a classy and subtle way had eyes turn towards her the moment she entered a room, even though she seemed to have no idea of how attractive she was. She either had the ability to ignore the odd remarks from men, or was unaware of the effect she had on members of the opposite sex; which was one of the reasons that she was still single.

However, there was one man that didn't seem to get affected in the same way as many others and Daven now ignored the frequent comments from his work mates about her. The guys were often commenting about her looks and asking if he was aware of her being involved with anyone, and being married to the only woman he saw that way, and failing to notice the same things his colleagues noticed, he felt strongly that looks alone was not why he had hired her. Of course he was aware that she was very good looking, but she was also over qualified for her job, and had seemed to achieve so much more than any other assistant or receptionist he had ever met.

She always arrived at work at least an hour before he did in the mornings, and had that *quiet efficiency* he needed in his office. By the time he would arrive, the telephone messages would have been sorted and cleared, all emails were either answered or deleted, the first morning delivery of mail was already opened and often replied to, and the coffee



machine was set to bubble mode. There was one thing that Daven appreciated more than all of this though and that was that Michella understood him pretty much more than anyone else. She always knew when he needed her support, especially when things got busy at certain times of the year. She almost always had the right answer lined up ready for him, she listened to everything he said, she cared and was interested, and gave good advice on a personal and professional level whenever he needed it. Basically, Michella was the best personal assistant that he could ever have wished for; that's how he saw her and although they were just a team of two as a complete department, he believed it worked and ran better than any other in the block.

When Daven strode into the office, later than usual was because the road between the office and his home was closed due to workmen carrying out repairs on a broken sewer main, she was sifting through a file and placing all the papers in order ready for his final signature before it was to be sent off for archiving.

"Good morning," she greeted with a fresh, morning smile, "Coffee?"

"Morning Michella. Yes, please." These were without doubt the standard seven words that were said between them every morning, routine, but encompassed everything that needed to be said until the day, or at least Daven's work mode, had started.

Daven walked through the reception area, taking a quick glance at the opened post to see if there was anything important, or of interest on top before he made his way to the door at the other end and opened it. This was his own private office and taking off his jacket, he then hung it up on one of the coat hooks that were affixed to the wall behind the door. The glass door showed the wording:

*DAVEN PORTER*

*NATURAL INVESTIGATOR*

He pulled back his leather chair, which was located right in front his large mahogany desk where the cleaners the night before had neatly left it, and sat down. He scanned around his office; he was now in his element. Daven did like his workspace to be free from clutter and as neat and tidy as possible, and like every day this showed on his desk. The marked filing cabinets beside him contained notes on cases he had already handled, as well as books and articles about a wide variety of natural disasters and phenomena. This catalogue of incidents and information continued onto the bookshelves next to the cabinet.

There were a number of black and white, framed photographs of hurricanes, tornadoes, tidal waves and the like lining the office walls and in the corner of the room stood a television and videocassette recorder on a stand. Under the television was packed away a box containing a number of videos and Digital Versatile Disks of natural disasters that had happened around the world, amateur footage in the whole, but also some news feeds and security camera offerings. Daven was proud of his office and felt comfortable there. He was in a space where his knowledge gave him power and confidence and he could handle almost any situation that may occur. He did of course answer to the Director himself, but next to him he was his own boss as long as everything ran as smoothly as it did; something no other department could boast.

It wasn't too long before Michella had supplied his first dose of caffeine, and Daven had taken his old typewriter out from the bottom drawer of his desk and placed it

in front of him on his desk. Over the years, the small feet of the heavy, manual object had worn away four neat little pits in into the polished surface of the desk and fitting into them gave him the perfect position for his fingers to hammer away. Very soon he was typing away and every ten minutes or so another piece of paper would be pulled out of the rollers, either to be placed tidily on the pile beside him, or screwed up and thrown.

His fingers moved quickly and yet somewhat awkwardly over the keys, thumping each one more often than not with just the right pressure, but tutting to himself each time he made a small error or if his finger slipped. He was working on his latest book 'Modern Natural Investigations', which was beginning to develop into quite a deep piece of work. He had just finished a section on a volcano he had witnessed three years ago, when Michella peered around the door with the second mug of fresh coffee in her grasp. When she saw the look of concentration on Daven's face she smiled. Daven was known to spend a large part of each day working on his writing, no matter how much other work he had to do. However, he always managed to meet his deadlines, and she often found it amazing that he managed to do both without either getting found out or failing to complete an assignment.

"You know... if the boss found out that you're back on that book he'd go off his rocker, even if you have finished those reports!" she laughed.

Daven looked up and returned with a grin.

"Well until he gives us another challenge he can do what he wants. I can't just sit here checking the same reports over and over." He had finished that last set of reports on some recent tidal waves in Indonesia the day before, and they were sitting in filing trays

on top of the cabinet by the door with some other files he'd managed to finish off the week before.

When an incident, anywhere in the World was reported, whether it was something that appears natural like a volcano or a tsunami, a file would be created and passed into the Natural Investigations office, along with any collaborating evidence like photos, videos and witness reports. It was then up to the small department, or more than often just Daven, to read all of the reports and decide whether the incident could possibly be not of a natural order, and in those cases, whether frauds in the like of insurance could be used with the incident being used as an excuse. It was of course quite rare for what seemed to be a natural phenomenon to have been caused by another reason, like some tidal waves that were created from test nuclear detonations or earthquakes caused by hydraulic fracturing and deep earth drilling. In 2010, there was a spate of earthquakes in Oklahoma, which after investigation was found to have been caused from injecting of water as well as other chemicals at high pressure, deep into the ground to shatter sediment particles and release natural gas.

Conversely, many natural events can give rise to damage of human equipment and sometimes lives. When these scenarios take place then the investigations after ascertaining the cause, will focus on the human cost, whether there are possible advantages to insurance claims or crimes and what the authorities can do to minimise any future problems.

Michella stepped up to Daven's desk and placed the mug on the coaster near his notepad after picking up the previous empty one. She then stepped to the side of the desk

to retrieve the numerous pieces of crumpled paper from the floor by the waste paper basket.

“You know, with a bit more practise, you’ll be able to actually get them into the basket,” she commented with a sarcastic grin. “Besides, this paper should go into the recycling box, not in the trash! I thought you were keen on the idea of saving the planet?”

She threw the paper into a plastic crate labelled ‘Recycling’ that was deliberately positioned next to the waste paper basket and returned to the desk.

"Thanks Ella. But if I put everything where it was supposed to go, you’d just die of shock. And anyway, without a bit of global warming we’d have less and less work to do," said Daven. He knew how hard Michella worked, and didn’t mean to drive her crazy with little clean-up jobs, it was just that when he was concentrating on one thing he tended to let other things slip. He was, in fact, very keen to ensure all members of the building did what they could in the way of recycling and conservation. It was he who had provided all the recycling boxes for every office, and he who would collect all the paper each week and take it to the collection point that he’d designated outside.

Picking up a few freshly typed sheets of her boss’s manuscript, Michella started to browse through the pages. She was his best critic, as well as his spell checker and living thesaurus. Daven never minded her looking through his work while he was still fresh on it, there couldn’t be a better person who could understand it almost as well as he did. He allowed her to read what he’d done so far that morning without interruption while he continued to type and for a few moments they were both silent but for the steady thump of the typewriter and the odd slurping sound as Daven drank his very hot coffee.

The rattling of the typewriter and the frequent tuts and groans from Daven as he made yet more mistakes continued as Michella picked up a red pen from the desk and started to scribble all over the typed pages that she was holding. Daven used to use a correcting tape in his typewriter, which allowed him to white out spelling mistakes and change them as he wrote, but he found this frustrating and now left all the corrections that he didn't find straight away to the hands of his assistant. As long as the page flowed right, even if there were the odd errors, it was the content that was important, and only then would it not get screwed into a small ball and thrown somewhere close to a bin.

"Why don't you just dump that thing and get yourself a computer, then it can do all this spell checking automatically?" she inquired, knowing the answer because she had heard it a thousand times before, but hoping that one day Daven would give in to her idea. It wasn't that she minded checking his writing for him, just that she sometimes felt as though she was intruding on his unfinished work, and sometimes as though she should be doing the job she was paid to do. However this was not how Daven understood the checking procedure.

"I've told you before, I've always used a typewriter and I feel comfortable with it, besides, the clattering it makes helps me think," he said, not even faltering in his finger tapping on the keys as he spoke.

Michella grinned. She couldn't help wishing she found the noisy machine as helpful as he did, but also that the office wouldn't be the same place with a peaceful computer and laser printer instead.

"I know you're my boss, but that doesn't stop me from thinking that you're a bit weird."

"You wouldn't like to work for just an average boss," he chuckled back.

## **Chapter 4 – Feathers**

As soon as the house had been emptied of other humans, Kathy was able to sit down for a few minutes to contemplate what she planned to do for the rest of the day; after smiling at the thought of having the most wonderful family she could imagine. Sam had quite cheerfully trundled off to school, rushing for the bus that hooted outside the house, and moments later, Daven had given her a leaving kiss before leaving for the Manhattan FBI offices. The last gulp of her orange juice was one of the sweetest, and she put the glass down on the table before getting up to start her chores.

