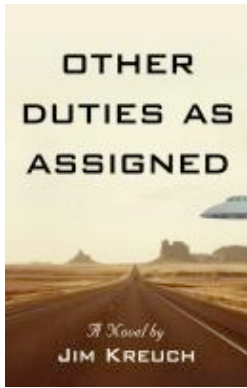


OTHER DUTIES AS ASSIGNED



A Novel by
JIM KREUCH



Marty has been sent on a business trip to the small desert town of Arroyo Desperado. Rumor has it that they're preparing to launch a mysterious new product there at the field office. As he drives on the lonely two-lane highway, he remembers a dream he had when he was a kid. He dreamed he saw a flying saucer. But, was it a dream, or was it real?

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First Edition

For Ivy, Kyle
and Elexis

Chapter 1

Marty McCallender sat in a meeting at a long rectangular table in a conference room on the second floor of a two story building in a brand spanking new office park. The office park sat all by itself on the outskirts of a medium sized city as if it were waiting for someone to build something, *anything* nearby. The city sat all by itself in the high desert, as if it were waiting for someone to build something, *anything* nearby. The desert sat in the western half of the United States of America on the planet affectionately known as “Earth”. The planet had always been known as “Earth”, the affectionate part coming seven years earlier when a day was named in its honor.

The subject matter of the meeting was boring, so boring that Marty could barely keep his eyes open. The florescent lights were ruthless. The beams of light hit his head like tumbleweeds blown by the wind in the springtime. He shut his eyes for a second, but the light seemed to burn right through his eyelids. They had these meetings all the time, somehow managing to squeeze ten minutes worth of business into a mere two and a half hours. It seemed like they had meetings for the sake of having meetings. Like there was a gold medal for whoever could put his name on the conference room schedule at the most opportune times.

“Howard, it looks like Johnson has grabbed that coveted Monday afternoon slot – he's going to be hard to beat.”

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“That's right, Frank. You can see where that financial services industry background is paying off!”

“Let's go to Melissa at the luge track now.”

They formed committees to study things and then report their findings to another committee, the chairman of which would present a summary of the findings to the staff. Most of it had little or no relevance to anyone actually doing their jobs, of course. Marty suspected the whole thing was being directed by one master committee, the *Let's Accomplish Nothing At All* committee.

Several of his coworkers were seated around the table. The chairs on which they sat were neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, as if they were the second attempt out of three to produce a decent one. Marty was pretty sure he knew why these particular chairs were chosen. People would shift and squirm in a chair that was any less comfortable, and fall asleep in one that was any more so. The decor, if one could call it that, was dominated by a large watercolor of the company's home office building on the west coast. The painting was hung on paneling that at first glance appeared to be real wood. Closer inspection revealed it to be imitation veneer, and not very convincing at that. The painting was situated so as to form a backdrop for the person at the head of the table. The wall to that person's left contained a row of windows that looked out on the desert, pristine were it not for the highway that divided it in two. On the wall opposite the windows there were a number of plaques arranged in a monotonous line on the bogus paneling. The plaques weren't for anything special, maybe runner up in a charity fund raising drive or commemoration of some long forgotten event. On the wall opposite the painting

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hung a large clock that ticked off the seconds audibly. It seemed like the seconds got longer and longer as the meeting dragged on. The air got thicker and thicker, the hands of the big clock struggling harder and harder to keep moving... tick... tiicktiiiitiiick.....

A middle manager stood at the head of the table making a speech. He was dressed in a business suit that was such a dark shade of blue that it may as well have been black. He wore a neatly pressed white shirt and a narrow maroon necktie. He was clean-shaven with neatly trimmed dark brown hair. It would have been difficult to distinguish him from all the other middle managers in all the other offices in all the other office parks on the outskirts of all the other medium sized cities. Marty wondered if human cloning had been perfected. The middle manager appeared to be the only person in the room with any degree of enthusiasm for the topic at hand. Just when it seemed the meeting might actually be winding down, he said "Needless to say..." and then kept right on talking. Marty knew that this meant another twenty minutes, at least. Amazed at how often people said "Needless to say..." and then kept right on saying, Marty began to daydream. He imagined himself sitting by a lake high in the mountains in a forest of pine trees...