During most normal days, Kathy would have to sit down at the desk in the drawing room and spend the day checking through and writing up financial statements, editing accounts and sorting through boxes of receipts. She worked part-time for Eagle Accountancy, a relatively young New York firm that primarily dealt with small companies, doing all of their bookkeeping and sorting accountancy statements for the I.R.S. However, she now had a couple of weeks off before the company's biggest client was to issue the firm with their books, and then her life would be a different story. Until then though, she was starting to get used to both sprucing up the house, including painting the bathroom, which she had completed a couple of days ago, and having time for herself; for a change.

Unfortunately, chores were chores and after just ten minutes of resting her legs, she got up and went to the cupboard under the stairs for the vacuum and other items for a quick clean of the house. Kathy always started her cleaning cycle at the top of the house and worked her way down, starting with her wannabe hero son's room. When she opened



the door to Sam's bedroom, the spoils of war on the carpet once again confronted her. Before she could do any cleaning she had to clear a space where the vacuum would actually be able to do its job. She picked up the large scattering of toys from the carpet and threw them haphazardly into the open toy chest, knowing that Sam would be cross with her for ruining a carefully planned battle scene. She then retrieved all the dirty clothes from around the room and dropped them just outside in the hallway ready to go into the laundry basket when she went downstairs again.

Moving Sam's large toy crane against the wall with Batman still dangling from some string at the end of its arm, she knocked it and the cover to the battery compartment, which powers the toy fell off, as did two of the large cylindrical power cells. With a huff more because she hadn't been as careful with the toy than its stability, she knelt down on the floor and rested the crane down onto its side so that she could re-assemble it. She had known about the little plastic plate, which held in the batteries not being quite as well made than the rest of the crane because this had happened a few times since he was given it, including the first time it was taken out of its rather large box.

Sliding the two batteries back into place and pushing a few wires that were protruding from the same space, Kathy used a couple of fingers to keep the wires back as she tried to clip on the covering plastic plate. "Oh come on," she hissed when the plate just wouldn't clip into place. It was only when she used both thumbs to press it down hard did she hear the sweet click of success. Lifting the crane back up and letting Batman swing madly for a few seconds, Kathy got back to her feet wishing that cleaning this room would one day be a little bit easier.

When Sam was a little younger and first began his collection of action figures, she would always make an effort to either clean around them or to replace them as closely as she could to their chosen positions when she had finished. After a few painstaking-cleaning sessions, however, she realised that she always got it all wrong anyway, and, in Sam's eyes, clearly did not understand the importance of the exact positioning of characters ready for battle. So these days she just went about her own business, safe in the knowledge that her son would be quite pleased with her for attempting to tidy his room again. This, of course, was not because he appreciated the lack of dust on his shelves and carpet, but because he would now have the chance to set up his creation all over again when he returned from school, despite the shouts of exasperation she knew she would hear when he entered his room for the first time at the end of the day.

The vacuuming itself took little more than a minute, and then she waved a feather duster around the surfaces in the room, none of which had any space on them in which any dust could have a chance to accumulate, but at least she was doing everything she could. "Better to give it a quick going over every day than to leave any dirt to build up," she thought to herself.

After she had finished with the feathers, her next job was to sort out the bed. As she pulled back the covers, Superman was catapulted onto the floor. She picked up the best superhero, as her son was keen to keep telling her and put him in pride of place on the shelf about the headrest before making the rest of his bed and refluffing up his pillows. After finishing the bed she stroked out every crease from the duvet cover, every hill and valley brushed flat, every indication that there had been an epic battle left only in one little boy's imagination. When the bed was back to being fit for sleeping in again,

Kathy paused for a second and tenderly patted his pillow. She felt a bit guilty for telling him off again that morning about wearing his Superman pyjama top under his school uniform, but they had had that same argument so many times. He was old enough to understand why it wasn't allowed, and certainly old enough to do as he was told. Still, she remembered a time when she herself had wanted to wear her ballet tutu to school, and felt that she understood somewhat of what her son was feeling.

She patted the little Superman figure on the head, and made sure he was facing the door ready for when Sam came home before winding the lead back onto the vacuum cleaner and picking up her feather duster ready for another room. Glancing up out of the window, she wondered for just a moment on whether her son's dream would ever come true, then left his domain and started work on the rest of the house. After all the rooms were tidied, dust eliminated and laundry collated on the floor in front of the washing machine, she would set the dial on to clean and sweet smelling mode before going back upstairs to brush her own teeth and have a shower before getting herself more presentable.

## Chapter 5 – Nerves

The clicking of pens, sounds of scribbling on paper, tapping on keyboards and people talking on the telephones gave off an almost musical effect, somewhere between the sounds of an orchestra with all of its instruments in perfect harmony and just a little bit of white noise to completely kill the effect. Trevor Ermine was oblivious to what was going on around him though, as far as he was concerned it was only his job that was important. He was smartly dressed in a blue pinstriped suit and silver tie, and pretty much ready to go back on air. Just behind him as he strode, the make-up girl had stopped trying to powder his forehead as Trevor walked down past the other reporters and control staff to the desk where the frantic Susan Dante was putting the last finishing touches to his report.

Susan was not looking quite so composed, sitting at her desk surrounded by computer screens, two of which were showing infrared and satellite photographic images of the whole planet's weather systems. To a layman none of the images in front of her would make any sense whatsoever, but she had worked with meteorological systems for many years and could read everything as clearly as if reading a novel. The centre screen on her desk however was a lot easier to understand. It had on it displayed the word-processor she was using, with the typed report on it that Trevor was to read to his viewers. The report, as usual was late and sitting opposite her was the reason for the delayed work. Right behind her computer monitors was a mating desk, and sat in front of it was Howard Little, a fellow weather investigator, Susan's right-hand man, and the source of a lot of frustration.

"Am I going to get my report, or do I have to go on air and make up the weather?" asked Trevor, when he finally reached Susan's desk after fending off an eager make-up woman. The impatience in his voice was clear.

"That's what we do all the time, it's about time you went with the flow!" joked Howard under his breath.

Susan snarled at him, the last thing she wanted was another petty argument. "You just keep quiet, I've had just about enough of your quips for one day," she demanded, taking this couple of seconds to press a button shown on the word processor and activating the printer beside her, which rattled into life and breathed out her words.

She picked up the loose papers from the tray, clipped them together and then held them out for Trevor. "There you go, sorry it's late." She looked back at Howard with a sarcastic smile. "Someone has been distracting me!" she continued.

Trevor took the papers from Susan's grip and started to speed read through the pages. He was used to getting the information he needed a short time before he was expected to deliver the report on air, and enjoyed the challenge of trying to digest enough from the papers she gave him to be able to give a detailed and informative forecast in just a minute or so.

"No funnies today?" he asked in a slightly disappointed tone. Susan would often try and add a humorous note into the days weather, citing an event that she wanted advertised or something to brighten it up; but not today.

"No, she wouldn't let me get my hands on it," retorted Howard with a cheeky grin.

Trevor was rarely as impressed by Howard's remarks than Susan was, and with that last comment he turned and walked off down past the desks where all the other

weather reporters were working away, closely followed by his make-up artist who had a facial brush in her mouth and was opening up a different foundation powder.

“Mr Ermine, I really need to do something about the shine on your forehead! If you go on air like that you’ll...” she sounded efficient but nervous, and one look over Trevor’s shoulder was enough to convince her to give up.

“Your call,” she shrugged, “but the studio has enough light bouncing around it already, I just didn’t want the reflection from your head blinding someone,” she said, and then muttered under her breath as she walked back to her room, “just trying to do my job!”

Susan leant over the desk towards Howard and gave him a stern gaze.

"Look Howard, you may be a very clever weather analyst, but you really do push the limits of my nerves sometimes."

Howard chuckled to himself and then continued with his work, typing on the computer keyboard in front of him. He enjoyed the daily banter between the two of them and it had become the most enjoyable part of his employment. Trevor however was never going to get into the spirit of things unless there was a camera pointing towards him, but Howard thought it was fun trying to wind him up as well.

## Chapter 6 - Coffee

The warm autumn air passed up the sidewalk, swerving around the shoppers and other people bustling backwards and forwards along the busy street. The air was heavy with the smell of the traffic just yards away, with cars and motorcycles being driven around the New York streets, barely missing the cyclists choosing to take the environmental approach.

The tables and chairs outside the Shoot the Breeze cafe encroached onto the busy sidewalk. The café had only changed hands earlier that year and already was becoming a thriving business, mostly because of its location rather than the quality of the place. However, even the look of the place was beginning to change due to one waitress who'd started there just a couple of weeks before. Today though, Sarah wasn't starting work until the afternoon shift, she had booked a couple of hours leave so that she could go to the veterinary physician and get her new pet looked at, seeing that the owner of the Pet Shop she had bought it from wasn't going to be any help. During her time out of work, the other employees had already had their fill of giggles about how her new rabbit was probably the closest thing to a man in her life. By the time Sarah had arrived to put on her apron though those laughs were forgotten because the early afternoon was in full swing, and seated people had to be served.

The other waitresses in the café were much younger than Sarah, and although they were polite to one-another, they resented the praise that the newest member of the team had received for her efforts in trying to upgrade the feel of the place. They often giggled together behind Sarah's back about how she looked and how in their opinion she would

live her life a spinster because no man on earth could possibly fall for someone like her – little did anyone know that on the weekend previously, the ever poetic Sarah had written a note and placed it into bottle, corked it and in a symbolic gesture, never expecting it to ever be read, she threw it into the sea off Battery Park. It read: *‘Please help. I am looking for my other half, he has been lost somewhere in the universe for an eternity, and I bet he is missing me terribly. If you find him, tell him where I am! Sarah X.’*

Since she had started in the café she tried not to show her sensitive side, especially in front of the other staff. Instead though it did show in the way she tried to brighten up the place, flowers were now a regular feature on the tables, the floors were squeaky clean and spouts for the milk-frothers weren’t all coated brown. Although Sarah was a quiet and timid woman, her work ethics were what got her the job in the first place, a mile away from the younger staff who used the place as a stop gap between getting better jobs or getting extra cash for weekend nights out in the many clubs and pubs that the city offered.

Drinking teas and coffees the people who were sitting and chatting on the seats barely noticed a fully robed person making their way towards them amongst the other pedestrians. New York City life did not often lend itself to the ability to notice other people, as everyone seemed so constantly rushed and overwhelmed with just going about their daily activities. Even those who had allowed themselves ten minutes to enjoy a leisurely coffee with friends or work colleagues were focused on their own conversation and not at all on the world around them.

As the hidden figure made its way past the first empty table, which just had a day old, single half-dead carnation in a vase as its centrepiece, a withered hand reached from



the tattered robes and brushed the petals. The robed figure continued, not even glancing back to see the flower that had been touched regenerating and reaching back up to the sky, but the subtle change was enough for just a couple of the lunch-breakers to notice out of the corner of their eyes.

No-one said anything, but slight looks of surprise and almost shock were made by the onlookers who could only compare in their minds the view of the flower in all its glory against the memories of how it had looked just seconds before. The difference between the flowers that had been choked by the fumes of traffic and warmth of the air around them against this the one on the front empty table was startling, and almost gave the notion that it had been palmed rather than just touched. However, shrugging off the idea that the flower had just turned from a dirty brown, withered piece to a full open bloom was dismissed as quickly as the thought had entered their minds and they continued to talk to their lunch partners without a word of the incident said.

## Chapter 7 - Strawberry

Dawn Saunders was sitting behind the counter serving a tall dark customer. She was stamping in his paying in book and then countersigning everything with her usual quiet efficiency when her boss, John Chilbrey walked up to her holding out his hand palm uppermost. He had a look of impatience on his face and an air of insolence his employees were used to, but never comfortable with. Mr Chilbrey as he demanded to be addressed by the people who worked for him, was by all who had been in his employment the worst kind of boss to have, and no-one liked his abrupt, and often offensive manner.

"Give me the safe keys," he demanded in his best superior tone. He didn't look either at Dawn or at her customer, but stared blankly between the two and maintained an impatient authority. He didn't actually tap his foot to indicate his impatience, but the need to comply with his demand was, nevertheless, implicit.

Dawn put down the stamp and slid the paying in book back to the customer, without changing the friendly expression on her face. Somehow, she managed to suppress the feelings of panic and discomfort while she smiled and said: "Thank you, have a nice day" as she always did. Only then did she take the key fob from her pocket and place it as swiftly she could in her boss's hand. The change in the look in her eyes was immediate and undeniable, as she went from friendly, helpful bank teller to submissive, unconfident subordinate.

"Sorry, I forgot to put them back after this morning's audit," she apologized.

As the keys dropped into John's waiting hand he snatched his fingers shut almost catching her grasp. He had still not made any eye contact and was already turning away from Dawn when he barked his trademark parting comment at her over his shoulder.

"Keep forgetting and you can forget that you work here," he warned her, and then added, "I'm looking for just one more excuse. Just one more excuse."

John walked away pushing against a security door hard causing it to almost fly open with a bang against the wall behind. All the waiting customers in the queue waiting to be served watched in disgust as he stormed out of the building. John frequently left a similar scene behind him but was always oblivious to the perception of other people. If he had known how people who didn't even know him perceived his character, he would not have cared in the slightest, and possibly would behave even worse.

"Well he's a right bundle of laughs," said the tall, dark customer that she was serving in sympathy, putting his paying in book into his wallet before stepping away to allow the next customer up to the counter.

Dawn's eyes were just starting to water. She wiped them and took a deep breath. She was always frustrated with herself when she allowed him to upset her with his rude manner the way he did. However, she always tried to be pleasant and professional even if she couldn't help but find him disagreeable and arrogant on every occasion.

As she straightened her notepad on her desk in front of her to give herself a moment to collect herself ready for her next customer, Dawn absent-mindedly pulled her hair back across to her left eye, hiding a strawberry birthmark on her temple. The mark that somehow reminded her of her mother every time she looked into the mirror, it was

her most defining feature, when her hair didn't hide it of course; and was the only thing that separated her looks from her twin sister.

"I do hope one day he gets his comeuppance," she said, and turned her attention to her next customer. "Yes, Madam, how can I help you today?" She spoke with a new, slightly false but nether-the-less friendly smile. Anyway she had reason to smile that day, because later her sister would be picking up the red dress that she had been saving her cents for, and ordered a couple of days before – today was the day it should be in to pick up.

In the street right outside the New York City bank, John Chilbrey pushed past a pedestrian as he stomped along the sidewalk. The woman carrying her bags of groceries muttered something no-one could hear as she stared at him for a moment, then adjusted her bags before continuing on her way, just another person he had upset in some way that day, abet in this case very briefly before it was forgotten.

With his chin leading the way, Chilbrey walked further down the street without a care for any of the other people occupying the city streets around him. He did have an important meeting to attend, and the people there were his one concern. For today he would have to spend a couple of hours around a table of executives to give them a run down of the bank's balance sheet, but more importantly for him, after that he would learn the details of the bonus he was to get this year – and by all accounts it would be a lot; maybe enough to buy his villa in California that he's been wishing for the past twelve months.

Meetings for John took up most of his time as the manager of a bank, often they were with owners of small businesses, which he was forced to help as best as he could.

He did feel it was better during the height of the recession when a lot of them were going out of business. He enjoyed the power of being in court giving the details of how much someone owed and hearing the bankruptcy demands being issued. However, since those days the economy had strengthened and although he didn't get to hear those authoritative words so much, there was now larger bonuses to have; and he knew which he'd prefer.

All of a sudden, a dirty old tramp stepped up to him, so closely that the eye contact so successfully refused in the bank was now forced unwittingly on Mr Chilbrey.

"Any money for some food sir?" the old man asked, "Come on Sir, have a heart Sir, just a buck to get some food."

"Get out of my way you disgusting outcast," snapped John, pushing the tramp backwards and continuing on his walk. The frail tramp turned to the next person he met walking along the sidewalk and asked them the same question. He seemed used to people treating him this way and was not at all put off by it, either that or it was a case of *Needs Must*. The passer-by put his hand in his pocket, pulled out some change to and gave it to the old tramp without speaking or making eye contact as hardly a step was missed.

"Thank you sir, oh thank you," the tramp saluted to the generous stranger as he watched him walking pass him and off up the sidewalk, only to disappear into the silhouettes of many other people doing the same.

## Chapter 8 – Grass

The two closest of pals were sat in the dugout waiting for their turn on the pitch. As usual they were both talking about the battles that had taken place in their bedrooms away from the school grounds that morning. Both of them were as bad as each other in that respect, although Sam had the edge, not just because he had been into the superhero scene for longer but because he really did want, and feel that one-day he could become one of the heroes he idolised so much.

Sam had found time earlier that morning, getting up before his mother, which was a bit unusual but because of it he managed to recreate the now famous battle in his mind where Superman captured the mind-controlled Batman who had been taken over by the evil lord Zeus. He was excitedly telling Charlie how it went, going into every tiny detail and explaining the next stage that was still to come when he was to finish it off later that day. Charlie on the other hand had only woken up when his sister had loudly knocked on his door and shouted that he was late for his breakfast and subsequently had no time to play for himself, as was often usual.

“So Superman tied Batman to the crane and swung him about until he’d confessed to where he was hiding the stash of secret weapons,” explained Sam to the just as enthusiastic Charlie who was trying to imagine the whole scene in his mind; unaware of the baseball match that was taking place just yards away in front of them.

“That’s cool!”