"So what do you think, McCallender?"

Over the years, Marty had compiled a stack of mental 3"x5" cards with stock answers and platitudes guaranteed to please the boss. As his mind was flipping through them he was literally saved by the bell. The fire drill bell, that is. At Western Amalgamated Consolidated Incorporated there were nearly as many fire drills as meetings. It seems the president of the company had made a brief attempt at a career doing property inspections for an insurance company. This required him to complete formal courses in loss control, learning about the myriad ways that awful things can happen to persons and

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property in the course of doing business. Having reached a degree of paranoia that was beyond useful, he developed some interesting rules for himself. For example, he would stay on the second, and only the second, floor of a hotel. The third, he reasoned, was too high from which to jump in the event of a fire, the ground floor too susceptible to flooding. This paranoia carried over to his management style, thus the fire drills.

The staff shuffled out of the room and into the hallway, down the single flight of stairs and onto the parking lot. It was only nine in the morning but already getting hot. Marty was trying to get his bearings, starting with what day of the week it was. This was usually done by remembering which one of his favorite TV shows he had watched the night before. Lately, though, the networks were intent on wreaking havoc with his system by moving his shows to a “new night”. He wondered why they couldn't just leave well enough alone.

The office park consisted of half a dozen identical two-story buildings in a sea of asphalt. The asphalt was interrupted by a few rows of young trees that would eventually provide some much needed shade. The buildings' exteriors consisted of three horizontal layers of beige stucco separated by two narrow layers of glass. The only relief from the visual monotony was the front and rear entrances, double doors made of the same glass as the windows. Marty's employer occupied most of one building and smaller sections of two others, having to settle for what space was available to accommodate unanticipated growth. This meant that the fire drills were a curious sight, as none of the other companies which occupied space in the office park participated. Only the people in Marty's building, and smaller numbers from the other two, were gathered in the parking lots.

“So, wacky Wednesday, huh?” The voice belonged to a heavysset man who had been standing next to Marty. He was an

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accountant, Dave, one of the few people in the office who was around Marty's age, the others being either fresh out of school or nearing retirement. Dave wore gray slacks, a white shirt, and a plain black necktie. He had already unbuttoned his top shirt button and loosened the tie a bit. He was average looking, so average looking that one would find it difficult to describe him to a police sketch artist. Not that he would ever do anything interesting enough for that particular situation to arise. The "wacky", by the way, was a reference to the acronym for the company, WACI.

"It's Wednesday?" muttered Marty, genuinely surprised. "But *Barney Miller* was on... oh, never mind. Can you believe how many meetings we've been having lately? This is my third one this week."

"You think you've got it bad? It's worse in accounting. We have meetings to discuss who's going to be invited to a meeting to discuss the presentation we're giving at another meeting!"

Marty slowly shook his head. "Seems like that's all we do, meetings and fire drills, meetings and fire drills. I wonder if they'll ever wise up and quit having so many meetings and fire drills...."

"Don't hold your breath," said Dave with a grim chuckle. "These executive types, once they get an idea in their head there's no letting go of it."

"But sooner or later don't you think someone would realize what a waste of time all of this is?"

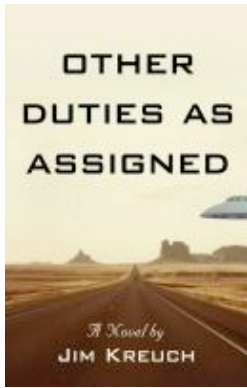
"You've got to understand, companies like this are resistant to change. That stuff from the organizational psychology classes you suffered through in college? It actually starts to make sense once you've observed the inner workings of a real-life company for a while. You know, the stuff about how companies have a corporate culture. How people tend to hire and promote people who think just like them, so a certain

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way of doing things becomes established. No one questions the status quo, and the organization resists change as if it's a creature with an instinct for self preservation. You rock the boat too much and it's bye bye promotion or worse, bye bye job. What it comes down to is they keep you in line with fear and greed, the great motivators."

"So what can a guy do?" said Marty with a sigh.

"Go with the flow. Save your pennies. Take early retirement. Anyway, that's my plan."



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