“If you come over on Saturday then we can do it all again if you want?” exclaimed Sam, just before he felt a tug on his shoulder by a bored pupil next to him, Sam looked up.

“Oi Sam, you’re up!” shouted the sports coach from the pitch ahead of him,  
“Come on boy!”

Sam jumped up, leaving his conversation behind him and instead putting his face protector on. He ran up the steps and onto the large sports field that was connected to the school. The arrays of grandstand seats at either side were empty, as they always were when he was playing during their Phys-Ed lessons. Sometimes though his parents had taken him to the evening matches, mainly because he knew his father had played in them so many years ago. The best thing at those games was the caramelized apples. In general, Sam wasn’t much for playing sports but he did quite enjoy baseball because it reminded him of playing with his father in the warm evenings and the times he was taken to those matches.

The pitcher had moved from the mound and was throwing the ball back and forth to some of the fielders, giving them some practise between batters, because up to that point there hadn’t been much in the way of action; in fact there was very little action when the younger students played, but it was part of the curriculum.

Sam picked up the bat that had been left by the last player and stood directly in line with where the pitcher would throw. Feeling the grip on the bat, his palm could feel the thin binding starting to come apart from years of use. Like a Chinese burn, Sam twisted his grip while watching the ball being thrown back to the pitcher for the last time before it would be sent spinning toward him. He cocked the bat behind his head and readed himself, digging his toes into the dusty ground ready to bolt. The boy who was going to be bowling to him was much larger than Sam who was one of the smallest in his

year but he didn't feel intimidated as he was being scanned up and down before the run-up and the ball was thrown.

Sam swung the bat and with a loud thwack he hit the speeding ball square just an inch from the tip. The loud cracking sound echoed around the empty grandstands as the ball shot through the air and flew fast right over the fielders and into the bottom corner of the field. Sam lowered the bat and watched the ball rolling away until it hit a wooden plank, which edged the field and marked its boundary. The smile grew on his face, it was one of the best swings he had ever done, and he wished his father had been able to see it.

"That's one hell of an arm you've got there Sam," said the coach, "maybe you should try for the team."

"Thanks Coach," said Sam with a grin.

"Well don't just stand there boy, RUN!"

Sam returned to reality in an instant and dropped the bat to the ground. Thrusting off with his head lowered and his arms flailing wildly across the grass, trying to gain as much speed as he could, he easily made it to the third base passing the batter before him. Stopping for a brief moment to check the field he saw that one of the fielders had just made it to the ball, so Sam sped off again. The ball was being thrown haphazardly from one fielder to another as they tried to get it back, but it was too late and Sam finished the home run to the proud applause of his coach.



## Chapter 9 - Sand

It was late afternoon and the heavy oak, wooden door to the reception area of the courthouse opened and the large foreboding figure of Judge Merton T. Hauer walked through it. He made his way slowly but purposefully the way that he always did, taking off his chamber robes as he went. When he reached the other end of the expansive lobby and into the open-plan reception office, he hung the robes on the hanger that was waiting for them, brushed out any creases and left them in pride of place on his mahogany coat stand. Most judges kept their robes in their own chambers, but Merton always used the reception area because from there they could be seen from the entrance window, a reminder of the justice within the building to all who would view them as they stepped up to the clearest of toughened glass.

It had been a long day for him and he felt his age was starting to catch up with him. There had been a lot of cases all in a line without so much of a lunch break let alone a sit in his chambers with a mug of coffee. Two young offenders had been placed into custody until their future was to be decided next week, and one man he had sentenced to six years for reckless driving, causing an accident that mowed down five innocent people waiting outside a cinema. The rest were easy in comparison to those but there was no doubt that it was taking its toll.

Evelyn was typing away on the computer screen right in front of her, entering one by one the details of the next day's cases in order of the time of each hearing from a list that was given to her earlier that morning. She had been working for Judge Hauer for just over a week on a job-share basis, but was already beginning to feel as though it was a job

she could do very well; abet a little more training. Her day now was nearly over and she had just a few finishing up things to do before she could start her much-awaited shopping trip.

Her computer skills were already up to scratch, helped by years of talking to her friends on social networks where it had kept her fingers supple. The typing, which she had learnt at high school was still second nature. She also had a very good telephone manner, smiling and helpful sounding tone mixed with a young enthusiasm of having her first proper job. The only issue that gave her some stress was that when she started the job, she had underestimated some of the paperwork side of things. To add to this, Merton was a real perfectionist, and she already understood that the usual way of running an office was simply not good enough here. He cared about the way in which paperwork was stored and handled before, during and after processing. He required that the court stamps and seals be placed in particular places on each page, perfectly within the printed rectangles on the pages awaiting the mark of authority. He even had a written script for how they should be inked and placed as well as instructions on standard telephone conversations that she would make on his behalf. Nevertheless, Eve was determined to prove to her new colleagues and to herself that she could be professional as well as efficient, and that she was indeed the right person for this job.

“Right then, Miss Saunders, I’ll see you in the morning,” said the Judge as he placed his coat over his shoulders.

“Sir, just before you leave, can you help me with the Parry file?” she asked with a slight hint of embarrassment about her lack of ability in solving all paperwork issues as quickly as she would have liked. “It’s only the mandate that needs addressing but I’ve

never done one before,” she continued, “and I would like to make sure I do it right from the start.”

Merton stopped in mid-swing of wrapping his black-silk scarf around his neck. He turned to look at her right into her eyes so that his point would be made clearly. He did not believe in anything other than full and frank communication of requirements in his office, and knew already that Evelyn was more than capable of solving such a problem for herself without having to bothering him. He had also ascertained in the short time he had known her that she could cope with being spoken to in a firm manner and always preferred to work with assistants who would accept instruction or criticism without becoming upset.

“Miss Saunders, I know that you are new to this position and I sympathise, but I haven’t got the time right now to do your job for you,” and with that he turned back towards the door and walked out. As he walked out of the reception and past the entrance window he peered in and could see Evelyn was already dialling a number on the telephone. “Probably asking her job-share colleague,” he thought to himself. “As long as she makes sure she does do it right from the start, I don’t mind!”

As Merton reached the front doors of the building, the two smartly dressed guards that patrolled the main lobby opened them in unison.

“Good evening,” he bid to both the burly men in turn, and they reciprocated his greeting one after the other. They knew not to try and make small talk with the Judge, just to show him that they knew their job. It was not that he was rude, as such, just that he appreciated people whom understood their role and carried out their duties without fuss.

All those who ever worked alongside Merton T. Hauer automatically gave him the respect he commanded and the admiration he deserved.

The warm, early autumn air was very different to the fully air-conditioned yet foreboding building, and although the sticky Manhattan heat encapsulated his face, Merton breathed in a lung full of the comforting breeze that jogged up the road as he stepped onto the sidewalk. Looking down at his feet, a little thought swept past his mind as he about how fine it would be to feel the soft sand of the beach between his toes right now instead of being in the centre of the metropolis called New York. It had been a good few years since he went to the seaside, and he wondered whether his wife, too, was feeling that it might be time for another visit.

“Maybe I’ll suggest it when I get home,” he thought, and with a newer expression than he would use inside the building that he left behind him, he started to daydream as he made his way along the block to the subway.

## Chapter 10 – Sea

The volume control for the radio was turned up so that the crew could all monitor the confident voice of Mickey, an air traffic controller on duty at one of the World's busiest airports. It had been a normal, and quite enjoyable and now they were on their last leg of the journey, which had taken them right over the Atlantic.

"American Airlines, one zero two heavy, this is New York... I have you on course at thirty-two thousand feet and seven hundred and twenty knots."

Captain Adrian Vaughan, the top-class civilian pilot exuded experience. His grey hair and short, freshly trimmed beard all helped in showing his maturity, which he thought was a very important aspect considering he had the welfare of over two hundred passengers at his mercy, and yet he flew as if he was born to it. His headset was not over his head but instead back around his neck with the microphone still hovering over his mouth so that he could talk freely into it. A quick glance at one of the many liquid-crystal monitors on the cockpit flight displays reassured him that everything was fine and that there were no problems, no warning lights and plenty of fuel for the rest of the journey.

"New York, this is American Airlines one zero two heavy, flying at thirty-two thousand feet and a speed of seven hundred and twenty knots confirmed."

His first officer, Simon Drew, peered down out of the cockpit window at the deep blue sea far below reflecting the setting sunshine as the voice spoke again.

"American Airlines flight one zero two - the skies are clear and it's been a beautiful day, pity you missed it," there was a slight jokey manner in his tone, a refreshing change for the pilots who were used to dealing with dead-serious controllers,

one of the things that made flying back towards American airspace much more enjoyable. "Have a great a sunset and I'll speak to you again when you're on my glide path."

Adrian removed the headset from around his neck and set it down on the steering column in front of him. Even though this was one of the most advanced aircraft that had ever been built and could be flown totally on the computer systems within it, designers knew that pilots still liked the feel of a steering wheel and had kept the format the same for this new one.

"Right, I've got to take a pee and get some coffee... can you do the honours?" he asked his second in command. It had been a long flight and his last rest break had been a couple of hours ago.

Simon nodded, leant forward and flicked the switch for the public address system in the passenger section. He enjoyed talking to the passengers from the cockpit, and couldn't help smiling as Adrian raised his eyes to the cockpit ceiling before licking his index finger and smoothing his left eyebrow in a comic gesture suggesting that Simon was about to sound almost as smooth as he felt.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are cruising at thirty-two thousand feet at a speed of seven hundred and twenty knots and will be beginning our descent in about fifty minutes. The hostesses will be around in just a moment to take any last trolley orders that you may have, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for flying with us today and we hope that you enjoy the rest of your flight."

As Simon was speaking into the microphone Adrian unbuckled his seat belt, and rather stiffly raised himself up, twisting himself past the centre console where all the aircraft's communications controls were set and into a standing position almost behind

his original seating position. Holding onto the small of his back and pushing, he tried to loosen up the stiff vertebrae before he walked out of the cockpit so that he could visit the restroom so that he could relieve himself.

Rod Harmon did not look quite at ease as the other two. This was his first flight in the massive fly-by-wire aircraft, and although he had a couple of years experience as a Navigator, nothing in something so complex and modern. Although he was still not comfortable in his position, he still looked quite calm and tried to stay collected. During the flight he had stayed fairly quiet behind the two pilots but no less alert, reading up the systems manuals to make sure he kept every possible button stroke at the fore-front of his mind. "Oh, long flight," he groaned, stretching his arms out. "Have you flown with Adrian much?"

First Officer Simon Drew didn't take his eyes from the cockpit displays as he spoke. "Probably over a hundred flights by now - you?"

"No, first time."

"A nice bloke, and a damn good pilot and as straight a man as you can get," said Simon as he removed his headset and peered over his shoulder, just a bit short from seeing the younger man behind him but enough to show his attention. Rod swung his chair around so that he was looking forward at the back of Simon's seat.

"Actually it's the first time for me in one of these babies," said Rod stroking the mapping display, "it flies so smooth. Much more than the smaller jets that I am used to."

"Yeah I love it... almost flies itself really!"

"Can you show me the button for it to navigate for itself... because if you can, I'll be made right up?"

“This plane might not need us Rod, but if it did everything for us then we’d have nothing to do, and how boring a flight would that end up to be?”

Rod smiled, he knew the comment was correct; there was nothing like the feel of being in charge of an aircraft, to feel it’s response to his commands, and also being part of the team who flew it.

In the passenger section of the plane, just behind the mostly locked door of the cockpit, everything was quiet. Many of the passengers had been sleeping while others reading books or listening to music on their personal stereos. There had been a break in the onboard films, which could be viewed from the headrests of the seats in front but for the screens that were still switched on, the ending of the last one was just finishing with credits scrolling from bottom to top.

Half way back along the many rows was a seat that was reclined as far back as it could go without disturbing the passenger behind, and Leslie who was slumped in it had his eyes closed. In fact they had been closed a lot since take-off as even the thought of flying gave him the jitters, let alone actually being on a plane. It had been a long flight but the panic he felt at the start, still after all these hours had not diminished to nothing. However, he kept his feelings to himself reasonably well, his greying hair shielding his damp scalp and his hands, although clasped together, not showing half of the white knuckles he had earlier. Meanwhile, the cooler hand of his wife, Frida, could be felt on the back of one of his hands. Her fingers stroked him and let him know that her thoughts were with him as she whispered in his ear, “Are you asleep?”



“No, have I ever fallen asleep on an aeroplane?” was his reply before continuing, “I’m just thinking that’s all.” He had to be careful that his voice didn’t betray the calm exterior he was working so hard to maintain. Of course, Frida knew perfectly well how he was feeling, but he didn’t like her to worry unnecessarily, so he tried as best he knew to cover up most of his own discomfort, and one of those ways was to keep his eyes shut and pretend he was somewhere else – jumping back to reality the second any turbulence touched the outer surfaces.

“What are you thinking about darling,” asked Frida, still stroking his hand.

“Oh, nothing much, just that we’ve had such a nice time this holiday, it’s such a shame its had to end.” The last few days replaying back in his head, trying to will himself away from where he was and back to those times. Frida smiled, it had been a very nice break and it was good to see that Leslie had relaxed throughout, other than the travelling of course. It was nice for him not even thinking about his hectic place of work and the endless chores to be done at home.

“You know, it’s been almost a quarter of an hour since that last bit of turbulence, I’m sure its safe to open your eyes now,” she said in a comforting tone. She tried hard to help him feel at ease, but after countless flights spent sitting at his side, reassuring him that nothing was going to happen and trying to change the subject whenever possible, she knew she would never really be able to make a difference to how he felt.

Leslie didn’t open his eyes at first. Instead he just said, “I’m fine thank you.” But just as he finished speaking he heard the noise of the drinks trolley pulling up next to his seat. His eyes opened wide and saw the long dark hair of the airhostess in front of him as she leant across to put the obligatory paper coasters on their tray tables.

“Would you like something from the trolley,” asked Candy Miller, the hostess with what looked like a permanently glued-on, smiley face. Now Leslie could begin to feel slightly more comfortable, as these were the words that marked the best part of his flight.

“Now you’re talking! Mine’s a whiskey!” he said with a grin as he sat up and adjusted his position in his seat so that Candy’s hair was not quite so much in his face, “straight!”

The long hair of the hostess was flicked back as she turned to face him, “Well, it’s nice to see that someone’s feeling better.”

“I was fine,” Leslie tried to justify himself, looking forward over the other seats with his chin slightly raised, trying to claw back some dignity as his wife grinned broadly next to him pretending to look out of the window.

“You didn’t look fine – and it looks as though I wasn’t the only one who noticed,” giggled Frida.

“You don’t need to worry Sir, this plane is probably the safest one ever, and our captain today is…” started Candy, just as Leslie noticed over the seats the Captain from down the aisle entering the crew’s rest room.

“Not at the controls!” spurted Leslie.

Frida elbowed Leslie in the ribs, a little jolt to let him know to leave it. There was being sympathetic towards intense phobic feelings, then there was letting someone know it’s time to keep their thoughts to themselves! “Leslie, you don’t have to dramatise everything! Mine’s a water love,” Frida asked, while giving Candy a little wink.

## Chapter 11 - Flowers

It was the sudden ringing of the telephone that broke the monotonous noise in the office. Daven had been on and off his book between telephone conversations and reviewing statistics of the year's storm activity around the Florida Keys, which had been particularly low in comparison to the previous marks on the graphs. He was especially surprised to find that in the last few weeks the weather had calmed right down, even across the notorious Tornado Alley. Comparing figures from previous years, these months would normally show a much higher occurrence of storms across the whole of the States but instead the weather patterns had calmed right down.

Michella moved quickly to answer the ringing but the disturbance had already occurred, and it was then that both Michella and Daven realised what hour it was by looking up at their wall clocks.

"Natural Investigations." Michella spoke in her usual telephone voice. "Evening Kathy," she said after a short pause, "hold on I'll put you through."

Daven peered down at the paragraph he had just typed and sighed. It wasn't that the words on the paper were not up to his usual standard, more that he realised he'd been typing non-stop for almost the whole day, completely focused and on a run with his thoughts and although he had a pile of twenty typed pages beside him, that was not going to justify a later than usual day at the office. Even the light shining through the windows was now only coming from street lighting, the sun had already started to set and was blocked out from the other tall buildings that surrounded his office set, in the heart of the metropolis.

“Kath’s on the line,” Michella called and then pressed the transfer button on the phone, in an instant the light lit up on Daven’s.

Taking a quick glance at his watch in the hope that the wall clock was an hour or two fast, Daven realised he would have to face the music and picked up the phone pushing the heavy typewriter to one side. “Evening Darling,” he uttered into the mouthpiece with a grimace that Michella could see through the open doorway into the reception area.

“You said you wouldn’t be late today, remember,” said the obviously unhappy voice of his wife on the other end.

“Sorry love! I was wrapped up and didn’t notice the time.” This was not the first time Daven had upset his wife by getting carried away with his writing. He didn’t mean to, it was just that when the words began to flow he had to let them. Who knew how long it would be before it would happen again, and he hated going through what he called *dry spells* when the next line of typed characters just would not come to him.

“Sam’s going to be getting ready for bed after his bath, and he wanted to know why you weren’t home. Oh yes, and your dinner’s getting crispy in the oven!”

“But I was just...” said Daven, trying to excuse himself.

“You’re working on that damn book again aren’t you... every time you’re near the end of a book it’s always the same,” Kathy interrupted.

Daven glanced back at the half-typed piece of paper sticking out of the typewriter. Of course Kathy was right, when he was nearing the ending of a book he would always spend a lot more time on it, and quite often everything around him seemed to suffer. It wasn’t as if he was writing to a deadline, he always gave any monies from his personal

projects to charity and had never had an official book deal. He thought of it more as part of his job as all the things he wrote were about his investigation knowledge and experience, they were highly respected within his rather limited, but nether the less exclusive community.

“I’m sorry love... but I feel as though I’ve hardly seen you these last couple of months, I don’t mean to have a go,” said Kathy after a brief silence while Daven collected his thoughts and excuses, but there were none. The small row of his books on the shelf in his office reminded him this situation, and even this conversation, which had happened many times before; and would inevitably happen again.

“Look babes, if I leave now I can be home in an hour and I’ll take the day off tomorrow. How’s that sound?”

Kathy’s voice instantly took a very different tone. A little effort on his behalf to remember that he had a wife and family at home made all the difference. With Sam being at school the next day, they would be able to spend a bit more time together. She thought it was a great idea, she had made her point and was now prepared to let the subject drop.

“Okay, that sounds better. Maybe we could take a picnic to the park?”

“Definitely! I’m leaving right now, see you in a bit.” Daven put the receiver down, picked up his script from the table and fed it into his top desk draw before opening the larger one beneath. Then, heaving up the heavy typewriter, he placed it squarely into its hidden cubbyhole, sliding the now heavier draw back into its closed position. Getting up with a bit of stiffness from his chair, he walked over to the coat hooks beside the door and picked his jacket off of one of them.

“Can you call the florist and tell them I want a bunch of flowers ready so I can collect them on the way home please?” asked Daven as he put his arms through the sleeves of the jacket and double-checked that he had his keys in the pocket. But almost as soon as the sentence had left his lips, he saw Michella standing in the doorway with a large bunch of flowers in her hands that she had bought for her own home – this situation seemed a much more appropriate use of them. Daven smiled, unaware that Michella had purchased them in her lunch break to brighten up her own home; instead thinking that she always seemed to have everything sorted before he even knew it needed to be.

“Now go home, I’ll cancel any appointments for tomorrow,” said Michella, knowing that Daven only had a lunch planned with a man in finance that he didn’t like much anyway – he would be pleased to miss that one.

“Saving my life again. Thanks, Michella,” Daven was a little embarrassed that his assistant would make a better husband sometimes than he was, “see you tomorrow.”

She opened the door into the corridor and as Daven left, she had her hand between his shoulder blades and literally pushed him out of it with a smirk on her face, now that he was gone she could finish what she was doing and then get home herself – after she had stopped on the way to buy some more flowers, she thought.

Closing the door, and now that the office was quiet and the finger tapping on the clunky keys had ceased, Michella knew that it would be even easier to concentrate, and so she decided she was going to quickly sort out the last of the pending files. On her desk she placed a pile of folders that when finished with would be placed in order into the filing cabinets, ready in time for the movement to the archives. She started to rubber stamp each one on the front of the folders. The stamp being banged against the bright-red

inked stamp pad and then hard down to leave its imprint of 'Natural Circumstances' with a space for the date. The number and details of each folder was then logged and dated on her weekly record sheet, which she kept loose in her works diary.

The whole reason for this office and the thing that kept both Daven and Michella in full time employment with the FBI was to check that things so easily classified as *Acts of Nature* truly were. For instance, a mudslide could be caused by heavy rainfall or slight movements of the Earth's crust, but could also be caused by a bomb, or some other kind of human-based activity. The shifting of tectonic plates could cause a tidal wave; on the other hand the testing of nuclear weapons out at sea had created many themselves. When the department of Natural Investigations was first formed then the investigation procedures were very extensive. However, as the years passed and Daven's knowledge grew, his experience in the field also grew to such an extent that certain things that happened were easily determined to be of natural causes like Tornados which had only ever been recreated in a theme park atmosphere, while others like mud-slides and or tsunamis were looked into with a much more investigative approach.

The office also now only dealt with things that either caused a loss of life or destruction of property, rather than every occurrence that was reported. This meant that the office could expand its coverage outside of the States and now handled all worldwide phenomena. Daven and Michella had also created tie-ins with some of the world's most prominent insurance companies, which had meant that over the last two years, the office was almost totally self-financing and didn't need the vast government budgets that the rest of the Federal Bureau of Investigation needed.

After stamping the files, Michella picked them all up and walked over to the filing cabinets in Daven's office. Inside these drawers were the last two years of files, each one of which holding the information on a particular incident. Some of the files just contained a couple of pages of reports, others were stuffed with witness accounts, photographs, seismic reports and anything else that would help the subsequent investigation from when the file was created. Every year the earliest of files were sent to the records office where each page was scanned and filed on computer, the latter files were then moved across in the cabinets leaving empty ones for the next year's events. The system was easy and flawless, with the linchpin being Daven and his deductive mind, and Michella keeping everything that her boss did in check – they were a great team.

The current drawer in the filing cabinet was the only drawer in the office that had any space left in it, the previous years files filling most of the drawers up to that point. Michella opened it and was just about to put the files away when a photograph fell out from the top file, a file marked '153-2A Tornado'. She put the other files into the cabinet and bent down to pick up the picture, but when she did, she noticed something that she had missed when going through it earlier that week. The photo was of a tornado that had hit the belt in the middle of the United States earlier that year. Tornadoes were one of the easiest things to investigate because up until now, no-one has been able to create one out in the open, which meant that if there were deaths or property damage caused from a tornado, then it was automatically stamped as an act of nature. But as Michella stared she noticed something rather surreal. In the picture, small enough to have been missed was a figure of a human. When she looked closer, she could see the shadowy outline of a human dressed in old-fashioned robes holding their arms out, facing the destructive swirl



as if summoning it. She quickly ascertained that the person must be some sort of wacko being so close to such a powerful force, most people would pick up their feet and run as fast as they could for cover.

Michella shook her head in disbelief, she new that some people were stupid enough to want to put their lives in such risk but rarely saw it in black & white, so to speak. She opened the folder and placed the photo back into the sticky-corners where it belonged and filed it between the others in the cabinet. She thought it was a bit strange the photo falling out like that, especially as the corner pieces it fitted to was still stuck to the page where it was displayed, but dismissed the strangeness of it falling out to maybe Daven taking it out to have a look and not placing it back properly – anyway, closing the drawer, that was the last of them, just a quick wash up of the coffee cups for the next morning and she would be on her way home.

## Chapter 12 – Milk

Evelyn was strutting along Broadway with her shopping bags. Each bag was clearly marked with designer labels on them for all who could see. A smile on her face confirmed her much-needed evening retail therapy trip. She had been to just about all of her favourite New York stores, including the new boutique that had opened recently on a side street from Fifth Avenue. As always, she had spent every cent she had, and maxed out her credit cards too, but she felt much happier now, and was looking forward to unpacking her bags and then modelling the new clothes for everyone at home. One of the best things about working in the Courthouse was that it was shut at weekends and she left at 4pm during the weekdays; so there was plenty of time to be the young lady that she was.

She did feel as though she badly needed a sit down and a cup of coffee, the bags seemed heavier the closer to home that she'd walked and there was still a mile to go. She enjoyed walking rather than taking the subway, but with the bags she was beginning to regret her decision. It seemed an age since she had stopped for a latte and Danish at her favourite coffee shop on Madison just before her shopping had started, and her feet were now killing her. She was well aware of the fact that she always wore the most impractical shoes when she went to work, let alone shopping, but it was extremely important to her to look right when she was out and about in the city. Who-knows-who she might meet while looking in a store window, queuing to pay or stopping for a refreshment break. As it happens the only person she was to meet while sitting down for a quick coffee was Sarah, the waitress at the Shoot the Breeze Café – the last person she could think of for showing off her new wears.

The house was just on the other side of Central Park but as the light from the day was as near as damn-it gone, she decided to crack on, stick to the roads and not take the short cut through the wooded areas of the recreational ground. With her music player singing away in her ears she was swinging the bags in close time to the beat as she walked, mouthing some of the words to the song playing when a car pulled up beside her. She had been taught to be aware of her surroundings whenever she was out on her own, and noticed the car immediately out of the corner of her eye.

Evelyn stopped in her tracks and whipped off the headphones just as the light from another passing car lit up her line of sight and she instantly recognised the vehicle, whose passenger window was winding down electronically. She instantly felt a wave of relief, as she turned towards the car ready to speak to the driver. She had always been very sensible as far as talking to strangers was concerned, but had frequently attracted unwanted attention as she walked around the city, and was pleased that this car was offering attention that was not only wanted but very much needed.

“Are you going to hop in or shall I see you at home?” asked her dad, shouting past the passenger seat and out through the window.

“Oh, hi dad – thanks,” said Evelyn. She opened the door and threw the bags into the back seat. “Don’t worry! They’re not all mine, some of this stuff is for Dawn.”

Dr. Mark Saunders watched as his daughter slump herself down in the seat beside him, kicking off her shoes into the foot-well and keeping one of the bags with her, placing it on her lap as she shut the car door. He smiled at how happy she looked, and was pleased that she had accepted his offer of a ride home. As any father, he worried

about her walking out on the streets on her own, he knew she was sensible but also knew that some other people weren't.

"I'm exhausted! Shopping's hard work, you know!" she exclaimed as she closed her eyes and leaned her head against the car seat, the music still playing in the headphones hanging around her neck, sounding more like a quiet squeak than tunes.

"Are you sure you've got enough, I could drive you back into town if you think you've forgotten something? I'm sure there must be at least a couple of stores open that you haven't been to yet!" he asked sarcastically.

"Oh Dad, it's my own money... and what's the point in earning money if you can't spend some of it every now and then?" Evelyn, just like her sister could always justify her spending, and it didn't seem to worry her in the slightest how much of her wages went on clothes and shoes rather than saving for her future. "If it pulls any weight, I've been to all of the best shops, you know how fussy us girls are about our clothes."

"But do they always have to be expensive designer ones?" Her Dad asked in a less than understanding tone.

"Of course, nice clothes make you feel young and carefree, as though you can do anything," She tried to express.

"Do they really? Well I guess you learn something every day huh," he said raising his eyebrows. "Every day I tell you." He gave a quick glance in the rear view mirror, over the tops of the bags that appeared to fill up the back seats, chuckled happily as pulled away from the curb.

At the home where they were driving on the way to, little Charlie was in his bedroom surrounded by a selection of old GI Joe figures that had been either collected or given as gifts, including one that had been to him by his Grandmother when going through his own father's childhood toys kept in her attic. Other figures included a teddy bear and a robot that he found in a yard sale. Accessories for the action figures were also playing a part and were scattered all over the place, on the floor, on the shelves and the on the bed. The protégé of his best friend Sam who had guided his imagination, Charlie himself was directing a planned strategic attack on the enemy forces to save the Prince Teddy who had been captured by the evil Robot. The sound effects were incredible, and what seemed to Dawn in the room below like endless thuds and bumps on the floor and walls were actually missiles and grenades exploding in the middle of one of the most thrilling battles of life and death. Only the Ninja GI Joe and his lethal forces could save Teddy from being mind-melted. This kind of operation took only seconds of imagination to plan initially, and the scenarios were changed often during the game, but the tension still hung in the air. The Realm of the Bear was at risk of being overthrown, and something had to be done – and soon.

However, every player would have to wait for the outcome, as an even more powerful being was just about to stop this battle in mid-swing – Charlie's powerful, and often referred to as 'evil' elder sister just entered the room.

“Hey Charlie, guess what time it is?” Dawn pretended to look at her watch to emphasize the lateness of the evening.

Charlie submitted instantly, lowered his hands and the grips on the Ninja as well as the robot eased; they fell from his grasp and bounced on the floor. The frustration and

disappointment were clear by the look on his face and the slump in his shoulders. His sister, in fact his whole family, never did understand how important it was for him to be able to plan and carry out an attack from start to finish. Every battle was crucial in his mind, and nothing else mattered to him at these times. Brushing his teeth, doing his homework, eating his dinner, none of these was as important as who would win the fight - it just wasn't fair.

“Aww, can't I have just five more minutes?” He gave his sister his best pleading voice in the hope that today of all days he could be granted a reprieve.

Dawn walked along the floor, bending down and picking up figures as she made her way to the bed. Without realising it, she was ruining the work of the last hour. Even his father wasn't this inconsiderate when he attempted to tidy the mess in Charlie's bedroom once a week – a familiar story that was empathized by his superhero wannabe friend.

“C'mon you, you've already had three five-more-minutes, now lets clear this lot up shall we?” She had an air that Charlie never liked to test too much; he knew when his luck was out. He could always set it all up again in the morning, if he got up early enough and it might even be better next time. Besides, if the truth were known, he was feeling pretty tired, and he thought it would be good to replenish his energy stores before round two anyway, even if his mind was staying over-active. Giving up any fight to play some more, he knew that he could only be told to go to bed so many times before giving in, even if the outcome of the biggest battle in his history was foremost on his mind.

Taking the two figures from his sister's hands and adding them to the ones already in his arms, the ninja, robot, teddy and GI Joe were placed on the windowsill

above his bed, just before he heard most of his other figures being dropped into his toy box behind him. Charlie sighed.

“Come on you, get into bed.”

Charlie leaped onto the pillow and slipped his body under the duvet until only his face was visible. As his legs wriggled into a comfortable position, there was the sound of yet more action figures that he'd forgotten about tumbling onto the bedroom floor.

“Good, now get some sleep,” said Dawn, tucking the duvet right around her younger brother's body, ignoring the sight of other plastic figurines that had been pushed from the end of his bed linen onto the floor. Leaning over him, she pulled his curtains closed and made sure there were no gaps between the fabrics, not so that anyone could see into the upstairs window but more to hide the figures of war and thus any temptation. She walked over to the open door and flicked the light switch.

“Night Dawn.”

“Don't let them bed bugs bite there, Charlie... Night.”

Dawn was just about to close the door when a tiny black and white kitten threw itself from under Charlie's bed and ran full pelt with its legs moving so fast they were just a blur out of the door. “For God's sake, Smirnoff!” she shrieked as the kitten sped past her and down the stairs like a thing possessed. She didn't get the chance to look properly, but Dawn could have sworn that she saw a small, plastic action figure sticking out of the kitten's mouth.

Dawn had only just sat down on the sofa when the front door opened and in walked the tall, handsome figure of her Dad. A powerful looking presence wherever he

walked, but in his own house the man looked and felt like a king. Placing down his briefcase onto the floor just inside the doorway, he dropped his keys into the bowl on the small ornate table and took off his jacket. He had just managed to hang it on the rack before Evelyn appeared from behind him, laden down with her collection of shopping bags and pushing past him.

Dawn rushed up to her father and kissed him on the cheek. “Hi Daddy,” she said with a smile before turning her attention to her twin sister. Taking some of the carrier bags from her sisters grasp she led the way to the sofas. “Did you get it?” she asked.

“Of course I got it,” replied Evelyn with a smile.

Past the two excited looking girls, Mark walked through the living room and into the kitchen; another day and no food on the table. When his loving wife died more than eight years ago, he thought his two girls would at least make him a meal when he came home from a busy day at the hospital, especially now they were nearly into their twenties. However, when they did cook, which luckily was only every now and then, it always tended to be a disaster – if only one of them decided to cook then at least the disaster was usually halved. The thought of the amount of washing up, burnt pans and exploded food stuff in the microwave that usually accompanied their dinner making was actually enough to make himself feel grateful that neither of them had actually attempted it tonight – although a take-away would have been nice.

Opening the freezer, he found three pizzas sitting on the top of the other arrays of quick eats, and in the refrigerator there was line of juices. Two minutes later and the pizzas were being cooked in the oven and a pint glass of fresh pomegranate juice was in his hand; now how difficult was that?



Back in the lounge, Dawn was holding up a deep red dress in front of her and swinging around as though she was on a catwalk showing it off. Mark stood for a moment to watch the two girls giggling as they played with the new goods that Evelyn had brought home.

“Dawn, did you get anything for Charlie’s dinner?” he asked quite loudly so he would be heard over the childish giggling.

“Yes, Dad,” she replied with a big grin on her face, “milk and cookies.”

“Milk and cookies?”

“He had a cooked dinner at school,” Dawn tried to justify her lack of sisterly care.

Mark shook his head slowly in disbelief, “What am I going to do with you two girls?”

Dawn smiled and tilted her head, holding the red dress higher to her chin in the hope that her Dad would comment on how beautiful she would look in it, but the view went right over his head so it was lowered, “I’ve only just put him to bed, he won’t be asleep yet.”

Mark put down the glass of juice and decided that he would go up and see his son for the first time that day. He had left early that morning, like most mornings, but this one in the hope that he could try and clear his desk, which was becoming overwhelmed by patient’s files. The latest health reforms and increased public pressure to live a healthier lifestyle had inadvertently put even more strain on the hospitals. This was mainly due to people overdoing the exercise, or most commonly recently people actually going to get checkups and finding things that they wouldn’t have before found.

Although being a surgeon paid very well and was most satisfying knowing every day he was helping to save lives, without the support that he was hoping to get at home the strain could sometimes tell; and today he did feel it more than some others.

Up the stairs, he opened the door to his son's bedroom, letting the light from the hallway fill the room where he saw his boy leaning on one of his arms, playing with his fingers running them up and down his duvet as if they were legs. When Charlie saw his father at the door he jumped away from his covers and ran up to leap into the awaiting arms.

"Evening Charlie, Wow... your sisters don't greet me when I come home like that any more."

Charlie sniggered on his father's shoulder.

"Anyway, shouldn't you be snoring away by now?" The big man joked.

"I don't snore," said Charlie pulling away from the shoulder and trying to give his father the best stern look a kid could give.

"Well, not as much as your sisters, I must admit."

"They are quite loud," nodded Charlie.

"Must be a trait from your mother's side," commented Mark as he walked into the room and over to the bed where he lowered his son so that he could once again slide into his bed.

"Did mom snore?"

"No, actually she didn't," his father admitted, tucking the duvet around the lump of his son under it, "in fact she was just perfect in every way," he smiled.

"I wish I'd met her," said Charlie with a sorrowed look.

Mark placed his hand on the part of the duvet where his son's chest was, "but you did, even if it was only for a short time."

Charlie made a very small smile but it disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared.

"Can we go and see her soon?"

"Of course we can, it's about time we changed those flowers, don't you think?"

"Yeah," said Charlie in total agreement, "can we get red ones this time?"

"Yes definitely, she'd like that," his father agreed, an answer that managed to re-emerge the smile on Charlie's face. "But for now, you get some sleep, we'll go and see her at the weekend."

"Oh I forgot, can I go over and see Sam at the weekend?"

"Sam?" Mark wasn't very good with names, especially as his daughters kept coming out with so many of them all the time.

"Sam, you know?"

"Oh Superhero Sam?" His mind suddenly clicked whom he was trying to think of, "yes of course, we'll have plenty of time to do both."

Outside the room the shadow from the hall light gave a quick glimpse of Dawn rushing past the doorway, she was holding her new dress, running to her room to change into it. Mark lent over and kissed his son's forehead. "Now get some sleep and we'll organise what we'll do for the weekend tomorrow when I get home."

"Okay Dad."

"Goodnight Char," said Mark making his way to the door, and pulling it shut behind him.

“G’Night Dad,” said Charlie as the last light drained from the room.

## Chapter 13 - Ants

Sam had a surprisingly good day at school, considering the early upset over the Superman top. As usually persuaded, his friends had agreed to play his favourite choice of game with him in the playground, with Jamie pretending to be Spiderman, Alex being The Thing, his best friend and co-superhero Charlie being Batman. Of course, the role of Superman was taken up by his good self. There were no life threatening incidents to deal with, but they managed to avert the end of an entire civilisation and save an ants nest from a particularly nasty giant spider. It was playtimes like this that marked Sam's best days at school. He enjoyed some of his lessons, but the times when he could play Superheroes with his friends were definitely the best.

When he got home from school that evening, the ongoing battle had continued on his bedroom floor, and he relived all the things he had done earlier on the schoolyard, using little green plastic soldiers and a tank as the spider. When it came to dinnertime, he had sat at the table with his parents and had eaten a whole plate of spaghetti followed by a large helping of fruit and ice cream. His mom had asked him about his day, so he gave her a blow-by-blow account of every manoeuvre and every action he had made as Superman, and how important he had been in the rescue of all those millions of unsuspecting insects. After reading his schoolbook and practising his show and tell ready for the end of the week, Sam went upstairs to get ready for bed with no complaints at all. He went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, dressed himself back into his favourite pyjamas and was now tucked up under the blankets waiting for his Mother's goodnight

kiss. All was right with the world again, and he felt safe, secure and loved, just as any eight year old boy should feel.

“Are you ready to be tucked in yet, sweetie?” called his Mother as she walked up the stairs. She took a detour to put his dirty clothes into the laundry basket before she appeared around the doorway of his room. A quick look around gave her enough information to plan a path to the bed in order to give him a kiss and a hug and tuck him in without upsetting things too much.

“Now I don’t want to see you wearing that top under your school clothes tomorrow – OK?” she said gently as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I won’t Mommy,” confirmed Sam between yawns. He had finally realised that, although it was obviously better to wear the required outfit as a superhero, he could still carry out some of his superhero duties while in his school uniform, acting out his secret identity.

Kathy reached forward and kissed Sam on his cheek and then turned around to the door. The crane that she had moved earlier in the day had made its way back into the middle of the room and she couldn’t help thinking that tidying his room was a bit futile sometimes, but at least it looked tidier when she turned the light out.

“Night, night Sam,” she said as she disappeared behind the closing door. “Love you heaps!”

“Night Mommy,” Sam yawned as he closed his eyes. “Love you heaps more!”

Daven pulled up in front of the garage to his house in his four-wheel drive sedan. Kathy’s dark blue BMW was parked right beside. He opened the door and got out,

closing the door behind him and pressing the button on the key fob to automatically lock the doors and set the alarm.

Squeezing past the front of the BMW, Daven made his way to the front door, key in his hand ready to open the lock. It was just as the tip of the key was sliding into its home position that he remembered – flowers!

Taking the key away again, he rushed back to his car, unlocked it and grabbed the flowers, only just in time as the front door of the house opened and Kathy's face peered around.

Daven appeared from the side of his vehicle with the bunch of flowers held up to cover his face. The grin on Kathy's face grew larger as the torso of her husband pushed past the car and stumbled over the first step as it made its way towards her.

"I'm sorry darling," said the voice behind the flowers.

"So you think you can win me over with flowers do you?" asked Kathy in jest, trying hard to conceal the smile she could feel spreading over her face. Daven lowered the flowers until his sorry face could be seen, lit up by the porch light.

"I was hoping so," he replied just starting to get a glimpse of her grinning face, which then let him know that it was time for him to smile also.

As he reached forward and handed the bunch of flowers to Kathy, she lent over them and kissed him on the lips. He felt her hand as she took hold of the wrapped stems, but instead of just taking the flowers as he expected, another article was passed into his hand as the flowers left them.

"They're lovely Darling, but a fair exchange is no robbery."

Daven looked down at his hand and noticed that he was now holding a strap. As the flowers fell away from his line of sight he followed the strap until its owner was painfully obvious. Shoey, the black Labrador was sitting quietly just beside Kathy in the doorway with his tail swaying from side to side, waiting for his master's response.

"If you take him for a quick walk, I'll try and rustle up something other than burnt offerings for your dinner."

"You drive a hard bargain," admitted Daven, giving in and nudging on the lead for his dog to follow him.

"Come on, Shoeless." The Labrador didn't need to be asked twice, and jumped forward to his master's leg, tail now wagging ten-to-a-dozen; a sight that only happened when he was taken out because most of the day he had just sat in his basket in the living room.



## Chapter 14 - Fox

During the transition where evening turned into night, shadows stretching along the ground masked the hooded figure as it walked into Central Park and slowly down the pathways. It moved with more of a shuffle than a normal, healthy adult, and was completely ignored by all passers by. The park wasn't very busy at this time of day, although there were some people who were still there from earlier when eager to make the most of the last minutes of daylight. Some were on bikes or roller-blades, but most were walking either alone or with their dogs and were interspersed with the occasional jogger.

The figure passed by two young scruffy adults who were sitting on a roundabout drinking beer and smoking rolled-up cigarettes. Carrying on past the teenagers the robed figure shuffled off the path onto the grass and then through some bushes to an even more secluded area, with no other humans around.

A squirrel was busy burying its stash of nuts when it noticed the robed figure approaching. In an instant it abandoned its quest and ran quickly up the nearest tree. Halfway up the trunk it suddenly felt compelled to stop, turning its head and looking around in confusion. Then, curiously, it scanned the cloaked shape. Slowly, almost as if it recognised the figure, it climbed back down the trunk of the tree and gingerly walked up to the shrouded being. One of the squirrel's ears twitched at the sound of a voice coming from past the trees, but it continued towards the figure, which was now standing still in the middle of the small clearing.

The high foliage surrounding the tiny clearing in the centre of the park also masked most of the blackness of the evening up above, except for the light clouds drifting slowly across the only patch of sky that was visible where the fingers of the trees didn't quite meet. Birds flew meaningfully on their way back to their nests, and only the sound of homeward bound traffic could be heard in the distance; the shouts of the children playing on the climbing frame and swings earlier in the day had long since faded, and the tinkling water fountain had been switched off until the morning.

This small section of grass was rarely visited by anyone except kids playing hide-and-seek or lovers who wanted a bit of privacy from the rest of the city. At this time of day, however, even those people did not come here, and the area appeared almost entirely deserted apart from the nocturnal creatures that started to wake from their daytime slumber. But now, unusually the air was so electric that even the hydrogen and oxygen molecules seemed alive, for tonight there was a presence that had not been felt in the park for a couple of years.

The figure, dressed in its rough brown robe and completely hidden from the rest of the human race was now allowing her face to be seen. Seen by the moths and bats that circled around above her head, seen by the squirrels on the grass and the ones half way up the trees that encircled the space where she stood. A small fox was sitting in front of her, its deep red fur looking even darker in the twilight, just underneath the branch on which perched a large owl. If the grass under their feet were to be examined then ants, beetles and some of the tiniest creatures that reside in the undergrowth could be seen. The

branches of the trees and the fingers of the grass even bent towards her body and stretched open, as if desperate to just feel the brush of her clothing.

Both animal and plant life knew who she was, because their minds and whole life force was not closed like the humans that she had passed, they could feel her presence in a way that only the most sensitive men or women who were aware of their surroundings could. For the figure in front of them, the old woman that was twirling around with her arms outstretched, her aura faintly glowing as twinkles of light sparkled from her fingertips, the wrinkled and well-worn human figure was the most powerful being on this Earth – Mother Nature.